Chapter V

SEASONAL AND AGRICULTURAL RITES AND CEREMONIES

I. The Bihu Festivals of Assam and Their Pattern in Goalpara

(a) In the Rest of Assam Valley

The most important and popular festivals of Assam are the three Bihus which "constitute a sort of a pattern, a ritual and festival complex covering the annual life cycle of the peasantry."¹ Having both seasonal and agricultural significance, the three Bihu festivals are known as Bohag Bihu or Rangali Bihu held in mid-April on the advent of spring, Magh Bihu or Bhogali Bihu, held in mid-January, the coldest time of the year and Kati Bihu or Kangali Bihu coming off in mid-October in the autumn season.

'Either because the Adivasi pull is strong or because it is the agricultural setting which still determines the social temper of the people, the festivals which are looked forward to and are widely enjoyed in this part of India are those associated with the beginning and end of the planting season.'² The festival associated with the beginning of the farming season is Bohag Bihu, the springtime that with the end is Magh Bihu, the winter Bihu. The former ushers in the new year while the latter indicates the gathering of the harvest. The springtime Bihu is the Rangali Bihu or the Bihu that cheers, while the winter Bihu is the Bhogali Bihu or the Bihu that one enjoys with

¹. P. Goswami: The Springtime Bihu of Assam, p.10.
². Ibid.
food and drink. In between the two is observed the Kati Bihu, also called the Kangali or beggar's Bihu, for there is nothing much to eat at this time.

'Astronomically Bohag Bihu is associated with Vernal Equinox, Kati Bihu with Autumnal Equinox, and Magh Bihu with Winter Solstice.'¹ The term Bihu is traced to Sanskrit Visuvan meaning equinox; but in the Assamese society it is associated not only with the two equinoxes but has come to signify Winter Solstice as well. Again, samkranti means the passage of the sun from one zodiacal house to another, taking place on the last day of a month. While the term samkranti is not unknown, 'in Assamese the term domahi is more popular than the learned samkranti. Domahi means the junction of two months. Further, in lower Assam, this term tends to replace the use of the name Bihu: the Domahi of Bohag, of Kati, or of Magh.'²

(i) Bohag Bihu: Of the three Bihus, the Bohag Bihu has come to be regarded as the most important national festival of Assam and is celebrated almost throughout the Brahmaputra Valley with great eclat by holding large public functions. But the basic features of the celebration of Bohag Bihu are the following:

(1) The performances of some cattle-rites signifying special care and attention given to the cattle, at times bordering on cattle-worship.

(2) The exchange of good-will and greetings—juniors showing respects to seniors, seniors blessing the juniors and


². Ibid., p.8.
friends and relatives visiting one another. This includes the offering of Bihu presents (bihuwān), mostly clothings, to the near and dear ones. Special value is attached to bihuwāns woven by the women themselves.

(3) A magical practice of writing of mantras on leaves of the näbar (iron wood) tree and keeping them under the rafters, meant as a protection against storms, lightnings and fire.

(4) The playing of various kinds of games, both indoor and outdoor.

(5) The eating of bitter leaves and herbs and the application of neem (margosa) and turmeric pastes on the bodies before the taking of bath.

(6) Holding of congregational prayers, especially in Vaishnava nāmghars.

(7) The continuance of the celebrations up to the seventh Bihu day (Sāt-Bihu) to which special significance is attached. On the seventh day it is customary to eat seven kinds of herbs (Sāt-Sāki).

(8) But the most spectacular and exotic features associated with this Bihu are the erotic Bihu dance and music 'characterising the spirit of the season' and 'inspired by a fertility consciousness', which are performed by young men and women, as also the carol-like huchari songs accompanied by dancing.

'Some of the features of the springtime Bihu are peculiar to upper Assam or areas influenced by upper Assam, say, in respect of


dance and music', and 'in rural areas in lower Assam there is hardly any dance and music of the type seen in central and upper Assam.'

(ii) Magh Bihu: The core of the Magh Bihu festival is a fire ceremony observed on the Bihu day; but the Bihu eve or Urukā, as it is called, has its own importance. On this day womenfolk get ready for the next day with various eatables like fattened rice (chirā), curds (doi), cakes (pithā) and sweet balls (lāru). Malefolk go to the lakes and rivers to catch fish and prepare for the communal feast which is the big event in the evening. On the Uruka day it is customary to take fish or meat at both the principal meals. Boys and youths collect in nearby fields stubble, dried banana leaves and green bamboos, and raise temple-like structures known as bhelāghar.

On the first day of Magh, at crack of dawn, someone in the family ties strings of bamboo, jute or thatch around fruit-bearing trees, calls out to the dogs and offers them rice. The womenfolk clean the house and cooking pans. It is also customary to take a purifying bath and put on washed clothes. Men and children then move on to the communal bhelāghars which are lighted amidst the cry of God's name.


2. 'The term bhelaghar may be from Sans, mesa - griha (mesa = bhera/bhela = sheep) in which some hairs of a sheep or goat are burnt on the eve of Daul Utsava associated with Krishnaism. The term used in upper Assam is meji and it may be from Sans. medha or Yajna. Thus, certain ancient associations seem to have been carried over to the institution of bhelaghar burning. The idea of Holika burning is not found in Assam; and Holi or Phag has no connection with Magh Bihu.' - See P. Goswami: The Springtime Bihu of Assam, p.13.
Offerings of chirā, pithā, etc. are made to the fire. Brahmane or elderly persons give blessings, and marks of ash are put on the foreheads. The half-burnt sticks and bamboos are scattered in the fields and piece of them are also taken home to be thrown near fruit-bearing trees. 'The belief is that the ashes and half-burnt bamboos increase the fertility of the fields and gardens.'

The people sing choral hymns (nām-prasanga). 'In fact, holding of nam-prasanga or singing of hymns begins from the evening of Uruka. Throughout this month, taken to be suitable for religious activities, it is usual to hold such nam-prasangas. In this aspect of the festival the influence of Vaishnavism is clear.'

Specially prepared food is taken at the mid-day meal. Holding of sports like wrestling, racing, jumping, egg-fighting and buffalo-fighting, etc. is another aspect of this festival. Some other features, particularly in lower Assam, are community fishing, hunting and eating of fried grains (Karāi/Kāre).

