Chapter VII

ESSENTIAL FEATURES OF BIHU FESTIVAL AND THEIR RELEVANCE IN CHANGING SITUATION

1. Preliminary Observations:

The various features of a festival are the structural unit of that festival. Obviously the three *bihus* of Assam are the constituent parts of the *Bihu* festival. Each *bihu* or constituent part thereof has some peculiar features. We have already gone through the traditions of the domestic and social customs connected with springtime, Assamese new year and agricultural rites of the *Bohag bihu* or *Rongali bihu*. This chapter deals with the traditional institutions of *Bohag bihu* connected with the cult of fertility.

2. Origin and Significance of Rati Bihu Institution:

Tradition and Change:

- *Rati bihu* is an important part of the springtime *Bohag bihu*. The ritual activities, merriments and ideals of the song and dance institution current as *Rati bihu* upto the first half of the twentieth century A.D, are

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2. In the previous chapter, we have focussed on the significance, form, content and pattern of the springtime *Bihu* song and dance.
3. *Rati bihu* refers to the springtime institution of the past where young boys and girls performed *Bihu songs and dances* during night hours.
traceable to distant Austric, Alpine and Mongoloid culture. The ancient Austric people associated song and dance with the fertility of agricultural land. The fact therefore remains that institution akin to *Rati bihu* in any form existed in the neolithic age when the Austric people introduced cultivation in prehistoric Assam. Evidently, the rites and rituals of the Austric people had evolved on their biological belief. They esteemed the earth as *mother* and performed phallic worship. The amorous songs and dances aroused by springtime urge and associated with the ancient *Rati bihu* institution were magico-rituals meant for increase in the productivity of man and crop. Subsequently, these fertility rites had become a complex whole of the *dhol* of Austric, the music of Alpine and the bamboo made musical instruments of Mongoloid people. Such assimilation definitely added some zest to the institution.

This grand old institution assumed the name *Rati bihu* in medieval age. The ritual form of *Rati bihu* was current among some tribes of Mongoloid origin in early medieval Assam. The relics of the ritual could be seen till the end of the eighteenth century A.D. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, the tradition of *Rati bihu* suffered a set back consequent upon the Burmese invasion of Assam. But subsequently it revived in modified form with the advent of the twentieth century A.D. Evidently, the tradition of the modified form of *Rati bihu* was prevalent among the tribes upto the early decades of the twentieth century A.D.

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6. L. Gogoi, op. cit., p. 4
7. P. Neog, *Rongali Bihur Nrtiya Git*, p. 11
8. L. Gogoi, *Nai Bai Jai*, pp. 76-115. The description of *Rati bihu* as found here was current in Sibsagar district.

R.K. Bordoloi, *Rongil*, pp 42-49. The *Rati bihu* as described here was current in upper Assam region in late medieval period
During this period, *Rati bihu* could also be seen among some lower caste Hindus with Adivasi affiliations. The earlier symbolism of agricultural fertility was missing in this modified form of *Rati bihu*; but the springtime procreative urge remained unaffected as the *Rati bihu* was still an occasion for exchange of hearts, choice of life partners and elopement of young couples. However, this form of *Rati bihu* also faced extinction from the 4th decade of the 20th century A.D. Although there were variations in the method of observance, a real picture of the common features of *Rati bihu* can be drawn from the descriptions of a few participants who are still alive.

*Rati bihu*, also known as *Choitar bihu*, is a hoary fertility institution associated with springtime. It was instituted by the marriageable boys and girls during night hours throughout the whole month of *Choit* before commencement of the formal part of *Bohag bihu*. Usually the participants preferred isolated places as *Bihu* ground and chose banian or fig or other big and bushy trees to dance thereunder. The songs and dances of *Rati bihu* were performed in the light of the moon or in the light of torch made of bamboo laths. Although the young girls came into prominence, participation of the young boys was also a must. Male and female participants instituted *Rati bihu* in separate but close ground.

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10. K.D. Borgohain, (82) Sripurua, Tinsukia described *Rati bihu* current in the first half of the twentieth century A.D. Some other attenders still alive are G.C. Buragohain(85) of Dhemaji, B. Koch (75) of Machikhowa, Dhemaji, A.Bora(70); Jorhat.
11. L. Gogoi, *Op-cit*, p. 4
The young boys assembled at their respective Bihu ground primarily with dhol, pepa, gagana and tal; the girls assembled at their Bihu ground with toka and gagana in hands. Been, bānhi, sutuli were also played occasionally. Two to four old aged men were present at the Bihu ground to check any unpleasant incident that could have arisen. Such watchmen were called Gabharu Bora. Evidently, the Rati bihu institution was a rare occasion to choose life partners and to elope with.

Before unveiling the drama of Rati bihu, the girls offered betel-nuts to the Bihu god. The group of girls then started singing Bihu nams and danced to the musical times of toka and gagana. This was followed by the Bihu nams of the group of boys singing from the nearest ground with the accompaniments of dhol, pepa, tal, gagana etc. However, the ritual of Rati bihu had begun with the singing of antiphonal songs sung alternately by both the sexes. The Bihu nams rolled over to Banaghosas of sexual frenzy with the passing of night hours. The girls danced deep into the night to the cadence of dhol and pepa played by the boys. At times, the dance turned off to courtship dance of one drummer or horn piper with one female dancer. The proficiencies in the art of drumming, piping and dancing were also considered important factors in the choice of life partner. Some girls even fled from homes to meet their would-be husbands at Bihu ground when their parents fell asleep at night. The sexual

13. L. Gogoi, Op-cit, p. 63
15. B.C. Allen, The Assam District Gazetteer for Lakhimpur, p. 139
16. The distinctive characteristics of Bihu nam and Banaghosa have already been dealt with in the previous chapter. Antiphonal songs were predominant in Rati bihu. See T. Phukan, B.N.T.A.N.S., pp. 67-72
17. P. Goswami, Op-cit, p. 39
relations of the run away matches were subsequently regularised by the concerned society under the existing social customs. The onlookers of *Rati bihu* either hid themselves from being seen or maintained a decent distance from the *Bihu* ground.

