Chapter IV

BIHU: PLACE OF MAGIC AND RELIGION

1. Preliminary Observation:

Magic and religion are the essence of the agricultural festivals observed worldwide since prehistoric time. It is an admitted fact that primitive agriculture was totally dependent on nature's favour. The agricultural people were therefore induced to resort to some activities for obtaining nature's favour. These activities, associated with agricultural rites, were the ritualistic behaviours which expressed collective emotion of the agricultural people. The ritualistic behaviour creating illusion of the desired reality was the primitive magic intended to draw the physical condition of nature for man's favour. Such magical techniques in primitive agricultural societies were devised to increase fertility in men, cattle and crops. Where magic failed, these primitive people shifted to religion to control nature through propitiation or conciliation of supernatural powers for attainment of material prosperity. Besides, the magic based on popular beliefs and supposed to bring a lasting benefit to society, got blended with primitive worship due to people's devotion and the whole process assumed the status of so-called "religion of the primitive people."
The traditional rites and rituals of the Bihu festival of Assam are magical and religious in spirit since the festival is associated with the fertility cult of the primitive agricultural people of the land. However, it can be comprehended from the relics of early Bihu now extant that people's belief in magic and religion has declined for obvious reasons; age-old rites and rituals are now observed because of tradition, habit and for amusement, but not because of belief⁵.

2. Significance of Magic:

Magic is a fascinating ritual practice and its application is associated with the belief that supernatural powers can be tamed to act in desired ways by taking recourse to certain specified activities. In other words, a magical act is a rite projected to twist nature in a specific way to satisfy human desire⁶. Obviously, magic referred to here, is an anthropological terminology involving a particular primitive art and not the art of hand tricks as is generally understood. In every agrarian society, some magical rituals are there to ensure good harvest, fertility of animals and human beings and to avoid evil effects on human beings. Magic rests on the principle that by creating illusion of controlling the reality, reality can be actually controlled⁷. Thus, magic is an enactment in fantasy for fulfilment of desired reality⁸. It has a greater affinity with emotional outbursts, the day dreamings and the long unrealizable desires⁹.

⁵ P. Goswami, Festivals of Assam, p.2.
⁶ R. N Sharma, Social and Cultural Anthropology, p.31.
⁷ G. Thomson, Religion and Society, p.9.
⁸ D. Craig (Ed), Marxists on Literature: An Anthology, p.65.
⁹ B. Malinowsky, E.S.S.4, quoted in Lokakristir Utech by S. N Barman, p.13.
Magic involves two basic assumptions; firstly, that like produces like or that an effect resembles its causes; secondly, that things or persons that have once been in contact can afterwards influence one another. The first assumption is called 'sympathetic' magic and the second one is called 'contagious' magic. The primitive men acknowledged the supremacy of the law of causation of nature through their belief in magic and this law of causation constituted theoretical magic which was the initial form of science; on the other hand, the rituals like singing and dancing performed for fulfilment of desired reality constituted the practical magic. This practical magic was the source of primitive art. Magic is not a science; it is a pseudo science. Scholars like Frazer holds that "magic is the bastard sister of science and an abortive art". 

3. Significance of Religion:

Religion is conceived as a set of beliefs and patterns of behaviour by which people try to deal with important problems that cannot be solved through the application of known technology. These patterns of behaviour may include prayers, offerings, sacrifices etc. as projected rituals to manipulate supernatural beings and powers to the advantage of the concerned people. In anthropology, religion is a "set of rituals rationalized by myth, which mobilizes supernatural powers for the purpose of achieving or preventing transformations of state in man and

10. Frazer, op-cit, pp.48-49.
11. S. N Barman, Lokakrislit Utch (abbr L.U), p.56
nature". Ritual is, thus, the primary phenomenon of religion and is also the religion in action. But ritual is not restricted to religion only; ritualism includes many of the aspects of art and culture.

