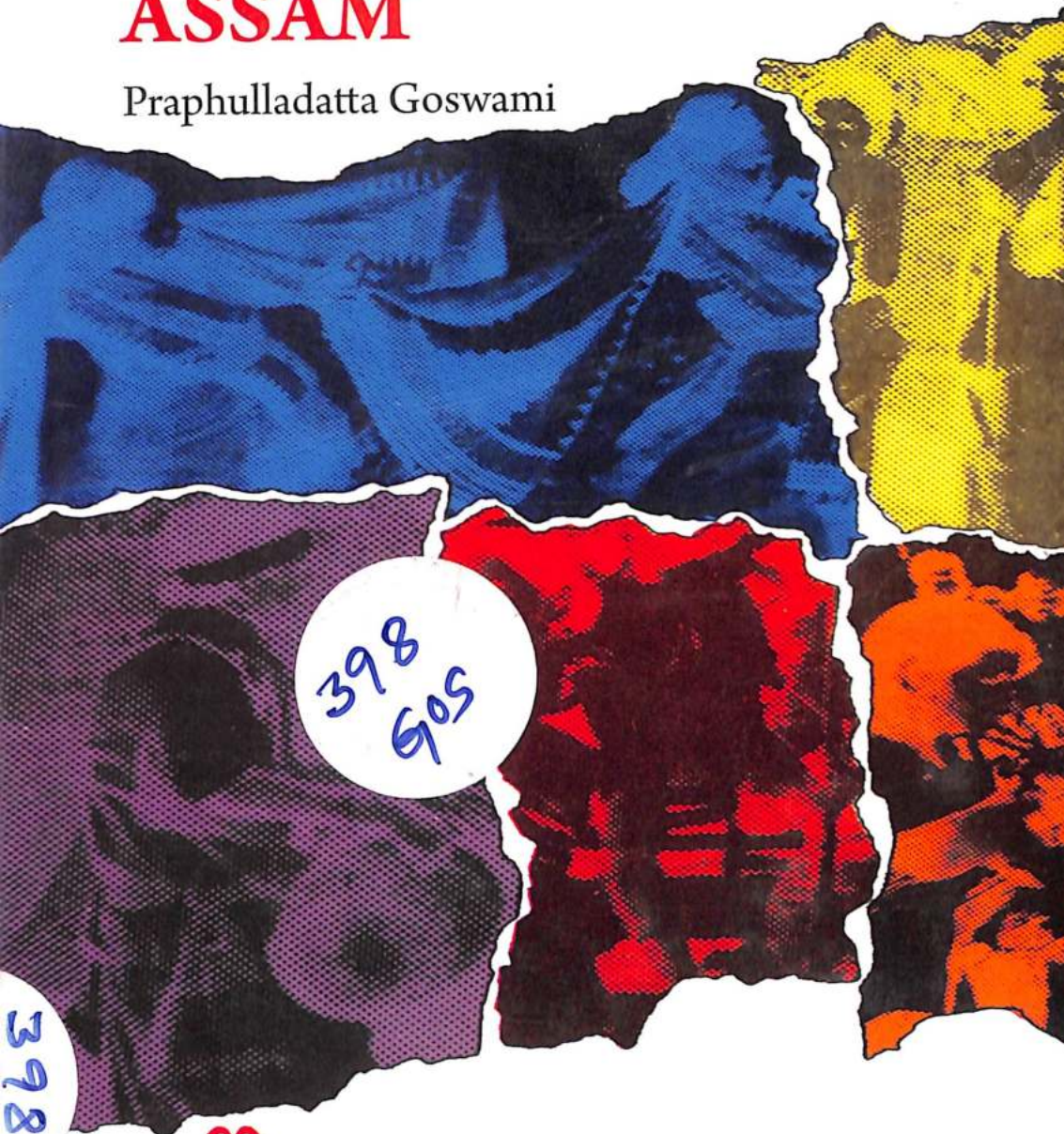


FESTIVALS OF ASSAM

Praphulladatta Goswami



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Anundoram Borooah Institute of
Language, Art & Culture, Assam(India)

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ANUNDORAM BOROOAH INSTITUTE OF LANGUAGE, ART & CULTURE, ASSAM
Guwahati (India)

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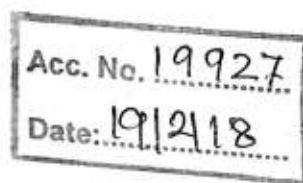
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PUBLISHER'S NOTE ON THE SECOND EDITION

All the copies of Festivals of Assam were sold out quite
sometime ago. The Anundoram Borooah Institute of Language,
Art & Culture(Assam) thankfully appreciates the response of the
readers to this last scholarly work of the doyen of Folklore Dr.
Praphulladatta Goswami.

The book has been reprinted without making any change.
It is hoped that the book will be useful to the scholars as well as
the general readers particularly those who are interested in folklore
of Assam.

Dilip Kumar Kalita
Director, ABILAC



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT (First Edition)

The Anundoram Borooah Institute of Language, Art & Culture, Assam is grateful to the North America Branch of Asom Sahitya Sabha for their financial assistance towards the publication of this book.

T. R. Taïd
Director, ABILAC

PUBLISHER'S NOTE (First Edition)

Dr. Praphulladatta Goswami, the author of this book, is no more. He took to his bed when its composition for printing was about to start, remained bedridden when its camera-ready-copy was in the process of preparation and, finally, gave up the ghost before it was brought out. His grave illness prevented us from discussing with him many things that we would have liked to discuss or should have discussed, including some matters relating to this publication. It contains descriptions not only of festivals, but of fairs also. So we wanted to discuss with him whether the title of the book could be modified suitably. There were also minor points regarding typography, illustrative photographs, etc. on which we would have liked to ascertain his views. But things were ordained otherwise, and, we had no alternative but to transfer the manuscript into print faithfully.

However, a few typographical changes have been made in consultation with Ms. Mrinali Goswami, the youngest daughter of the author. The late Professor had a distaste for pedantry and just tolerated things like use of diacritics with letters to differentiate sounds. Two days before he breathed his last, I went to know from him whether some non-English words in the book (which are not proper nouns) could be italicized. I found him deep asleep. Mrinali tried to wake him up in vain. When I told Mrinali of my task, she said that she thought her father would, perhaps, agree to the italics in question if he were in position to consider the matter. It is on the basis of this brief conversation that words like nam-prasanga, pitha, bara (rice), laru, chira, dighlati, makhiyati, etc., which the author showed in roman forms in the manuscript, have been italicized in the book.

We have also added a few photographs to the ones supplied by the author in order to reinforce the illustrations.

So strong were the likes and dislikes of the redoubtable Professor that one wouldn't normally venture even to cross t's and dot i's without his knowledge after he had finalized a text.

That, however, was only one side of the man known in his lifetime for his critical and uncompromising attitudes. He possessed a highly inquisitive mind and often rambled widely beyond his forte—literature and folklore. He had a wholesome zest for life, had warm and tender feelings and possessed a keen sense of humour. Any person who came into his contact and remembers today his cynical grins and intolerant frowns would certainly remember his innocent and disarming laughs at the same time. As for me, I look back with a sense of pride and happiness—and, of course, with a sense of personal loss at his death—to my days of close association with him in the endeavour to shape the Anundoram Borooah Institute of Language, Art and Culture since its pre-natal days in the late eighties. (A short biographical note on Dr. Praphulladatta Goswami is appended to this publication).

The present book is the last of Dr. Goswami's published works. As the readers will find, it is not an exhaustive treatise on the subject; it is essentially introductory in nature. But even this scanty volume reflects the quality of his scholarship. ABILAC will be rewarded enough if the readers, particularly those who are not very familiar with the cultural fabric of Assam, find it useful.

We are grateful to the North America branch of Asom Sahitya Sabha, particularly to the president of the branch, Shri Brojen Bardoloi, for their financial assistance towards the publication of this book. ABILAC has been subsisting on the grant-in-aid provided annually by the government of Assam. Needless to say, the grant does not go far enough in meeting the needs of the Institute. Therefore, any financial assistance of the kind serves as a positive support and encouragement to the academic efforts of the Institute. We hope the sons and daughters of Assam living in the USA will continue to extend their goodwill and co-operation to ABILAC.

T. R. Taid
Director, ABILAC

PREFATORY

There are so many festivals in Assam and the same festival exhibits such local variations that it is sometimes difficult to find a clear pattern or paradigm and this makes the writer's job a difficult one. Secondly, though for decades I have moved about a lot in this state it was not possible for me to attend or notice all the festivals. Hence I have had to depend to a considerable extent on the writings of, or information supplied by, several of my younger friends. I have made clear my indebtedness to these scholars wherever I have leaned heavily on them. A short Bibliography has also been appended. Professor Birendranath Datta, the Directorate of Culture and Dr. Nabin Chandra Sarma of the Folklore Research dept. of Gauhati University, Assam, and Sri Rupam Barua, a Journalist, have obliged me with a few photographs. Professor Datta has even helped me with useful suggestions. Thanks are also due to Srimati Aru who has kindly typed out my manuscript.

I have to add that this book is on festivals not on performing arts as such. Chapters 8 and 9 are closely associated with performing art forms. It has to be noted however that the term festival does not, for instance, exclude musical or theatrical performances.

Praphulladatta Goswami

February 1, 1994
Guwahati

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FESTIVALS OF ASSAM

INTRODUCTION

Aryans or people bearing Aryanized culture probably started entering Assam (ancient Pragjyotisa and Kamarupa) by the fifth or fourth century B.C., for we have to remember that Assam was situated more to the west in the early centuries – was closer to Bihar which was cleared and colonised by Videgha Mathava about the seventh century B.C. as described in the *Satapatha Brahmana*. As is characteristic of migrants and colonisers, these people from the west pushed forward and began to settle among various groups residing in this forested and hilly region and speaking Austroasiatic languages. If we are to believe Chinese history (132B.C.), Aryans even migrated through this land to South-East Asia. There were other sources of migrants into Assam.

In the Chinese mainland, as the Hans pressed downwards, lots of Tais had to disperse southwards. According to A. C. Haddon, Tais penetrated Assam as early as the eighth or ninth century. At the same time under various political pressures Tibeto-Burman-speaking tribes also started entering Assam. The military adventures of Kublai Khan, the Mongol emperor of China, in the thirteenth century, were a major factor in the dispersal of

* Colin P. Masica, *The Indo-Aryan Languages*, 1991, p.468

racess and tribes. His conquest of Tibet and Burma must have sent down a lot of people into this region. Later on, other people, like Muslims and tea-garden labourers, came and settled in this fertile land. Through the centuries all these people who had come to colonise or settle in this part of India have mixed considerably, not only physically but also culturally. Hence we have in Assam a composite culture and it is often difficult to find out the parentage of the various cultural features that we notice now-a-days all around us.

Thought the framework of Assam's society is Sanskritic, along with the caste system and the usual Hindu *samskaras* and the dominant language here is a child of Sanskrit, the local Monogoloid or tribal pull has softened the rigidity of the caste system and added considerable diversity to most festive occasions of this state. Communal harmony is also a speciality of Assamese society. Assam may have ethnic problems as elsewhere in the world, but there are no communal riots here.

Festivals are a part of traditional culture; their nature is determined by both the seasons and religion or religions followed by the people. Further, tradition is never static, with change in the life style of the people and greater social mobility, customs and beliefs also tend to change. As it seems, we do many things because of habit and not because of belief, and perhaps to give an outlet to one's repressed feelings. Therefore it is that in many festivals observed by the people we notice more of noise and exuberance than the evidence of faith or the conventions insisted upon by elders. As W. H. Auden says :

Law is the wisdom of the old,
The impotent grandfathers shrilly scold;
The grandchildren put out a treble tongue,
Law is the senses of the young.

THE PAN-INDIAN FESTIVALS

(i)

Assam being a part of India, it has its pan-Indian festivals connected with religion. Janmashtami, the birthday of Krishna, Saraswati Puja, Diwali, Holi, Durga Puja and so on are observed everywhere. What would be stressed in this book would be the local or localised forms of these festivals.

Saraswati Puja is a source of pleasure to young students. The Goddess of learning is worshipped either at schools or at some convenient place. Students decorate the place of worship, by raising a pandal, providing lights for the evening cultural shows and sitting arrangements for invitees. It is amusing to see little girls putting on adult dresses and making a beeline for the place of worship in the morning in order to offer their prayers to the beautiful idol of the Goddess. The children have a vegetarian meal after the worship is over. At one time after the functions were over children used to carry the idol of the Goddess on their shoulders, singing songs in her praise, and ultimately throwing her into the water or discarding somewhere. Now-a-days Rikshaws and Trucks are used.

Diwali is another festival popular with children. It is customary on the dark-moon day of October to plant one or two

banana trees at the gate and put lights on bamboo strips joining them. Lights are also put in the kitchen-garden, on verandahs and at the foot of the *Tulasi* plant. This is the *Kali Puja* day. The Goddess is worshipped by some people, but in Vaishnavite Assam it has no social significance. What is significant is the bursting of crackers and display of various kinds of firework. These crackers and other such things come mostly from *Sivkasi* in Tamil Nadu.

The worship of Durga, in particular in urban areas, is a grand affair. A stream of Shakti worship has been there in Assam since early times. The temple of Kamakhya near Guwahati is a well known centre of Shakti worship while the temple of Ugratara, right in the centre of the city, is also fairly well known. The public manifestation of Shaktism is however limited in a land washed by the Vaishnavism preached by Sankardeva (1463-1568) and his followers. That there is no religious conflict here is owing to the liberalism of Sankardeva who taught about one God and one way of worship, that is, the devoted recitation of the name of God, but also emphasized that the devotee of Krishna is not to look down upon the faiths followed by other people.

The public form of Durga puja as seen now-a-days was more or less introduced in the last century by Bengali officials and clerks when Assam, occupied by the East India Company in 1826, was attached to the Bengal presidency for reasons of administration. Every town now holds one or more pujas in the autumn season. The puja goes on for four or five days. The festive side is more important than the ritualistic one, for it is an occasion for purchase of clothes for children, buying of toys and sweets, and enjoyment of traditional performances like *Ojapali*, *Dhuliya* (drummers), and theatricals. Normally there is no animal sacrifice at this worship, but at the Ugratara temple on the Navami day there is the sacrifice of a buffalo and some goats are also sacrificed at the Kamakhya temple. There are no festivities of the Dasserah type in Assam. On the Vijaya or last day the idols of the Goddess in Guwahati are carried to the Brahmaputra, put on boats and

afterwards thrown into the water. On this occasion there is large gathering on the riverside and also a fair with lots of stalls.

(ii)

Holi is another pan-Indian festival associated with the spring season. In urban areas the throwing of coloured powder or coloured water is a common sight, but though there is a fair of Bihari and such people in urban areas, the exuberance and vulgarity as seen in northern India is not to be seen here. In fact, holi in Assam has undergone a transformation, in particular in Vaishnavite centres. The Holi festival at Barpeta, one of the most important of such centres, covers several days and attracts a lot of people. It is called *Doul*, continues from three to five days and only the last day is Holi proper, also known there as *Phakua*. The idol of Srikrishna is brought out of the *Keertan-ghar* or large chapel on the first day amidst hymn-singing, ululation, bursting of crackers and playing of drums and cymbals. In the evening the *Gosain* (idol) is taken seven times round a *Bhela-ghar* or specially prepared fire. This *Bhela-ghar* is normally a feature of the winter festival *Magh Bihu* (about this later). After this the *Gosain* is placed on the *Doul*, a pyramid like mound with steps. This is followed by theatrical performances. The next day people gather from all parts and pay homage to the *Gosain* with coloured and perfumed powder, sandal, etc. The visitors are given shelter and food by the local residents of Barpeta and this act is taken to be an act of merit.

On the last day, known as *Phakua*, Barpeta becomes pink with *Phaku* or coloured powder and the place resounds with songs and hymns. The Holi songs go like this :

*Shyam is celebrating Holi,
Gopas and Gopis all together at Vrindavan,
The peacock and the peahen dance in the woods,
They are celebrating Holi...*

Modern poets have also composed songs suited to the occasion. The idol is later taken to the 'city of *Ghunusa*', another Vaishnavite spot about a kilometre away. When the Gosain returns, he is barred from entry by the servants of Lakshmi. There is a jostle over a barricade of strong bamboos. Later when Srikrishna apologises to Lakshmi he is allowed to enter the *Keertan-ghar*. It is a sort of drama enacted by the *bhakats*.

Another Vaishnavite festival quite popular is *Rasa Mela*. The ritualistic part is not so important as the exhibition of clay figures illustrating the various episodes in the life of Krishna. Sometimes figures depicting current life are also added. This is an inducement to artistic activity. There is no *Rasa* dance as such. Then there are the stalls for selling various items. At Nalbari in Lower Assam arrangements are also made for theatrical performances. The festival goes on for several days and there are thousands of visitors.