(iii) Kāti Bihu: Kāti Bihu is 'a one-day affair, associated with the worship of the tulasi plant ... and certain rituals performed for the well-being of the paddy fields.' It takes place on the last day of Ahin (September-October). On this day the earthen platform for the sacred tulasi plant in the courtyard is specially tidied and wiped and earthen lamps are put near it in the evening. Hymns are sung. Sometimes a small banana tree is planted near the

1. Ibid.
3. Ibid., p.10.
platform and lamps are put on the body of the banana tree on shelves made of bamboo sticks. Lamps are also put at the granary, in the vegetable garden and in the fields.

To protect the maturing paddy from pests, men take recourse to certain rituals and magical practices. Some people requisition the aid of a medicine-man (bej) for the purpose of casting spells on the fields. The mantras recited by the bej are meant to 'bind' the mouths of animals, birds, rats, etc. Dr B. K. Barua points out how some of the rituals practised by the Assamese cultivator recalls passages of the Atharva Veda. 'The Assamese cultivator whirls a piece of bamboo; lights earthen lamps in the fields and recites rowa-khowa mantras. In some areas they put a string on the neck of a mouse and keep it tied in the field. One finds in the Atharva Veda prescription of worship of the Aswin brothers for the purpose of protecting crops from the depredations of mice, insects, birds and animals like deer. There is also mention of the mouth of a mouse being tied up with a hair and then being buried in the field.'

Some people also light the sky-lamp hanging from the tip of a tall bamboo pole.

(b) In Goalpara

If we analyse the seasonal and agricultural festivals of Goalpara against the background of the pattern of Bihu festivals, we shall easily see that even though in all parts of this district, in

1. Ibid., p.11.
particular in the western parts, the same kind of significance is not attached to them and they do not constitute 'a ritual and festival complex', as in the rest of the valley, very similar ceremonies are performed in different parts of the district, with rituals which closely resemble those followed in the Bihu festivals.

The eastern parts of the district closely follow the pattern of Kamrup. The two principal festivals are called **Domahi—Boihagar Domahi, Maghar Domahi**; and greater importance is attached to the winter festival than to the spring festival. But the third festival, held in autumn, is not always regarded as another **Domahi**.

In west Goalpara, however, none of these festivals is called either a Bihu or a Domahi; although the rites are significantly similar each is observed independently and there is no conception linking them together.

(i) **The Springtime Festival**: The springtime festival in the western parts is called **Bishua, Bishma or Beshoma**, the winter festival **Pushna**, while no particular name is generally found for the autumn festival.

In the areas in between eastern and western Goalpara on the north banks of the district, the term **Damasi** is found, but it is used exclusively to mean the winter festival.

In the eastern and middle parts of the district almost all the features of the spring festival are common with those of Kamrup.

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1. Some people call it **Choit Bishua** which recalls the term **chotar Bihu** used by some people in upper Assam to designate the spring festival.
(1) The cattle from every household are taken to the nearby river or pond. Each cow is given round its neck a garland of pieces of turmeric, ginger, brinjal, bottle-gourd, etc. strung together with the stalk of a dighlati plant. The cows are bathed and then an elderly man throws all the strings into the river or pond. All others jump into the river and each tries to catch one of the floating strings, being careful not to pick up a string belonging to his own cow. After this, the young men and children play various traditional games on the bank of the river or in some other convenient place.¹

(2) Twigs or shoots of various bitter plants like vásaka, cane, pundi, karchishá, bish kutuli, bhéti, etc. are collected and bunches of them are placed in the living apartments, in the cowshed, in the granary, at the well and at the entrance to the compound, the belief being that it keeps the snakes away.² Some people burn them, when dry, as the smoke is considered efficacious in driving off diseases. Juice extracted from some of these plants, particularly vásaka, is drunk. The belief in the medicinal potency of vásaka is so strong in some areas that on the eve of the festival day, every household puts areca nuts and betel leaves by the side of vásaka plants, which the members share the next day.³

(3) The eating of seven kinds of herbs or leafy vegetable (satsáki) is also an important ritual followed in this festival. In some parts of east Goalpara, especially in areas contiguous to Kamrup on the northern bank, the collection of the vegetables is an elaborate

² Ibid.
³ M. Das: 'Goalpariya Samskriti Aru Bihu' in Dainik Asam, April 7, 1972.
all-female affair. The women of the village go out in a body to some nearby lonely place outside the village, sing and dance and enjoy themselves to their heart's content before returning home with basketfuls of leaves and herbs collected during their outing.¹

(4) The customs of doing obeisance to elders and offering of presents are also found in these parts. Women are expected to present hand-woven cloths (generally napkins) to male members of the family.

(5) In those areas particularly influenced by Assam Vaishnavism, the holding of congregational prayers forms another feature of the celebrations.

(6) People generally abstain from cooked rice and have a meal of flattened rice, curds, molasses, etc.

(7) In some areas, an assortment of fried grains (āt-kārī) is eaten with pieces of small green mango.

That Bishu or Beshoma or Bishma was an important festival in west Goalpara can be inferred from the fact that the Koch king Biswa Singha, who originally belonged to Chiknajhar in Goalpara, was known, before he had assumed the sanskritised name, as Bishu, as he was born on the Bihu (Bishu) day.² Although we do not know exactly in what manner the festival was held in older times, there is reason to believe that the festivities continued up to seven days, as in other parts of Assam, for in a number of shrines in these parts are held large

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1. 'At Barpeta (in Kamrup) ladies go to some open waste land dance a little, sing cheerful songs, and in a merry mood pick seven kinds of herbs.' — See P. Goswami: The Springtime Bihu of Assam, p.23.
fairs which are called  sat Bishuār melā (fair of the seventh Bishuā day).\(^1\) In fact such fairs are a popular feature of the festival almost throughout the district.\(^1\)

However, Bishuā or Beshoma, as it is observed in the western parts today is a one-day affair held on the last day of Choit (March-April). Some of the features of the ceremony are common or very similar to those found elsewhere in Assam:

(1) Titā-khāwā (eating of bitter - tasting things): In the morning of the Bishua day, juice extracted from such bitter leaves and herbs as neem, tender pine apple leaves, raw turmeric, kānchishā is drunk.

(2) Twigs of the neem tree, shulti (a small wild plant), and gan-jāi (wild hemp) are taken together and made into a bunch with which water is sprinkled all around the house. The twigs are then kept inserted in the rafters of the roofs.

(3) Sāt-sāki (eating of seven kinds of leafy vegetables): Leafy vegetables of at least seven varieties are collected and prepared into a special dish. Many people do not have rice at the mid-day meal but eat flattened rice, curds, etc.