On the sixth day of the month of *Bohag*, the *Bihu uruwa* ceremony was observed to conclude the springtime singing and dancing. This day also synchronizes with the seventh day of *Bohag bihu*. On that day, the participants of the *Rati bihus* instituted in an area, met on a common ground with all the musical instruments. The participants wrapped a *Bihu Gamocha* around a tree and offered betel-nut to the *Bihu* god. This was followed by simultaneous singing and dancing of all the participating groups; excessive enthusiasm marked the occasion; significantly, the drummers, pipers and the female dancers had left their respective group and got mixed up with other group. The celebrations of this day surpassed that of the other days. Finally, the participants of the *Bihu uruwa* ceremony bade farewell to *Bihu* breaking the *tokas* on the *Bihu* ground and left for home without looking behind. Some young lovers also managed to flee on this day. However, regional variations were there mostly in respect of the day of the ceremony and the method of observance.

This type of fertility institutions were also prevalent among the aborigines of Assam. The *Boros* “abandoned themselves freely both to drunkenness and other forms of licentiousness”. It is logical to believe

22. S. Endle, *The Kacharis*, p. 50
that the acts of ceremonial licence in primitive societies expressed
reverential attitude towards the forces of regeneration and fertility in man
and nature; the very existence of society was dependent on such forces.23
The relics of springtime Bihu songs and dances throw light on the fact that
the ancient Austrie, Alpine and Mongoloid people conceived of these
forces and approved of considerable freedom to women. The fact that Bihu
festival was a period of considerable licence for the female sex in medieval
Assam is attributable to this primitive sanction. In a fertility institution like
the Rati bihu, the freedom of the girls was not “attended by any stain,
blemish or loss of reputation”24. In the form of Rati bihu discussed here,
the original meaning was not to be found. It was reduced to an institution
of legitimate love making and selection and collection of life partner.
Evidently, the contest of love songs as a prelude to marriage was a
common scene in South-West China, Tonkin and Tibet25. This custom was
also found among the Shan youths of North Myanmar26. The Rati bihu
institution of Medieval Assam is believed to have been influenced by the
customs introduced here by the immigrants from these places. This form of
Rati bihu is reflected in present day Gabharu bihu and Mukali bihu
organised publicly.27

23. B. Malinowsky, Magic, Science and Religion, p. 41
24. J. Butler, Travels and Adventures in the Province of Assam, p. 126
25. Marcel Granet, “Festivals and Songs of ancient China”, referred by P. Goswami in
B.B.A.B.S., p. 52
26. P. Goswami, Op-cit., p. 52
27. The origins of Gabharu bihu and Mukali bihu are traceable to Rati bihu of Medieval Assam.
These two institutions in a changing scenario, are being treated separately.
3. Significance and Changes found in the Context of Gabharu Bihu:

Gabharu bihu or Gastalar Gabharu bihu associated with springtime Bihu songs and dances is exclusively confined to the womenfolk and performance is also limited to the womenfolk. Since the ancient fertility cult was connected with woman and earth, it would be rational to believe that women in the past had some fertility institutions of their own akin to Gabharu bihu. However, the present form of Gabharu bihu had evolved on the female part of Rati bihu; its tradition was established consequent upon the extinction of Rati bihu. Evidently in late medieval Assam, this institution was known as Gabharu bihu.

The women, mostly the grown up girls, instituted Gabharu bihu in abandoned lands preferably under a tree from the month of Choit and concluded on some convenient day of Bohag. The participants assembled in the Bihu ground with toka and gagana, offered prayer to the Bihu god placing betel-nut and gamocha under the tree. Firstly, they performed a ring dance singing some ballads. Then some of them danced to the cadence of toka and gagana while others were singing Bihu nams. In a few places, some girls also played hornpipe and sutuli and at times, they also appointed a male to play on hornpipe. The hopes and aspirations of the women found expression in the Bihu nams of Gabharu.

28. T. Phukan, Bihu Namar Taiparya Aru Nandanik Soundarya, p. 62
29. R.K. Bordoloi, Rongili, p. 62
30. P. Neog, Rongali Bihur Nritya Git, p. 16
31. Ibid, p. 17
bihu$^{32}$. The dance forms included the patterns described in the previous chapter. But evidently, some of the dancing gestures suggested the springtime fertility cult of earlier times. The girls danced in pairs and occasionally one of the pairs impersonated the role of male making the gesture of union with fingers$^{33}$. Since the core of the dance was sexual, the girls used to dance a little away from the male eye; they demarcated their Bihu ground making a fence around with bamboo twigs or branches of tree. Gabharu bihu was instituted during night hours in the past; but in subsequent times, the girls preferred day-time and concluded at dusk under the supervision of Gabharu bora and Deka bora. On a convenient day of the month of Bohag, the girls gave ceremonial parting to their Bihu wrapping a gamocha around a tree and placing an areca nut and a betel leaf thereunder$^{34}$. From these descriptions, we may come to the conclusion that present day Gabharu bihu is the part played by the female sex in the drama of Rati bihu now extinct. However, the Gabharu bihu now noticeable in public platforms is devoid of earlier erotic styles.