The supernatural powers and beings in religion consist of gods and goddesses, ancestral and other spirits or impersonal powers. Religion involves propitiation or conciliation of these supernatural powers and beings believed to control and direct the course of nature and human life. A body of myths associated with these powers rationalizes the beliefs underlying the concerned religion.

Religion is an indispensable part of human culture. At folk level of societies, religion is a basic ingredient of everyday life and at elite level, religion is restricted to particular occasions. Religion serves some important psychological and social purposes. It reduces anxiety and keeps confidence high to cope with reality providing comfort in the belief that supernatural aid is available at the time of crises. Religion sanctions a wide range of human conduct by providing notions of right and wrong and setting precedents for acceptable behaviour. In addition, religion plays an important role in maintaining social solidarity.

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4. Relation between Magic and Religion:

Magic and religion played a significant role in primitive societies seized by crude beliefs. The fact that women produce children out of their wombs and vegetation also grows out of the earth, provided strong grounds for the primitive people to believe that the fecundity of women was same as that of the earth\(^{19}\). This belief was prevalent in almost all primitive societies of the world and the ancient fertility cult had evolved round this belief. For this belief, the primitive agricultural people were induced to take recourse to certain magico-religious activities associating these with agricultural operations. Thus magic and religion emerged as indispensable features of the primitive agro-based culture.

But primitive magic and religion did not evolve simultaneously. Magic is older than religion in the history of humanity and ancient magic was the very foundation of ancient religion\(^{20}\). When magic failed to give the desired result, the primitive men naturally leant towards the belief that the whole universe was guided by some invisible powers\(^{21}\). This persuaded them for prayers and propitiation of those invisible powers for attainment of the realities which could not be achieved through magical deception. Malinowsky, however, holds that "religion is born out of the real tragedies of human life, out of the conflict of human plans and realities"\(^{22}\). Whatever the source of origin, primitive religion must have bred in primitive mind. But primitive magic and religion were not the

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19. R. M Nath, _B.A.C_, p.3
20. Frazer, _Op-cit_, p.34.
22. B. Malinowsky, _Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences_, p.641.
same thing although had a common objective and identical rites and rituals. In religion, the world is assumed to be guided by conscious agents who may be turned by persuasion for attainment of desired reality; it is obviously antagonistic to magic where course of nature is assumed to be determined by immutable laws acting mechanically. However, the primitive men lacked proper thinking to understand these differences.

The fact therefore remains that both magic and religion were closely connected with agriculture and allied arts of the primitive men with a common end. Magic and religion created symbolic environment through enactment of rituals in primitive societies although magic explains things with reference to supernatural powers and religion explains the same with reference to gods and goddesses. Through magic supernatural powers are controlled to the advantage of men and through religion prayers, sacrifices are offered to appease these powers for achieving desired end.

5. Place of Magic and Religion in primitive agriculture:

In primitive societies, many activities connected with agriculture, animal husbandry, fishing, hunting etc. requisitioned the help of magic and religion. As the advanced production technology was not known to the primitive agricultural people, there is every reason to believe that these people had to live on subsistence level with limited and crude means of production. Consequently, they had no alternative but to depend

24. S. N Barman, *Op-cit*, p.64
on nature for good harvest. The folksy primitive men were possibly guided by instinct rather than reasons; they believed that nature is guided by supernatural powers and beings who may be manipulated and satisfied through magic and religion for obtaining nature's favour. So, the primitive agricultural people took recourse to magico-religious activities which enabled them to adjust with their environment.

In the early phase of the agricultural societies all over the world, the rites involving magic and religion were observed during the agricultural cycle of the year connecting them with planting and harvest. These rites expressed an attitude of belief and reverence towards the forces of generation and fertility in nature on which livelihood and existence of the primitive people depended.