(4) Pastes of neem leaves and turmeric are applied to the body before the taking of bath.

(5) Choitā-bāo: A string died yellow with raw turmeric is tied around one of the hands of children and young people. (Smaller children are made to wear it round the waist). This is called choitā-bāo and is believed to be a precaution against diseases. Sometimes a small bundle containing pieces of onion, unripe mango, fruit of the gulancha (plumera acutifolia) tree, etc. is suspended from the string.

\(^1\) Dr M. Neog (Ed): Pavitra Asam, p.52.
Beddings are put out in the sun to dry and a cleaning operation is undertaken. Cooking pots and pans are thoroughly cleaned by putting them upside down over a fire.

It is said that in earlier times there was a custom among the Rajbansis of this region of going out on a hunt on the Bishua day. But the custom seems to have died out.

It is further to be noted that in most parts of west Goalpara no cattle-rites are observed along with the Bishua festival. Only in some areas contiguous to eastern Goalpara, there are some rites like beating of the cattle with vasaka twigs, of breaking the twigs by pressing them against the breast and of snapping the old tethers before giving the cattle new ones. All this is believed to ensure the welfare of the cattle. Otherwise, cattle rites in these parts are reserved for the winter festival Pushnā.

It may be pointed out that nowhere in Goalpara, as, indeed, in any part of lower Assam, do songs and dances of the type found in upper and middle Assam constitute a part of the celebrations of the spring festival.


2. As noted earlier, the ceremony called Bhatheli or Sori in Kamrup and Deul in Mangaldai, though not exactly a part of the Bihu rites, has come to be regarded almost as an adjunct of the Spring Bihu festival in these areas. It is also held in some parts of east Goalpara near the Kamrup border, particularly on the south bank. It has also been suggested that Bās Puja of Goalpara, though not similarly connected with the Spring Bihu festival, is closely akin to Bhatheli.

In North Bengal the Bisuā or Bisubā festival is observed, in particular by the Rajbansis, with rites and practices, some of which recall, however remotely, rites followed in the Bishua festival of Goalpara. C. C. Sanyal gives the following description of the festival:

'On the last day of the month of Choitra (March-April) a spring hunt is arranged by the Rajbansis. It is called Bisua or Bibuba. During the whole month of Choitra, the Rajbansis eat or
(ii) The Winter Festival: Whether called Maghar Domahi (eastern parts), Damasi (middle parts) or Pushna (western parts), it is the winter festival that is celebrated with greater enthusiasm throughout the district, and the rites, particularly in the eastern and middle parts, are mostly the same as those followed in the rest of the Brahmaputra Valley. Thus, ceremonial burning of fire, feasting, and eating of various kinds of delicacies constitute important parts of the rites of the festival. However, in most parts of Goalpara it is this festival which incorporates the cattle-rites whereas elsewhere in the Assam Valley, the cattle rites are associated with the spring festival.

Though the festival itself runs for one or two days (in some places the festivities continue up to three, four or even seven days), preparations for it start well in advance. Boys and young men go to drink a decoction of some bitters, e.g. Brihati, Basak (Adhatoda Vasica) etc. On the last day of Choitra, none will eat rice. They eat fries (bhadza-bhusda), this contains fried chura, curds and fried dal (lentils). While eating fries, it is a custom to spit out the first morsel without swallowing it. This means that an enemy is to be killed. On the Bisuba day all able-bodied Rajbansi males go out for a hunt with any weapon he can get hold of, e.g. bamboo pole, spear, sword, katari (dao), gun, etc. They must kill an edible animal and eat its meat either roasted or cooked in the forest. If they fail to kill an animal the Rajbansis believe that the coming year would be bad for them. This spring hunt is gradually being abandoned due to restrictions imposed by the Forest Department of the Government and also due to the impact of the new civilisation.

In the same night of the hunt a Garam puja is held. The Mahadev, the presiding deity in the nearby bamboo grove in a hut, is worshipped in order to drive away any evil spirit that may cause disease in the village and bless the villagers with good crop in the field. No woman is allowed to attend this ceremony.' - The Rajbansis of North Bengal, p.144.
the nearby hills or jungles to gather bamboos, dry wood and other fuel for the ceremonial fire. These excursions in themselves are a source of considerable excitement and joy. Often the groups spend the nights round a big fire (dhuni) lit near the village shrine or some temporary shed erected for the purpose. In some areas rehearsals for dramatic or musical performances are held around the fire and the practice is called akhra porā.

On the day preceding the date of the main festival, which comes off on the last day of Push (December-January), big stacks are prepared in open fields with the firewood, bamboo-stumps and hay collected earlier. These structures are called bhelāghar. In some areas temple-like structures called punji are made. Sometimes a number of bhelāghars, small and big, are prepared. Feasting, singing of devotional songs and merry-making continue till late at night. The women-folk engage themselves in preparing cakes and snacks for the special occasion.

Also on the same day, the elderly men of each household tie the fruit-bearing trees with bamboo cords (tengal). The belief is that this increases the fruit-bearing capacity of the trees.

On the Pushnā (or Damāsi) day, everybody gets up very early in the morning. The malefolk and the children go to the place where the bhelāghar has been erected and after taking their baths they gather round the bhelāghar to which fire is set by an elderly man to the chanting of God's name (Hari-dhwani). Cakes and other eatables are offered to the fire. Green bamboos and wood-apples are put in the fire, which burst with loud notes much to the delight of the children.
People mark their forehead with ash from the ceremonial fire. After this, the custom in many areas is for the people to form themselves into a procession and to proceed along the main roads of the village singing devotional songs. Then come the cattle rites. The feet of the cows are washed, mustard oil is smeared on their horns and hooves, and coloured powder is put on their foreheads. After this, coloured marks are put all over the bodies of the cows with specially prepared pastes. In some areas the paste is made of rice-powder and mustard flowers and the stamp is made of the spine of a banana leaf. In other areas rice-powder and a black substance obtained from a kind of reed (ghesuli) are used to make the paste, and the marker is a tube-like weaving implement (ba chunga). This rite is known as goru-chitā (cow-marking). Cakes are offered to the cows and obeisance is done to them. Some people also tie coloured jute fibres and garlands of marigold flowers round the horns of the cows. In some areas again coloured marks are put on the granary and other houses.

