Chapter V

BOHAG BIHU AND PREHARVESTING RITES:
TRADITION AND CHANGE

1. Preliminary Observation:

The three *Bihus* observed by the people of Assam at three different phases of agricultural operation during a year may constitute a festival complex. The *Bohag Bihu* or *Rongali Bihu*, a part of the annual *Bihu* festival, has been causing the largest amount of stir among the people of this region irrespective of caste-creed, colour, religion and language since time immemorial¹. This *Bohag Bihu*, observed in the month of *Bohag* is significant for its hoary association with springtime, Assamese new year and agricultural rites of the peasants of Assam².

People of diverse races constitute the Assamese society; so a composite culture is cherished by the people of Assam³. Evidently therefore, the *Bihu* festival of Assam, which had evolved on the primitive agro-based culture of the land, is flamboyant with the cultural contributions of the diverse races who came to and settled in different parts of Assam with distinctive cultural traits⁴. This phenomenon is responsible for regional and racial variations which may be observed in

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1. P. Goswami, *BBAB.S.* p.7
the tradition of the Bihu festival. The Bihu festival is embellished with Aryan and non-Aryan cultural elements and it has been projected as the national festival of Assam shared by indigenous people. At the same time, the different tribes are also seen to have observed the rites in isolation in their respective traditional style. Our treatment here will confine to the general features of the Bihu festival projected as the national festival of Assam in order to focus on the change in tradition in the changing socio-cultural milieu.

Tradition is never static. The tradition of the Bihu festival is also found to be no exception since it has been undergoing changes alongside the social changes at different levels of Assamese society in different periods of the dynamic history and prehistory of Assam.

2. Bohag Bihu and Springtime Rites:

The Bohag bihu is known for Springtime gaiety which induce people to call it Rongali bihu. The significance of spring for its power of creativity is universally held all over the globe. This is evident from the springtime festivals observed worldwide. The harvesting rites connected with fertility cult and observed in springtime are most often sexual in nature.

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6. The festival of a country where almost all inhabitants share merriment and whole-heartedly participate, is the national festival of that country. - L.N. Bezbarua, *Bisbarua Rachanawali*, part-II, p.1885.
8. The social changes in Assam and the consequent changes in the attitude of the people towards traditional culture will be treated in a separate chapter.
In primitive societies, as people had to seek everything from nature, it is logical to hold that the relation between nature and the agricultural people was inextricable. Usually, the advent of spring becomes visible in nature in the magical touch of spring, nature regains its splendid beauty and vigour faded away in winter; all living beings also become instinctive with impulse for procreation at the creative power of spring. There is every reason to believe that the primitive people in the past took full advantage of the situation.

Evidently, in all monsoon-ridden areas, the spring comes between winter and summer. The Assam region is exposed to south-west monsoon. As in today, the cultivation of Sali variety of paddy started in the past as soon as the spring was over and low lying lands were inundated by monsoon rain. By that time, the Ahu paddy plants had grown luxuriantly in the fields. The Bohag bihu of Assam has been getting associated with fertility belief and paddy cultivation. The primitive agricultural people of Assam conceivably gathered experience from nature that the monsoon rain which followed the spring was vital for good harvest. Guided by instinct, they thought of doing something at that time to awaken the propensity for fertilization in mother earth in order to ensure bountiful harvest. Assumably to cope with the situation, the agricultural people of Assam in the remote past celebrated the moments with much ado before taking to cultivation. This festivity used to come

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13. Op-cit, p.31
15. Op-cit, p.2
spontaneously at the advent of spring; people succumbed to the arousing
effect of spring and filled the festive occasion with spontaneous
utterances and lascivious physical exertions in order to give expression to
the season’s mood. It was indeed a natural phenomenon wherein
involved the primitive enactments of dramatic designs intended not only
to have sufficient agricultural produce but also to increase man power for
survival in ceaseless warfare against nature. The sexual overtones of the
*Bihu* songs and dances of Assam\(^\text{16}\) as also the sex-rites prevalent among
some tribes in other parts of India\(^\text{17}\), provide enough grounds to believe
that the sort of dramatic designs described above and evolved on the cult
of fertility had been enacted through springtime festivities at the earliest
stage of the agricultural society in Assam.

Since tradition never remains static, the springtime rites observed
by the primitive agricultural people of Assam must have undergone
changes over the centuries. It has been already noted that so many races
of people had come to and settled in prehistoric Assam who exerted a lot
of influence on the existing tradition of agro-based culture of the land\(^\text{18}\).
Inevitably the scope of the festival was also extended with incorporation
of many other rites and rituals consequent upon the changing socio-
cultural environment\(^\text{19}\).