The extant magico-religious rites and rituals associated with prim­­eval agriculture are noticed even today among agricultural people. The primitive agro-based culture was illusively connected with woman and sex. The connection of sex rites with agriculture is attributable to the ancient fertility belief that the earth produces food crops just like the women produce children out of their wombs; the primitive mind was gripped with confidence that fertility of woman increases the fertility of the earth and vice-versa. And as copulation precedes fertilization, the sex cult became inextricably linked up with the cult of fertility. Thus the agricultural rites involving sex with magic and religion had evolved on

29. S. N Barman, Op-cit, pp. 24,34
30. S. Biswas, Op-cit, p.43
this fertility cult and the rites were intended to promote fertility in men and crops\textsuperscript{31}. Evidently the conception of 'Earth Mother' emanated from the primitive fertility cult, is universally held by the people all over the globe; 'earth' is the female consort of the 'Sky Father'\textsuperscript{32}. The Sun is projected as a male principle by some tribes and is held as a live symbol of the power of 'Sky Father'\textsuperscript{33}. The primitive agricultural people endeavoured to appease the 'Earth Mother' and 'Sky Father' through enactments in phantasy and religious prayers and offerings.

Magic and religion emanating from primitive fertility belief and from the conception of 'Earth Mother' are noticeable in the agricultural festivals observed in different parts of the world. In the spring and summer festivals of Europe, Frazer observed that the rude forefathers of the concerned societies, "personified the powers of vegetation as male and female and attempted, on the principle of Homoeopathic or imitative magic, to quicken the growth of trees and plants by representing the marriage of the sylvan deities in the persons of a King and Queen of May, a Whitsun Bridegroom and Bride, and so forth\textsuperscript{34}. The Pipiles of central America kept themselves away from their wives for four days before they committed the seeds to the earth in order that on the night before planting they might indulge their passions to the fullest extent; further, it was a custom on the occasion to engage some other persons in sexual act with their own wives at the very moment when the first seeds were deposited

\textsuperscript{31} S. N Barman, \textit{Op-cit}, p.48
\textsuperscript{32} S. Biswas, \textit{Op-cit}, p.37
\textsuperscript{33} S. Biswas, \textit{Ibid}, p.63.
\textsuperscript{34} Frazer, \textit{Op-cit}, p.135.
in the ground. The use of their wives at that time was enjoined upon the people by the priests as a religious and lawful duty\textsuperscript{35}.

In prehistoric India also a few ritualistic behaviours associated with song and dance were projected by the agricultural people to develop magical power and to appease the goddess of fertility for material prosperity\textsuperscript{36}. The custom of disobeying the ethics underlying sex was also prevalent at the time of agricultural festivals all over India. In the 'Sohrai' festival of the 'Paragonaiti' tribe of Rajmahal hills, the unmarried men and women indulged freely in copulation; this custom along with exchange of women continued for one month in the New Year festival of the 'Punjas' of Jaipur. The season of paddy plantation was a period of licensed sexual activities among the 'Hou' tribe of Sotanagpur; in the 'Magh Porai' spring festival of the 'Bhuyans' of Orissa, no woman cared anybody as husband or blood relation. The \textit{Bihu} festival of Assam has always been claimed by the female sex as a period of considerable licence\textsuperscript{37}. Such type of festivals were also found among the tribes of North Myanmar and Manipur\textsuperscript{38}.

Some rituals relating to the primitive religion of agricultural people are still current in some parts of India. The Munda women do the essential works of planting and transplanting in agricultural operations with a sacred belief in their age-old custom\textsuperscript{39}. The women of the Kulu district of the Punjab come to the field with a handful of young rice when

\textsuperscript{35} Frazer, \textit{op. cit}, p.136
\textsuperscript{36} S. Biswas, \textit{Op-cit}, pp.13,21
\textsuperscript{37} J. Butler, \textit{Travels and Adventures in the Province of Assam}, p.126
\textsuperscript{38} Asam Lekhak Samahay, (ed) \textit{Sam Pratibha}, pp 366, 37
\textsuperscript{39} S. C Roy, \textit{The Mundas}, p.477
the field is prepared for planting; they move and dab the young plants and sing as they work. It is noticed that most tribal women retain the role of priestess through the traditional association with agricultural magic and religion.