No rice is taken on the Pushnā/Damāsi day. It is customary to eat flattened rice and curds (doī-chirā), cakes and sweet-balls (pithā, lāru/molā) and other eatables specially prepared for the occasion. As the festival comes after the winter harvest, rice, pulses, sesame, molasses, etc. are in plentiful supply and every family, however poor, procures at least some special items for the day. One special item nobody would like to miss is a mixture of several kinds of fried grains like bonni rice, various pulses like mās kālāi, mug kālāi, kulti kālāi, gram, sesame, and also flattened rice. This is called kārāi or at-kārāi or kārāi-chirā. It is generally served with salt, mustard oil and ginger, or sometimes with curds and sweets. In
Some areas, enormous quantities of this item are prepared and consumed for days and often for months. In some areas a special item greatly relished by all is topla bhat or sima bhat, the sticky bonni rice boiled in bundles made of goita leaves.¹

Another custom followed in many villages as part of the celebration of the festival is that of community fishing. In the villages the grown up male members of every household go out together on a fishing expedition to one of the nearby lakes or swamps that abound in fish and collect fish for the special festival meal. This kind of community fishing is called bao diya or baho mara. Sometimes the call for the outing is given by the blowing of a horn (shinga). It is said that often the manner of blowing the horn informs the villagers of the particular direction in which they are to proceed. The practice of going out on a hunting expedition in a similar manner is said to have been quite popular in the past; but gradually being discontinued.

An interesting custom followed by the people of some areas is that of making predictions about the weather for each month of the year by a peculiar method. In the evening prior to the Pushnā day, twelve arum leaves, one meant for each month of the year, are selected and tied in such a way (without however tearing them off) that each looks like a pouch. They are left in that position for the night. The next morning the ties are loosened and from the amount of dew collected in each of the arum leaves, villagers make forecasts about which of the coming months are going to be wet and which are going to be dry.²

² The Bodos follow a similar practice. — See Bhaben Narzi: Boro-Kachārir Samāj Āru Samskriti, p.66.
Community feasts are another important feature of this winter festival. In some parts of eastern Goalpara, contributions are asked for during the festivals days and with the fund thus raised a community feast is arranged. In arranging the feast boys and young men take the initiative but grown ups also occasionally join. This feast is known as *lākhal bhat*, literary, feast of the cowherds. The feast may not be held on the festivals days, but any other day following the festival may be chosen for the event. In other areas, the feast is held with contributions collected earlier by singing *gīri* songs.¹

In the western parts, as we have already pointed out, the festival is linked up, although not directly, with Sonārāy Puja for which throughout the month of Push contributions are collected from house to house by the cowherds. The main part of the puja is, however, a feast held by the cowherds, with the provisions thus collected, on the Pushnā day.

(iii) The Autumn Festival: We have already mentioned that in almost no part of Goalpara (excepting a small tract immediately adjacent to Kamrup) is the idea of a third Bihu or *Dahāni* to be found. But on the same date (i.e. the last day of Ahin) on which the rest of the Assam Valley celebrates the Kāti Bihu, all over Goalpara people observe rites which are substantially the same as those of Kāti Bihu. As in the rest of Assam Valley, this is a one-day affair, the most important part of which is the lighting of lamps in the evening.

In the eastern parts of this district, earthen lamps are placed in the paddy fields, in the cattle-shed and in the granary and beside the tulasi plant in the courtyard along with offerings (naivedya). In some villages, lights are also placed in the village shrines. The lamps are either earthen or are made of pieces of the ou fruit (Dillenis indica).

Another interesting feature of the celebration of the day is the reciting of some rhymes by the members of each family in the rice-field belonging to it. The rhymes as sung in different regions have different versions, some of which are reproduced below:

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\begin{align*}
\text{sagāre dhān āul-jhāul} \\
\text{āmār dhān sudhā chāul}
\end{align*}
\]

All others will have paddy full of chaff
Our paddy will be full of grain.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{oinner goru nātā thengrā} \\
\text{āmār goru bhoisher pārā}
\end{align*}
\]

Other people's cows will be short-statured and crippled,
Our cows will be [stout\like male buffalos.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{oinner bhandār lare chare} \\
\text{āmār bhandār thāite bhare}
\end{align*}
\]

Other people's granary will remain empty,
Our granary will be full in no time.

1. The tulasi plant, however, does not seem to occupy the same exalted position in the rituals of the day in this district as in other parts of Assam. In the western parts, practically the plant does not figure in the ceremony in any special way.
In some areas the reciting of the rhymes starts with the chanting of the words 'kāti dol dol' or simply 'dol dol dol'.

In the western parts, people beat the embankments of the rice fields with long sticks while reciting the rhymes.

Another peculiar custom found in these parts is that of lighting some special kind of flames (bhoga dewā). Some cotton or jute fibre is tied to the end of a long dry jute stick (shinrā) and soaked in ghee or oil. When lighted the oil-soaked fibre burns with a big flame. This is called a bhoga. Such flames are planted in the rice fields.

As already mentioned there is no special name attached to the occasion. Some people call it Lakhi Bāti because the lamps are believed to please Lakshmi, the goddess of rice. Some call it Kati-Dol-Dol because of the chant uttered on the day. Some people in the western-most parts call it Buri Pujā but the significance of the name could not be ascertained.

It is obvious from the nature of the rites and the rhymes that they represent some kind of rituals having magical significance, aimed at the welfare of the crop. The rice plants either flower or have ears at this time of the year. They are most vulnerable to attacks by insects at this season. While the rhymes clearly express 'hopes' for an abundant harvest, the lighting of the lamps and flames symbolize the ritual destruction of the enemies of the crops. In some parts of Assam, as already mentioned there is the chanting of mantras
and even the employment of medicine-men highlighting the magical nature of the rites.¹

Many people also begin lighting from this day special lamps put high up in the sky with the help of bamboo-poles and continue it throughout the month of Kāti.

II Similar Tribal Festivals

The Bodos and the Rabhas have their own festivals which both in their significance and their manner of celebration have much in common with the Bihus. In fact many of the features of these important festivals are believed to have been drawn from these tribal people.