The rites which expressed springtime urges involving utterances
and lascivious physical exertions evolved into song and dance in latter

\(^{16}\) P. Goswami, *Festivals of Assam*, p.16.
\(^{17}\) S.N. Barman, *L.U*, p.43
\(^{19}\) P. Goswami, *B A B S*, p 2
Spring usually comes after the Ahu cultivation is completed and before the Sali cultivation begins; this period of time was the time of leisure for the agricultural people of Assam in the past. Since this leisure period was followed by agricultural operation associated with the cultivation of Sali paddy, the agricultural people of prehistoric Assam utilized the time for preparing themselves mentally and physically for the ensuing agricultural operation. So, they observed the preharvesting song and dance ritual which virtually began with the advent of spring. Having been inspired by a fertility consciousness, people enacted the dramatic design of song and dance to increase fertility in mother earth who was believed to be possessing the same physiological properties as a woman. This was done logically by rousing the sexual urges in the womenfolk indulging in amorous songs and sex appealing dances. These songs and dances of erotic style characterising the spirit of the season had become a vehicle of exchanging hearts for the young boys and girls in the subsequent ages; therefore, the Bohag bihu was an occasion for choice of life partners and the Bihu ground was a convenient place for elopement of young couple. The springtime festivities had left for the people fresh hopes and aspirations for the days to come. In course of time, Bohag bihu came to be observed with effect from the day of choit samranti prefixed as per the Aryan calculations; consequently, preharavesting Bohag bihu had to absorb many other customs and usages.

21. L. Gogoi, Op-cit, p.4
23. R.M. Nath, Op-cit, p. 5
26. L. Gogoi, Op-cit, p. 41
to be followed by the agricultural people. All these requisitioned some advance preparations like tending gardens, repairing houses, weaving *Bihu* clothes etc. which began with the advent of spring. Handlooms of the Assamese women created a noisy atmosphere in the villages as the women got naturally inspired in spring to complete the weaving of *Bihu* clothes before commencement of the *Bohag bihu*.

The springtime festivities associated with fertility cult and sex rite are also prevalent in some other countries of the world. The springtime rites observed in China are almost identical to those prevailing in Assam. But, as in other countries, the springtime rites of *Bohag bihu* have also been undergoing further changes from the early decades of the twentieth century. These rites associated with the *Bohag bihu* are no longer a part of life as they were accustomed to. The older fertility symbolism has now lost its ground among the peasantry of present day Assam. The earlier springtime song and dance ritual has already left its rural abode and has captured the public platforms as performing art where springtime ritualism has naturally become irrelevant. The present agricultural scene observed in rural Assam is that the traditional varieties of paddy have been replaced with high-yielding varieties cultivated in different seasons with improved manures and irrigation facilities. This has rendered the age-old cult of fertility substantially futile. Now, spring has virtually nothing to do with the agricultural people of Assam.

30. P. Goswami, *B.B ABS*, p.69
The approaching time of spring has now changed noticeably. In the northern hemisphere, the springtime now appears splendidly in Phaguna and Choit instead of Choit and Bohag which was the springtime in about 1500-2000 years ago. Astronomically, Spring-Vernal Equinox or Mahavisuvan, the day on which the formal part of Bohag bihu starts, now falls on 20/21 March\textsuperscript{32}. As a result of the precession motion of the earth’s axis, the Vernal Equinox has since migrated into ‘Pisces’; in about 2000 years ago, ‘Aries’ was the location of Vernal Equinox, which will move into the constellation of ‘Aquarius’ in about 800 years\textsuperscript{33}. These changes in the sky have caused inevitable changes in the natural phenomenon of the earth. Noticeably, the springtime nature is not visible at the time of Bohag bihu now; the melodious voice of the cuckoo heralding spring is seldom heard in Bohag these days; the rising summer temperature is now felt in Bohag instead of springtime mild temperature. Although the Equinoxes have been occurring in the sky slightly earlier in each successive year and so also the spring and other natural phenomena on the earth, the springtime Bohag bihu is being observed w.e.f. the day traditionally prefixed some 2000 years ago when Astrology was formalised.

The fact therefore remains that the present day Bohag bihu of Assam does not have much bearing on the springtime nature. Although the formal part of Bohag bihu in the past started on the Choit Samkranti

day extending to the sixth day of Bohag, the merriments had begun earlier\textsuperscript{34}. But the most noticeable change now occurred is that the merriments do not start earlier than the Choit Samkranti day; instead, the Bihu festivities spill over beyond the sixth day of Bohag. It is further observed that the Bihu festival is now more a calendaric festival than a seasonal festival. Instead of springtime nature, the advent of Bohag bihu is now known to the people of Assam from the audio cassettes of Bihu songs that are persistently played in public places right from the time of post harvesting Magh bihu or mid January.