The earth is conceived as the 'Mother' everywhere in India as in other parts of the world; people keep faith on her supernatural power. 'Mother Goddess' cult is widely prevalent particularly among the tribes of India in various forms and she is worshipped in various ways with different types of rituals and dramatic designs. The Oraons offer rice beer to 'Mother Earth' before taking to cultivation and the women strike on the ground with open hand in order to fertilize the 'Mother Earth'; in east Punjab, 'Shaod' the 'Mother Earth' is worshipped as goddess; in Mirzapur, the Kharowars observe a rite at the time of sowing seeds to satisfy corn mother 'Hariyari'.

In the Vedic world, Prithivi was considered to be the female consort of the sky father. Although the Vedic idea of the earth has a religious philosophy, the goddess as depicted in Atharva Veda belongs more to this world rather than a celestial world. In earlier Vedic literatures, no reference to this cult is available despite the fact that 'Mother goddess' has been receiving the due reverence from the primitive people of India. There is every reason to believe that the beliefs and practices of the native pre-Aryans of India influenced the religio-

41. R. Briffault, The Mothers, p.247
42. N. Bhattacharya, Bharatia Dharmar Itihas, p.30
43. S. Biswas, Op-cit, pp. 37, 38
philosophic trends of the subsequent mixed Hindu society and the gods and goddesses of the native people have been absorbed in the Hindu pantheon afterwards. But the conception of 'Mother-goddess' was not un-Vedic although the deities of the corn field were not important to the Aryans; in fact, the care of material prosperity of men in respect of harvest, animals etc. was entrusted by the Aryans to the great gods.

The cow festival of the Vedic Aryans is a Sympathetic enactment. The festival may be summarized with “marking of a pair of calves as male and female, offering of messes of rice to a bull, a cow and a calf and lighting a fire among the cows.” This cow festival is a dramatic design intended to develop fertility in men and earth; the deification of cow reflects the personification of all reproductive energies of nature. The primitive agricultural people also believed that the tie between animal and vegetation world was closer and hence, they combined dramatic representations of reviving plants with a real dramatic union of the sexes for furthering the multiplication of fruits, of animals and of men by the same act.

The rites and rituals associated with worship of Devi or Mother Goddess and their time of observance convince that these are crop festivals. Basanta, Sarata, and Hemanta are believed to be favourable seasons for puberty; the earth becomes fertile, crops grow, flowers bloom.

44. S. Biswas, op-cit, p.42
45. A.B. Keith, Religion and philosophy of the Vedas and Upanisads, p.187
46. A.B. Keith, ibid, pp. 364-365
47. S. Biswas, op-cit, p.29
and fruits come out of the flowers at these periods. 'Devi Durga' is the chief crop-goddess and in her worship, a Sarbatobhadramandala is drawn whereon a Purnaghata along with Panchapallava and a coconut are placed. The priest touches these objects chanting mantras intended to hasten the growth of trees for bearing fruits. Thus the rites of 'Durga Puja' indicate the association of the 'Mother' with the cult of fertility.

The sex cult or sex worship is the other aspect of the age-old fertility cult. The sex rite as a process of achieving material prosperity was also practised by the Vedic Aryans. Certain hymns of Upanisada bear testimony to the prevalence of sex rite in Vedic days. The ritual practices of the sex cult became linked up with the conception of the 'Mother Goddess'. The identification of the earth with woman pervades the thought of all stages of culture. In the Hindu rites and rituals, innumerable examples of the comparison of woman with the earth and crops are found; Manu Smriti symbolizes woman and man as corn filed and seed respectively. Brahma-Baiwartapurana holds that disrespect to woman is disrespect to the great nature. In a mantra of Atharvaveda, 'Mother-earth' says that "like the germination of seed in the hole of the earth created by ploughshare, let child, cattle and all types of food crops be produced in me (Mother earth). It is thus evident from