SIVA IN ASSAM AND SIVARATRI

Siva-Mahadeva is rather a popular God, popular even at the domestic level. When a girl is married womenfolk sing of the improvident Mahadeva and his exasperated wife Parvati. Girls often offer prayers to the God in expectation of a good husband. Tribals like Kacharis and Rabhas trace to him the origin of the world as well as their ancestors. People consider him affectionately as one who indulges in *bharg* (or Indian hemp) and enjoyable eccentricities.

Mahadeva, the great God, has a hoary ancestry. In the *Rigveda* he is traceable in the form of Rudra, the lord of songs, sacrifices, welfare to men and women, horses and cattle, and of medicine. Gradually he begins to acquire the character of a fierce God and also to claim the role of the greatest, as Mahadeva. Then emerges another conception, that of Siva, a god of benignity and of reproduction, with the *linga* as his symbol. He ends by being the third deity of the Hindu triad, performing the function of destruction.

Siva-Mahadeva is benign as well as fearsome, and popular from the lowest to the highest level, for he has cult as well as philosophy associated with his name, specially in south India. Why is he of such widespread acceptance? Mahadeva, in fact,

carries an old and non-vedic tradition, the tradition of the male god, the god of the skies, of storms, of the thunderbolt of the trident, of the phallus, who came later to be associated with the Mother Goddess of prehistoric times. Just as the mother conception of godhead (as Durga, Sitala, etc.) stirs up a lot of people emotionally, recalling a race memory many thousand years old, so does this male god command reverence and remembrance with a fairly ancient ancestry.

Siva-Mahadeva is indeed an important figure in the Hindu pantheon in spite of the dominance of Vishnu, a god of more aristocratic ancestry. Siva normally does not require any sophisticated *puja* or procedure to please him. Throw a few bael leaves on his *linga* with reverence, that is enough to please him. But then, Brahmins, the great integrators, will not leave any popular and traditional God without giving him recognition, thus ensuring acceptance by all sections of the people, by means or ritualistic *puja* with Sanskrit *mantras*. They have fixed the fourteenth night in the dark-room of *Phagun* for the worship of Siva-Mahadeva and this day is known as Sivaratri.

Sivaratri occasions a few *Melas* or fairs in certain places of Assam, for instance, at Guwahati, Tezpur, Dhubri, Sibsagar and near Dhekiajuli at Singari. The *Mela* at Guwahati as associated with the Siva temple on Umananda, an island on the Brahmaputra, close to the city, while the one at Sibsagar is held by the Muktinath temple on the bank of the large tank, originally known as Sivasagar, sagar being an outsize tank.

Let us try to give a description of the *Mela* at Guwahati. Right from the morning devotees, Marwaris, Biharis, Bengalis being conspicuous, start visiting the Sukreswar temple by the riverside as well as the Umananda temple. Boatmen have profitable day, for they have to carry thousands of devotees and pilgrims to Umananda where they pour milk or water and place bael leaves on the ancient *linga* maintained in the temple. If you have no milk you can buy an earthen pot to carry some water from the

Brahmaputra. The island further provides you, unofficially of course, *bhang* in some form or other. You can buy a *laddu* with *bhang* in it, have a smoke of the narcotic or even get a special preparation of *bhang* made with milk and spices. It is a part of Sivaratri festivities to indulge clandestinely in a bit of *bhang*. The ritualistic part of Sivaratri is conducted by priests at night and with this most people are not concerned. There is however sacrifice of goats, killed by suffocation, and the cooked food is distributed to those who wait for it.

The island is small to provide much space, but on the river-bank by the Deputy Commissioner's courts, there is not only a crowd of people but also a market. You find there also persons who are not eager to take the trouble of crossing the stream of the river and get to the island. The crowd can look around, men and women and children, and buy certain things if they so wish. You will find small clay images of the pot-bellied a tiger-skin clad God, some just sitting and others riding his bull Nandi. You will find images of his associate Parvati as well. Then there are other things to buy, like sweets, melons, sugarcane, toys and balloons, and even works of bamboo.

As in other parts of India Siva and Parvati are worshipped in their symbolic *linga* and *yonis* form. Though phallic worship may indicate a desire for creation or generation, the usual combination of *linga* and *yonis* does not suggest the rituals performed by the *Tantrics*. Siva and Parvati in rural areas are known as *Burha Gosain* and *Burhi Gosani*, the old God and Goddess. Womenfolk sometimes arrange *nam-prasanga* or prayer session, offer soaked rice and lentil, sugarcane, banana, cocoanut and *larus* (*laddus*) of rice-powder to either the old God or his consort according to necessity. The session starts towards evening and the songs are mostly about the reckless life led by the God and the complaints raised by his wife.

There's neither a house nor a door
nor is there any cultivation,

you just roam in burning places
arranging for sessions of *bhang*.

A lonely woman I am,

there's no end to my chores,

you just pass the time sleeping

with the excuse that you've smoked too much.

These songs are touching compositions in simple language and reflect as it were the poverty and lack of resource of the ordinary peasant. Siva is also associated with the tiger while Parvati is worshipped sometimes as Byaghreswari, as at Bangaigaon, as a protection against tigers.

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BOHAG BIHU

As it seems, none of the avowedly Brahminical festivals can be taken in Assam as the one which is observed by most of the people or which really gives them a thrill. Either because the tribal pull is strong or it is the agricultural setting which still determines the social temper of the people, the festivals which are looked forward to and enjoyed widely are those associated with the beginning and the end of the planting season. The festival associated with the beginning of the season is the *Bohag* or springtime *Bihu* and that associated with the end is *Magh* or winter *Bihu*. *Bohag Bihu* is associated with Visuva Samkranti or the Vernal Equinox. In Vedic times certain rituals seem to have been performed at this time for the purpose of controlling the movement of the sun and thus secure reproduction – "(the fruits of) those seeds which are produced after ten months or a year" (*Aitareya Brahmana*).

The term *Bihu* has to be derived from Sanskrit *Visuvat* and its use is not confined to Assam. It is heard in Chittagong as *Biyu* while Capt. T.H. Lewin records that "The *Bishoo* is the chief festival of the Chuckmas of the Arakan and Chittagong tracts in the year (1870)". The Oraons have the term for they describe their summer hunt as *Bisu sikar*. L.K. Anantakrishna Iyer makes

mention of the Vishnu New Year festival of the Nayers of Kerala. The New Year day in Tamil Nadu is also called *Chaitra Vishu* for the reason that it commences in the month of *Chitrai* or *Chaitra*. The Khasas of Himachal Pradesh have their *Bisu* New Year festivities. The Panjabis have their *Baisakhi*. In Assamese the word by itself refers usually to *Bohag Bihu*, the formal part of which starts on the *Chaitra* (*Chot*) *Samkranti* day and extends to the sixth day *Baisakh*, though the merriment begins earlier and spills over beyond the period prescribed for the festival. By extension of the meaning of the term *Bihu*, which may mean just festival as well, the winter festival of *Magh* is known as *Magh Bihu*.

Some of the features of *Bohag Bihu* are typical of Upper Assam, say, in respect of dance and music, while festivals known as *Bhatheli* and *Suweri* are typical of Lower Assam, though *Bohag Bihu* has come to cover entire Assam as a cultural festival now-a-days. The *Bihu* festivals at Guwahati are impressive affairs and the dance and music exhibited in these cut across ethnic problems and political differences. Before describing how *Bohag Bihu* is observed let us see what William Robinson had to say about the festival in 1841:

"The Assamese have two principal festivals, called *Bihu*. The first festival of the year is termed the *Baisak Bihu*, and is celebrated in the first three days of *Baisak*. On this occasion people devote the whole of the first day to mutual visits and compliments, as Europeans do the first day of the year.... The cows are then worshipped with peculiar honours. They are first sprinkled with holy water, like the horses in the Circusian Games, or bathed in the sacred stream of the Brahmaputra; the devotees next prostrate themselves before them, their horns are painted with various colours, and their necks are decked with garlands of flowers and strings of fruit. The consecrated animals are then driven in a body through the villages, by crowds of people who make a discordant noise upon various musical instruments. During the remainder of the day the cows are permitted to stray wherever they please,

and seek a pasture in every field without restraint. On the two following days of the festival, large groups of people parade about, attended by numbers of dancing girls, who pause from time to time to exhibit their wanton movements, and charm the audience with their lascivious songs.

"The other *Bihu*, or festival known as the *Magh Bihu*, is celebrated about the end of the month of *Pous*, or the beginning of *Magh*. It is equivalent to the Harvest-Home, the festival occurring after the inning of the winter harvest. It occupies two days, both of which are defoted to feasting and merriment".

Robinson was an official in the Education department of Assam and though not accurate, his description has some historical value.

After the harvest is over people can relax and attend to chores like tending their gardens or repairing their houses. Womenfolk start weaving the clothes they will have to give away at *Bihu*. Trees like the *coral*, the palas, the mango are in blossom. Leaves are sprouting on most trees, the birds are tuning in, the first showers are falling and there is a fragrance in the air. One tends to get a little forgetful in this atmosphere, songs seem to spring to one's lips unbidden, and if one is young the heart flutters a little, perhaps in yearning. One sings:

So dear is the bobbin of muga (silk),
So dear is the shuttle,
dearer still is the *Bihu* of *Bohag*,
What else to do but observe it?
Chot is gradually over, it is *Bohag* now,
the *bhebeli* creeper has bloomed,
though one goes on speaking of *Bohag Bihu*
one does not come to the end.

Bihu starts on the last day of *Chot*, but it begins with a sort of cattle worship. The first day is called *Garu Bihu* or the day for cattle, the second is *Manuh Bihu* or the day for men, the third is sometimes called *Gosain Bihu* or the day for God. Another

important aspect of *Bihu* is *Husari* carol singing and this starts from the *Manuh Bihu* day. *Uruka* or *Bihu* eve is a day for house cleaning, washing of clothes, preparation of various eatables like *chira* or parched rice, *pitha* or cakes, *laru* or balls or scraped cocoanut, roasted sesame and so on. Preparation of curds is a must.

On *Garu Bihu* day, early in the morning, children prepare pieces of bottle gourd, aubergine, turmeric and bitter-gourd and keep them fixed on three-pronged bamboo sticks. They rub black gram or *matikalai* paste and turmeric on the foreheads and horns of the cattle. They also rub mustard oil on the horns and what remains of it they rub on their own bodies. The cattle are taken to a neighbouring pond or stream for a *bathe*. On the way the pieces of gourd, aubergine, etc. are thrown on the cattle. The boys also strike the cattle with sprigs of *dighlati* and *makhiyati* plants and recite:

Eat gourd, eat aubergine,
Grow from year to year,
Your mother is small, your father is small,
may you be a large one.

After the *bathe* is over, the old ropes are cast off through the legs of the cattle, as if indicating the casting off of all the evil that may have proved harmful to them. The animals are then let loose in the fields. The boys return home after their *bathe*, carrying back some of the pieces of gourd or aubergine. The grown-ups too rub a paste of black gram and turmeric on their bodies and take a bath. Then they all offer prayers to God in their private chapels or at some nearby communal *Namghar*, offer respects to their elders, and have a meal of *chira*, curd, cake and other things specially prepared.

New ropes are prepared for the cattle and red threads are wound on them. They are also sanctified with a sprinkle of *Tulasi*-soaked water. When the cattle return in the evening their feet are washed, given *chira* and *pitha* to eat and then tied up in the

cattleshed. In the Nalbari area in Lower Assam Brahmins and other people offer *puja* to cows in the conception of *Go-lakshmi* or Cow-Lakshmi. *Sudras* employ Brahmins and the *puja* is performed in the cattleshed. The pieces of gourd, turmeric, etc. that were brought back in the morning are kept fixed on the walls or roof of the cattleshed.

Before the cattle are brought back in the evening a smudge of paddy chaff and certain kinds of strong-smelling leaves is lighted at the gate of the compound and near the gate of the cattleshed. The custom is meant to drive away mosquitoes and other pests. Fans can be used only after they have been utilized to waft the acrid smoke of the smudge. Next morning the ash is mixed with oil and smeared on the neck of bullocks either as medicine or as preventive of the sore caused by pulling the plough. The plough and harrow are also washed in the morning of the *Garu Bihu* day and given cakes as an offering. This morning it is customary for people to take a little of green mango and jute leaves mixed with mustard and salt. Eating of tender mango on the New Year day was an old Indian custom known as *Navamrakhadika*.

The day after *Garu Bihu* is *Manuh Bihu*, the first day of *Bohag*. This day people show respects to their elders, are given the *bihuwan* or *Bihu* present, mostly a *hachati* or *gamosa*, a sort of handkerchief and towel combined, a *dhoti* or *chadar*. In towns children may be given frocks and pants. Mill-made products have hit hard the traditional cottage industry of spinning and weaving. *Husari* carol singing starts on this day, the first songs, mostly hymns, being sung at the communal *Namghar*. *Husari* may sometimes start on the *Garu Bihu* day, for it is considered beneficial to secure the blessings of the carol singers on this day:

On the *Garu Bihu* day take the blessings,
Only then can you find a place in heaven.

The cloth presents are family affairs, but servants, near relatives and even close friends can get them. A cloth present is often a token of love. The borders of a *gamosa* are usually red; at

one or both ends there are attractive designs of flower motifs.

A practice observed on this day is the writing of a Sanskrit prayer to Mahadeva on leaves of the *nahar* or ironwood tree as a protection against storms, lightning and fire. The leaves are kept under the rafters of the house. In rural areas a Brahmin or an astrologer consults an almanac and tells the members of a family how they are going to fare in the coming year. Visiting relatives and friends may start on this day.

Some of the other practices of this day and the days following are games played with cowrie shells and eggs. There may be outdoor games as well. Some of the chess-type games played with shells have been traditionally handed down. Playing with shells is supposed to cause rain, while the egg may be a symbol of reproduction. In a London hotel I was once offered on the Easter day a coloured egg by a Swiss lady. In the Christian world the egg is considered as a symbol of resurrection. In ancient Assyria the egg was the symbol of eternal life. The idea of the cosmic egg does not seem to be the invention of India.

The third day is *Gosain Bihu* assigned to religious functions. The chief feature of the day is congregational prayer held at the *Namghar* (*Keertanghar* at Barpeta). There is no caste restriction within the *Namghar*. A peculiarity of Assam's Vaishnavism is the offerings made to God not to include sweets or cooked food: they are sprouted lentils, sugarcane, banana, ginger, coconut and so on, quite a nutritious combination. The prayers are accompanied by kettle-drums and cymbals. Even tribals like *Kacharis* and *Rabha* take part in these communal prayers.

The other day till *Satbihu* or the seventh Bihu day have no special functions assigned to them. However, *Husari* singing goes on and in the fields or under some big tree, go on dance and music suggestive of the spring season. One practice observed on the seventh day is the eating of seven kinds of herbs which normally grow in the fields after the first showers have fallen. In the Barpeta area elderly ladies go to some wasteland, dance a little, sing cheerful

songs, and in a merry mood pick the seven kinds of herbs. They do not allow malefolk to go near them and do not allow others to know what they sing – apparently ribald songs!

In upper Assam, when *Husaari* singing is over, *Bihu* is given a ceremonial parting and this is called *Bihu Uruwa* or flying *Bihu* away.

This is the general picture of *Bohag Bihu*, sometimes called *Chot Bihu*, that we find in Assam. There are local variations, in particular among the Hinduised tribals.

Something must be said about *Husari* and *Bihu* dance. The *Husari* bands of young and middle-aged persons are the symbols of the *raij* or community and to secure their blessings is a kind of social recognition. The dance as seen in Upper Assam is a ring dance, in which the men move in a shuffling manner with a leader in the centre, who starts the songs while the others take up the refrain. Musical instruments, like small drums, split-bamboo clappers, small cymbals and hornpipes are in use. The householder offers a cloth, betel nuts and leaves or even some money by way of respect to the *Husari* band.

The band begins with religious songs:

Being soaked in the dew

on the head of Krishna

a *bakul* (flower) has opened its petals.

Hari Hari Gopala Govinda Ram.

They sometimes sing Vaishnavite prayer-books, sometimes even humorous ballads. Some of the verses they sing are significant in that they reveal a concern for social and spiritual obligations:

Give the king a rupee, my lord,
give the community a rupee,
we boys are sporting,
give us too a rupee.

Give gifts to the guru, my lord,
give gifts to the guest,

before you die take the name of the Lord,
only then will you find a place in heaven,

Husari singers are not supposed to sing *Bihu* songs proper, which are rather of an erotic nature, but one can hear a song like this:

It was God who planted the seedlings of songs,
it was Brahma who tended them,
forgive me if an unbecoming song comes out,
let me first sing of love.