3. Bohag Bihu and Assamese New Year:

It is ritualistic in every society to bid farewell to the year just passed off and to welcome the new year just commenced\textsuperscript{35}. The tradition of welcoming the new year has also been prevailing in Assamese society since time the people of Assam used to predict the approaching new year from nature. The new year in Assam is associated with the agricultural cycle of the peasantry which begins with the month of Bohag and ends on the last day of the month of Choit. As the Bohag bihu of Assam ushers in the beginning of Assamese new year\textsuperscript{36}, the tradition of ceremonial rites meant for new year is linked up with that of the springtime Bohag bihu.

Evidently, the Assamese new year had come in the remote past in keeping with the eternal law of nature. This new year was an indication

\textsuperscript{34} P. Goswami, \textit{op-cit}, p.6
\textsuperscript{35} Asamyaya Jana Sahitya, p.36.
\textsuperscript{36} B. Datta, "Bihu" in \textit{Bharatar Bibhinna Utsav}, compiled by N.B.T.I, p. 15.
of the eve of agricultural operation of the peasantry of Assam. So it naturally trembled the agricultural people. But subsequently, the new year in Assam came to be observed in accordance with calendaric prefixation. This tradition is supposed to have prevailed in India with the introduction of saka era traceable to king Sakaditya. Although the Aryans introduced the tradition in Assam, the Mongoloid people used to observe a festival on the occasion of natural new year prior to the 'saka' new year. Now, the indigenous people of Assam observe the Assamese new year on the first day of the month of Bohag i.e., the second day of the Bohag bihu; certain rites and rituals associated with the Bohag bihu are exclusively meant for a happy and prosperous new year the agricultural people of Assam eagerly hope for. Bohag bihu marks the beginning of Assamese new year and so this Bihu is alternatively known as the festival of Assamese new year. On this occasion, prayers are held for welfare of family and society; elders are paid tributes for invoking blessings for the new year. It is customary to put on new garments on the occasion of new year in Assam. As seen in Nepal, Kashmir and Iran, presentation of new clothes in the form of Bihuwan is also prevailing in Assam as a token of Assamese new year and Bohag bihu. The agricultural people discard the agricultural implements so long used and replace these with new ones. In fact, the entire paraphernalia of rites and rituals associated

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37. H.K. Barua, op-cit p.55
40. S. Biswas, HFB S.A, p 32
41. B. Datta, Op-cit, p.16
42. H.K. Barua, Op-cit, p.36.
with the springtime *Bohag bihu* is observed for wellbeing of the agricultural people in the on-coming new year⁴³.

But the above tradition of Assamese new year is no longer observed in its earlier form. Since the tradition is linked up with the springtime *Bohag bihu*, it has undergone changes along with the changes in the tradition of *Bohag bihu*. At rural folk level, it is noticed that the agricultural people still observe the ritual tradition associated with the Assamese new year in a reverential way; but the earlier enthusiasm is absent among these people. The convention insisted upon by the elders are now seldom noticed to have been followed by the youngers⁴⁴. At other levels of the Assamese society, change in various aspects of the tradition of Assamese new year is observed. Offer of *Bihuwan* is now not only a token of Assamese new year and *Bohag bihu*; rather it has gained importance in other social ceremonies also as a token of Assamese culture and a token of respect to distinguished individuals. Cheers of new year are not seen among the people on the first day of *Bohag* or the previous day; rather it seems, people are ignorant of the commencement of Assamese new year on this day. Alternatively, a new tendency for celebrating the first and the last days of Christian calendar year has grown particularly in the young minds of the Assamese society these days.

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4. Bohag Bihu and Agricultural Rites:

The familiarity of the peasantry of Assam with the agricultural rites of *Bohat bihu* is found to be above everything. These rites are mostly preharvesting rites the agricultural people have been observing before taking to cultivation of transplanted paddy. The springtime rites that we have already discussed, are also indirectly connected with the preharvesting agricultural rites. The agricultural people of Assam conceive the *Bohat bihu* to be an auspicious occasion for holding preharvesting rites. As the ancient Austrie and Mongoloid people of Assam lived on agriculture, the assimilation of their identical agro-based culture gave a native form to the *Bihu* festival. Evidently therefore, the Austrie and Mongoloid cultural elements are found interwoven along the length and breadth of the *Bihu* festival.

5. Significance of the month of Bohag:

The month of *Bohag* has been considered as a significant period for the peasants of Assam since time immemorial. The significance of *Bohag* is not resting only on its being the first month of Assamese new year; the significance of *Bohag* is ultimately resting on the eternal association of the month with spring; this relation indicates a particular position of the Sun in the sky. The *Bohat bihu* and the month of *Bohag* are inextricably bound up with spring. We are already familiar with the

45. S. Biswas, *H.F.G.S A*, p. 16
46. N. Borpujari, *Op-cit*, p. 62
47. L. Gogoi, *Op-cit*, p. 41
wonderful impact of spring on birds, animals and also on nature. Further, it is very significant that observance of certain magico-religious rites in the month of Bohag coincides with the particular position of the Sun in the sky.