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52. S. Biswas. Op-cit, pp.47-48
54. Manu Smriti, quoted by S. N Barman, L.U, p.37
55. Ibid, p.37
56. Atharvaveda, translated by W. D Whitney, 10/06/33
these early literatures that in Vedic religion also sex and magic associated with the cult of fertility existed in the agricultural rites and rituals. Keith observes that "the fertility of the earth and of the crops is produced by the mimicry of sexual relationships at the soma sacrifice, at the horse sacrifice and the actual performance of the sexual intercourse at the Mahavrata offering"\textsuperscript{57}.

Singing and dancing are significant dramatic designs of magic and religion associated with almost all agricultural festivals observed worldwide. The belief in the power of song and dance is long-founded. The agricultural festivals of the Mundas, Bhils and other tribes of India are associated with dramatic prayers of song and dance. The harvest festivals of the North-East India, particularly of Assam, are always seen to be accompanied by musical exuberance. The bodily gestures exhibited in singing are designed to indicate a physical and visual expression of emotion and desire\textsuperscript{58}. In ancient India, while singing Chandas\textsuperscript{59}, a type of magic song, the priest made significant movements of hands and fingers.

Singing and dancing associated with some agricultural festivals have a bearing on the 'Solar cult' and 'Fire cult'. These two cults are intimately connected with the cult of fertility and the rites in connection with the Sun and fire worship are found in different parts of the world. The Sun and fire are alike worshipped by the peasantry as life inspiring

\textsuperscript{57} Keith, Op-cit, p.987
\textsuperscript{58} P. Goswami, B. B. A. B. S., p 121
\textsuperscript{59} S. Biswas, Op-cit, p.34
forces. The observance of these rites associated with agricultural festivals coincides with the arrival of the Sun at its highest point in the sky\textsuperscript{60}. The heavenly shower is a pre-requisite for growth of plants on earth. Meteorologically, this shower from the sky depends on the position of the Sun in relation to the movement of the earth. Although this is a natural phenomenon, rain is believed by the agricultural people to be the blissful gift of the heavenly spirit; the eternal love between the sky-father and earth-mother and the consequent ejaculation of rain by the sky father renders the earth-mother fertile; accordingly ceremonial techniques are devised, magic is cast and projected, prayers are offered to appease the heavenly spirit for rain\textsuperscript{61}.

Frazer has given some specimens of technique practised by different tribes for magical control of the sun\textsuperscript{62}. He further gives elaborate account of the fire cult prevailing among the peasants of Europe since time immemorial. All over Europe, the peasants are accustomed to kindle bonfires on some particular days of the year and perform dance round or leap over the fires; plentiful harvest is believed to be ensured by leaping over the fire\textsuperscript{63}.

The existence of a number of temples dedicated to sun gives ample evidence to the prevalence of the 'Sun cult' in India since pre-historic time. We have already found that the sun is said to be singing out food for people in the \textit{Chandogya Upanisada}, \textit{Agni} has been recognized as sun

\textsuperscript{60} Frazer, \textit{Op-cit}, pp. 632, 636.
\textsuperscript{63} ibid, pp. 609, 641.
and Sayana comments that Agni is the priest who causes the union between the 'Sky father' and the 'Earth-mother' for heavenly shower. The people of India have thus recognized fire and sun since primitive ages as creative powers for fertilization of soil.

The prevalence of the 'Sun cult' in Assam is evident from icons of Sun or Surya or Vishnu in some temples and from images of Surya or Vishnu excavated in some places. However, the earliest reference to Sun worship in Pragjyotisha is found in the Grhya Sutras. Although the earlier significance of the Sun cult and fire worship is now lost, the relics of the rites and rituals associated with the cult is noticed in some form or other, even today, among the Hinduised people particularly in their Bihu festivals.