The *Bihu* dance as seen in Upper Assam has a few fixed patterns and seems to have sexual overtones, suggesting its association with some springtime fertility cult of earlier times. The dancers, usually girls, at first keep their hands on their hips, then sway their trunks, gradually opening out the arms and pushing out the pelvic region as well as breasts. Even the male dancer exhibits a similar form. The steps are simple and seem to be unstudied but the movement of the hip, the swaying arms and the pushed out breasts catch the eye of the onlooker. In 1957 I saw in the eastern part of the Sonitpur district girls dancing in pairs, surrounded by married women and young girls, some of them singing and accompanying the dancers with cymbals and claps. One of the dancing pair impersonated the role of the male and in some of their movements they made the gesture of union with their fingers. It is because the core of the dance is sexual that womenfolk used to dance a little away from the prying male eye. Now-a-days *Bihu* has become 'culture' and been taken away from its natural traditional setting, therefore the dance has become mixed and a little innocuous.

The drumming that accompanies the *Bihu* dance in mixed dancing is technically developed. It is said that the drumming suggests the sound of rain-bearing clouds and it is the function of the dancer to suggest the union of the male fertiliser and the female, fruitful earth. That the dance has, or had, a ritualistic significance seems to be obvious. The songs that are sung

antiphonally, often between dancing girls and drumming lads, constitute a language of love, and can be used even while working in the field or fishing in the ponds and streams. In fact, at one time it was through these songs that affections were indicated and later even elopements took place.

I would dance the whole day, O friend,
I would dance the whole day,
only do not carry me off while I dance
for heavily you will have to pay.

The payment refers to the sum payable to the parents of the girl. Among some tribals it is customary for the prospective groom to work for a period in the house of the girl's parents. It is a sort of compensation for the loss of the daughter.

The *Bihu* dance is the most well-known dance in Assam, however ethnic groups like Misings and Deuris in Upper Assam and Kacharis in Lower Assam have their variations of this dance exhibited during *Bihu*. Misings have also poetic songs like the Assamese *Bihu* type.

MAGH BIHU OR MAGHAR DOMAHI

If *Bohag Bihu* festivities are characteristic of Upper Assam, without denying their relevance in Lower Assam, *Magh Bihu*, the post-harvest winter festival seems to have a stronger hold on people of Lower Assam, not excluding the tribals. And the term *Bihu* is not that popular as the term *Domahi* (*Damhi*), meaning the junction of two months. So it is *Maghar Domahi* in Lower Assam and it is the festival of feasting. If *Bohag Bihu*, is described as *Rangali Bihu* or the Cheering *Bihu*, *Magh Bihu* is known as *Bhogali Bihu* or the *Bihu* of Enjoyment.

A fire ceremony is closely associated with *Magh Bihu*, but more significant is *Uruka*, the *Bihu* eve. On this day womenfolk get ready for the next day with *chira*, *pitha*, *laru*, *curd*, etc. *Uruka* is not exactly a one-day affair, for fuel has to be gathered, fish has to be got from ponds, streams, and if possible, some meat too. In tribal settings women prepare rice-beer, usually undistilled. In winter it takes four or five days to get the beer matured.

Another important chore is to build temple like structures in fields. Usually young lads take a hand in this. These structures made with green bamboo, dried banana leaves and hay are usually temple-shaped and called *meji*, and those which are hut like are called *Bhelaghar*. Sometimes cowherds pass the night in a

Bhelaghar warming themselves by a fire and making use of the vegetable that they steal from the villagers' gardens and the eatables that are given to them.

Uruka feasting may be a family affair or communal. After the feasting evening is over, next day at crack of dawn, someone in the family ties thin strips of bamboo, jute or hay around fruit-bearing trees, calls out to dogs and offer them rice, while womenfolk clean the house and cooking pans. Then all take a purifying bath and put on washed clothes. The malefolk and children then move on to the *mejis* and *Bhelaghars* where offerings of eatables are made to the god of fire, *Agni*. Then to cries of God's names fire is set to the structures. Red flames warm the people so long shivering in cold and the tubes of bamboo burst like gunfire. Brahmins or elderly persons give blessings and put marks of ash on the forehead. The half-burnt sticks are scattered in the fields and a pieces may be brought home to be thrown near fruit-bearing trees. The belief is that the ashes and half-burnt bamboos increase the fertility of fields and gardens. Europeans who lighted Lenten and Midsummer fire also had the belief in the efficacy of ashes and embers as a means of fertility. Some of them also had the custom of tying bands of straw round tree-trunks to render them fruitful (Frazer). These fire rituals have apparently an Indo-European origin.

After the *mejis* and *Bhelaghars* are burnt people sit and to the accompaniment of Kettledrums and large cymbals hold a session of hymn-singing. In fact, holding of *nam-prasanga* or hymn-singing is a noted feature of this month of *Magh*, supposed to be suitable for religious purposes. In this aspect of the festival the influence of Vaishnavism is clear.

The lunch taken on this day is not rice and curry but *chira*, *pitha*, *curd* and so on. One special preparation is *mah-karai* (*mah-kare*), a combination of roasted rice, black gram, sesame and pieces of ginger. When offered for chewing it is smeared with oil. Another preparation is *tekeli-pitha*, salted rice powder steamed on the

mouth of a small pitcher or even a cattle. It is a kind of idli, but larger. Another kind of preparation is *sunga-pitha*, moist rice powder put in a green bamboo tube and roasted in fire. The ingredient mixed with the powder used to be salt but now-a-days some people prefer a sweet variety. In Upper Assam they make what is known a *sunga-saul*, the sticky bara rice steamed in a bamboo tube. When done the sticky roll is made into pieces and eaten mixed with milk and *gur*. In Upper Assam there seems to be a preference for fried *Pithas*.

No meat is allowed on the *Domahi* or *Samkranti* day, the lunch being made up of *chira*, curd, etc. the evening meal consists of rice (sometimes new rice, if not taken earlier in the month of Aghon), curry of black gram, fried yam and so on. Next day at noon it is customary to take a little left-over rice kept soaked in water and left-over dal. Is the custom of eating soaked left-over rice a memory of the tribal habit of drinking rice-beer?

The Kacharis, the most numerous tribe of Assam, have similar customs, though these differ in certain features. They also tie cords round fruit-bearing trees. They offer rice to "the flying, the sinking and the moving", that is, to birds, to fishes, and to animals like dogs and pigs. Further, on the *Domahi* day they put a mark of water mixed with cowdung around their granary. On the seventh day of *Magh Bihu* (sixth *Magh*) they again clean the utensils, sacrifice fowls to Bathou, their God, and go out carol singing, collecting eatables. They call this custom *magan* or begging.

Another point to note is that Kacharis consider the construction of *Bhela-ghars* (*bilagur* in their pronunciation) and setting fire to them to be the special prerogative of cowherd boys. The boy burn the *Bhelaghars* before dawn, 'before the crows come out of their nests'. The leading cowherd while setting fire to the *Bhelaghar* in a village starts a prayer in this manner:

Glory, glory, glory -glory to our village!
In the recitation he is accompanied by the other boys. He

prays that disease may not visit their village, that their village may be filled with paddy and riches, that their cattle may be large and strong like the rhinoceros and the elephant, that those persons who had beaten them even though the cattle in their charge had not eaten up those persons paddy may suffer long and much. Glory, glory, glory -glory to their village!

One interesting feature of this *Bihu* is the holding of sports, like wrestling, racing, jumping, buffalo fighting, egg fighting. In earlier times more martial games, like sword play and javelin throwing were customary. From weeks ahead young people used to make camps on dry river banks and exercise themselves in the arts which were found necessary to defend the land from aggressors.

I have ignored another *Bihu*, *Kati Bihu*, held in the autumn, as a festival of little significance. It has no public significance. In the family yard a light is put at the foot of the *Tulasi* plant and women and children sing in this manner:

Tulasi, O Mother, *Tulasi*,
You are Govinda's favourite,
Which way has Krishna gone,
Mother, tell us quickly.

The plant is considered symbolic of Vrinda, one of devotees of Krishna.

Another aspect of *Kati Bihu* is that ploughman does certain things for the protection of his crop. He plants a small bamboo in the field and lights an earthen lamp at its foot. He may also whirl a piece of bamboo and chant certain mantras to protect the maturing paddy from pests. Some persons light the *akash-banti* or the sky-lamp hanging from a tall bamboo. The Kacharis put lamps at the foot of the *Siju* cactus, symbol of their chief God *Bathou*, in the garden, at the granary and in the field. *Kati Bihu* cannot be called a festival as such.

BHATHELI AND DEUL

(i)

In rural areas of Lower Assam there is hardly any dance and music, if we do not mention tribals like the Kacharis, typical of *Bohag Bihu* as seen in Upper Assam, but certain festivals going by names such as *Bhatheli*, *Suweri* or even *Deul* are held in the first week or so of *Bohag* and these attract a great many people.

In chief feature of *Bhatheli* is the planting of two green bamboos in a field. On the fixed date in the morning young men after taking a cleansing bath cut two bamboos. These are cleaned and washed, then decorated with coloured cloths and chowries. The bamboos are then ceremonially planted in the midst of a din made by beating of drums, clashing of cymbals and blowing of conches. The higher of the bamboos is known as the male *para* (pigeon) or bridegroom *para*, the other being the bride *para*. These are planted close; a little away is made a small hut with a roofing of banana leaves. This is known as *Bhatheli-ghar* and in it are placed some eatables and coins. The throne on which the idol of Vishnu-Krishna is kept is sometimes brought out in a procession and kept in a part of the field. The fair that grows up around the bamboos attracts traders with sweets, handicrafts, traditional

claymade toys and even locally produced lentils, spices, etc.

Towards evening young lads strike the *Bhatheli-ghar* and cry: *Bhatheli* is over, *Bhatheli* is over! They share the eatables and the money. Thus ends the day. In certain areas the breakers of the *Bhatheli-ghar* come from another village, resulting in a sort of mock fight between them and the local youths.

In the southern part of Kamrup, where the festival is known as *Suweri* (*Sori*), planting of tall bamboos is not seen, but bamboo posts with the tuft at the top uncut are planted to indicate where the thrones of the deities brought from the neighbouring villages are to be placed. Some decades ago one could see in this festival buffalo fight, elephant fight and horse racing. The festival starts after midday; towards evening the thrones are carried back to the respective *Namghars*. As each throne is carried back the people divide into two parties, one carrying the throne and trying to beat or cut down the overhanging branches or shrubs on the way. While the other party puts up a mock fight and try to stop the progress of the throne. The throne is taken to each households on the way and received at the gate with a light and some offerings of rice, gram, etc.

In a few villages near Palasbari, to the west of Guwahati, there is also the function of *Dadhi-mathan*, symbolic churning of milk by four pairs of small girls known as *Gopis* and twelve boys (*Gopalas*) dressed up as Krishna, the God of cowherds. Thus, the association of Krishna and the idea of cow welfare seem to be indicated.

It is not clear why the festival is called *Bhatheli* or *Suweri* or why the tall bamboos are called *para* (pigeon). People bow to the bamboos in northern Kamrup and they also touch them with reverence, but it does not look like any sort of bamboos worship, or even tree marriage. B. C. Allen, however, had observed that a mock marriage was performed between the best bamboo and the others raised round it in a circle (*District Gazetteer for Kamrup*, 1905). A section of Muslims near

Chamata perform what is known as Bas-biya, their local name for *Bhatheli*. Bas-biya or bamboo marriage may be some form of the *Madan-Kam puja* (worship of Kamdeva at the foot of a bamboo planted for the occasion) that is seen in Cooch Bihar in northern Bengal. The *puja* is performed on the full-moon day of *Chaitra*. It may be noted that in the Bajali area of the Barpeta district the bamboo kept leaning on a banyan tree is known as Madanmohan Gosain, a name for Krishna, and also worshipped as such.

The Kacharis also observe the *Bhatheli* ceremony, though they give it their own interpretation. Those in northern Kamrup call the festival *Bhaitheli*—that which goes down. They make a small hut near the bamboo, offer eatables to all Gods and Goddesses, good and evil, also a black pigeon and a black goat, and pray to these Gods and Goddesses to go downstream and not to bring to their village any mishap or disease. They symbolize the departing of the Gods by putting the pigeon and the goat on a raft and casting this loose in a river. The ceremony seems to recall what J.G. Frazer describes as the public expulsion of evil spirits at fixed times.

The planting of bamboos at *Bhatheli* seems to recall the Ind Parab of the Mundas. Mundas call the tallest Sal post that they plant as Ind-pole. Sarat Chandra Roy explains that "This festival is celebrated in memory of the first Nagbansi chief".

The planting of tall bamboos and Sal posts suggests some kind of Indra worship, of Indra as the supporter of the heavens, as the God of rain, and so on. The local Assamese idea that the bamboos represent a bride and a groom may suggest the unification of heaven and earth, for, as the *Vajasaneyi Samhita* has it, "When Heaven and Earth are in harmony with each other, then indeed it rains". Banikanta Kakati, the linguist, wanted to derive the term *Bhatheli* from *bhasthalika*, the sky region, and suggested that the bamboos might be some sort of Indradhvaja or pole raised in honour of Indra. In his *Visnuite Myths and*

Legends Dr. Kakati refers to the joyous festival described in the Mahabharata as Indradhvaja in which a standard used to be set up seven days before the full-moon day. It was a fertility ceremony later "converted into a festival in honour of Indra, the sovereign of the clouds and waters which generate the grain. Krishna replaced it by instituting the worship of the Govardhana hill."

Indra worship survives in parts of India even at this date. In west Bengal districts like Bankura and Midnapur people, mostly Santal, perform Ind-*puja* or Ind-parab in the month of *Bhadra* (Aug-Sept). The *puja* is performed by a priest with Sanskrit *mantras*. They plant a tall Sal post sometimes the number may be two or three—the taller or the tallest is called the Indradhvaj. In Assam apparently the bamboo has conveniently replaced the Sal or other trees used in earlier times.

In his exposition of Bhoja's *Sringara Prakasa* V. Raghavan observes that Sakramaha or Indrotsava seems to have been the greatest ancient Indian national festival and reference to this can be traced back to the Rig Veda. It was an autumnal festival, marked by music, dance, sword-fight, wrestling, etc. The *Kalika Purana*, composed in Assam about the tenth century, observes that the king who 'raises the staff of Indra' and worship him becomes affluent and rules for long. An inscription of Valavarma of the ninth century records that the king donated land to a Brahmin at the at the Sakrotthana ceremony. So apparently, *Bhatheli* still recalls this ancient tradition, though the festival is no longer autumnal.

(ii)

The *Doul* of Barpeta is associated with Krishna or Vishnu worship and the Pan-Indian Holi has been Vaishnavised here, but the many *Deul* festivals that are popular in Darrang and eastern Kamrup, though associated with a core of Vishnu worship, have grown out of the *Bhatheli* type of festivals where the bamboo plays a role. The *Deul* of Darrang has been considered to be a

transformation of *Bhatheli*, made popular because of the patronage of the local kings. The amusing fact is that it is performed in some villages or other every day of the month of *Bohag*. Sometimes there is first the worship of Vishnu with *homa*, then only the throne of God taken out to the *Bhatheli* ground. *Deul* is basically a puja and a *Mela* held in the spring.

Deul indicates a pyramid-like mound made of earth and several metres high. It has seven stairs up to the top. Four bamboos are planted at the four corners of the pyramid at the base, and at the top there is a covering of cloth stretched on bamboo posts. Just before the worship begins the priest takes the throne of God to the top, while the *Oja-pali* sing hymns, the drummers and pipers do their work and womenfolk make the sound of ululation. The throne is then taken down, placed on an altar and the worship proper starts.

On the day preceding *Deul* proper there is what is known as *Meshadaha*, the burning of the beard of a he-goat, supposed to be the symbolic killing of the demon *Mesha*. Normally, this *Meshadaha* is a feature of *Holi* of the month of *Phagun*. *Deul* occasions a large gathering and a fair where are available works of metal, bamboo, cloth, sweets, toys and so on. In earlier days when shops were scarce a fair of this type was quite a necessity. Even now it creates a market for certain things not available at the same place.

Certain popular beliefs are also associated with performance of *Deul*. It is said that in the afternoon of the *Deul* at *Khatara* storm and rain are a regular occurrence. In all these festivals it is difficult to find a fixed pattern: there are local variations. Even gambling is a feature of some of these *Deuls*.

(iii)

Hajo is well known for its temple of Hayagriva-Madhava, situated on a hillock as well as for Poamakka, another hillock on which is situated the dargah of Ghiasuddin Auliya. The town is

about fifteen miles to the north-west of Guwahati. Though the presiding deity of the Hajo temple is the 'Horse-necked' Madhava or Vishnu, the *deul* festival is known as *Govinda Deul*. The stone idol of Madhava is not possible to move and another idol, known as movable Madhava, is brought out to the *Daula-griha*, a brick temple, where the deity stays for three days. Beginning from the full-moon night of *Phagun* the usual rituals, including *Meshadaha* or burning or singeing of a goat, are gone through and *phaku* or coloured powder is offered to the deity. On the third day the deity is brought out in a procession and on this day people play with coloured powder and water as is done in the *Holi* festival.