Admittedly, seasons are the cyclical changes in nature. The annual motion of the earth and the consequent position of the Sun in relation to the earth cause changes in seasons⁴⁸. The Sun is the giver of life and light. Shower, which is a pre-requisite for good harvest, depends on the position of the Sun in relation to the earth⁴⁹. During spring time, the Sun comes nearer to the equator; this great luminary creates temperate climatic condition during spring leaving certain creative effect on nature and creatures. On the day of Spring Vernal Equinox the Sun comes on the ecliptic and crosses the celestial equator heading north; so on this day, the Sun’s ascension and declination are both zero⁵⁰.

Naturally, the primitive people were ignorant of the cyclical revival of seasons; so they adopted magical rites intended to ensure the revival of nature in spring that faded in Winter⁵¹. This provides us with a strong ground to believe that the primitive agricultural people of Assam could also conceive the impact of spring and took recourse to enactment of magical rites.

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The whole month of Bohag that immediately follows the Spring Vernal Equinox, is considered auspicious by the Assamese Hindus for holding religious rites. The Aitareya Brahmana refers to the observance of such rites on the Visuvan Samkranti day. Some of these rites extend to the whole month of Bohag. These rites are intended to control the movement of the Sun and to secure reproduction of seeds.

The following verse of an Assamese song goes into the depth of truth in connection with the significance of the month of Bohag:

bohag akhoni sristi dalil
suryar jyotit powa

(Bohag is a document of creativity derived from the light of the Sun). This song is a philosophical representation of the relation between the Sun and the month of Bohag. Bohag, the auspicious beginning of Assamese new year, inspires people for creative thoughts thereby to engage in creative work afresh.

4. Preparation for Agricultural Rites:

Certain ritualistic activities allied to Bohag bihu had begun in the past from the first part of the month of Choit, the concluding month of Assamese year. Particularly the Rati bihu ritual of young boys and girls was

53. An Assamese song composed and sung by B. Hazarika,e.g.
   'bohag matho eti ritu nahai--------'.


instituted throughout the month of Choit\textsuperscript{54}. For this reason, Bohag bihu is still known as Choitar bihu. But the tradition of Rati bihu peculiar to the rural areas of upper Assam and a contribution of the Alpino-Mongoloid people, has since disappeared for obvious reasons\textsuperscript{55}.

The other activities carried on prior to the Bihu day of Choit-Samkranti include gathering of the sheaths of wild cardamom used in preparing ropes for tying cattle on the Garu-Bihu day. The women weavers keep themselves busy to conclude weaving of Bihuwans before the day of Garu-Bihu since use of the Bihuwans woven beyond this day is a taboo\textsuperscript{56}. Young boys engage themselves in cowrie khel prior to the day of Choit-Samkranti; cowrie symbolizes the female reproductive organ and the game symbolizes agricultural life\textsuperscript{57}. On the day of uruka, the womenfolk clean houses and utensils, wash clothes and prepare various kinds of eatables like chira, pitha, and laru\textsuperscript{58}. However, enthusiasm for these advance preparations could be seen till the early decades of the twentieth century. Now at rural folk level, the earlier enthusiasm is absent among the toiling people; at urban level, the tradition of offering handloom-made Bihuwans has changed to a great extent and mill-made Bihuwans have become the substitutes for handloom made; it is also observed in urban households that the traditional Assamese eatables of Bihu have been replaced with foreign dishes. But some sort of advance enthusiasm is noticed among the people.

\textsuperscript{54} L. Gogoi, Op-cit, p.46
\textsuperscript{55} H. Buragohain, Bihu Akou Ahit, p.14.
\textsuperscript{56} I,. Gogoi, Op-cit, p.46
\textsuperscript{58} P. Goswami, Bohag Bihu of Assam and Bihu Songs, pp.12-13.
of both rural and urban areas for arranging public cultural shows on the occasion of *Bohag bihu*. The melodies of horn-pipe now do not flow from distant places; instead one can hear such melodies coming from *clubs* and *namghars* where the youngsters rehearse *Bihu* songs and dances for public performance.

7. **The Formal part of Bohag Bihu: Tradition and Change:**

The most bewildering complexity found in the *Bihu* festival observed all over Assam is the prevalence of local and regional variations in the tradition of various features of the festival. Some customs and traditions have also evolved on environmental and regional necessities\(^{59}\). Still admittedly, a common objective is found despite variations in the style of observance. This study is designed to deal with the changes in tradition of various features of the *Bihu* festival; just to focus on the changes, the main features of the formal part of *Bohag Bihu* have been brought to light in this sub-chapter. Here too, one may find variations from place to place. A separate research on the varying features of the festival prevailing in different areas will show the nature and dimension of variation.