The tradition of Gabharu bihu we have noted above, was in vogue upto the sixth decade of twentieth century A.D. particularly among a few tribes of Mongoloid origin who have since forgotten their own dialects and are harmonized with the culture of Assamese non-tribals. The Gabharu bihu now instituted by teenagers during day time in a few places near Borpather of Golaghat district is a modified version of the form prevalent

33. P. Goswami observed this dance form in the eastern part of Sonitpur district as early as 1957. P. Goswami, *Festivals of Assam*, p. 17.
34. This general picture of Gabharu bihu has been drawn from the descriptions given by some attenders who are still alive. These varied forms were current upto the sixth decade of the twentieth century A.D.
in the first half of the last century. A similar pattern is also seen in Laipuli village near Tinsukia. Ghar bihu, Maiki bihu, Chenehi bihu, Jum bihu, Zeng bihu, Toka bihu etc. are the variations of Gabharu bihu now performed by womenfolk both married and unmarried in publicly organised Bihu festivals. Of these, Ghar bihu, Maiki bihu and Toka bihu were performed by married and unmarried women within the house hold premises in the early decades of the twentieth century A.D. In Ghar bihu, the new daughter-in-law, if there was any in the family, was also caused to dance.

In early 20th century, the girls who were yet to attain puberty, the grown up girls who had already attained puberty and those women who were going downstream in age instituted Bihu separately in separate grounds. All these institutions representing the ideal and form of Gabharu bihu resumed during the period in varied names after the Rati bihu institution had received a set back in 19th century. The variations of the name of Gabharu bihu already noted, are attributable to local influences. Among these, the term Zeng bihu now widely used to signify Gabharu bihu is confusing. The term Zeng refers to leafless branches and twigs or an offence. Evidently, leafless branches and twigs symbolize wintertime nature instead of springtime nature. Fencing of Zeng put round the Bihu ground in earlier Gabharu bihu was not a measure to prevent

35. Information received from B.K. Barua of D.U.
37. J. Gandhiya, Op-cit, p. 3
38. A. M. Bhagawati, Sanskriti Malika, pp. 6-8
39. The Burmese invasion of Assam in the early decades of 19th century, demoralized the people to continue the existing cultural traditions.
40. H.C. Barua, Ilemkosh, p. 409
offence but a prevailing practice to demarcate and isolate the Bihu ground so that the women could freely expose themselves to their springtime feelings. In an environment lively with springtime nature, leafless Zeng is not related to Gabharu mon. Hence, the term Zeng is not itself significant to suitably signify Gabharu bihu. Evidence is not wanting to show that the term Zeng has been introduced in the recent past. The term was not prevalent in 19th century\textsuperscript{41}. It was first used in the 5th decade of the 20th century when Gabharu bihu developed to a performing art\textsuperscript{42}. It is pertinent to observe that the springtime song and dance programmes exhibited exclusively by womenfolk in present day Bihu, although have separate names and entities, are segments of the traditional Gabharu bihu.

4. Significance of Mukali Bihu: Tradition and Change

Mukali bihu is the modern form of ancient Rati bihu instituted by males and females together. The term mukali means free or open; as such, Mukali bihu signifies the Bihu performed by boys and girls together with a free and open mind\textsuperscript{43}. Mukali bihu, an entertaining feature of present day Bihu festival is publicly organised either in plat-forms or in open grounds. In fact, every Bihu dance form attended by participants of both sexes seen in present day Bihu festival is Mukali bihu and represents the hoary

\textsuperscript{41}. In his description of Rangpurat Sat Bihu, R.K. Bordoloi did not mention the term Zeng bihu; instead, he mentioned Gabharu bihu which points to the non-existence of the term Zeng bihu upto early 19th century A.D. See also R.K. Bordoloi, Rongili, p.62

\textsuperscript{42}. A controversy arose 50 years ago as to the suitability of the term Zeng Bihu in signifying Gabharu bihu. It is therefore confirmed that the term Zeng bihu was introduced by someone at the time of this controversy. See P. Gogoi, “Letters to the Editor” in Amar Assam, ed. H. Boroghain, 23rd May, 2000 issue, p. 3.

\textsuperscript{43}. J. Gandhiya, Huchar: Mukali Bihu Aru Bihu Na, p 11
tradition of *Rati bihu*. The art-forms underlying the ancient *Rati bihu* have come to light in the present day *Mukali bihu*. This modified version is incorporated with most of the features of ancient *Rati bihu* we have discussed earlier; the boys and girls play their respective musical instruments; the girls dance to the musical times of *dhol* and *pepa*; the drummers and hornpipers play on the *nachani cheos* to cause the girls to dance. The songs and dances of *Rati bihu* are now modified to the present day taste of the people\textsuperscript{44}. The most important feature of *Rati bihu* and also an attractive feature of present day *Mukali bihu* is the *Bihu songs* sung antiphonally by the participants of both the sexes. The *Mukali bihu* performed in present day *Bihu* festival thus gives the onlookers an insight into the ancient *Rati bihu*. The singing and dancing of the youngsters and the haunting melodies of *dhol*, *pepa* and *gagana* pervade the people’s mind with a nostalgic sense.

The term *mukali bihu* was first used to replace *Jum bihu* in Jamugurihat of Sonitpur district in the year 1957\textsuperscript{45}. Of late, the term *mukali bihu* is found to be popular all over Assam. It is instituted either on platform with a single group or in open ground with a number of groups.