Two other deities join Madhava on the bank of the stream *Lakhaitara*, these two deities being *Kedareswar* and *Kameswar*, both being representations of *Siva*. On the way back to their abodes the deities receive various offerings from the people, *Kedareswar* and *Kameswar* receiving *siddhi*, a liquid *bhang* preparation.

This, in a summary form, is the *Govinda Deul* of Hajo, but what is interesting is that a second festival known as *Raja Deul*, a repetition of the earlier one, is celebrated about a month later just after the next full-moon day. Tradition says that because a queen could not attend the normal *Deul* as she was in her period, the king had to provide for another one in order to suit her. The tradition seems to have a historical foundation. King *Rudra Simha*, the most powerful Ahom King (d. 1714), celebrated the *phaku* or colour festival while camping at the mouth of the *Barnadi*. He also visited the Madhava temple at Hajo in 1705-06. It is most probable that it was at his instance a second *Deul* had to be observed. The tradition has remained.

BAS PUJA OR MADAN-KAM PUJA

This festival reminds us of the ancient spring festival known as Madanotsava, but how Madan or Kamdev, the Indian God of love, came to be symbolized by bamboos is difficult to explain. Madan again seems to have blended with Krishna-Vishnu, as suggested by the *Bhatheli* festival.

Certain groups of people in the erstwhile Goalpara district are seen to perform the *Bas (Bans)* Puja ceremony at the *Madan-Chaturdasi* time in March-April. The ceremony continues from three to five days. Two stout bamboos are ceremonially cut, trimmed and washed and wrapped in cloth. The longer one, about twenty-nine feet in length, considered to be the male, is wrapped in white cloth and the shorter one, about twenty-four feet, is the female and wrapped in red cloth. Only male members take part in the ceremonial activity, but women and children attend the function.

The significant feature of this folk festival is the narration of etiological ballads describing the birth of *Madan-Kam*, different species of bamboo, selection of the right species for the purpose of the ceremony, the origin of cotton and the weaving of clothes, the creation of *bhang* or hemp and its consumption by various Gods, even by rivers, and so on. The

songs, accompanied by dance and musical instruments, are descriptive, for instance:

He has come, *Madan-Kam* has come
The pot, the lampstand, the sieve, the lamp
they have been brought out,
He has come, *Madan-Kam* has come,
Sugar, pudding, flowers, *batasa* (a sweet)
they have been brought out.

A song describes how presents are given to the bride by her relatives:

The bride's *mama* has come to offer his present,
He has left presenting a golden pitcher,
The bride's *mami* has come to offer her present,
She has left by presenting a golden flute,
The bride's granddad has come to offer his present,
He has left by presenting the broken beam of a boat,
The bride's granny has come to offer her present,
No present, no dowry, she said, 'Be happy, my dear'

The ceremony ends with what is known as *Bas Phurawa Geet*, songs asking for alms or presents from various households in the village. Some amount of dancing accompanies the singing.

The bamboos as symbolising the male and the female suggest also procreation and some parts of the songs have an erotic tone. Sometimes even songs associating Radha and Krishna are sung. These folk festivals have considerable variations according to areas and communities. For instance, the Hajong tribals near the Garo hills put up three bamboos; the third bamboo has peculiar function. A *jakai* a contrivance for catching fish, a creel and a broken plough are hung up on this bamboo. Malefolk dance and sing while womenfolk just attend and observe without taking any active part. The musical instruments played are the drum, the pipe, cymbals and the flute. The songs carry feelings of desire as well as pain at not getting someone:

It is now the rainy season, O Mohan (dear), the river is full,
My mind wants to fly like a bird, wings were not given, O
Mohan

It's Jeth and Baisakh, the fishes are coming upstream,
Radha went to get water, Kanai (Krishna) started tailing her.
In these variations of the festival there is no role for a Brahmin
priest.

OJA-PALI: BIYAH, SUKNANNI, KUSHAN GAN

(i) Biyah

Biyah is a local form for *Vyasa* or one who recites Puranas like the Mahabharata. Bharata's *Natyashastra*, the *Harivamsa*, Palakapya's *Hastyaurveda* and local inscriptions—all indicate that in Pragjyotisa or ancient Assam dance and music was quite developed. The Odra-Magadhi type of drama is characterised by the preponderance of speech and humour. In *Oja-Pali* narration or in the folk exhibitions of drummers speechifying and humorous tales or jokes are the features that keep the public entranced. The *Oja-Pali* narration is a kind of *kathakata*, but semidramatic in form. This humour is also an attractive feature of the medieval *Ankiya Nat* or Vaishnavite play. The *Oja-pali* team consists of the *Oja* or Master, *Daina Pali* or chief Assistant, and other three or four Assistants. The terms *Oja* and *Pali* are Sanskritic in origin.

As it seems, *Oja-Pali* narration combining dance and music was closely associated with Siva or Vishnu temples. The old tradition is no more extant, but the institution has acquired a broader field being invited to private houses on religious occasions and to *pujas* and to *Sabhas* of a public nature. Unless the *Oja-Pali* narrates the *lilas* or activities of the particular God or Goddess

the function cannot be considered to be complete. *Oja-Pali* of the *Biyah* type has been accepted by even Hinduised tribals of the Darrang District.

The dance, music, the narration interspersed with anecdotes, jokes, proverbs and even references to current affairs have made *Oja-Pali* a unique institution, enjoyable, educative and keeping the people in touch with traditional Indian culture. It is a source of education and if the illiterate peasant cannot be called ignorant it is because of the *Oja-Pali* and the influence of the Vaishnavite Satras.

The *Oja* narrates the verses in certain ragas, occasionally demonstrating the action with mudras or gestures. The expert in this kind of semi-dramatic activity used to be known as *Byaskalai* and there is a village near Mangaldai which is known *Byaspara* – a centre of expert *Ojas*. There are certain local traditions as regards the two types of *Oja-Pali* – the *Biyah* type and the *Suknanni* type. It is said there were two brothers known as *Byaskalai* and *Kendukalai*, the first starting the tradition of *Biyah* while the latter of *Suknanni*. *Kendukalai* worshipped the Goddess *Kamakhyā* with attractive music so that the Goddess herself danced naked to his music. The Koch king of Western Assam (and North Bengal) came to know of this and persuaded the priest to let him have a glimpse of the dancing Goddess, with the result that both, king and priest, lost their heads. The Koch kings since then stopped looking at the temple. *Kendukalai* seems to be a historical figure and his image is seen carved on the wall of the *Kamakhyā* temple (near Guwahati). The *Suknanni* type of *Oja* is associated with *Devi* worship and the worship of the Snake Goddess, while the *Biyah* type depends on local versions of the *Mahabharata* or *Ramayana* or works derived from them, sometimes adding verses of their own.

The *Oja* is really a master, he is normally of an attractive personality, with a strong voice, experienced in musical modes, dance mudras, and with a strong memory, for he has sometimes

to go on for hours and hours. He has also to train his assistants, in particular the *Daina Pali*, his chief assistant. The latter is equally competent, with considerable resourcefulness, a sense of humour, and in emergencies he may himself deputise for the *Oja*. There is a saying about who is the most competent *Oja*.

*Hate mudra mukhe pada pawe dhare tal,
mayura sadrisa nase sehi Oja bhal.*

–Mudras in his hands, verses on his lips, rhythm in his feet, dances like the peacock – that *Oja* is the best. This is an echo of a verse from the *Abhinaya-darpana*, where the bird referred to is *Garura*, not the peacock.

The *Oja* has his special dress. He has a conical paggri on his head, a long-sleeved jacket on his person, bangles on his hands, a *Ghagra* type skirt hangs from his waist, a pleated coloured *chadar* hangs lengthwise from his shoulder, and he also puts on anklets on his feet. The dress of the *Palis* consists of *dhoti*, shirt, and may be a *chadar* or *gamosa* towel around their necks. All the dresses are white. A special *Sabha-griha* or *pandal*, open on all sides, has to be built in order to accommodate the dancers and the men and women flocking there. *Sabha* is a Sanskrit word which means an assembly, but in Lower Assam the term implies a gathering associated with some religious function like the commemorative *Sraddha* ceremony of the founder of a *Satra* or Vaishnavite establishment and where the *Oja-Pali* and drummers play a major role.

The *Oja* enters the *pandal* with anklets in his hands followed by the *Palis* with small cymbals in their hands. The *Oja* advances towards the throne of God, and offers his prayers, the *Palis* following suit. The *Oja* then puts on the anklets, stands, and receding with his *Palis*, begins the *Alaap*, of his music with necessary gestures. The *Palis* accompany him on their cymbals.

The *Oja* pays homage to the gathering by describing the origin of the *Sabha* institution. He sings :

Listen o people, do not take me amiss,
Listen all with a settled mind,

The origin of the Sabha listen with attention,
 Carefully listen filling your ears,
 It was not there formerly on earth or in hell,
 It became revealed only in the Kali Age,
 Judhithira, son of Dharma became king in Hastinapura,
 He it was who brought into existence this Sabha....
 Those who gather here and decry the Sabha
 They all go away to Hell (Naraka)
 The instruments, the music, the beats, those who decry them
 Know for sure, as the son of Dharma asserts.
 Jama punishes them and sin burns them all*
 The Oja refers to various Gods and Goddesses, even
 Gandharvas and Apsaras, including God Krishna. He says that
 the pillars of the pandal should be of banana trees and the rafters
 of bamboo, being covered with banana leaves.

When the Oja starts his recitation after a verse or two the
Palis take up the refrain. The Oja explains the verses in simple
 language in a dialogue with the *Daina Pali*, who elaborates and
 sometimes adds a tale or a joke. Oja-Pali dance and music is not
 always based on the Mahabharata or the Ramayana: in the late
 thirties one Phatik Oja of Mangaldai sang of the Gandhian
 movement. In the first decade or so of the century when a railway
 line was being laid this also became a subject-matter for Oja-Pali
 narration.

This is all about 'Biyah Gowa Oja-Pali' or Oja-Pali of the
Biyah type, but there are local variations, in Central Assam or in
 the Vaishnava Satras. Perhaps the Ojas of the Mangaldai area are
 the most well-known and it is from them that traces of old classical
 Ragas have been discovered. When at the All-Assam Music
 Conference held at Guwahati in 1953 Oja Dhaturam Sarma
 exhibited his art by singing the *Saranga Raga*, Pandit Pattavardhana
 cried out, "why, this is the unadulterated form of India's ancient
 * Recorded from an Oja who belonged to the fishing community in my
 viallage

Saranga Raga. No where in India is found such a pure form of
 this Raga". There is a time when a particular Raga has to be sung,
 but the order followed in Assam may not agree with that followed
 in Hindustani music, for instance, *Puravi* is sung here in the
 morning and *Bhairavi* is sung in late night. The Ojas of various
 schools have retained traditional mudras or gestures, but they
 often just exhibit them without knowing their names well.

(2) Suknanni

The word *Suknanni* is said to be a contraction of the name
 Sukavi Narayandev who is the author of a *Padma-Puran* in
 Assamese, dealing with the tussle between the Saiva merchant
 Chando or Chandradhar and the Snake Goddess Manasa or Padma.
 Many people in the Darrang, Kamrup and Goalpara districts
 observe *Manasa Puja*, some as an annual family affair and others as
 a public festival, usually in the rainy season, not necessarily on the
 Naga-Panchami day as in Gujarat. *Manasa Puja* is popularly known
 as *Mare* or *Marai puja*. *Marai puja* continues for three or more
 days, but a shorter version of just one or two days known as *Rang*
Puja. The *Suknanni* type of Oja is closely associated with the worship
 of the Snake Goddess.

Snake worship is almost a universal phenomenon. In Assam
 sculptural remains indicate that some sort of Snake Goddess was
 worshipped from about the ninth or tenth century. How through
 the centuries she came to acquire prominence is a matter for
 speculation, but sixteenth-century poets like Narayandev,
 Durgabar and Mankar composed kavyas and hymns in praise of
 the Goddess. Was she also associated with Durga? Ojas recite her
 story even at Durga Puja. The Koch kings of Darrang patronised
Suknanni Ojas and at one time there were even Muslim Ojas and
 Kaliyas or pipers.

The *Suknanni* type has not remained uninfluenced by the
 older tradition of *Biyah Oja-Pali*, but in this case *Raga* music has

Kusa, one of the two sons of Rama. *Kushan Gan* has considerable resemblance in technique to *Oja-Pali*, hence it has been included in this chapter.

In a *Kushan Gan* troupe there are fifteen to sixteen persons. The leader is called either *Mul* or *Geetal* and he conducts the performance. The performance opens with two benedictory verses, one for the Goddess Saraswati and the other for the audience. The functions of the *Geetal* are similar to those of the *Oja* of *Oja-Pali*. In reciting the verses he plays the *bena*, a locally produced one stringed instrument. Although there are other instruments like the *Khol* and cymbals, the use of the *Bena* is characteristic of *Kushan Gan*. Therefore *Kushan Gan* is also known as *Bena Gan* among some people. The other persons in the troupe include a *Dowari* or chief assistant, a few musicians and some dancing boys known as *Chengra* or *Chokra*. The *Dowari* has important functions. He not only takes part in singing and dancing but also enters into conversations with the leader and other assistants. In his role as an actor he occasionally plays the buffoon and provides amusement by making humorous remarks. In an allied form known as *Bhari Gan*, where the battle of Rama and Ravana is a popular theme, the *Mul* or leader recites the verses and dances with a fly-whisk and his assistants provide accompaniment with *Khols* and cymbals. The *Mul* exhibits dramatic gestures but does not explain anything through dialogue as in *Kushan Gan*.

** With acknowledgement to Professor S. Bharali

BHAONA

Bhaona is the staging of the *Ankiya Nat*, the type of play introduced by the Vaishnavite saint Sankardeva (1463-1568). Indian culture –song, dance, poetry, drama and so on can be loosely described as Krishna-Vishnu centred. Some sort of dramatic activity based on Krishna's lilas has been going on for two thousand years. A Mathura inscription of the first or second century mentions two Chandaka brothers an earning reputation by exhibiting the activities of Samkarshana and Krishna. In the *Vishnuparvan* of the *Harivamsa* we have some details of such dramatic activity. Krishna once invited his Kinsmen to the seacoast and arranged for entertainment. There beautiful ladies danced in a circle keeping beats with clapping (*Rasa*) and then staged certain incidents that were pleasing to Balaram and Krishna: the killing of Kamsa, killing of Pralamba, Aristaka and Dhanuka, life in the Vraja area, killing of the demoness Putana, the defeat of Kalinga, the abduction of Subhadra and so on. Patanjali also mentions how persons known as *Saubhika*, *Chitra* and *Granthika* exhibited Vaishnava stories. (Norvin Hein, *Miracle Plays of Mathura*, 1972).

This dramatic tradition in some form or other survived and became conspicuous at Mathura, about the sixteenth century. It is known as *Rasa Lilanukarana* or *Rasalila*: *Rasa* dance at the

beginning by Gopis, then the *Lila* or exhibition of an episode in the life of Krishna. A Swami or Rasadhari trains up some young boys and they take on the roles of Krishna and the Gopis. It is said that Swami Haridas, the *guru* of Tansen, first gave shape to what is known as the Rasa-mandala in the middle of the sixteenth century. He gave training to Brahmin boys about acting and music. Abul Fazal mentions in his *Ain-i-Akbari* (1597) that the *Keertanias* were Brahmins; their instruments were old-fashioned; they rigged up smooth-faced boys as girls and made them sing the glory of Krishna and show the latter's activities in a dramatic form.

Mathura is even now a centre of such dance-drama. Though the Rasadharis stress dance and acting they do not insist on written plays as such. The Rasadhari or Swami functions as the Sutradhar and as needed recites descriptive verses, sings and even speaks in prose. Sankardeva travelled for years in various parts of India, and was familiar with the cultural activities of places like Mathura and Vrindavan and Puri. A talented person, having a command over languages, dance, music, painting and with an observant eye, the saint must have observed the dramatic activities in the Vraja area, and as it seems, he must have been stimulated to emulate the example and in the process producing a more well-formed drama. He also, trained boys to act as girls and used a piece of cloth held by two persons (but no screen as such) when an actor had to make his appearance. The actors were known as *Natuas* and they entered the stage dancing. Masks were a regular feature, especially for some Gods like Brahma, Ganesha, for demons like Bakasura, Chakravaka, Ravana, the monkey Hanuman and the bird Garura.