We have grounds to believe that at the early stage of agricultural society in Assam, the observance of agricultural rites did not conform to any prefixed day or period; since the people were solely dependent on

nature, they could also predict time from natural phenomena and accordingly the nature and time of agricultural rites were determined by seasonal changes\textsuperscript{60}. This is further evident from the fact that some tribes of Assam still observe \textit{Bohag bihu} on convenient days of the month of Bohag instead of the \textit{Choit Samkranti} day\textsuperscript{61}.

The whole drama of seven-day long formal \textit{Bohag bihu} is presented through some sequences of events wherein the Garu-bihu unveils the introductory scene. The expectation which finds expression through this drama is attuned to the hopes and aspirations of the peasantry of Assam\textsuperscript{62}. The customs and usages practised in \textit{Bohag bihu} are almost identical to that of Cwing Mwing festival of China where each day is entrusted in the name of a domestic animal\textsuperscript{63}. Some time in the past, the Boros of Assam also dedicated each day of \textit{Bohag bihu} to a domestic animal\textsuperscript{64}. The present tradition of observance of formal \textit{Bohag bihu} for seven days is traceable to the Boros. But subsequently, each day came to be renamed with assignment of allied rites and rituals particularly under Aryan influence\textsuperscript{65}.

Admittedly, cattle have been an indispensable necessity in the agricultural economy of Assam since the introduction of plough culture in the remote past. The traditional operation of agriculture still prevails in

\textsuperscript{60} P. Chaliha, \textquoteleft{Rongali Bihu : Utcha Aru Upadan}\textquoteright{} in \textit{Asamiya Bhasa, Sahitya Aru Samkriti}, ed. S. Bharali, p.10.
\textsuperscript{61} L. Gogoi, \textit{Op-cit}, p. 41.
\textsuperscript{63} H.K. Barua, \textquoteleft{Bohag Bihur Baisista}\textquoteright{} in \textit{Bihur Rup Ras Aru Tatva}, ed. A.C. Sarma, pp.54-55
\textsuperscript{64} P. Goswami, \textit{Springtime Bihu of Assam}, p.37
\textsuperscript{65} A.C. Sarma, \textquoteleft{Bihur Utpatti Aru Kramavikash}\textquoteright{} in \textit{Bihur Rup Ras Tatva}, p.59
Assam. As the fruit of agricultural labour is produced with the help of cattle, the agricultural people naturally expect that the cattle may bring prosperity to them. The increase in cattle population is therefore regarded as means to increase wealth. Evidently, in Vedic India also wealth was conceived in terms of cattle. The cattle rites are therefore intended to protect health and promote fertility of cattle. It has been quoted Keith to focus on the cattle rites of ancient India associated with fertility. In Assam also agricultural people worship and anoint cattle chanting mantras on the Garu-bihu day.

Garu bihu is observed on the first day of Bohag Bihu. The origin and antiquity of Garu bihu is traceable to plough culture when pairs of bullocks were yoked in ploughs for tillage. The ideal of cow-worshipping got linked up with the tradition of Garu-bihu from the Aryans who were cow-worshippers. This tradition is surviving among the indigenous agricultural people of Assam since unfolding of the Aryan culture in Assam.

Early in the morning of the Garu-bihu day, the head of the agricultural household observes the position of the cows tied in the cow-shed. The traditional belief associated with this practice prevalent in some areas is that standing posture of the cows indicates occurrence of flood and sitting posture forecasts favourable weather for the agricultural people in the new year. Multi-pronged bamboo sticks are made and

69. L. Gogoi, Nai Bai Ja, p. 13.
pieces of bottle gourd, brinjal, turmeric, bitter gourd etc. are fixed thereto on the Garu-bihu day. In some places, these items are sewed by a string of tender bamboo. A paste prepared from blackgram, raw turmeric, roots of black zedoary, rice etc. is mixed up with mustard oil and rubbed on foreheads, trunks and horns of cattle; the left over is used by men. Oily ashes are also used as a paste for rubbing cattle. The cattle are then taken to neighbouring river or pond for a wash. On the way, the cowherds strike the cattle with green sprigs chanting mantras meant for good health and well-being of cattle. This ritual is followed by collective bath of cattle and propitiation of cattle throwing bottle gourd, brinjal etc. intended to multiply cattle. The ritual is also found among the Boros. The incantations of this ritual give expression to people’s aspiration towards cattle fertility. After the cattle bath is over, old ropes are cast away through the legs of the cattle; the cowherds return home with left over pieces of bottle gourd, brinjal etc. and keep these on the walls and rafters of cow-shed. Thereafter, prayer to Lord Krishna is held in private chapels or communal Namghars. Another custom of this day is paying of tributes to the elders by the juniors of the family. This custom has come down to Bihu from ancient Mongoloid culture. Members of the agricultural household then have a meal of soaked flatten rice, curd, mollasses, cake and other eatables specially prepared for the day. In some places, these items are also offered to the cattle in the evening. Some kinds of strong smelling leaves are lighted with paddy chaff near the entrance of the cow-