6. Place of Magic and Religion in Bihu Festivals:

The rites and rituals of the Bihu festival that have come down from the hoary past, definitely give an insight into the primitive mind. It has been already noted in the preceding chapter that Bohag bihu, Kati bihu, and Magh bihu constitute a festival complex covering the annual life cycle of the peasantry of Assam. As in the harvesting rites observed in other parts of India and abroad, magic and religion are also noticed in the rites and rituals of the Bihu festival of the people of Assam being

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64. Macdonell, Vedic Reader, p. 39.
67. Ibid, p. 408.
observed since remote past. These rites and rituals are directly or indirectly connected with the fertility cult of the primitive agricultural people of Assam.

The desire for abundant harvest induced the people to devise ceremonial techniques associated with magic and religion which centred round the cult of fertility. The song and dance ritual observed in Bohag bihu has a sexual basis indicating its association with the springtime fertility\textsuperscript{68}. The sexual gestures exhibited in this ritual is a magical device intended to increase the fertility of man and earth; at the same time, this ritual is a prayer connected with primitive religion designed to appease the 'Sky father' for heavenly shower in order to quicken the fertility of soil. The rites observed in the Cow-bihu are meant for welfare of the cattle. The ritual of striking cattle with leaves of green sprig chanting mantras is magical in intent\textsuperscript{69}. Cow is regarded as Go-Lakshmi and in some places cow is worshipped in the cowshed employing a priest\textsuperscript{70}. The paste prepared with the combination of matikalai pulse, keturi (curcuma rubescens), tender mango, couch grass and roots of some wild herbs and rubbed on the foreheads and horns of the cattle keeping the left out paste for use by the members of the family, is believed to be a remedial measure against various cattle and human diseases. Another magical belief associated with the Cow-bihu is that the old ropes used to tie up the cattle are cast away through the legs of the cattle. This suggests the casting off of all the evil that may prove harmful to the cattle\textsuperscript{71}. Lighting

\textsuperscript{68} P. Goswami, \textit{Op-cif}, p. 37.
\textsuperscript{69} \textit{Ibid}, p 13.
\textsuperscript{71} P. Goswami, \textit{Op-cit}, p. 13.
of fire with paddy chaff and certain strong smelling green leaves in front
of the cow-shed is a magico-ritual performed to provide a remedy to the
cattle diseases and to drive away mosquitos and other insects. The ashes
are strewn over the orchards and gardens to scare away leeches and to
make the crops fruitful. This ritual may have a probable relation with the
ancient fire festival. The *Atharvaveda* also mentions such a sacrifice
offered with chaff as the magic intended to frustrate the effects of
demons. The writing of a Sanskrit mantra on the leaves of *nahar* and
keeping of under the rafters is magical in intent. This *mantra* is a prayer
to *Mahadeva*, the howling terrible god of the Vedas and is meant for
protection of the house against storms, lightning and fire. Chess type
game played with *cowrie* in *Bohag bihu* is intended to cause rain.
*Cowrie* is a symbol of reproductive organ, the *cowrie* board is the symbol
of earth and the whole *cowrie* game is the symbol of agricultural and
pastoral life. The use of *cowries* indicates the primitive magic relating to
crops and sex. Egg is believed to be a symbol of reproduction and the
egg-breaking contest held in *Bohag bihu* is meant for increasing the
productivity of crops. The custom of chewing *neem* leaves in the
morning of the ‘Cow-Bihu’ day and eating of seven kinds of herbs in
lower Assam and one hundred and one kinds of herbs in upper Assam on
the seventh day of *Bohag bihu* is intended to keep away diseases and
medicines for the whole year.

The ritual of singing *Huchari* in *Bohag bihu* is observed in a reverential way. The *Huchari* institution is primarily meant for offering blessings to the household for material prosperity. Both magic and religion are noticed in the *Huchari* institution. The *Huchari* songs sung with bodily expressions by moving round and round are songs for food. Music has been given a 'divine origin' in *Huchari* institution.