The tradition of *Bihu uruwa* ceremony that we have dealt with in connection with *Rati bihu* and *Gabharu bihu*, no longer exists. This tradition was in vogue at the time when *Bohag bihu* institutions were ceremonial and connected with peasants’ tradition. The peasants gave a ceremonial parting to *Bihu* after the *Sat bihu* was over and thereafter

\textsuperscript{44} The modified songs and dances have already been mentioned in the previous chapter.
\textsuperscript{45} This information was given by R. Rajbongshi of Jamugurihat.
engaged themselves in agricultural operations with fresh hopes and aspirations. But in a changing scenario, the Bohag bihu institutions enriched with art-forms have now been detached from pastoral and agricultural background. These are now organised publicly merely for amusement where earlier work culture associated with peasants' tradition and so also the Bihu uruwa ceremony have become irrelevant. Instead, it is rather observed that the festivities of springtime Bihu overflow beyond the month of Bohag at the hands of some idle people. The existence of a festival called Bohagi bidai and held even in Jeth or Agrahana could be noticed a few years ago. This untimely Bohagi bidai festival was neither traditional nor a variation of earlier Bihu uruwa ceremony. The tendency of holding such untimely ceremonies in the name of Bohag bihu is still found to be reflected in Bohagi utsav, Bohagi sanmilan etc. held usually after the Bihu proper is over.

B. Significance of Huchari Institution and its Changes in Modern Society:

Huchari has been an inevitable institution of Bohag bihu since prehistoric time. Huchari is associated with the tradition of carol singing in Bohag bihu. The Huchari institution is significant for its concern for spiritual and social obligations. The co-operative character of early agrarian society of Assam is evident in ceremonial Huchari instituted in Bohag bihu.\(^{46}\) The origin and antiquity of Huchari carol singing remain obscure. Still, the nature and ideal of Huchari convince that this tradition

\(^{46}\) P. Goswami, Bohag Bihu of Assam and Bihu Songs, pp. 36-37
was established as and when the early agricultural people used to live an organised social life. The Boros or Kacharis have their own carol singing institution and they trace the origin of dance and music to Bathou. This institution is known as bi-hau among the Boros. According to folk-etymology of the Boros, bi means to beg and hau means to give\textsuperscript{47}. Identical institutions are also seen among other tribes of Mongoloid origin. Hymns for food are also found in Atharva-veda and Chandogya Upanisada\textsuperscript{48}. Likewise, we have the Huchari songs intended for food and community welfare:

\begin{flushright}
Moving round and round are we singing
And we will press for eatables\textsuperscript{49}.
\end{flushright}

All these give a comprehensive idea of the social content underlying the carol singing institutions of Bohag bihu since its primary stage. But we are left with no idea about the pristine form of Huchari institution prevalent in prehistoric Assam. However, in the light of the historical facts, we may ascertain the forms of Huchari prevalent in Assam since medieval age. Institution alike with Huchari is still current among the Shans of North Myanmar\textsuperscript{50}. There is, therefore, no doubt that the Ahoms who belonged to the same Shan race introduced the North Myanmarian pattern of Huchari in early medieval Assam despite the existing ones current at the time among various tribes of Assam. In this pattern, the Huchari team came only to the gateway of the family, beat drums and played horn pipes,

\textsuperscript{47}. The Boro term bi and hau suggest likeliness with the ideal of Huchari institution.
\textsuperscript{48}. S. Biswas, Harvest Festival and the Bihu Songs of Assam, pp. 2, 34.
\textsuperscript{49}. P. Goswami, Op-cit, p. 121
\textsuperscript{50}. L. Gogoi, Bihu Eti Samiksha, p. 6
offered blessings to the family and collected alms. But no songs and dances were performed. But in late medieval Assam, the *Huchari* teams reached the yards of the kings and nobles and thereafter, the custom spread in the whole society. The tradition of singing and dancing incorporated in *Huchari* institution, was definitely a subsequent development. This form is noticeable among the non-tribals. The songs and dances have mostly been derived from the tribal tradition. The spiritual songs and blessings and the Vaishnavite style of performance now observed are attributable to the influence of neo-Vaishnavism.

To offer blessings for material prosperity and wellbeing at the commencement of Assamese new year is the motto associated with the *Huchari* institution. There have been different suggestions as regards derivation of the term *Huchari*. Some exponents opine that the term *Huchari* is a corrupt form of *Ha-chari* of Dimasa Kacharis which means rolling over land; some exponents of the neo-Vaishnavism try to link the term with *Hari-ucchari*. A few others trace the term *Huchari* to *Ruchengri* dance associated with the *Chumcheng* worship of the Tai-Ahoms. But none of these sources precisely explain the chief motive of the *Huchari* institution. It may be reiterated that the present form of *Huchari* institution as also the functions assigned thereto have developed from the pattern introduced and popularised by the Tai-Ahoms in Assam.

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51. This was explained by Kshetriradhar Borgohain (82), Tinsukia, Assam.
   Also see L. Gogoi, ‘Bihur Bani’ in *Bihu Sanskritir Rup Rekha*, ed. J. Gandhia, p. 6
52. S.P. Das, *Sampratik Drishti Bihu Kriti*, p. 4. This is also confirmed by the Kachari cheo and Mising cheo of dhol included in the *Huchari* of mixed Assamese society.
54. P. Goswami, *Op-cit*, p. 34
Among the tribes of Tai-Chinese origin, the term *Hu-cha-ri* is explained to mean giving blessings to the family uttering in merriments. This is also the meaning of present day *Huchari* current in the mixed Assamese society. So, the term *Huchari* is possibly the corrupt form of the Tai-Chinese term *Hu-cha-ri*. This possibility can also be thought of from the fact that no evidence is found as to the prevalence of the custom of giving blessings in the carol singing institutions of the Tibeto-Burmans. Further, incorporation of the Vaishnavite hymns in *Huchari nams*, which added spiritual flavour to the institution exclaiming the greatness of *Hari* or *Krishna*, was a development of late medieval Assam. This is evident from the Sanskrit verse *nrilyali laliiang hariguna balilang gayati bihuwilasam* composed by Kaviraj Chakraborty the royal poet of Ahom King Rudra Singha.