The Sutradhar's role is important. The Sutradhar wears a kind of long white gown with a paggri on his head. His dress and functions seem to have affinity to the *Oja* of the *Biyah* type. After the preliminary music with the *Khol* is over (there is no dance of the *Rasa* type here), the Sutradhar not only appears with prayers

and a prologue at the beginning of the *Anka* or play, but stays on the stage most of the time and goes on acquainting the audience surrounding the stage with details of the action. In the Sanskrit play he disappears after the *Nandi* or benediction. In the Assamese play, he it is who announces the play and conducts the show with dances, songs and explanatory commentary. The language used but for the occasional Sanskrit verse is *Brajabuli*, a mixture of Assamese, Maithili, Hindi. The dialogue is often in prose. The written text of the drama begins with a *Nandi* (benediction) in Sanskrit, announcement of the name and theme of the piece to be presented, a *Bhatima* (panegyric) of the hero, and an extremely short dialogue between the *Sutradhara* and a *Sangi* or associate. The introductory songs then usher in the hero, the heroine and other character in dance compositions. The real action now begins. The play closes with a *Muktimangala-bhatima* wishing everyone general welfare.

Sankardeva wrote six plays, *Patni-prasad*, *Kaliya-daman*, *Keli-gopal*, *Rukmini-haran*, *Parijat-haran* and *Rama-vijay*. His able disciple Madhavdeva's plays like *Arjuna-bhanjan*, *Pimparguchowa* are lighter dealing as they do with the pranks of the child Krishna. There were other writers who followed these pioneers.

The objective of Sankardeva was to establish Vaishnavism of the new school. There is not much scope for characterisation but the *Ankiya Nat* (called such because it has no act division)* is not simply the transcription of a story from the *Bhagavata Purana* or *Vishnu Purana*. A play like *Rukmini-haran* has fairly outlined characters and the speeches are usually short, homely and sometimes quite lively, as when divine ladies quarrel, as in *Parijat-haran*. The plot of *Rukmini-haran* may be summarised:

After the appropriate songs the Sutradhar announces that Srikrishna and Rukmini will present themselves. Srikrishna appears and takes his seat in a corner of the stage. Rukmini also

* The *Lilas* of Mathura also have no act division

comes with her maids and taken her stand. (We have to imagine Srikrishna is in dwaraka and Rukmini is in Kuntin in North-East Assam). A beggar arrives and tells Krishna of the accomplishments of the princess. Another beggar (bhat) comes and sings to Rukmini the praise of Krishna. Rukmini loses her heart to Krishna. Her father, king Bhismak, broaches the matter of her marriage. Everyone desires Krishna as the son-in-law, but Rukmabir, brother of the princess, stands in the way, for he wants Sishupal as his brother-in-law. The old king has to yield to his overbearing son. The wedding is fixed, the guests start coming. Not eager to be passed on to Sishupal, Rukmini calls in the priest Vedanidhi and sends him to Krishna with the message that she be carried off from the temple of Bhavani on the day preceding the wedding ceremony. The princess passes her time in deep anxiety, but Krishna does not fail her and, in the presence of all the visitor kings, carries her off. Sishupal gives chase but is badly defeated. Then Rukmabir goes out to fight, is badly defeated and spared with his life only at the entreaty of Rukmini. Krishna arrives at Dwaraka and the wedding is celebrated amidst considerable rejoicing.

The story is taken from the *Bhagavata* and the *Harivamsa*, but the depiction of the wilful Rukmabir, the sensitive but resourceful Rukmini, and the tall-talking Brahmin Vedanidhi seems to be given some local colour. The play interests one almost like a romantic creation.

Some religious occasion, like the birthday of a saint, may be the reason for staging an *Ankiya Nat*. The *Namghar* halls in the villages or within the precincts of a *Satra* or even an improvised construction with a covering of banana leaves may serve as the stage. Educated people may have lost the reverence that was associated with a Bhaona performance, but as an art creation of considerable broad appeal the *Ankiya Nat* has not lost its prestige.

Before Sankardeva wrote his first play *Kaliya-daman* he experimented with the *Patua* type of painting with dance

demonstration. The *Patua scrolls* can be as long as fifteen or sixteen feet and about two feet broad. The word *Patua* is from *pata* or picture: the pictures depicting the kingdom of Jama of Death on the model of the old *Jamapattikas*, or later, describing themes from the *Puranas*. *Pata lekhibaka*, *patuara pray* are expressions found in medieval Vaishnavite literature. Sankardeva prepared *Chihna-jatra* by depicting pictures of the seven *Vaikunthas* or heavens and Gods and Goddesses and explaining these with appropriate dance and music. The pictures were on paper. The term *Chihna* has not been explained by Assamese scholars but it means *mudra* or gesture in the Mathura tradition.

Sankardeva's disciple Madhavdeva also produced *Govardhana-jatra* 'in the manner of the *Patuas*'. It is therefore that these so-called plays do not exist now.

(ii)

More spectacular is *Baresahariya Bhaona* which is organised every five years or so in a place like Jamuguri in the Sonitpur district. Many neighbouring villages have to combine their resources in order to prepare the ground and make the stage which is circular with a diameter of about eighty feet. Just imagine how capacious it should be when fifteen to twenty, or even more plays have to be staged simultaneously. The roof of the stage is covered with thatch. In the centre of the stage is the *Manikut* or *sactum* containing the *Bhagavata Purana* kept on a throne along with tree-shaped lamp-stands and *sarais* with offerings. Surrounding the *Manikut* there is about thirty feet of open space used either for *nam-prasanga* or to move about on some chore or another. Each compartment of the stage is adequate to put on a play. On the front and central stage is put on a play by Sankardeva. This is out of regard for the great preacher and innovator.

The festival begins with the singing of the glories of God Krishna and this part is led by the *Adhikars* or *Gosains* of the

neighbouring *Satras*. The place becomes resonant with the playing of *Khol* and cymbals and the music of the verses of Assamese Vaishnavite literature. For two days during daytime, this kind of *nam-prasanga* goes on, though some time may be spent on an academic session discussion theological or spiritual matters.

The *Bhaona* starts at about nine in the evening and goes on all night. The second night also passes in this manner. The audience sit on the ground on cloth, womenfolk sitting separately. Thousands of people gather to witness the *Bhaona* and there are volunteers to look after this huge concourse. Many of the visitors become guests of relatives and friends. Some have to be accommodated in temporary guest houses. *Baresahariya Bhaona* is a unique institution providing for give and take among a large number of people and reminding them that they possess a rich heritage in the fields of music, dance and drama.

The tradition of this institution must be about two hundred years old for it is said that the Ahom Governor Salal Gohain, posted at Satiya not far from Jamuguri, used to patronize this type of *Bhaona*. Later the Jamuguri area came to nourish the tradition. The model may have come from the Kaliabor region on the south bank of the Brahmaputra in the district of Nagaon. There is also the legend that once when cholera killed off a large number of people at Jamuguri, Vishnava gurus instructed the people to perform *Baresahariya Bhaona*, with the result that after the performance the disease disappeared.

* With indebtedness to Sri Ram Goswami

PASATI OR PASETI

Pasati is a domestic function performed for the welfare of a son on the fifth day of his birth. On this day the mother has a cleansing bath, smears the baby with turmeric-mixed water and allows it to be held by other women. On this day astrological calculations are made about the future of the child and a name given to it. Womenfolk present are given batel-nut and leaf, salt, fish, oil, etc. In some areas a feast is offered.

Somehow or other this local function got transformed into a festival associated with Child Krishna, in particular in the *Satras* or Vaishnavite establishments. The cowherd King Nanda performed the *Pasati* or fifth day rites for the welfare of Krishna without the knowledge of King Kamsa, who wanted to slay and child born to his sister Yasoda. So this imitation *Pasati* is to be observed on the fifth day after *Janmashtami* or on Krishna's birthday, also a festival in its own right. But this month of *Bhada* is a period when the people are engaged in various chores connected with cultivation ploughing, preparing the soil, growing seedlings, and so on. Therefore the date of celebration had to be moved – to the last day of *Kati* in a *Satra* like *Outala* and the last day of *Bhada* in the well-known *Khatara Satra*.

The *Pasati* or *Paseti* observed at *Khatara Satra* is a major

festival. Though Rama is identified with Krishna Vasudeva he is hardly worshipped separately in Assam, but the chief deity of *Khatara* is Rama. This *Satra* was founded by Govinda Atai, a disciple of Madhavdeva. Govinda Atai chose this area full of jungle because he happened to see here a frog swallowing a snake. He had the jungle cleared, laid the foundation and raised a *Keertanghar* (*Namghar*) there. Now there were four *Khats* (sort of mastan) living in that area and they began to give trouble to the saint. Being unable to tackle these rogues Govinda Atai went to his *guru* for counsel. Madhavdeva instructed him to provide for the worship of Rama, giving him the idols of Rama, Lakshmana, Sita and Hanuman.

Govinda Atai brought the idols to his *Satra* on boat, established them ceremonially and with his disciples and followers began a series of prayers and readings from the scriptures. There was also dance to the accompaniment of various musical instruments. The four *Khats* had a change of heart and submitted to the saint. Because the *Khats* were defeated the *Satra* came to be known as *Khat-hara* and, ultimately, *Khatara*.

So the chief deity here is Rama and there are idols of not only Rama, but also Sita, Lakshmana and Hanuman. Various beliefs have sprung up regarding these objects of worship, for instance, Hanuman is the source of rain when it is necessary and of children for women who are barren.

Govinda Atai, like the typical Vaishnava preacher, was an expert in such things as dance, music and drama. He earned considerable reputation by staging the *Dadhimathan Jatra* and was even invited by King Naranarayan of the Koch kingdom of western Assam. He pleased the king by dramatically demonstrating the churning of milk by the young boys dressed as *Gopis*. The action was enlivened with music to the accompaniment of *Khol*, cymbals etc.

The tradition of *Dadhimathan* or the dramatic churning of milk for butter, originally introduced at Sundaridiya near Barpeta,

has remained an important feature of *Pasati* at *Khatara*. The festival starts on the last day of *Bhada*. The day before, after certain religious rites are over, the entire night people are entertained by *khel* players with their comical skits and *Oja-Pali* dancers of the *Biyah* type. Next morning the deities are worshipped in the *sanctum sanctorum* of the *Keertanghar*.

The drama of *Dadhimathan* is exhibited through pantomime outside the hall of the *Keertanghar*. They make a structure with wood and bamboo with a churning mechanism, the churners being males dressed as women. Before the churning begins there gather the *Oja* or *Sutradhar* with accompanying actors and musicians. As the musicians begin playing with *Khol* and cymbals the *Oja* starts reciting the relevant verses with illustrative dance movements. As the speed of *Khol* music increases the *Oja* also raises his tempo till the whole affair continues for about three hours. Throughout the night too *Khol* players, comic reciters, *Nagara* or Kettle-drum players and *Oja-Pali* have to entertain the people gathered there. Next day the rite of *Nandotsava* is performed. This recalls what Nanda did after the birth of Krishna.

The dramatic churning of milk and the desire to play homage to the idols of Rama, Sita, Lakshmana and Hanuman draw thousands of men and women from the surrounding villages. There are visitors even from Nagaon and Kamrup. The number of women and young girls outnumber that of males. Many come walking long distances. Some of the visitors pass the night here. Womenfolk offer betel-nuts and leaves and a little money to the idol of Rama.

Another aspect of the festival is the *Mela* that grows up at the place. All sorts of the people, including Muslims, flock here and participate in the general festivities.

Dadhimathan, this symbolic churning of milk, is also a feature in the *Sabhas* or *Sunweris* of certain areas in Southern Kamrup.

* With indebtedness to Dr. Nabin Chandra Sarma

MATHENI OF DEVANANDA SATRA

Just as Khatara Satra is well known for its Paseti festival Devananda Satra in the same district of Darrang is famous for its Matheni (Sans, manthana) or Churning of the Sea festival. Matheni is celebrated in the autumn on the Kati Bihu day. The Koch king of Darrang patronised festivals like Deul, Paseti and Matheni and thus encouraged the local cultural traditions.

In the Matheni festival is exhibited the churning of the sea by the Gods and demons through narration and dramatic action, though there is no written play as such. The story behind the festival goes like this: Lakshmi has to leave Heaven at the curse of the hot-tempered sage Durbasa. This leads the Gods to a lot of suffering—hunger, anxiety, and so on. On the other hand, demons start oppressing them. The defeated Gods approach Brahma for relief. As Brahma is unable to help them they all now fall at the feet of Vishnu. God Vishnu instructs the Gods and demons to churn the sea of milk, Kshirasagara. The Mandar Parbat is made the churning rod and the serpent Vasuki is made the churning rope. Vishnu in his Kurma or tortoise incarnation upholds the Mandar Parbat. The Gods get hold of the tail of Vasuki while the demons grasp the head and thus they start churning the sea. In this way as they go on churning come out the Kalakuta poison,

Kamadhenu, the cow that gives whatever you need, the horse Unchchaishrava, the elephant Airavata, the Parijata flower, the jewel Kaustubha, the apsaras, and last of all, the Vaidya (physican) Dhanwantari with two pitchers of amrita or nectar in his hands. The demons snatch away the pitchers of nectar. Then Vishnu takes the shape of Mohini and her charms confuse the demons and the Gods, taking advantage of the situation, drink up the nectar. The demons then attack the Gods and there is a fierce battle. The demons have to acknowledge defeat. This is the theme that is partly dramatised and narrated in a musical form.

Preparations begin several days ahead of the festival. A large pandal raised near the Satra temple. There on the Matheni day is the worship of Vishnu with homa, reading of scriptures and *nama-keertana*. Right from early morning a Mela or fair begins on the large ground near the temple. Thousands of people gather here and they attend the stalls selling various local products. The drama of *Sagara-manthana* enacted under the pandal. Banana barks are laid on an area of about thirty square yards. In the middle of this area a pit is dug, a pitcher is put there and in it is placed the churning rod which is about ten cubits high. At the top of this rod are hung four bows painted with colour. At a distance of about six cubits from the churning rod are planted four posts of wood. These are wrapped with banana bark. Further, powder of *jaha* rice mixed with curd, milk ghee, honey, and sugar is put in a clay pot and the pot is hung up at the top of the churning rod. This is Amrita or nectar. A strong and long rope is fixed to the churning rod so that if one pulls at it the rod turns easily.

There are other rites associated with Matheni. For instance, the leading lady of the Gosain family in charge of the festival and a few other ladies get water from a tank or stream and ceremonially pour it into the pot holding the churning rod. The leading lady also bows to the rod and pulls at the rope three times, symbolizing the churning of the sea. After she leaves enter four boys and a party which is in charge of religious songs. As the party goes on

singing the boys pull at the churning rope dancing to the music and beat of cymbals and clapping.

Next day towards afternoon the four boys appear in female dress followed by the musicians. They again pull at the rope and start churning. The party in charge of music sing to the accompaniment of cymbals and clapping such verses:

Taking a light of ghee, taking a light of oil,
Come friends, let's invite Krishna,

Come friends, come, let's churn milk

O friend, O brother, which way has Hari gone,

Me the unfortunate did not see,

My eyes now are watering.

So though the drama is about the churning of the milk sea, the stress is on Krishna.

That night at about eight o'clock the main drama of churning the sea begins. First there is singing of hymns by the singing party. Then enter some elderly persons wearing washed clothes and with cymbals in their hands. One of the seniormost among them with a flywhisk in his hand takes his stand in front. He is the *Sutradhar* and in speech and narrative verse he pays to Vishnu, explains why the sea has to be churned, how it is churned, and so on. Besides speech, for the narration he depends on a *kavya* in *pada* metre composed by one Satananda Dwija. The *pada* metre has fourteen lettered lines and every two lines rhyme. It is lively narration, only the churning of the sea being shown in action. The *Sutradhar's* graphic description is like this:

O assembled persons, seeing the pitchers of Amrita being snatched away the Gods began to cry like this- Alas, O God, we could not achieve our objective. We struggled for nothing. We are undone. Thus the Gods kept crying their hearts out. Noticing their grief God took the shape of Mohini (the beautiful charmer), and managed to give the nectar to the Gods. They became undecaying and immortal. See this and listen to this, and take the name of Hari, say Hari, incessantly.

When the narration is over, the sons and grandsons of the Gosain family, covering themselves in white clothes, catch one end of the churning rope, while some of their disciples, putting on dark clothes and caps of various colours, grasp the other end of the rope. The latter are the demons while the former the Gods. The demons begin the churning making quite a noise, while the Gods do their job in a dignified way. After some time the rope breaks and the tussle ends; The pot hung up at the top of the churning rod is brought down and the ricepowder mixed with ghee, honey, etc. is shared by the Gods as well as the demons.

After this function is over, there is playing of *Khols*. The *Khol* players also exhibit some sort of comic skits. Thus the night passes.

To attend the Matheni festival and see the churning of the sea and listen to the story of the rise of Lakshmi are supposed to be beneficial, leading the welfare and happiness. To get a piece of the churning rope is fortune indeed.

* With indebtedness to Dr. Nabin Chandra Sarma

SPRINGTIME FESTIVALS OF TRIBES

(1) Boro-Kachari

We have got a general description of *Bohag Bihu* as observed by the Assamese Hindus, though it is rather difficult to draw the line where Hinduism ends and where 'tribalism' begins. Let us now see how the Boro-Kacharis of Lower Assam observe their *Bihu* or *Boisagu*.