(i) Among the Bodos

The springtime Bihu is an important festival of the Bodo-Kacharis.² They call it Boisāgu and celebrate it in much the same manner in which the Bohāṅ Bihu is celebrate all over Assam. The festivities are spread over seven days and the various rites include

¹ Though called a puja, a ceremony called Lokhi Dak, which is very much similar to the one described above is held in North Bengal also:

'This puja is held in the evening of the last day of Aswin (September-October). When the paddy is flowering and ears are out, this puja is held in the paddy field ... A small hut about three feet high is erected with jute sticks. Two small earthen balls are placed on the roof. The balls are then worshipped with milk and ripe plantains but without incantations. There is no priest. The headman of the field (the owner) takes a powder containing mustard cake ... and dried leaves of pumelo (dzomura or dzhadi) in a small basket, lights a torch made of dried jute-sticks (sinja) and then moves about in the field holding up the burning torch and shouting the following ... 'Sor-ha: sogare dham aul dzhaul, mor dhan moth tsaul.' Even if the paddy of others does not fruit properly, let me have a bumper crop.— See C.C. Sanyal: The Rajbansis of North Bengal, p. 142. In some areas the cry is 'Insects and rats be off.'— See para. 2.

² For details of the rites of Boisāgu, see Bhaben Narzi: Boro-Kach.
cattle worship, worship offered to dead ancestors, house cleaning, eating of bitter preparations, putting on of washed or new clothes, exchange of good-will and formal bidding of fair-well to the festival, etc.

The first day is meant for cattle and the rites are very similar to those described earlier: the cattle are given a wash, their horns and hooves are smeared with oil and their bodies are marked with the soot of the cooking pot with the help of a bamboo pipe or a twig of the erā (castor-oil) plant. Garlands of pieces of gourd and brinjal etc. are made and offered to the cows amidst the chanting of rhymes. They are gently beaten with twigs of dighlā and bhedāi plants. The cattle-shed is thoroughly cleaned and the cattle are given new ropes.

The next day is meant for human beings. On this day special tunes are played on the siphūṅg flute. Houses and cooking pots are cleaned. People also offer worship to Bāthou and his consort as well as to their dead ancestors.

It is customary to eat on this day fowl’s meat prepared with a bitter herb called khungkā. There is also the custom of presenting gifts, which are normally home-woven napkins. Showing respects to elders and mutual exchange of good-will are also special features of the day. There is, moreover, the ritual of elderly men and women singing and dancing after drinking rice-beer.
From the next day it is the turn of the young men and women to enjoy themselves by singing and dancing to the accompaniment of traditional musical instruments like the siphung, the serpā, the khām, the gangamā and the jothā. Apart from expressing the joyous mood of the occasion, most of the songs of the area contain sentiments of love and desire exchanged between the young men (chengerā) and women (sikhā).

Another important feature of the Bodo Boisagu is the begging of alms (māgan) from house to house on the festival days. Finally, on the seventh day, a feast is held with the collections made and Boisagu is given a formal parting. It is also customary to eat seven kinds of bitter things on that day. After this, they become 'clean' by offering worship at the village shrine (gārjā-shalī).¹

Some peculiar customs are found among the Bodos of the south bank of the district. 'On the cow Bihu day Daranggiri Kacharis put leaves of the cane and the dighlati plant and the flower of the keturi (a shrub similar to the turmeric) in the rafters of the roof, on the fencing near the gate and in the well. Further, they sprinkle phaku or abir (coloured powder) on a sheaf of the three things and keep the sheaf planted upright in a corner of the yard. Next day Bathou is worshipped in the place. The sheaf is thrown away after the seventh day of Bihu. On the third day young girls make ornaments of flowers and leaves and put them on the arms, necks, ears and feet of old women.'²

¹ In some parts of Goalpara, the Bishua days are considered as a period of uncleanness which is ritually removed on the seventh (Māt Bishuā) day.

Bodos also celebrate the winter festival with enthusiasm. They call it Damāsi and like the Damāsi or Pushnā or Maghar Domāhi of their non-tribal neighbours, it is the festival of fire rites and feasting held on the last day of Paush. On the Damasi eve, Bodo women prepare cakes and other fare for the special occasion and the men also collect fish and meat for the special Damāsi dinner which is usually an elaborate affair. They also prepare small hut-like structures with inflammable material and call them bilāgur (a corruption of Bhelāghar). Young men and boys spend the night in the bilāgurs, have a very late dinner and set fire to it the next morning at the crack of dawn amidst shouts of 'Glory, glory, glory be to our village!' They also recite verses containing prayers for the immunity of the village from disease, for the bounty of the crops and for the welfare of the cattle. People have an early bath and groups of young men in buoyant festive spirit visit the houses of the village asking to be entertained with cakes and other eatables.¹

Most Bodos, however, do not celebrate the Kāti Bihu as such but simply put lamps in the rice field, in the cattle-shed, near the granary, and on the entrance to the homestead on that particular day.

(ii) Among the Rabhas

The Bāikhu festival of the Rabhas has less in common with the Bohag Bihu festival than the Bodo Baisāgu but even then, some of its features have interesting parallels in the Bohag Bihu.

¹ Bhaben Narzi: Boro-Kachārir Jana-Sāhitya, pp.4-5; R. N. Brahma: 'Boro-Kachārir Samskriti' in Asam Sāhitya Sabhā Patrikā, Year 13, No.3.
The core of the festival is the worship offered to ancestors and to gods and goddesses, chief among whom are Chāri, Bāikhu, Kāncha and Darmāṅg. Two priests take watered rice-powder and squirt it on each house of the village. In return every household offers them rice-beer.

There are also the customs of giving the cattle a ceremonial wash and of putting certain leaves in the cattle-shed as a precaution against cattle-diseases. Water purified with tulasi leaves is also sprinkled on the cattle-shed. Rabhas near Dudhmāi prepare a special food in bamboo tubes with bhedālātā, a medicinal plant with a pungent smell, main leaves, broken rice etc. This is called dingā sak. Sometimes they put fowl in the thick pudding-like preparation which they use in the performance of some cattle-rites.

Eating of bitter dishes is another practice followed by the Rabhas on this occasion. Dried fish with bitter seasoning, eaten at this time is believed to work as a preventive against disease.

Singing and dancing are essential ingredients of the ceremony. Some of the songs are of a religious nature and others have an erotic appeal. But all of them have ritualistic significance and are associated with the welfare of the soil, men and beasts. Young men and women dance and sing erotic songs (called chatkāmini chāthār) in groups.