Negative magic or taboo has also been playing a significant role in some rites and rituals associated with the *Bohag bihu*. In the *Bihu thowa* ceremony observed to bid farewell to *Huchari* singing, the items offered to *Bihu* god are not taken away by any-one and the spot where offerings are placed is considered as taboo and even dangerous. Another ceremony called *Bihu uruwa*, is associated with the farewell of romantic *Bihu* songs and dances performed by young boys and girls. In this ceremony, after the ritual enactments are over, the participants return home without looking behind; the musical instruments used in singing and dancing, are not played until the advent of the following *Bohag bihu*. The *Bihu* god, as the belief goes, may cast evil effect if these taboos are violated.

The *Kati bihu*, observed on the day of autumnal equinox signifies that the seed has been sown and the 'Mother Earth' has conceived. Both

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81. P. Goswami, *Op-cit*, p. 36
82. *Ibid*, p. 35.
magic and religion are noticed in the rites and rituals observed in this Bihu. Tulasī the symbol of goddess Lakṣmi, is worshipped lighting earthen lamps and offering naibedya and prayer for well-being of paddy. A string is put on the neck of a mouse and kept tied in the paddy field. This magical practice is intended to preserve the paddy from the depredations of the locusts and other evil spirits. Spells are also cast over white mustard seeds and scattered on the paddy field; this is intended to bind the mouths of animals, birds, rats etc. that may harm the paddy. Lighting of the sky-lamp hanging from the tip of a tall bamboo is supposed to show the souls of dead persons the way to heaven or to enable one to attain the abode of Vishnu.

Agni Puja and feasting are the main features of Magh bihu, the post harvest festival of Assam observed in winter solstice. The burning of Meji or Bhelaghar in Magh bihu is a religious rite relating to Agni Puja which had evolved round the primitive fire cult. Agni was recognized by the primitive agricultural people as a creative agent which favours fertilization of soil. The ashes and half - burnt bamboo thrown near the fruit bearing trees are intended to increase fertility of fields and gardens. While it is customary to eat fish and meat in the meals of the uruka night eating of these non-vegetarian food items in the lunch of the Magh bihu day is a taboo. Another magical belief prevailing in Magh

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86. B. K Barua, *Op-cit*, pp. 73-78.
90. B. K Barua, *Op-cit*, pp. 73-78
92. Ibid, p. 10.
bihu is that by eating pointa-bhat on the first day of the month of Magh, one becomes as strong as a tiger. These major ritual-practices involving magic and religion are observed in the Bihu festival of the people of Assamese mainstream. However, local variations are noticed among these people in case of some minor ritual practices. Besides, the magico-religious ritual-practices discussed above, are observed in distinctive style by different tribes in their respective Bihu festivals. Evidently, the aims and objectives of the tribal and non-tribal magics and religions associated with their Bihu festivals are identical.

7. Bihu Festivals: Values of Magic and Religion in a changing scenario:

Magic and religion were the vital aspects of the early Bihu festivals. As in other parts of the world, the primitive agricultural people of Assam also did not have the least doubt on the efficacy of magic. The primitive magics succeeded in achieving the desired results because of the persevering efforts of the people. Magics changed the subjective attitude of the primitive people towards reality and so magics could change the reality also.

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93. T. Sarma, Op-cit, p. 72
94. S. N Barman, Op-cit, p. 60.
95. G. Thomson, Religion and Society, p. 9.
Primitive magic succeeded for their timely projections. Evidently, the agricultural people of Assam observed the 'song and dance' ritual of *Bohag bihu* in spring season when the reproductive urges of birds, animals and of human beings naturally get a boost and the first shower of the year falls on earth which quickens the fertility of agricultural land. The stimulating effect of music has also been proved by modern science. A scientific experiment carried out by Dorothy Retallack of Denver, Colorado in the twentieth century, demonstrated the effects of different kinds of music on a variety of plants. Besides, a few primitive magics succeeded for coincidence with desired realities.