Perhaps the earliest description that we have of *Boisagu* is from an English missionary (1911). Sidney Endle writes, "Among the Darrang Kacharis this festival lasts for seven days, during which little or no work is done, the whole period being given up to merrymaking, dancing, feasting, etc. As is the practice among their Hindu neighbours, on the opening day all cattle are taken to the nearest river or tank, and there formally bathed, and afterwards sprinkled with a preparation compounded of rice-beer, tomatoes [aubergine?], and turmeric. The horns are smeared with oil, ashes, and pounded rice flour are applied in patches to the bodies of the cattle. This duty discharged, the people abandon themselves to sheer merriment, the younger folk especially giving themselves to dancing, singing, etc. The verses sung at these festivals seem for the most part to be little better than mere

meaningless jingle-jangle rhymes, made up on the spur of the moment, though occasionally some of them give an insight into the peculiar humour of the Kachari character and temperament". The verses chanted by Kachari youth when the cattle are taken to their bathe are similar to those of their Hindu neighbours:

Eat your gourd, eat your aubergine
grow up from year to year,
to spite your mother and your father
you will be large bullocks;
don't be sort-statured like your mother,
be large like your bull father
like the frog in the garden corner
may you be sleek and long.

Boisagu as observed by these people indicates the pattern which the festival follows over the several days. The first day is *Mansoi Domahi*, *Magou*, meant for the cattle; the second day is *Mansoi Domahi*, meant for men; the third day is *Saima*, meant for dogs; the fourth day is *Ama*, meant for swine; the fifth day is *Daoni*, meant for fowl; the sixth day is meant for ducks and other birds; the seventh day is set apart for the reception of relatives and friends. Household cleaning, cattle rites, worship of *Bathou* and offering of eatables, including rice-beer, to their ancestors, putting on of new or washed clothes, receiving and visiting may be said to constitute the main features of *Boisagu*. Like their Hindu Neighbours Kacharis also thrust *Nahar* or ironwood leaves into the thatch of their roofs as a protection against thunder and lightning, but these leaves may not have a *mantra* written on them.

On the second day of their *Bihu* Kacharis offer worship to the five-ridged *Siju* cactus*, the symbol of *Bathou* or Mahadeva. The next stage is offering of food and drink to their ancestors and recently dead relatives, the food being placed in a corner of the yard. There is also the ceremonial eating of fowl cooked with a

* These five ridges symbolize the five principles of their faith the *Panchabhutâs*.

kind of bitter herb. This is also offered to visitors. Towards evening elderly persons lose themselves in drink and show a tendency to dance. From next day dance and music becomes a regular feature, and while young men play the long *Siphung* flute, the drum, the four-stringed *serja* and beat out rhythm with a split bamboo, girls dance in bands and play the jew's harp and small cymbals.

Kacharis at Daranggiri, in the Goalpara district and hundred km. to the west of Guwahati, seem to possess certain local customs and traditions not found in northern Kamrup. On the Cow *Bihu* day Daranggiri Kacharis put leaves of the cane, the *dighlati* and the flower of the *keturi* (a shrub similar to the turmeric) under the rafters, on the fencing near the gate and in the well. Further, they sprinkle phaku or abir (coloured powder) on a sheaf of these three things and keep the sheaf planted upright in a corner of the yard. Next day *Bathou* is worshipped in this place. The sheaf is thrown away after the seventh day of *Bihu*. On the third *Bihu* day young girls make ornaments or flowers and leaves and put them on the arms, necks, ears and feet of old women.

They have further an interesting tradition. In earlier times when they went out for begging (*magan*), they happened to meet parties of Garos coming down from their hills with the same purpose. Garos came with a large horse made of bamboo laths, with a man inside. They used to show 'the art of making the horse dance'. Whenever a Kachari party came on such a Garo party there would be a contest in dancing and drumming. It was found that the Garo dancer tended to fall down in a trance. The man could be brought round only when the Garos conceded to the greatness of the Kachari God *Bathou*, 'broke eggs for him', and offered him homage. Even now Garos bring eggs with them when they come down during *Bihu*.

This type of horse dance, known as '*Hana ghorar nas*', seems to have been adopted by the Rabhas of the Goalpara district. The *Hanas* are said to be a section of the Garos.

(2) Mising

The Misings, formerly known as Miris and ethnically akin to the Adis of Arunachal Pradesh, are found along the banks of the Subansiri, the Bharali and the Brahmaputra. They have their springtime seed-sowing ceremony known as *Ali-ai-ligang*, or *Ligang* for short.

Mising starts their cultivation during the winter, on the fertile sandbanks thrown up by the rivers, but they observe the *Ligang* festival in the first week of *Phagun*, several weeks before *Bohag Bihu*. They start on a Wednesday, associated with the Goddess of Rice and considered to be auspicious. And they sing:

The wind of *Phagun* is blowing,
the paddy is growing splendidly,
the trees are putting forth leaves,
flowers have bloomed,
in the village they are celebrating *Ali-ai-ligang*,
young men and women are wild with enthusiasm,
come, let us go there.

On the day of the ceremony proper offerings are made to their ancestors and then a few handfuls of *ahu* paddy are sown in the field with the following prayer:

We will give to the seeker, we will give to the beggar, We will give to our gurus and *bhakats*. O Gods, find no fault with us. When the harvest will be gathered, we will offer *puya* to you. O ancestors, you will have to guard these plantations, otherwise your children and grandchildren won't be able to survive and then who will give offerings to you?

The ceremonial *Ligang* commences from about noon. Boys and girls dance in a ring at every house starting from the easternmost in the village and as they dance they cry out: *Ali-ali-ai!* The houses of Misings are built on piles and have bamboo floors. The visitors are treated to food and drink, though the dance is held outside on the ground. The dance later spreads to fields

and the riverside. The scene is made attractive by the colourful dresses put on by the girls.

The Ligang festivities continue for five days. In recent years the tendency has been to synchronize the *Ali-ai-ligang* festival with *Bohag Bihu*. Mising are also accepting the cattle-bathing ceremony and Husari singing of their Assamese neighbours. The *Husari* verses are in Assamese while the other songs are in their own language. The dance that I noticed during *Bihu* in 1966 at Bahguri village near Dergaon seemed to be mimetic, representing sowing of seeds, planting, reaping, threshing of paddy in wooden mortars, weaving with the shuttle, etc. Each feature formed a sort of tableau, the raising of the arms over the head and waving of hands forming a 'rest period' at the conclusion of each tableau. This was purely ritualistic dance, not the dance with erotic suggestions usually associated with *Bohag Bihu*. The girls danced in groups of three or four, often taking turns.

Girls attended by senior male-folk visit towns at this time and earn some money by *Husari* dance. A significant feature of this period is the worship of the *Bihu* God, and it is not certain whether this worship is part of the *Ligang* festival or a distinct ritual linked up with it. *Bihu* symbolizes the New Year, youth and love, and it has to be parted with reverentially. Young Misings, men and women, raise a dais to the *Bihu* God in a nearby forest and plant a sapling of the silk-cotton tree (*Salmali*) nearby. The tree is supposed to symbolize long life. The young people shower flowers on the dais and dance round it long into the night. Before the ceremony is over a light is put on the dais and everyone leaves offering prayers and money before it. None looks behind as he leaves; for if he does so the *Bihu* God will return with him and his mind will not settle down to his work at home or in the field.

The planting of the silk cotton sapling seems to suggest that like *Bhatheli* it also recalls one of the ancient festivals of India – the youthful festival of *Ekasalmali* or *Salmalimulakhelana* – playing

round a silk-cotton tree blindfolded and trying to seek one another. It is also said that people of the Vidarbha country in Central India used to observe this festival. It is of course not known if the tree also symbolized a long life.

In the Assamese *Magh Bihu* or *Domahi* there is no dancing but at Mising *Po-rag* festival held in the month of Ahin after the *ahu* paddy is harvested, there is plenty of dance and music. Some of the dances are mimetic suggesting sowing, reaping, weaving, etc.

Why shouldn't we have a few missing songs now? The *Bihunam* or *Bihu* song is quatrain, the second and the fourth line rhyming, while the Mising *Oi-nitam* is of two lines, not always rhyming :

When the koel coos and the orchid blooms
the waters of Mother Subansiri will start swelling.
The rain have brought distress to forest animals,
menam (dear), my heart is distressed because of you.
the canoe is light, the paddle is broken,
how can I row up to your village?
If I had got you I would have gone in my light canoe
talking heart to heart with you,
alas, dear, now I am going downstream like driftwood.

For comparison, here are two *Bihu* songs:
While boating upstream I heard Nagas talking,
and I moored alongside the bank,
I did not get news of my treasure clearly,
let me go downstream to the west.

You need not go downstream to the west
feeding on dried rice-powder,
you would prick your feet on thorns far away,
you won't have anyone to weep for you.
The natural background is reflected in these songs.

administrative relevance now, they are just descendants of historical figures and just symbols, socially recognized.

Tiwas, Karbis, Jaintias, the common Assamese people, traders of various types—it is a huge concourse, many taking temporary shelter in makeshift huts covered with paddy stubble. The hill people come down to procure *pithas* or cakes, dried fish, vegetables, medicinal herbs and so on by bartering with ginger, turmeric, arum and such things that they themselves produce. This is a traditional gathering with a traditional mode of trading. The things that the hill people procure here are used to celebrate their feasts up in the hills. The people come down walking about twenty miles or so.

The market now-a-days exhibits furniture like bedstead, table, box, articles like quilt, mattress, sweets, cloths and so on. There is a formal meeting as part of the celebration and some dance and music as well as a bit of speech-making are there. Old war implements like swords, rhine-hide shields, one or two small cannon and spears are also exhibited. The dancers put on attractive traditional dresses. One of the dances shown was the rice-powder making dance, a mimetic affair.

Though Wednesday is supposed to be auspicious for most tribals this winter *Mela* is held on a Friday and the people, at least those that come from a distance, start leaving after a day or two.

MAGH SAINJRA OF THE DIMASAS

The Kacharis at one time ruled in areas later occupied by the Ahoms. Having been pushed hither and thither they at the time of British occupation of Assam had been ruling in the plains and hilly areas of Cachar. The Kacharis dwelling in the present North Cachar Hills district are known as Dimasas; the plain areas have been swamped by immigrants.

The Dimasas have not escaped from the general pattern of Assamese *Bihus*—the springtime *Bohag Bihu*, the winter *Magh Bihu* and the less important *Kati Bihu*. At one time, it is said, *Kati Bihu* or *Gaddi Sainjra* or the plantation ceremony has considerable ritualistic significance. In the past on such a day males were forbidden to go out to their *jhum* (or slash and burn) fields to work while women were forbidden to do any work except cooking. On this day their priests offered puja to *Brai Sibrai* (Mahadeva). *Heremdi*, the presiding deity of their old kingdom, also known as *Gamadee*—as wife of *Brai Sibrai*, and *Ranchandi*, worshipped in the form of a sword. Sacrifices were made and there was feasting with meat and drink.

At present they lay more stress on *Magh Sainjra* or *Magh Bisu* (*Busu*). *Baisagi Sainjra* or *Bohag Bihu* is not that important, though they observe house cleaning and the custom of offering

Bihu towels. When the labours of *jhum* cultivation are over and the harvest is gathered in, there is relief as well as an invitation to merriment. First there are prayers of thankfulness to *Brai Sibrai* and his consort *Gamadee*. The priests chant:

Through the grace of God *Sibrai* we have got this day, waiting and waiting we have got this day. Out of a thousand days this is the day that we have got. Brothers, allow no anxiety or sorrow into your mind. Do not allow any anxiety or sorrow to get into your mind. The more you allow them to get into your mind the more they will go on increasing.

The Dimasas have the *magan* custom (begging) of the plains *Kacharis*. They first visit the leading persons, dance and sing, then visit other households. One thing to note is that this festival is not observed on a fixed day but on any day found suitable to a village. This means a series of visiting and inviting, to drink and to eat. The food is not as diversified as in the plains of Assam. There are no cakes, for instance, but there is stewed sticky *bara* rice with rice-beer and meat.

The dance is said to vary from place to place. The male dancer puts on a shirt, sometimes also a black coat, a *dhoti* and a *paggri* with a hanging tail. The girl puts on a coloured loincloth and another cloth that hangs from the breast to the knee. She may put on a blouse as well. It is customary to maintain a balance in the numbers of the male and female dancers, for instance, five against five, six against six. They have, however, lost the traditional forms. What remains is mostly leg movement and cries in the manner of Nagas. The Dimasas of the *Dijowa* area towards the plains have dances which are suggestive of certain aspects of agricultural life. In one form girls make use of two bamboo-made sieves in an artistic manner.

The musical instruments used are the drum, a long pipe and also a string instrument. Though it is a winter festival the jest that the songs carry suggest the spirit of spring. As they go for visiting various households, the boys and girls sing:

On this lovely day are flying thousands of birds,
we are fortunate to have such a day,
we haven't today any sorrow.
Just as you throw away the chaff
so do you throw away your wealth.
Beasts and birds that there are, let them come,
there's no anxiety, no sorrow.
Carefully do you spread the cloth.
On the earth given by God *Sibrai*
throw away theree cubits with a shovel,
of the water given by Mother *Gamadee*
throw away three times like the crab.

* With indebtedness to Shri Nagendranath Barua

KHERAI PUJA

Kherai puja of the Bodo-Kacharis is a festival of various kinds of dance and music involves considerable expenditure and hence it is not performed regularly in individual families. But the one held in the month of *Kati*, in the autumn, has a public character. The *puja* is held for the welfare of men, animals and in particular for the growth of paddy. Therefore various Gods and Goddesses are worshipped, including *Bathou Borai*, their chief God, *Sang Raja*, owner of wild animals, *Bhandari*, owner of the store of foodstuff, *Ranchandi*, the Goddess of war, *Bulli Buri*, the owner of the fish, *Laokhar Gosain*, the God of cowherds, *Nawab Badsha*, the God of Muslims, *Mainao*, the Goddess of wealth or paddy, and so on.

As the Kacharis have no fixed shrine or temple they choose an open place and prepare a longish altar. The altar starts from the south and ends in the north. It has two parts. In the first part a piece of cloth is hung up above the ground. It indicates peace. In the main part a *Siju* cactus is planted as symbolizing *Bathou Borai*. It is surrounded by low fencing. A light and offerings like betel-nuts and leaves, green bananas, and a pot of water with a gold ring and *Tulasi* leaves are placed at the foot of the *Siju*. This water is sprinkled on the altar. As a symbol of creation an egg

and as a symbol of truth a piece of stone are kept in front of *Bathou*. In some areas the egg and the stone are buried in the ground and over the spot the *Siju* cactus is planted. One or two swords and shields are also kept on the altar. Though there is the *Deuri* or *Oja* to conduct the *puja* it is the *Doudini* or female dancer who represents the various stages of the rituals. Her dress is red and she keeps her hair unbound. The *Oja* and the *Doudini* have to observe a fast for one day before the ceremony starts.

On the *Kherai* day after sunset the *Oja* starts praying and the *Doudini* keeps kneeling in front of the altar till the prayers are over. While thus sitting with folded hands the woman starts shaking and as soon as she stands up and while the instrumental music with the deep sound of the drums, the sweet wailing of the *Siphung* flute and the clangor of the cymbals create a mystic atmosphere, she begins her dance. As she goes on dancing a time comes when she falls into a trance and then she is possessed by the Gods and Goddesses. Now she dances vigorously accompanied by the music of drums, flutes and cymbals. The music varies by the music of drums, flutes and cymbals. If there is a mistake in keeping in tune with the various dances. She may be joined by other worshippers in a circle. As she dances the beat of the music the *Doudini* may stop and show irritation. She may be joined by other worshippers in a circle. As she dances the *Doudini* imitates the nature of the Gods and Goddesses. When she imitates *Ranchandi* (*Rana-chandi*) she holds a sword and a shield in her hands. After the dancing is over she makes prophecies about the welfare of the people and the crops. From the artistic point of view what requires notice are the various dance forms.

It is not possible to describe the dance forms but a few dances may be mentioned. In the *Bathou Gidingnai* the *Doudini* moves round the altar of *Bathou* dancing slowly to the music of drums, flutes and cymbals. In the *Chotrali* the *Doudini* dances with a sword and a shield demonstrating war dance in honour of *Ranchandi*. *Khoijama Phonai* is another war dance. *Nao Bonai* is in honour of *Laokhar Gosain* or *Krishna*. In the *Daothoi Longnai* the *Doudini* takes the blood of a sacrificed cock in a cup and

standing by the altar drinks it up. In another dance she puts the burning wick of a light into her mouth. There are more than a dozen varieties of dance.