70. L. Gogoi, op-cit, p.47
73. L. Gogoi, Bihu Eti Samiksaa, p.41
74. P. Goswami, B.B.A B S, p 13
shed at the time the cattle return home in the evening and smokes are fanned with handfans made of bamboo. The members of the family can use handfans only after the cattle have been fanned on this day. The cattle are then tied up with new ropes made from sheaths of wild cardamom or jute. In some areas of lower Assam, puja is offered to cows as Go-Laksmi; a Brahmin priest is employed to perform puja in the cowshed.

*Koni juj* is held on the Garu-bihu day in upper Assam and it continues till the seventh day of Bohag bihu. In lower Assam, this custom defers to Magh-bihu held in mid-January. Young girls dye the palms of their hands with jetuka mehendi on this day. A special alkaline curry prepared with one hundred and one kinds of wild herbs is eaten in upper Assam with the supper of Garu-bihu day, this custom is observed on the second and seventh day of Bohag bihu in Barpeta and north-Kamrup region of lower Assam.

A prevailing belief associated with the Garu-bihu day is that one can find a place in heaven if one is blessed by the Huchari carol singers on this day. Huchari usually starts from the night of the Garu-bihu day. This custom, peculiar to upper and central Assam, will be treated separately. However, some sort of song is also found in the Bihu-Diya ceremony current in north Kamrup of lower Assam. Young boys visit house to house on the Garu bihu day and Manuh bihu day, sing a kind

77. *Ibid.* p.48
of song beating *taka* exclaiming the magnanimity of *Bohag bihu* and collect alms. The *sat sak tola* songs prevalent in Barpeta region of lower Assam is also another kind of song associated with *Bohag bihu*.

Apart from cattle rites, a custom known as *siyal kheda* was prevalent in undivided Kamrup till the sixth decade of the last century. This custom is still noticeable among the *Boros*. On the *Garu bihu* day, the villagers enter the nearby jungles with lethal weapons to drive off jackals since the animal is harmful for other domestic animals. The *Boros*, who still observe the custom, arrange feasts on the day with the flesh of the wild animals falling prey to them. The cattle rites observed in the eastern part of undivided Goalpara district resemble the pattern followed in Kamrup. In west Goalpara, *Bishua*, or *Beshoma* or *Bishma* is observed on *Choit-Samkranti* i.e, the day of *Garu bihu*; although some rites of the day are common with those observed elsewhere in Assam, no cattle rites are observed in this area.

The tradition of the cattle rites is now surviving among the agricultural people in a low intensity; earlier enthusiasm is not noticed among these people. The enthusiastic scene of washing cattle collectively in rivers or ponds is hardly seen now-a-days; instead, it has been a common scene that the agricultural people wish wellbeing of cattle sprinkling on them a few buckets of tube-well water within the household.

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81. B. Goswami, *Samskriti Aru Loka Samskriti*, p.66
82. H.K. Sarma, *ibid* p.28
84. *ibid*, p.103.
campus. However, despite the changing socio-economic scenario even at rural folk level, the age-old religious belief associated with cow is still found among the people and cow is still regarded as Go-Laksmi. In urban scene, the rites and rituals of Garu bihu are irrelevant and hence, are not observed.

The second day of Bohag bihu is observed as Manuh bihu. This day is significant as the first day of the month of Bohag and also as the first day of Assamese new year. The agricultural people start the day chewing nim leaves in empty stomach in order to keep away stomach trouble for the whole year. Another belief associated with this custom is that venom of snake-bite is neutralized if nim leaves are chewed on this day.

The rites and rituals observed on the Manuh bihu day are meant for wellbeing of the members of agricultural household for the new year which commences from this day. Some of these have already been mentioned in connection with Assamese new year. In addition to that some other rites and rituals are also observed on this day. As has already been noted, sat sak or sat saketi or sak tola rite of Barpeta region is performed on this day exclusively by the womenfolk with ceremonial songs and merriments. Sat sak is not necessarily restricted to seven kinds of herbs; it may include some more varieties of herbs having medicinal values believed to keep away some diseases for the whole year.

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86. H.K. Sarma, Op-cit, p.30
year. People visit friends and relatives and exchange good wishes for the new year. The head of the family employs a Brahmin or an astrologer to consult an almanac for foretelling him how the members of his family are going to fare in the new year. A Brahmin is also employed on this day to write a *sanskrit mantra* on the leaves of *nahar* and the leaves are kept under the rafters of that shed house; this *mantra*, a prayer to *Rudra Siva*, is intended to protect the house from natural calamities like storm, lightning and fire.