Some similarities can be observed between the Bāikhu songs and dances of the Rabhas of this region with the Bihu songs of upper and middle Assam. Like the Bihu songs and dances, these songs and dances are performed by young men and women in an atmosphere of freedom allowed by society which turns largely permissive on these days.
In both cases they are the relics of a primitive fertility cult which equated human fertility with vegetal fertility. Not only do the songs and dances in both cases represent the ritualistic expression of sexual symbolisms, but the free and uninhibited mixing of young men and women often lead to exchanges of hearts and even elopements to which an indulgent society later accords approval.¹

A peculiar institution prevalent among some Rabhas of this region, which is seen in practice during this season, is what is known as lewa-tānā (lit. dragging the creeper). This is in essence a tug-of-war in which young men and women take part amidst much singing and shouting. The Hajongs living in the south-west corner of the district also have this institution, perhaps borrowed from the Rabhas.²

The Rabhas also celebrate the winter Bihu festival, which they call Damāsi, closely resembling the Māgh Bihu. Rabha women also prepare quantities of cakes and other eatables with the freshly reaped corns. The Rabha youths also erect bhelāghars and set fire to them amidst shouts of joy and chanting of rhymes. The cowherd boys arrange fights between bullocks and buffaloes in the fields. Community feasts held on the bank of a river or the foot of a hill are also an important feature of this festival.³

Though Rabhas do not observe the Kāti Bihu by this name, or by any other name, at the time when the Kāti Bihu is held, they

1. Mani Rabha: Chāthār, see Introduction.
3. Mani Rabha: Chāthār, see Introduction.
have their own autumnal ceremony called Grimbudā which they celebrate at the time of the junction of the months of Kāti and Ighon. The purpose of the ceremony is to pray to the god of the fields (Grimbudā) for a bountiful crop and to goddess Chāri for the safe reaping of the harvest. After the performance of pujas and sacrifices held in the fields, young unmarried girls ceremonially bring to the homesteads sheafs of the rice plant amidst ritualistic singing and dancing.¹

III Some Other Agricultural Rites and Ceremonies

Gosar Gonā, Gosar Panā or Gusi Newā: This is the ceremony that marks the beginning of the transplanting of sali seedlings (rowā gārā). On any auspicious day the cultivator observes a fast since morning and after taking a bath goes to his field which he has already made fit for receiving the seedlings. Apart from the seedlings he carries with him a banana sapling, black arum leaves with stalks and green jute plants. He places these things in the field, bows down facing the east and then plants the first seedlings in a reverential mood.

Muth Newā: This is the ritual of sowing the Āshu or bitri paddy for the first time. On an auspicious day in the dark half of the moon, the cultivator similarly fasts and washes himself before going to the field with a basket of paddy seeds, from which he throws fistfuls of the paddy.

In some places, the cultivator observes some peculiar rituals before seeds are sown: he strips himself naked, turns about leftwise and puts a mark on the ground. As reported by those who practise them, these acts are supposed to give immunity from the evil eye. But there is little doubt that they have connections with the fertility concept as well.

Ag Inā or Ag Newā: This is the ceremonial advance bringing of the mature paddy before the actual harvesting. It incorporates both a thanksgiving at the maturing of the paddy and also a prayer for its protection from pests and hailstorms before the harvest has safely reached home.

Some women of the family go to the rice-field with a sickle and a winnowing tray. After offering prayers for the safety of the crop, they cut a few sheaves, place them on the tray and reverentially bring them home. Meanwhile, the courtyard is swept and wiped clean with a mixture of cowdung and water, and when the ceremonial load comes, it is put here at a place specially prepared for the purpose. In those areas where it is customary to have a baistō pole, a few sheaves are tied to it and the remainder is placed in the barn. In other areas some sheaves are placed in the family shrine or on a specially made platform.

Sometimes a short mimetic act is gone through at the courtyard where the sheaves are first placed. A small girl (called buri) takes a few sheaves on her head and is chased by a small boy (called burā) who beats her from behind. The pair circles the spot seven or nine times after which they run to a nearby river or a pond and take a splash.
There is no fixed date for the ceremony and each family selects a day according to convenience.

*Nayā Khāwā/Nabān*: This is the ceremonial eating of rice from the freshly harvested crop. Regular eating of the new rice is permissible only after the ceremony is over. Though there is no fixed date it generally takes place soon after the winter harvest (November-December).

Rice cooked with newly harvested grain along with curries and other eatables is first offered to the cattle. Some of it is placed on banana bark containers (*kalārh dholgol*) and left in the backyard to be eaten by jackals and dogs. Only after this the members of the household partake of the food. Guests, generally limited to a few friends and relatives, are invited for the occasion which is considered to be a particularly happy one inasmuch as it marks the consummation of the expectations after the toils of the farmer.

*Bhimer Hāl*: In some villages, there is a peculiar custom known as *Bhimer hāl* according to which sometime during the winter season, cultivators go to the ownerless fallow lands of the village, plough them and sow a fistful of paddy each. This is perhaps because of the aversion of the farmers to cultivable land lying fallow.

*Dāpul Gārā*: It is the planting of the fore-part of a bamboo tree on a piece of uncultivated land by its owner, which according to custom, prevents others from tethering their cows on that land.
Bhotā or Bhuti is the name for the straw-effigies used as scarecrows. The practice of using scarecrows, both to keep away birds and to give protection against the evil eye, is very common.

Cultivators of all communities abstain from ploughing (hāl kāṃṣi) on some particular days. These include the days of fasts and festivals like Bishuā, Pusknā, Gasa-Lagā, Amatī, Idd, Muharram and so on.

IV Some Interesting Rituals and Beliefs

Amatī: Amatī is the term used in Goalpara, as also in Kamrup, to denote the Ambuvachi ceremony basically associated with an ancient fertility cult and also incorporated into the mother-goddess cult with Kamakhya as its centre. According to the tradition followed in these parts, during the Amatī days, mother earth is believed to be passing through her menstrual period and thus to be in an unclean state. Hence on these days the farmers would not till the soil nor plant any seed or seedling. Orthodox widows and Brahmanas abstain from all kinds of food except fruit. All household articles are believed to contact uncleanness and a thorough-going cleaning operation is undertaken after the Amatī period is over. As this is the time of the year when the monsoon sets in with the fullest vigour, it is usual to have continuous rains during these days and older people attribute the phenomenon to Amatī. The idea of the earth’s menstruation is

1. 'According to Jyotisa, when three quarters of mṛgasīrā are over and within 1st pada of Ādara, the earth attends menstruation. This period of time is known as ambuvachi in which the doors of the temple of Kamākhya are closed to pilgrims for three days ... ’ — See D. Sarma: 'Religious Fairs and Festivals of Assam' in Journal of Assam Research Society, Vol.xviii, 1968.
clearly symbolic of the belief in her productive capacity which naturally becomes particularly activated after the onset of the wet weather.