It is so much obligatory for the agricultural family to secure blessings of the *Huchari* band during *Bohag bihu* as much as it is the intention of the *Huchari* band to offer blessings. Admittedly, local influences are exposed more in the *Huchari* institution than in any other aspect of the *Bohag bihu*. This phenomenon is responsible for the local variations found in *Huchari* from place to place. It is observed that *Huchari* carol singing is regulated by the *dhulias* from middle Assam to undivided Sivsagar district; in places beyond Sivsagar, it is regulated by the *namatis*.

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57. This is the verse of a *Bihu* song composed in Sanskrit by Kaviraj Chakraborty and incorporated in his manuscript *Aligan*. This manuscript is preserved in the Auniati Satra of North Guwahati.
Huchari was instituted as a ritual or ceremony by the rural folk of upper Assam up to a few decades ago before it became a performing art\textsuperscript{59}. The Huchari band of young and middle aged men is the symbol of raij. Participation of women in the Huchari institution of mixed Assamese society is a taboo believed to have emanated from Vaishnavite custom. This taboo is not observed in the Huchari of some tribes like Misings, Deoris, Tiwas etc.; even Huchari singing young boys and girls of a few tribes leave their homes for several days under the control and supervision of appointed officials\textsuperscript{60}. The Huchari band of mixed Assamese society, first perform Huchari in the yard of the village namghar and then visit house to house of the respective village from the night of the Garu Bihu day. The Huchari band conveys its arrival by beating dhols at the gateway of the family to be visited; this practice is in vogue because Huchari singing is a taboo in the family where there is outbreak of small pox, ceremonial defilement occasioned by the death of any member of the family and acute illness. Otherwise, the head of the family receives the Huchari band with great enthusiasm and reverence. The Huchari instituted at the yard of a family has three parts. In the first part, uttering the name of Hari or Rama the band sing of Huchari namas and perform a ring dance. In the second part, the head of the family bows down before the raij offering a sarai of betel-nut and alms; as requital, the leader of the Huchari band who is usually an aged man overbrims the family with best wishes for the new year and blessings for prosperity of the agricultural

\textsuperscript{59} This tradition was not prevalent in lower Assam region. The Bihu diya songs and dances alike to Huchari and performed by herdboys in Palasbari area of South Kamrup, have been already referred to.

\textsuperscript{60} P. Goswami, B.B.A.B.S., P. 52
household. This is the core function of the Huchari institution. Although the custom of offering blessings varies from place to place, these mostly conform to the Vaishnavite style. The money secured as alms are utilized for community welfare. Some tribal Huchari bands utilize the money so collected in purchasing salt and yarn. In the concluding part of the Huchari of mixed Assamese society, the young boys perform a dance with prior permission of the family. This is not a prevailing tradition in undivided Nagaon district. Upto a few decades ago, young boys dressed in female attire performed a dance in mock female style in some places of Jorhat and Golaghat district. The boys also performed dances in this part of Huchari by whirling kahi. The sparkling bellmetal kahi symbolizes lightning in the sky which may be a forecast of rain. However, the tradition of instituting this peculiar dance along with Huchari is a development of 2nd or 3rd decade of the twentieth century.

On a convenient day of the month of Bohag, preferably on the seventh day of Bohag bihu, the Huchari singing community observes the Bihu thowa ceremony. It is considered to be an evil omen for the family at whose yard the singing of Huchari is concluded for the year. So, the Huchari band concludes singing of Huchari at the yard of the village namghar wherefrom they had started Huchari. Alternatively, they select a ground of fallow land outside the village. On the day, the band sing

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61. As discussed in the previous chapter, the dance form and the theme of the songs observable in this dance do not resemble those performed by boys and girls in springtime Bihu dance.
62. This information was received from J. Gandhia at Srimanta Sankardev Kalakshetra. The dance form is hardly noticed now-a-days.
63. D. Chetia, speech on BihuUtpatti Aru Kramaavikash delivered in the seminar held at Srimanta Sankardev Kalakshetra on 28th March 2000.
65. P. Goswami, Op-cit, p. 35
Huchari to its heart's content and concludes putting a few pieces of betel-nut and pice on a banana leaf and stretching a gamocha between two shrubs for the Bihu god. The participants bow at the place and apologize the Bihu god for any fault or guilt that might have been committed by them unknowingly. Thereafter the whole community of Huchari singers returns home without looking behind. These rituals have variations from place to place. But since the present day Huchari has lost its ritual character, the Bihu thowa ceremony has become concomitantly irrelevant.