Sports and pastimes are also found to be associated with the tradition of *Bohag bihu*. Like the 'cowrie khel' that has already been mentioned, *Koni juj* is also associated with fertility cult of the agricultural people of Assam. Egg is a symbol of reproduction, that egg breaking game increases fertility of crops is an Austric belief. Other indoor events include *Bagh Ball, Kachu Guti, Dice, Ghila* etc. The outdoor events include mainly *Haphal, Dhop khel, Haugudu* etc. These are popular events at rural folk level; but variations are noticed from place to place in respect of name and style. Besides wrestling, hawk fight, cock fight, buffalo fight, elephant race and fight are traditional events organised for amusement. The medieval history of Assam records instances of royal patronage extended to these events on the occasion of *Bohag Lihu*. The Ahom king Rudra Singha had built a pavilion

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89. *Ibid*, p.14
90. *Ibid*, p.14
91. L. Gogoi, *Bihu Eti Samiksha*, p.32
wherefrom the king, nobles and the princes witnessed these amusing events\textsuperscript{94}.

It is observed that the elderly people at rural folk level are still adherent to the age-old beliefs; the fact therefore remains that the tradition of house-hold rituals has not undergone any remarkable change despite disappearance of the old socio-economic scenario at this level. But people's belief in the efficacy of \textit{mantras} has since declined to a considerable extent while the role of astrology in personal and social life is still noticed. In the field of sports and pastimes, it is observed that the traditional local events are not organised now-a-days; the elders are found disinterested in and the youngers are found unfamiliar with the traditional sports and pastimes. In fact, the earlier tradition has changed and a new tradition has developed with the introduction of national and international events even in rural areas since post-British time. Of the pastimes, the tradition of buffalo fight is alive in a few places and is seen especially in \textit{Magh bihu} held in winter solstice.

The day after the \textit{Manuh bihu} is \textit{Gosain bihu} and this day is dedicated to religious functions. On this day, \textit{pujas} are held in temples and particular places believed to be the abodes of evil spirits\textsuperscript{95}. Congregational prayers are also held on the day at \textit{Namghar} and \textit{Kirtanghar} where influence of neo-Vaisnavism is noticed\textsuperscript{96}. The fourth, fifth and the sixth days of seven day long \textit{Bohag bihu} are known as \textit{Tatar}

\textsuperscript{94} K.K. Bordoloi, \textit{Rongili}, pp.60,62.
\textsuperscript{95} L. Gogoi, \textit{Nat Bai Jai}, p.102
\textsuperscript{96} P. Goswami, \textit{Festival of Assam}, p. 15
Bihu, Nangalar bihu and Jiwajantur bihu. No special functions are assigned to these days except cleaning of handlooms by the womenfolk, cleaning of ploughs and tending domestic animals by the menfolk. It is pertinent to note that there are regional variations in respect of the names and functions of these three days of Bihu. Evidently, at most places the agricultural people cannot recall the names and functions assigned to these three days. In olden times, romantic Bihu songs and dances performed in isolated places and house to house visit of Huchari teams went on all these days. The tradition has since changed and these are now performed in public platforms.

The formal part of Bohag bihu is concluded on the seventh day and this day is known to the agricultural people as Sat bihu or Chera bihu. It has already been mentioned that sat sak is customarily eaten on this day in north Kamrup and its adjoining areas. These are natural herbs which normally grow after the first showers have fallen on earth. In upper Assam, the springtime rite associated with romantic song and dance comes to an end on this day and youngsters bid ceremonial farewell to springtime Bohag bihu in a ceremony of excessive festivities known as Bihu Urvowa. The Huchari Carol Singing is also concluded on this day in Bihu thowa ceremony held on the occasion. The traditions relating to springtime song and dance and Huchari singing prevalent in central and upper Assam are not prevalent in lower Assam. Instead, a fair

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97. L. Gogoi, op.cit,p.102
98. P. Goswami, B.B.A.B.S., p.15
99. Ibid, p.15
100. L. Gogoi, Nai Bai Jai, pp.103-107.
101. P. Goswami, op.cit, p.35.
known as Bhintheii or Sori or Deul held usually in the first week of Bohag, is a special feature of this region\textsuperscript{102}.

This is a general picture of the past and present tradition of Bohag bihu barring the performing art forms associated with the tradition\textsuperscript{103}. However, the Bohag bihu observed in the Vaishnavite sattras is an abridged version of the festival. The rites and rituals continue only for three days from the day of Choit samkranti; cow rituals are observed on this day followed by Manuh bihu and Chera bihu on the first and second day of Bohag. Instead of Bihu songs and dances, Satriya bhaonas and hymn singing are noticed in the Bohag bihu of the Vaishnavite sattras\textsuperscript{104}.