**Jaṭrā-Shāit**: On the Vijaya Dasami day, which is considered specially auspicious, cultivators generally observe a fast. They clean the farming implements and tie artificial pith flowers (*sholar phul*) to them. Household articles like choppers and knives are similarly consecrated. Students also give their books and other reading aids a special treatment. This operation is known as *jaṭrā shāit* or giving an auspicious beginning.

**Gasa-Lāgā**: This is the local version of the Dewali festival. *Gasa-Lāgā* literally means the lighting of lamps. The term is particularly popular in the western parts.

Lamps are placed in the fields, in the cattle-shed, beside the well, near the granary, at the corners of the houses and also on the road. Some people also plant a banana plant in the courtyard and place lighted lamps on pegs stuck into its trunk.

Many people light a few lamps on the previous evening on containers made of jack-fruit leaves, which are called *bhirut bāti* or *pret bāti* (lit. lamps for the ghosts). But the peculiar custom is that of lighting special lamps placed on tripods (*tekhātā*) dedicated to dead ancestors.

Another interesting feature of the ceremony as observed in Goalpara, particularly in the western parts, are some cattle-rites.
Gullāi (a wild creeper), gor-rosun (a variety of garlic), bish mārā (wild arum) and ginger are roasted and left overnight in the dew. Next morning paddy husk, mās kālāi and onion are added to these and all this is pounded. The mixture is then added to cow-fodder or made into small bundles with banana leaves and given to the cattle to eat.

The Muslims also celebrate the festival and they call it Divā-bāti or Chorāt. Among them some peculiar customs are observed. Oil is applied to the horns and bodies of cattle. Then marks are put on the bodies of cows, particularly lazy ones, with a heated sickle or a chillum (earthen tobacco pipe). Sometimes burning reeds are also used for this purpose. This is known as gori dāgā (branding the cows). In some Muslims villager, a straw effigy is thrown into the midst of a number of buffaloes who have been earlier enraged by goading and teasing. The buffalo that charges at the effigy first is considered to be the winner and the leader of the herd.

Terāi-Merāi: On the thirteenth day of the month of Phāgun (February-March), the villagers thoroughly sweep the cattle-shed with brooms, take some earth mixed with cow-dung and cow-urine in a banana bark and throw it at the junction of three roads. After this they wash themselves (and also the cattle) before entering their houses. The belief is that evil is thus cast away.¹

¹ The Rabhas of South Goalpara observe a more elaborate rite of public expulsion of evil. A boat (dingā) is prepared with banana trunks and barks, it is placed on the bank of a river where a puja is held. On the completion of the puja, the boat is floated and allowed to drift down the river. The idea is that ghosts and spirits are carried away in the boat. Meanwhile young men go from house to house with a bamboo cot on which each household places the old brooms, mops and waste-baskets. Each family presents them with eggs or fowls. When all the houses have been visited, the youths take the load to a place away from the village, dump the load and bar the way to the village with the cot.
Khori-Bhāngāni/Khori-Bhāngri: Khori-Bhāngāni is a rather undefined figure—neither a god nor an evil spirit—whose existence is vaguely believed in and who is associated with storms. It is said that Khori-Bhāngāni comes every year in the months of Boisāg (April-May), and Jeth (May-June) bringing along severe storms and breaking and uprooting trees on the way. It is also believed that after the day Khori-Bhāngāni goes back—which is on the last day of Jeth—there are no more storms.

This is very much similar to the belief in eastern Assam in Bardoichilā, a vague and mysterious figure, who, it is said, brings storms with her when she comes to visit her mother on the occasion of Bohag Bihu and also when she goes back.

Shing Jāwā: Shing is another mysterious figure somehow believed to be the brother of Mahāmāyā. On the last day of Shāon (July-August), he is supposed to go to bring Mahāmāyā from her mother-in-law's place and to return after thirteen days. The village people believe that the nature of the transport used by shing in his journey can be found out from certain signs left on arum and tulasi leaves. For example, long lines on arum leaves indicate that he took a boat whereas spots on tulasi leaves mean that he went on horse-back.

V Magical Control of the Weather

Primitive agricultural communities throughout the world have rites and practices meant for the magical control of the weather. Some such primitive beliefs and practices persist in more advanced agricultural societies either openly or in some veiled form.
In Assam where the rains do not usually fail and long dry spells, though not unknown, are not frequent, not many rain-inducing ceremonies and rituals are in practice. One particular kind of rain-compelling rite, the celebration of frog-marriage, is, however, to be found throughout Assam, including many parts of Goalpara in the south and the east.

A frog-marriage (beng biyā) is often an elaborate affair in which a frog groom and a frog bride are married, sometimes with all the rites of a human marriage including ceremonial drawing of water, bathing of the bride and the groom, sending of presents to the bride and so on.

Sometimes even a fire service (homa) may be performed. The marriage takes place on the bank of a river or a pond and the married couple is let loose after the ceremony is over. The belief is that rain is sure to fall after this.

But in the western parts of the district, where the dry spells are more frequent than in the east, some other types of rain ceremonies are to be found.

The Hudum Puja which has been described in Chapter IV is, as we have pointed out, nothing but an elaborate rain-compelling ceremony.

Beng-Kanda (lit. croaking of the frog): It is a peculiar device found in many parts of west Goalpara which is believed to have a rain bringing effect. A winnowing tray (kulā) is placed on a wooden mortar (urun). The two sides of the tray are joined with a fine piece of cane string. When plucked, the string emits a peculiar sound resembling the croaking of a frog (the tray on the hollow of the mortar).
acting as a resonator). Hence the name beng kāndā. This is believed to induce rain obviously because of the association of frogs with rain. The practice is similar to that of using the bull-roarer for rain-making in many parts of the world.

In some parts, a crow is killed and suspended from a tall tree with the belief that rain will fall.

On the other hand, there are some rites meant for reversing the process, that is, to stop the rains when rainfall is considered undesirable. The most common practice, found also in other parts of Assam, is to plant a broom or a few broom-sticks upside down in the courtyard. In some areas a jabā (china-rose) flower is tied to the broom. Another practice, not equally popular, is that of burying a husking pedal (dhenki) upside down.