This is a general picture of the Huchari institution observed mostly in the mixed Assamese society. The major tribes who have not been absorbed in this mixed society, have their distinct Huchari institutions. However, the earlier significance and form of the Huchari institutions cherished by both tribal and non-tribal societies are now missing. The ritual or ceremonial character of Huchari is hardly seen now-a-days even at rural folk level. To offer and to receive gua-pan, the token of humble submission to elders and to the community, is uncomparable even with money and is a long standing custom prevalent in Assamese society. The custom has lost its earlier significance. As it seems, collecting money pressing the family is the design of Huchari now instituted in the yards of the rich few. In the platforms of Bihu festival, where Huchari is now exhibited as performing art, a mixed form of Huchari and Rati bihu newly termed as Bihu Huchari is noticed. Here, springtime songs and dances of youthful love follow the spiritual songs and dances of Huchari. This has created an upstart tradition in the age-old Huchari of Bohag bihu. It is to be reiterated that the Bihu dance part of the Huchari institution is
not the Bihu dance of Rati bihu. Admittedly, Huchari and Rati bihu have their separate significance and entity in the tradition of Bohag bihu. But the mixed form termed as Bihu Huchari is not traceable to any age in the dynamic history of Bohag bihu. The term Huchari explicitly explains the Huchari instituted in Bohag bihu which renders the new term Bihu-Huchari superfluous. Further, Huchari singing with its concern for social and spiritual obligations is unique by itself; it is unmixable and unmatched with the songs and dances of Rati bihu having typical features related to springtime love.

6. Costumes, Ornaments and Toiletries associated with Bohag Bihu:

The people of Assam have been reflecting high accomplishment in production and use of costumes, ornaments and toiletries from time immemorial. This is evident from the references made in early medieval literatures like Kalikapurana and Arthasastra of Kautilya. The Bihu festival is a great occasion for the people of Assam to decorate themselves with traditional attires, ornaments and toiletries.

We have every reason to believe that there were no particular garments prescribed for the Bihu institutions in the ritualistic era; since

66. P. Chaliha, *Op-cit*, p.4
67. This has a reference to the respective features, ideals and styles of performance of Huchari and Rati bihu discussed separately in this chapter.
Also see II. Dhekiyal Phukan, *Assam Buranj*, ed. J N Bhattacharya, pp 112-113
Bihu was associated with the peasantry, the participants wore indigenous dresses meant for day-to-day use in agricultural life\(^{70}\). As found in some verses of traditional Bihu songs, the male garments included cotton *churia, enga sola* and *kuruta, paguri, gamocha* and *tangali*; the female garments included cotton *mekhela, riha* and *hachali*\(^{71}\). The antiquity of the *Bihu* songs proves that these garments were worn in the *Bihu* institutions of late medieval Assam. The blouse worn by Assamese women is traceable to British costume and has become indispensable garment among the Assamese women after British annexation of Assam\(^{72}\). The ornaments used by dancing girls in the *Bihu* institutions of late medieval Assam included *muthi kharu* or *gamkharu, mani, jon biri* or *dhol biri, keru* or *thuria*. This practice is proved by medieval literatures and sculptures\(^{73}\). The garments and ornaments used by the agricultural people were mostly the items of domestic use. Evidently, Bhaga Raja (1641-44) of Ahom regime imposed restriction on the use of certain silk and *muga* costumes and gold ornaments by the common people\(^{74}\). We have therefore reason to believe that the unsophisticated rural folk who were protectors and promoters of *Bihu* used costumes and ornaments befitting their standard of living.

In early Assam, it was an accepted custom of the women to colour their nails and hand palms with the juice of *jetuka* during *Bohag bihu*.

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70. Bihu Nritya Git Khacara Niyamawali, pub. By Sadou Asam Bihu Nritya Git Prastuti Samiti, p.11
71. L. Gogoi, Bihu Git Aru Banaghosa, pp. 49-56; N.C. Bhuyan, Bohagi, pp. 10-23
72. S.N. Barman, Sanskriti Sankat, p. 31
73. P. C. Choudhury, *The History and Civilization of the People of Assam to the 12th Century* A.D., p. 331
74. S.N. Sarma, *Economic and Cultural History of Medieval Assam*, pp.256-257
The girls painted their lips and teeth by chewing the tender leaves of *barhamthuri*, made pair of marks on their foreheads with vermilion and proceeded towards the *Bihu* grounds. The girls with *Bihu* fever adorned their hair-knots with *kapou phul*\(^75\). During *Bohag bihu* of medieval Assam, *kapou phul* was presented by a young boy to his beloved girl. This practice is traceable to Chinese springtime festivals\(^76\).

The use of garments made of fibres or bark of trees was common among the plains tribes of Assam in the past. The males of these tribes had also been accustomed to the use of head dresses\(^77\). While taking part in dances, the most common garment of a tribal male was only a coloured *gamocha* of big size worn round the waist and above the knee. The white cotton *dhuti* worn covering caffs of the legs is now noticed among a few tribes. The common garment of the tribal women was a girdle hung from above the breast level and fastened by a *gamocha* round the waist. This costume is still noticed in some remote places particularly among the old aged tribal women. Apart from this, the tribes have many more items of traditional costumes which they wear in their respective *Bohag bihu*.