At the conclusion of *Kherai Puja* the worshippers symbolically retrieve *Mainao*, the Goddess of wealth. A pig is sacrificed to her with necessary mantras. Music goes on. The *Doudini*, who has been possessed by the Goddess, addresses the people in the voice of *Mainao*: O Boro children, where are you going to take me? If you take me today you will cast some quantity on water, some on fire, and you would neglect me. You would go back the way you have come. The *Oja* prays:

You must come, Mother *Mainao*; without you how can we survive? You are our life, on your mercy everything exists. We cannot live for a while in your absence. If you do not visit our houses you will be touched by sin, for you will have to drink the blood of our heads. O mother, you must come to us.

Mainao, the source of wealth, that is, paddy, assures the people that she will not forsake them.

It may not be easy to organize *Kherai Puja* and associated activities, but some of the dances are exhibited out of their contexts as specimens of the artistic activity of the Kacharis. The clothes put on by the womenfolk also draw one's attention. Their music is fairly developed. The *Kherai* ceremony continues for three days and nights.

A considerable number of Kacharis in the Kokrajhar district to the west of Assam have adopted what is known as *Brahma-dharma*, a reformed cult of Hinduism. Whenever they have to perform a religious function, they make a *kunda* or shallow pit and pour into it incense, ghee and such fragrant things and recite Vedic mantras, thus giving up the worship of their traditional Gods and Goddesses. Some of them have even given up drinking rice-beer. Obviously, they have stopped performing the *Kherai puja*.

CHOMANGKAN OF THE KARBIS

The Karbis (formerly known as Mikirs) dwell mostly in the Karbi Anglong district. Though influenced by Hinduism and they believe in a Supreme Being, they are happy with their traditional dress, dance, music and folklore. Their traditional Gods and Goddesses, are more significant than Hindu Gods and Goddesses but the amusing fact is that they have their own version of the *Ramayana* story, known as *Sabin Alun*, a sort of folk epic.

The most elaborate socio-religious ceremony that the Karbis observe is *Chomangkan*, a death ceremony. The term means 'a Khasi dance'. Why it is called a Khasi dance, though it has no relation to any such Khasi ritual, is a mystery. It is said the original name of the funeral ceremony was *Arleng Karhi*; the term was "replaced.....by the term *Chomangkan* perhaps during the period when the Karbis were compelled by circumstances to live in Jaintiapur, the land of the Khasis and Jaintias". In dance and other matters the Karbis have borrowed to a certain extent from the Khasis.

When a person dies the body is kept till his relatives arrive, then after formalities have been gone through the body is burnt and the bones buried. This is normal activity, but a time comes when the *Chomangkan* ceremony has to be performed, sooner

or later. There are three types of *Chomangkan*, the most prestigious being *Harne*, performed by a family of a higher status and greater resources.

The ceremonial rites are so many that it takes months to get them prepared. Provision of a large quantity of rice and rice-beer is made to feed hundreds of people for at least four days during which the ceremony continues. Pig meat and tea (without milk) have also to be provided. Then there is the construction of small huts for the accommodation of the guests.

Two persons play a major role in the performance of the ceremony. One is the *Uchepi*, an elderly lady who is the professional weeper capable of singing the songs of lamentation, cooking the special food and the manner of offering it to the departed one. She is conversant with all the rituals to be observed. The second important person is the *Duihudi*, the master drummer. He leads the party playing drums that accompany the ceremony. For each rite there is a particular set of drum beating. Therefore the *Duihudi* has not only to master the techniques of drum beating, he has also to know the various stages of the ceremony. Another feature of *Chomangkan* is the invitation extended to the maternal uncles of the deceased, for they also have to play a special role.

A tiny square-sized tank has to be dug outside the village boundary, five *Jambeli Athons* (decorated wooden posts with wooden birds on its branches) are prepared. One is planted near a flat stone or slab on which food is placed and the other four are planted at the four corners of the tank. Then there is the *Banjar* post of bamboo, about seven feet in height and ornamented with bamboo shavings. At the top of the post are inserted a bunch of green leaves and there bamboo sticks placed crosswise. The Karbis believe in the soul and the soul of the departed is represented by a cowrie.

The gist of the song sung by the *Uchepi* is: "O you, the spirit of such and such, we are offering you food and drink specially

made for this occasion. We are honouring you also with a dance. Please come to the world of the living and live with us". The so-called Khasi dance is danced by boys holding each other's hands and going round and round. The details of the entire ceremony are not necessary here, but one thing to be noted is that of singing *Kapa-er* by a group of young boys while dancing rhythmically during the first three days of the ceremony. The subject matter of these *Kapa-er* songs is sex, not poetic, but explicit. These songs may have some ritualistic purpose, how else can they be allowed on a grave occasion like a funeral ceremony? It is not possible to give any sample of the songs here!

The dead person is represented in an effigy of hay and it is burnt at nightfall on the fourth and last day. Next morning in the courtyard of the host is the recitation of the sacred myth known as *Masira Kohir*. This myth not only narrates the basic principles of creation so far as Karbis are concerned but traces the origin of the people from a dim past.

* With indebtedness to Dr. B.N. Bardoloi.

MOHO-HO

Moho-ho, the mosquito driving festival, popular in Lower Assam is entirely a folk festival. It is observed in the evening of the full-moon in *Aghon*. Mosquitoes are a pest in humid Assam and bands of cowherds, tribal or non-tribal, take sticks in hands and start visiting households in order to ceremonially drive away the insects. There is a *Bhaluk* or bear among the boys and he rigged in dried banana leaves to represent the bear. He it is who dances in a shuffling manner while his fellows hit the ground with their bamboo sticks. As they move around the boys sing

O hari *moho-ho*!
Take sticks to drive away the mosquitoes
The mosquitoes cry, Ah, we get destroyed,
We eat baked *tepol* (berry),
There's no salt in the *tepol*,
(They) are husking rice in baskets,
Not giving rice they give us just cowries,
Their houses is getting shaky,
While moving in a hurry,
While tilling with a gold plough,
A plough of gold and share of silver,
That *gharjiya* is ploughing,

Moho-Ho

75

We put the plough on the furrow,
Used the harrow on the patch of jute,
We sent the mother of mosquitoes
Across at the *ghat* of the Burhadiya.

It is quite a problem to translate these doggerels in dialect. A *gharjiya* is a husband who lives in his father-in-law's house.

These boys come expecting something. If the householder proves stingy the boys sing satirical verses; normally they would sing:

The bamboo are ripe (*paka-jaka*)

Please give us each a rupee (*taka*).

After a little rice or money is given the boys depart showering blessings on the family visited.

From Darrang to Goalpara these songs have many variations in matter and language. In certain areas in Goalpara instead of *moho-ho* they sing *maso-so*, both referring to mosquitoes. In a song in the Belsor area it is the tiger which is supposed to be driven out. In southern Goalpara the Rabhas have the *Bhaluk* or Bear dance, the bear being dressed in dried banana leaves. What importance the bear has in a mosquito driving campaign it is difficult to explain, but that the boys have considerable fun and some rice and money cannot be denied.

TEA-GARDEN FESTIVALS: TUSU PUJA

There are lakhs and lakhs of tea-garden labourers in Assam. They have been here for about a century and a half and have accepted this land as their own. *Kols, Mundas, Kharias, Santals* and other groups were inveigled into the gardens by agents of the Sahibs to work as labourers. Their life was hard and many of them died of disease and neglect. Things are much better now and some of their youths have come up with the aid of education.

This conglomeration of people have retained their old festivals like *Sarhul, Karam Puja, Tusu Puja*, at the same time adopting also some local beliefs and customs. Some of the pan-Indian festivals like *Holi, Diwali, Durga Puja*, and even *Manasa Puja* popular in western Assam, they do not ignore. Like the Assamese the garden labourers observe *Magh Bihu* by setting fire to the *meji* or *Bhelaghar* and eating cakes, *chira*, curds, etc. This *Magh Bihu* coincides with their *Tusu Parab*. *Tusu* is identified with Goddesses like *Kali, Sita, Durga*, and even *Savitri* who managed to get back her dead husband from the God of Death.

Tusu is a purely folk Goddess. Legend has it that pressed by the Badshah of Delhi the Kurmi king of Gujarat had to leave his kingdom and take shelter in the kingdom of Birbal in Panjab. The Gujarat King's daughter Rukmini alias *Tusu* and Birbal's

son Sitaram fell in love. The Badshah now wanted to have *Tusu*. So her father had to leave in order to escape the wrath of the enemy. He travelled to the land of the Santals and then to that of the Bhumij people. The Bhumij king united *Tusu* and Sitaram in marriage. Sitaram however died soon after and *Tusu* sacrificed herself on the funeral pyre of her husband.

So *Tusu* got transformed into a Goddess and she is propitiated among other things, with songs describing various aspects of her life. As her idol, made of flowers or of clay, is carried from house to house, young lads accompany the girls with various types of drums. The attractively dressed girls dance and sing with waving Kerchiefs in their hands. It is a cheerful gathering of youthful persons. At the end of the festival the money received from the visited households is spent on a public feast.

COMMEMORATIVE FESTIVALS: SANKARDEVA AND TEG BAHADUR

I

Vaishnavism is the dominant religion of Assam and the state is dotted with Satras or Vaishnavite establishments. The name of Barpeta has already been mentioned in connection with Holi. These Satras, at least the larger ones, have retained the tradition of dance, music and drama initiated as a means of propaganda by Sankardeva and his associates in the fifteenth-sixteenth century. The birth and death anniversaries of Sankardeva and other Vaishnava gurus are occasions for various festivals, either localized or of a public character. The festivals in honour of Sankardeva in particular are celebrated with meetings, processions and cultural functions.

II

The Sikhs commemorate the birthday of Guru Nanak, but Assam is more concerned with the commemoration of the birthday of the ninth Sikh guru Teg Bahadur. When Raja Ramsimha was despatched by Emperor Aurangzeb to conquer Assam the Mughal general met Teg Bahadur at Dhaka in Bengal and persuaded him

to accompany the former. The large army as well as the guru reached Dhubri (in western Assam) in February, 1669. There was a tradition that even Guru Nanak had visited Dhubri. In order to keep the memory of Nanak alive Teg Bahadur requested the soldiers of Ramsimha to carry a shieldful of earth each to a place and raise there a mound. A Gurudwara was built there and many Sikhs following Ramsimha stopped at Dhubri and did not return home. The Gurudwara Teg Bahadur Sahibji reminds one of a moment in Assam's history.

Dhubri remains a sacred spot for Sikhs and annually Guru Teg Bahadur is remembered with reverence and associated meetings and prayers. Some thousands of Sikhs have also settled near Chaparmukh in the Nagaon district. These people live like the usual Assamese peasants, accepting local occupations, local food-habits and local dresses. They have, of course, retained their traditional faith and remember their Gurus.

It is said that Teg Bahadur made an attempt to bring about peace between the government of Assam and Ramsimha, but there had to be a series of battles. Ultimately, General Lachit Barphookan defeated the Mughal army in the naval battle of Saraighat near Guwahati. The guru was ruthlessly tortured to death by Aurangzeb a few years after his return from Assam.

ME-DAM ME-FIE

When the Tais of China began to disperse under the pressure of the Hans some of them left Yunnan and spread over South-East Asia, often carving out principalities in areas extending from Thailand to Assam, early in the thirteenth century, a few thousand Tais crossed the Patkoi range and managed to occupy an area in North-East Assam. Soon they came into conflict with local tribes and gradually began to extend their hegemony. Though they retained their traditional rites and customs they began to mix with the local people, in time even giving up their language. They were good fighters and organizers and in course of the centuries they not only became Hinduised but came to control entire Assam. They were tolerant in religious matters and generally followed either Shaktism or Vaishnavism. These Tais, later known as Ahoms, ruled till 1826 when the land passed into the hands of the East India Company.

The priestly class of the Ahoms retained their language and to a certain extent maintained their traditional religious rites. One major rite was ancestor worship, well known as *Me-dam Me-fie*. It is a sort of *puja* with offerings of food, fowl and rice-beer accompanied by *mantra* and prayers. *Me* means worship, *dam* means a particular stage of existence after death till it attains the

fie status or the status of a spirit or God living in the 'middle kingdom' between heaven and earth. The Tai belief is that the worthy ancestors are still living in the middle kingdom.

The Ahom kings of Assam performed this ancestor worship at first at a place called Charaideo. This is still a sacred spot for the Ahoms. The Hinduised Ahom now-a-days call the worship *Bar-sabah*, big prayer, or *Na-purushar saul*, or rice offered to nine generations of ancestors. There is no fixed place for the performance of *Me-dam Me-fie* and it has become a sort of public function; it is observed in various places of Assam on 31st January. It is not only now a religious but a social gathering with enjoyment of food. Non-Ahoms may also attend the festival.

A MUSLIM FESTIVAL: IDD

The festival of Idd or Idd-ul-fitr is in a way the culmination of the month-long fast of the month of Ramzan. Fasting is an ancient practice, associated with all major religions and even faith followed by tribal people. Fasting has certain purposes, one being controlling the natural appetites so that the body becomes fit to contemplate the higher matters of religion, and the other is the good influence that it has on health. 'Fasting and prayer' is an old custom found not only in traditional Indian religions but also in Christianity and Islam.

The Quran prescribes the month of Ramzan as the most suitable for fasting, for it is in this month that the teachings of the Quran were received by prophet Muhammad. During this month Muslims get up at dawn, take a little food, then remain fasting the entire day till sunset, when they are allowed to eat light food. During the day they cannot even drink a drop of water. Prayers and helping the poor (a tenet of Islam) are characteristic of this month. When Ramzan is over and the new moon is seen, the roza or fast is broken. There is public namaz or prayer of well-dressed people on an open ground and then there is Idd-ul-fitr or the feast, in the evening. Idd is an occasion for wishing well of others and of inviting even Hindu friends. It is a period of

happiness and merriment.

Some of the Muslims in Assam are descendants of persons who settled here centuries ago. The kings of the state gave responsible positions to qualified Muslims. And one Sufi saint, Azan Pir or Ajan Pir, sang of one God and prescribed a clean life in the manner of the medieval Vaishnavite preachers. The songs known as *Zikirs* are quite popular.

THE URS OF GHIYASUDDIN AULIYA

Urs or *Urus* means the union of bride and bridegroom. In Islamic belief death symbolizes the return of the soul to its Creator. Sufis consider this return as the merging of the lover with his bride or beloved. *Urs*, therefore, is associated with the death anniversary of saints who after a fruitful existence in the world return to their beloved God. The well known *Urs* at the dargah of Poamakka at Hajo celebrates the death anniversary of the Sufi saint Ghiyasuddin Aulia.

This *Urs* is one of the most important festivals for the Muslims of Assam. Pilgrims from every part of India gather at the shrine at the time of the *Urs*. The festival begins from the first day of *Magh* and continues up to the month of *Bohag*. The full-moon day in the month of *Magh* is known as *Purna Urs*.

The *Urs* starts with the *fatiha* prayers at the tomb of the saint on the Poamakka hillock. The prayers are recited by the Mullah while the gathering joins him in asking for the blessings of the saint. A part of the festival is the distribution of food to the poor in the evening.

Ziki (*Zikir*), which implies the recitation of the name of God, is also performed. The Mullah starts abruptly with the cry of *Illai-lah* and begins to move his head from one to the other

side in a frenzied manner. The entire gathering repeats the same utterance and the same gesture. This continues for a pretty long time.

One aspect of the *Urs* festival is that pilgrims can make their offerings to the dargah at any time. Besides Muslims many local Hindus also visit the dargah during the festival and offer earthen lamps at the tomb of the saint. A fair is held at this time near the shrine and traditional eatables, handicraft and other local products are sold in the stalls and the place hums with people.

* With acknowledgements to Dr. Prabin Das

NOUKA-TANA OR BOAT-PULLING CEREMONY

Baramasi songs describing human experience in the setting of the twelve months are found in the Assam as well as the Barak Valley, in a district like Cachar. In Cachar these songs have a clear ritualistic purpose and are sung by women on the night of *Navami* and on *Dasami* or *Vijaya* day of Durga Puja in association with the *Nouka-tana* ceremony. The *Baramasi* songs are supposed to cause rain and fill the rivers and the 'boat-pulling' ritual is a symbolism of trading boats which can move without mishap if there is sufficient water in the rivers. Boat-pulling may be performed in association with *Manasa Puja* as well, but is usually seen in association with Durga Puja.

A boat is made of banana bark. Those families which perform the ceremony every year usually keep a small boat made of wood. The boat is decorated with paper flags and paper tassels, and filled with such things as rice, paddy, cloth, cocoanut, banana as in a trading vessel. The boat is kept by the image of Durga. Then with a new towel the boat is pulled out of the Puja Pandal. Now men and women start singing *Baramasi* songs going round and round the boat in a dancing manner. When the singing is over, the boat is pulled to the gate of some leading person and the people sing in this manner: The boat has struck a sandbar at your *ghat*, please

do something to get it released. The gentleman offers some money. In this way the boat is taken to other persons also and the night passes in merriment. Occasionally the people stop for a while and dance around the boat singing *Baramasi* songs.