But all primitive magics associated with the *Bihu* festival could not produce the desired results. Admittedly because magic is a sort of pseudoscience and it differs from modern science in its misconception of the nature of the particular laws that governs the succession of events. Hence, primitive magic was false and barren. Further, magic failed because the emphasis of the primitive people was more on rightly projection of magic-ritual than on persevering efforts required to achieve a desired result. Wherever magic failed, the primitive people believed that some faults might have developed with the projection and enactment of the concerned magic. But the repeated failures of magic rendered the primitive people helpless; such undesirable situations induced them to

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believe in some invisible supernatural beings who might be acting from behind and naturally these people leant towards prayers to appease those perceived beings for help. And thus, unsuccessful magics underwent transformation into religion. This fusion of magic and religion in primitive agricultural societies was a usual phenomenon\textsuperscript{102}. The fire of \textit{meji} of the post harvesting 'Magh-bihu' of Assam was originally associated with the fire cult of the primitive people where fire was employed as a creative agent\textsuperscript{103}. This fire was subsequently transformed into fire-worship\textsuperscript{104}. There is, therefore, every reason to believe that some religious elements crept into the early \textit{Bihu} festivals in this way.

Religion is ritual in action\textsuperscript{105}. It is based on belief rationalized by myths associated with supernatural beings. No natural law governs the success of religious events; obviously therefore, the 'primitive religion' did not succeed in achieving the desired realities. This primitive variety of religion lacked philosophical speculation noticed in the higher religions today\textsuperscript{106}. Although religion is a part of all known cultures, no known culture has achieved complete certainty in controlling the universe\textsuperscript{107}. Religion of the primitive people connected with the \textit{Bihu} festival of Assam was also no exception. Despite this negative aspect of primitive religion, it is evident from primitive people's devotion and adherence to religion that their religion was not devoid of some positive aspects. As in every primitive society, sustenance of life in the primitive

\textsuperscript{102} Frazer, \textit{Op-cit}, p. 54.
\textsuperscript{103} B. K Barua, \textit{Op-cit}, pp. 73-78.
\textsuperscript{104} L. Gogoi, \textit{Op-cit}, p. 43.
\textsuperscript{106} S. Narayan, \textit{Social Anthropology}, p. 69.
society of Assam was also dependent on nature's favour; people believed that nature was guided by some supernatural beings. So, the primitive agricultural people of Assam practised various rituals in their Bihu festivals to appease gods and goddesses of fertility. This reduced their anxiety caused by failures in achieving nature's favour through other technological and organisational means and kept their confidence high and prepared them to cope with reality\textsuperscript{108}. These positive aspects definitely added a survival value to religion.

In the present day context of changing scenario, it is observed that the primitive magics and religion attached to the Bihu festivals of Assam have shed much of their earlier significance. This is attributable to the changing attitude of the people towards traditional culture. It is this attitude of the people for which the tradition of the Bihu festival is passing through the present generation not because of the underlying beliefs, but because of habit and perhaps to give an outlet to one's repressed feelings\textsuperscript{109}. The people at folk level of Assamese society are found to be less prone to changes, which has rendered the household ritual practices unchanged although these are now confined to a few agricultural people with a declining intensity. But the conventional attitude towards magic and religion attached to these rituals is not a matter of concern for the agricultural people these days. The magic and religion associated with the song and dance ritual have been up-rooted at all levels of the Assamese society. Similarly, primitive religion associated with the fire cult and other harvesting rites has been replaced with new religion\textsuperscript{110}. All these aspects of change in the tradition of Bihu festival are being treated in a separate chapter.

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid, p. 358.
\textsuperscript{109} P. Goswami, Festivals of Assam, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{110} P. C Choudhury, H. C. P. A., p. 408.