The diverse tribes of Assam also celebrate Bihu festival in accordance with their respective traditions. The Boros observe preharvesting agricultural rites in their Baisagu festival celebrated from the last day of the month of Choit\textsuperscript{105}. The cattle rites described earlier are observed on the first day of Baisagu\textsuperscript{106}. The next day synchronises with the first day of the month of Bohag. On this day, the juniors reverentially bow down to their parents and elders. Bathou, the supreme deity of the Boros is worshipped by offering chicken, rice-beer etc. Community singing and dancing continue till the seventh day of Baisagu\textsuperscript{107}. The Sonowal Kacharis of upper Assam observe all rites and rituals of Bohag bihu in the same

\textsuperscript{102} The significance and detailed tradition of this fair will be dealt in a separate chapter.
\textsuperscript{103} Field work not only give slight regional variations in respect of the style of observance, but also bring to light certain additional and connected customs and usages current in some areas; the reasons attributable to these variations have already been shown.
\textsuperscript{104} N. C Goswami, \textit{Satriya Sanskritir Svarnarekha}, pp. 143-151.
\textsuperscript{106} B. Narji, \textit{Boro Kacharir Samaj Aru Sanskriti}, pp.207-212.
\textsuperscript{107} B.N. Bordoloi, \textit{Tribes of Assam} (part-I), p.9
style followed by the non-tribal Assamese people\textsuperscript{108}. They perform Hagra and Bahuwa dances in the context of this Bihum\textsuperscript{109}. The Deoris observe Bohag bihu or Bohagiyo bisu from the first Wednesday of the month of Bohag which is usually preceded by a Than puja. Ceremonial bathing of cattle and other rituals are observed on the day of Than puja. Both male and female constitute a Huchari party; Huchari is first sung in the Than and thereafter they go from house to house\textsuperscript{110}. Like the Deoris, the Morans also observe the Bohag bihu from the first Wednesday of the month of Bohag\textsuperscript{111}. The Baisak bisu of the Tiwas is also connected with agricultural operations. A fowl is sacrificed in the puja performed in Barghar before observing the cattle rites on the Bihu day. Joratola ceremony, Boka nas and Gosain uliwa utsav are important features of Baisak Bisu\textsuperscript{112}. The Baikho festival of the Rabhas is an agricultural festival and is performed with worship to ancestors, gods and goddesses. The cattle rites of the non-tribal Assamese people are also noticed among the Rabhas\textsuperscript{113}. The Misings celebrate the Ali-Aye-Ligang festival on the first Wednesday of the month of Phaguna before sowing seeds\textsuperscript{114}. However, the Misings also celebrate the Bohag bihu from Choit Samkranti like other non-tribal Assamese\textsuperscript{115}. The Dimasas of N.C. Hills celebrate the Bihu festivals in the pattern followed by the non-tribal Assamese. Their Bosagi Sanjora is regarded as the springtime and preharvesting festival\textsuperscript{116}. The Buddhists of Assam

\textsuperscript{108} G.C. Goswami, ‘Sonowal Kachari’ in Asamar Janajati, ed. P.C.Bhattacharya, p.75
\textsuperscript{110} B.N. Bordoloi, \textit{Op-cit.}, pp.31-33.
\textsuperscript{111} J. Gandhiya, ‘Rongali Bihir Lokasar’ in B. R. R A. T., ed. A.C.Sarma, p.15
\textsuperscript{113} P. Goswami, \textit{The Springtime Bihu of Assam}, p.49
\textsuperscript{114} J.J. Kuli, \textit{The Misings : Their History and Culture}, p.71
\textsuperscript{116} N. Hagjer, \textit{Festivals of the Dimasa Kachari Tribe of Assam},(Asam Academy Review), p.2
celebrate Pai-Chang-Chen from the Garu bihu day and observe a ritual known as Chan-Phra to wash the idol of Lord Buddha\textsuperscript{117}. The rites and rituals observed by the tea garden labourers of Assam in their Sahrai, Karam puja and Choit parab also resemble some of the rites and rituals of Bohag bihu\textsuperscript{118}. It deserves mention that the people of Assam co-existed for several centuries in the past with the people of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Manipur and Mizoram\textsuperscript{119}. Many festivals associated with agriculture and fertility cult are current among various tribes of Austro-Mongoloid origin inhabiting these states\textsuperscript{120}. Evidently the springtime urges, which got exposure in ancient Bihu institutions, are also noticeable in the springtime festivals of the Nagas\textsuperscript{121}. There is every reason to believe that the festivals of these Adivasis may have some bearing on the Bihu festival of the present day Assam.


\textsuperscript{119} P. Goswami, Essay on the Folklore and Culture of N.E. India, p.1


\textsuperscript{121} B. Bhattacharya, “Bihu and Naga Bihu” in Bohag Bihur Bareboroniya Chabi, ed. P. Goswami, pp. 76-79