It is pertinent to note that the costumes, ornaments and toiletries prevalent in Assam have their regional and racial variations particularly in respect of design and style of use. Even today, the names of certain items vary from place to place. Over and above, new customs and motifs replaced the old ones prevalent in the mixed Assamese society in 19th

\(^{75}\) S.N. Sarma, *Op-cit*, p. 257
\(^{76}\) P. Goswami, *Asamiya Jana Sahitya*, p. 21
Century A.D. Although it was not a custom, the girls used to take part in springtime *Bihu* institutions wearing handloom made *mekhela* and *riha* of *muga-silk* ornamented in red with embroidery. At this time, red blouse also occupied a prominent place in female costume. All such changes occurred in the early decades of 20th century A.D. owing to the change of economic standard of the peasantry. But from the 5th decade of the century, springtime *Bihu* songs and dances came to the public platforms to be performed as a show business and costumes, ornaments and toiletries also underwent concomitant changes. The simple *mekhela-riha* of cleansing taste have now been replaced with rich variety of *mekhela* and *chadar*. This fashion, which the indigenous people cannot afford, does not seem to represent the traditional folk-costume associated with the springtime *Bihu* institutions. The *riha*, a traditional female costume, has now disappeared from major parts of rural Assam. However, simple and domestically woven *mekhela-riha* of *muga-silk* is noticed in some Bihu festivals now publicly organised in Sonitpur, Lakhimpur and Dhemaji district. The traditional male costumes have remained almost unchanged as observed in present day *Bihu* institutions of public platforms. But except the *dhuti* worn in some religious occasions also, the prevalence of *enga-sola* and *kurufa* are now hardly seen among the peasantry of rural Assam. The ornaments now used by the female dancers in *Bohag bihu* represent the traditional varieties; but these differ slightly in motifs from the earlier ones now preserved in Assam State Museum. But occasionally some female dancers are seen wearing more than one necklace. This is neither a traditional style nor is adaptable to present day taste since the fashion

78. N. Chutia, 'Bihur Saj Par Aru Asamiya' in *Ajir Asam*, ed. R.M. Bhagawati, 14th April, 1995 issue, p. 5
lessens the physical beauty of the wearer. Use of *jetuka mehendi* to paint nails and hand palms is still seen among the girls of rural areas and among those who take part in *Bihu* dances. But in painting lips, modern cosmetics have replaced the earlier *barhamthuri*.

7. **Significance of Bhatheli or Sori celebrated in the context of Bohag Bihu:**

In lower Assam region, the ritual traditions, relating to song and dance associated with *Bohag bihu* were not observed in the past. Instead, a festival known as *Bhatheli or Sori* held usually in the first week of *Bohag* was a special feature of this region and is still current in some places. The *Bhatheli* festival is known by various names. In parts of erstwhile north Kamrup, it is known as *Pawra-tola* or *Dahor phuruwa*. In southern Kamrup and parts of erstwhile Goalpara the festival is known as *Sori* or *Suanri*. In present day Darrang district, it is known as *Deul*; however, *Deul* differs from *Daulotsav* associated with *Holi* festival.

The ritual activities connected with *bānh puja* observed in these festivals suggest their probable relationship with ancient phallic worship. Bamboo is believed to be the symbol of male reproductive organ i.e., phallus. On this ground, it may be held that *Bhatheli or Sori or Deol* is

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80. J. Goswami, "Kamrupat Sat Bihu Utsav" in *Bohag Bihur Barebarania Cabi*, ed. P. Goswami, pp. 32-36
81. P. Goswami, *Bohag Bihu of Assam and Bihu Songs*, p. 16
82. K. Saharia, *Asamiya Loka Samskritir Rengani*, p. 44
83. N.C. Sarma, "Darrangar Bohag Bihu" in *Bohag Bihur Barebarania Cabi*, ed. P. Goswami, p. 92
84. R.S. Endle, *The Kacharis*, p. 50
associated with fertility cult and has a hoary ancestry. Two green bamboo are reverentially cut down by youngmen of the village; after cleaning and washing, both the bamboos are decorated by wrapping coloured clothes. The bamboos are then planted close in an open ground amidst beatings of drums, cymbals and blowing of conches. The village people bow before and touch on the planted bamboos in a reverential way. Both the bamboos are known as pawra of which the taller one is male pawra and the shorter one is female pawra. A little away, a small cottage made with bark of banana tree is built wherein some eatables and money are kept. These rituals are found in varied forms. In southern Kamrup, bamboo posts with uncut tufts are seen instead of tall bamboos. In Darrang, a deul having seven stairs is raised and four uncleaned bamboos are planted in each of the four corners of the hillock; four twigs of bamboo are tied with the planted bamboos.

Bānh puja is also current among the Tibeto-Burman tribes particularly among the Boros. Evidently, these tribes cherish the bamboo culture and make various household implements from bamboo. The Boro-Kacharis call the festival Bhaithel which means going downstream. They also plant a tall decorated bamboo, make a hut and place eatables alongwith a black goat, a black pigeon therein. These ritual activities are identical with those observed in Bhatheli or Sori by the non-tribal Assamese. This also provides grounds to believe that the bānh-puja of the

85. P. Goswami, Op-cit, pp. 16-17
86. N.C. Sarma, Asamiya Lokasamskritir Abhas, p. 274
87. P. Goswami, Essays on the Folklore of N.E. India, p. 65
non-tribal Assamese now observed in the form of Bhatheli or Sori, had evolved on the bānh puja of the Tibeto-Burman tribes. The original phallic worship in the form of bānh puja of Bhatheli or Sori was converted into Indra worship for rain and consequent good harvest. Indra is regarded the “sovereign of the clouds and waters which generate the grain”\(^8\). The village folk now fail to recall the original meaning of Bhatheli or Sori. Nevertheless, Bhatheli or Sori is still a fertility festival. This is evident from the fact that the agricultural people conceive the two pawras as the pair of bride-groom and their unification suggests the unification of heaven and earth; if heaven and earth are in harmony with each other, it rains\(^9\). Indra, being the supporter of heaven and rain, deserves to be worshipped by the agricultural people. On the other hand, the Deul festival of Darrang is a sanskritized form of Bhatheli. It has now attained the form of Vishnu worship with homa rites.\(^9\)

These magico-religious rites intended for rains and observed in these festivals cannot be isolated from preharvesting agricultural rites. However, it is now observed that the objective of these festivals is not a matter of concern for the rural folk; what the rural folk is concerned for are the melas held in these festivals. Holding of mela is now a usual feature noticed in these festivals. There are stalls of sweet and other necessary items of day to day use in these melas. The villagers flock to these melas.