But a peculiar custom is that of burying a cup (bāti gara). A bell metal cup is taken from a household (this must be without the knowledge of the householders) and buried under the ground. Then, there are the practices aimed at 'burning' or heating away the wet spell. Such articles as old sickles or spuds are heated in the fire and thrown into the yard. Often hot ashes are also thrown. In the western parts there is also the custom of lighting big flames (bhogā) in the courtyard.

In addition to, and also in confirmation of, what we have said about the co-existence of religious beliefs and practices in the

1. Crooke also mentions a similar rite obtaining in Northern India—Popular Religion and Folklore of Northern India, p.46.
2. Ibid., pp.46-47. Crooke mentions lighting of lamps and placing of live coals on a piece of tile.
district, it may be pointed out that the festivals, ceremonies and rites described in this chapter like Bishua, Pushnā, Kāti-dol (the autumn festival), Gasā-Lāgā, Gosar Gonā, Muth Newā, Āg Ānā, Nayā Khāwā, and the beliefs and practices connected with Terāi-Merāi, Khori Bhāngāni, Shing Jāwā and the rain-rites, are not confined to the Hindus alone; they are observed also by the local Muslims either in the same manner described here or with certain modifications. As a matter of fact, much of the information about the rites and customs given here was collected from Muslim villages.

VI Certain Festivals with a Religious Bearing

Durga Puja is one of the biggest festivals held all over the district in autumn. Puja pandals agog with hectic activity are to be seen in all towns and big villages. Special worships are arranged in Saktā shrines and in some of them big fairs are held. But it may be mentioned that although a holiday spirit is much in evidence among villagers who come to the puja pandals and particularly to the fairs in big numbers, the manner in which these pujas are arranged has something of an urban air and the festivities do not have much of a folk character.

Much the same is true of Lakshmi Puja. Worship of Lakshmi, the goddess of plenty and prosperity, is of course performed by some in the manner prescribed by the scriptures. Publicly organised pujas with fairs are also held in some places. But the ordinary village people do not attach much importance to a formal annual worship of the goddess. She is rather associated by the folk mind with crops, especially with rice. The women in particular are careful not to incur her displeasure in any manner.
Saraswati Puja is another festival which is celebrated even in the remote village but it is practically confined to educational institutions and has not much to do with folk life in general.

Sivaratri is another religious ceremony that is widely observed with appropriate rites. Special pujas accompanied by fairs are held in many Siva shrines of the district on the occasion of Sivaratri.

Another popular festival of the district, which has a predominantly Vaishnava character, but which is also celebrated by non-Vaishnava Hindus, is Deul. Deul is the popular name for the local form of Daulotsava or Phalgutsava held on the full-moon day in the month of Phalguna.

The Vaishnava satras and shrines take the leading part in the celebration of the ceremony in most places. Normally all the procedures enjoined in the shastras are followed. They include the ceremonial placing of the image of Krishna on a specially erected pavilion, fire rite (Vahnyotsava) with the symbolic burning of a sheep (mesha-dāha, popularly called bherā-ghar). The festival normally lasts for three days but in some areas it continues upto four or five days. The day preceding the full-moon day is called gondh and the ceremonial installation of the image on the special pavilion takes place on that day. The final day of the celebrations is called suenri, sowāri or surāli. On this day the image, smeared with coloured powder, is taken out in procession. People also freely throw coloured powder at one another. On the return journey of the image to the shrine people divide themselves into two groups, one group barring the way with a bamboo pole and the other with the image, trying to force
its way. A mock fight ensues, in which the bamboo pole is broken and the image is finally installed back in its place.¹

Janmashtami, the festival celebrating the birth of Lord Krishna is another Vaishnava festival particularly in the eastern areas. The nature of its observance is more or less the same as in other parts of India, with womenfolk taking a more direct and lively interest in the proceedings. While the rites connected with the festival conform, on the whole, to prescriptions laid down in the scriptures, there are a few ceremonies, also associated with the birth of Krishna, which seem to be based upon the folk tradition of the local Vaishnava cult. These are dadhi-mathan (the ritual churning of curds, also called dari-tāṇā in some areas), pek-bhāona or kādāṅg-bhāṅga (playing with mud) and particularly pachati, the ceremony of fifth-day birth rites.² Pachati is observed exclusively by women with singing, dancing and semi-dramatic performances depicting the birth of Krishna and the exploits of the holy child. It is probable that Pachati was a pre-Shankaradeva Vaishnava ceremony with a folk bias and was later modified under the influence of the neo-Vaishnava movement.³

However, in some parts of the district, more particularly on the southern bank of the Brahmaputtra, the Vaishnava character of the

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¹ This pattern of celebration of Deul is found in most Vaishnava satras of Assam but it is Barpeta which is famous for the grandeur of its Deul festival. Other satras including those of Goalpara largely follow the Barpeta pattern. — See D. Sarma: 'Religious Fairs and Festivals of Assam', in Journal of Assam Research Society, Vol. XVIII, 1918.

² According to the custom prevalent in lower Assam, certain birthrites, known as pachati, are observed on the fifth day of a child's birth.

³ P. C. Bhattacharya: Asamar Loka-Utsav, pp.48-56.
festival is not in evidence and Śiakta elements seem to dominate the proceedings. The centres for the celebration of the festival here are the Śiakta shrines and it is the deuris and deodhās who perform the main functions. Goats are sacrificed and pigeons are let loose in the name of the deity. The deodhās as usually work themselves up to a frenzy, drink the raw blood of the sacrificed animals, fall into a trance and make prophecies. Specially made garlands steeped in holy coloured powder are in great demand.

A peculiar custom is found to be in vogue in the Bongaigaon area. Somebody is made up as a king and some others as his retinue. The king, called Holi Rājā, accompanied by his retinue, visits the houses in a royal fashion and gives various orders to the householders. This seems to be a new innovation.

The Muslims of the district observe the Muslim religious festivals like Idd, Muharram, Fatiha-i-Dowaj-daham etc. with due solemnity. In many areas colourful tajias (locally called dāka) are brought out and special songs and dances are performed on the occasion.

Of the many fairs (melās) held in different parts of the district on different occasions, the most important are the fairs of the seventh Bihu day (Sāt-Bishuār melā) and the Durā Puja and Sivarastrī fairs held in many shrines. The Ashokastami fair held on the bright ashtami day in the month of Chaitra is another popular fair

drawing large congregations to the Brahmaputra, a dip in whose waters on that day is believed to give the same merit as bathing in the Ganges. Another important fair of the district is the one held at Shri-Surya hill on the full-moon day of Māgha. Over and above, there are many minor fairs of local importance.