\(^{88}\) T. Sarma, “Asamiya Jatiya Utsav Bihu Aru Lokasar” in Bihur Rup Ras Aru Tatva, ed. A.C. Sarma, p. 70
\(^{89}\) B. Kakati, The Visnuile Myths and Legends, p. 50
\(^{90}\) P. Goswami, Op-cit, p. 18
\(^{91}\) N. C. Sarma, Op-cit, p. 66
for a general atmosphere of merriment prevails there. It is pertinent to note that the participation of indigenous people has added a secular character to these melas although the festivals attached thereto are not without a religious flavour. Evidently, these melas have become the convenient grounds for choice of life partners for the marriageable boys and girls. As in the Bihu grounds of olden times, instances of elopement of young couples are also not rare in these melas. The traditions of holding buffalo fight, elephant fight and horse race could be seen in some of these festivals upto a few decades ago. These traditions have since disappeared and instead, the tradition of holding gambling is noticed now-a-days in most of these festivals.

8. Publicly organised Bihu Festivals in a Changing Scenario:

We are already familiar with the fact that upto the early decades of the twentieth century A.D., the springtime Bihu institutions and the songs and dances associated therewith could be seen among the tribes of Mongoloid origin; among the non-tribals, these institutions were prevalent among those castes who have now been scheduled as backward class. The tribal institutions like Dekachang, Gabharuchang and Murongghar play a significant role in keeping the traditional institutions of Bohag bihu alive; this was done by some appointed officials in non-tribal societies. In a

92. N.C. Sarma, Op-cit, p. 277
93. P. Goswami, Festivals of Assam, p. 23
changing scenario, springtime *Bihu* songs and dances are now widespread in the whole Assamese society. The state of change that has occurred in the traditional art forms associated with the *Bohag bihu* may well be compared with that of any part of India and other countries.

The springtime *Bohag bihu* is no longer the sole domain of the agricultural people; the art forms nourished naturally at rural folk level, have since crossed over to public platforms. In order to keep pace with the fast fleeting times, the traditional art forms of the *Bohag bihu* have now been refined and developed to suit stage performance before spectators of varied class and status. The public stages or platforms of *Bihu* festival are now noticed all over Assam during the days of *Bihu*. These community *Bihu pandals* are the common grounds for exhibiting songs and dances that have been surviving with *Bohag bihu* since distant past. Indigenous people are found to be involved in these functions either as artistes or spectators. The distinctive art forms that have survived among the tribes are also performed in these publicly organised *Bihu* festivals.

The *Rongali bihu* or *Bohag bihu* instituted at Guwahati in 1931 was the first publicly organised *Bihu festival*95. Records on publicly organised *Bihu* festivals in a few places of upper Assam in the 4th decade of twentieth century are also available96. But these endeavours continued for a few years. Only the *Bihu* festival publicly organised by *Guwahati Bihu Sanmilani* at Lataasil ground in 1952 is alive till today97. *Bihu* festival

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96. P. D. Chaliha, *An Aspect of Assamese Culture*, p. 32
came to be projected as the national festival of Assam from the time of its appearance in public platforms. A special feature of the present day community Bihu pandals is the holding of competitions on songs and dances of springtime bihu where best performers are awarded suitably. This is a part of endeavour to preserve and popularize the art forms associated with springtime Bohag bihu. After completion of individual performance, every female competitor is required to answer a few questions on various aspects of Bohag bihu. The questions are asked from the judges’ bench before a large enthusiastic audience gathered at the Bihu pandal. This new tradition, introduced by Guwahati Bihu Sanmilani, resembles the style followed in Miss India or Miss World contest. The Ahom monarch Rudra Singha also arranged Bihu in the courtyard of historical Ronghar and awarded the choicest dancers and drummers 98. In Europe also, May King and May Queen are selected in Maypole festival. In most places of upper Assam, the Shrestha Bihuwati and Shrestha Bihuwa are appellations of honour given to the best female Bihu dancer and the best male dancer respectively. However the appellations kunwari and samraggi given to the best female Bihu dancers mostly in lower Assam region, are irrelevant in the context of the existing social and democratic set up where people are supreme. The terms kunwari and samraggi take us back to feudalism of medieval age since discarded. However, the terms Bihuwati and Bihuwa are significant and adaptable to people’s culture Bihu.

98. R.K. Bordoloi, Rongili, pp. 65-67
As a latest development, the Bihu festival has spread beyond the geographical periphery of Assam. Besides being celebrated in various places of India, the festivities of Bihu are also celebrated in foreign soil. Reports on celebration of Bihu festival in foreign countries with all enthusiasm at the initiative of the Assamese staying abroad, continue to pour in during the days of Bihu festival. Further, electronic mass media has added a new dimension to popularising the art forms associated with springtime bihu. Of late, running cultural programmes of a few big Bihu pandals of Guwahati City are telecast through INTERNET\(^99\). Evidently, these arrangements of live telecast enable one to witness the Bihu programmes from any place of the world instantly. Thus, present day Bihu festival has not only entered the new era of technological excellence, but also received international propagation.

\(^99\) Vedanti Dot.Com., a web site, first arranged for live telecast of Bihu programmes exhibited in the Chandmari Bihu ground of Guwahati in 2001. For details, also see 16th April, 2001 issue of Dainik Janambhumi.\(^{16}\)