When morning arrives the boat is pulled back and kept in the granary. After a week the boat-pulling is resumed for a while. The foodstuff in the boat is distributed among those present and at last the boat is left to drift in the water.

* With acknowledgements to Dr. Amalendu Bhattacharya

POSTSCRIPT

It is difficult to say whether there were more festivals in traditional Assam or their number has increased in recent decades. There has been an ethnic consciousness which also inspires some communities to organize cultural fetes with invitations to important public figures and demonstrations of dance and music. These are usually held in larger towns or at Guwahati. To give an instance, *The Assam Tribune* for February 14, 1992 announces: "The 18th Karbi Youth Festival will be held at Hamren in Karbi Anglong from February 16 to 19. About 6000 participants from all over the state are expected to attend the festival. The demonstration of traditional Karbi culture and customs will be the highlight of the festival". In this four-day festival 'Eminent personalities of the state will be the guests of honour'. In the same manner, Sutias who had ruled in the Sadiya region a few centuries ago recently held their Deo Kuber festival at Guwahati and, among other things, exhibited 'the historic sacred royal properties of the community, viz. shield, sword and an image of a golden cat'.

There are music conference and drama festivals. It is well known that Bohag Bihu is a big affair in this state, but what can one think of Bohagi Biday –farewell to Bohag –a cultural festival

seen in these two decades or so and held at the end of Bohag or even in Jeth? And there is the annual session of the Asam Sahitya Sabha, the Assam literary Conference, where lakhs of rupees are spent and which attracts more than a lakh of people as in a Mela. The Sabha does not achieve much in the way of language or literature, but it must be the biggest festival in India to draw so many people in the name of literature. The annual session of the Sabha is not concerned exclusively with persons directly interested in literature. As it seems, there is no end to the invention or growth of new festivals, though these do not have any religious or seasonal association as in most of the traditional festivals.

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APPENDIX

Praphulladatta Goswami
 (1919-1994)

Praphulladatta Goswami, who died quietly in his Chenikuthi residence on the morning of 19 November, 1994, was a man known, in the first place, for his insistence on three things: precision of language, continence of feeling and economy of form. His wariness of adjectives, or any type of rhetorical flourish for that matter, extended as a matter of course to his overall view of life and things, institutional honour and recognition. One noticed a certain type of tentativeness in just about everything Praphulladatta Goswami did: and this, compounded with his restlessness, was perhaps the reason why definitions eluded him during his life and they continue to elude his name still. His curiosity was wide-ranging and he managed to keep the questioning child in him fully alert even in his death-bed.

Born on 18 March, 1919, at Nahira, about forty kilometres southwest of Guwahati, Praphulladatta Goswami lost his father Singhadatta Dev Adhikari – a well-known poet of his times – at the age of six. After graduation (1940) with honours in English from Cotton College, Guwahati, he served for a couple of years at Shillong, first as an office assistant and then as a teacher, before proceeding to Calcutta for post graduate studies. His interest in English literature was there stimulated by inspiring teachers like

Srikumar Banerjee, Mohini Mohan Bhattacharje and Amiya Kumar Chakravarty. Under the supervision of Professor Mohini Mohan Bhattacharje he completed a dissertation on *Italian Influence in Later Elizabethan Tragedy* in partial fulfilment of his M.A. degree (1944), and this –he loved to recall –was for him an important lesson in writing and research. The dissertation incidentally won him the Regina Guha Gold Medal of the year.

With the methodological stimulus subsequently obtained from his exposure to the writings of Stith Thompson, Praphulladatta Goswami began working on a project 'Studies in the Folklore of Assam' for his doctoral degree. Meanwhile he taught English literature for about three years (1945-48) in Cotton College, Guwahati, before joining the Department of Commerce and B.T., Gauhati University, as a lecturer in 1948. In the academic environment of the new University he now found himself absorbed in the systematic study of Assamese Culture, its enchanting wealth of folklore material in particular. In 1955 he became one of the first three recipients of the D. Phil degree, Gauhati University, and four years later he was appointed Reader and Head of the Department of English Teaching. A visiting Professorship in Indiana University, Bloomington, U.S.A., in 1966 enabled him to establish personal contacts with a host of distinguished folklorists abroad, particularly Stith Thompson and Richard M Dorson. The full-fledged Department of Folklore Research, Gauhati University, having come into being in 1972, Praphulladatta Goswami became the founder Professor and Head of the new department, and for nearly a decade since then he worked zealously to train up a band of dedicated scholars, taking personal care to supervise their research.

His abiding legacy consists in his manifold activities as a writer and scholar. As a novelist he turned out a work, *Kecâ Pâtar Kapani* (1952), which is probably the first Assamese novel that marks a radical break from the conventional narrative structure. His biographical writings –Manikchandra Barua (1977) in

particular –are specimens of balanced reconstructions of the past, the lives and times of some select individuals finely evoked. His short stories, travel books, historical writings and stories for children including a wonderful little book on various species of birds are all written in a terse, laconic style, marked by a functional use of words and scrupulous avoidance of clichés. His works on folklore will remain an important source of dependable material for all future scholars who, like Verrier Elwin in the past, will read them with profit and delight for their inherent quality demonstrated in the "exceptional power of organization of comparative material in a clear and readable manner".

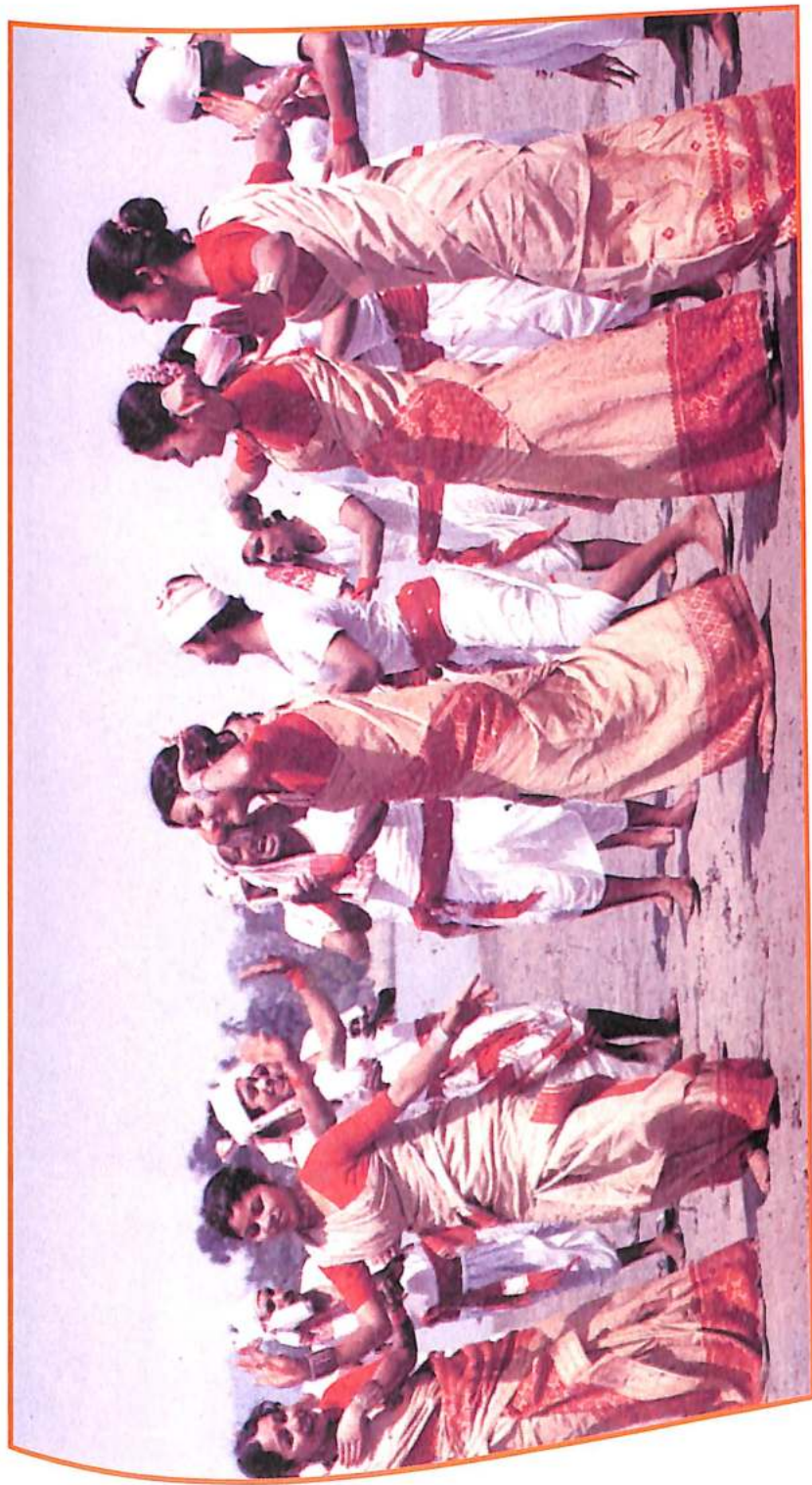
The last four years of his life saw him actively associated with ABILAC, taking a leading part in the planning and execution of its various academic projects.

Professor Goswami's death has now created a void that will be rather difficult to fill for quite a long time to come.*

Ranjit Kumar Dev Goswami

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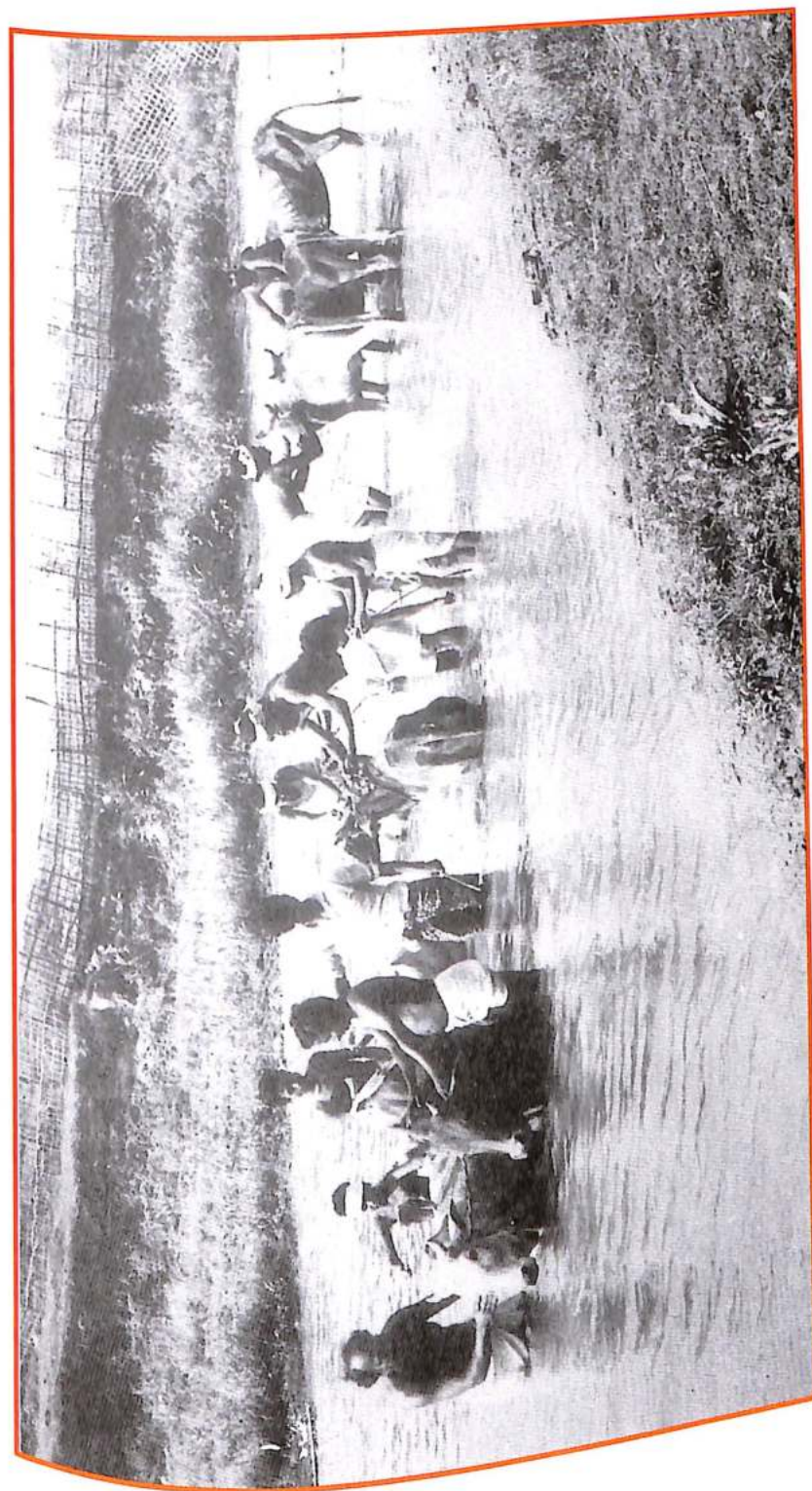
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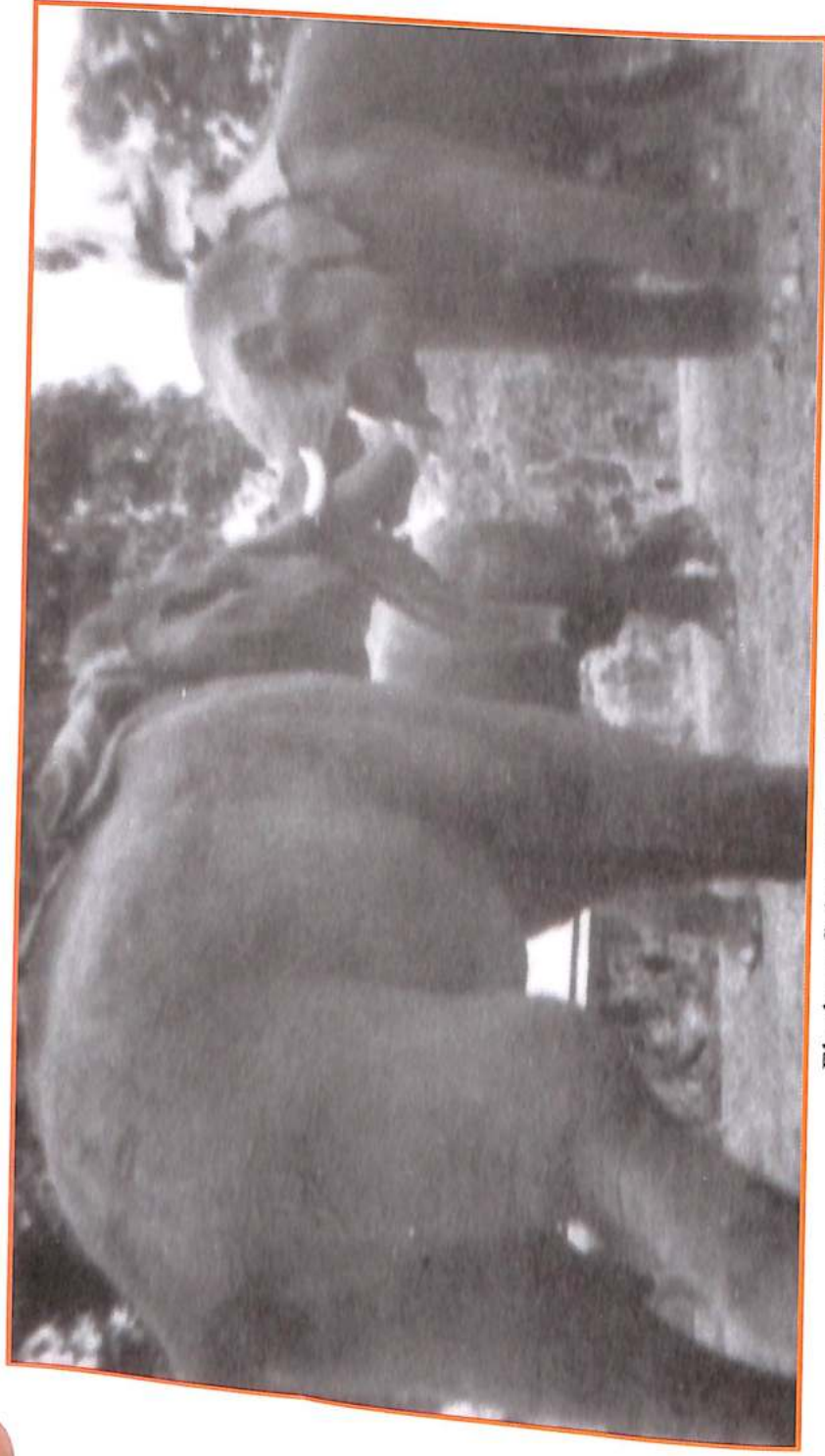
A Dancing Group : Rangali Bihu (Photograph: by M. Saadulla)



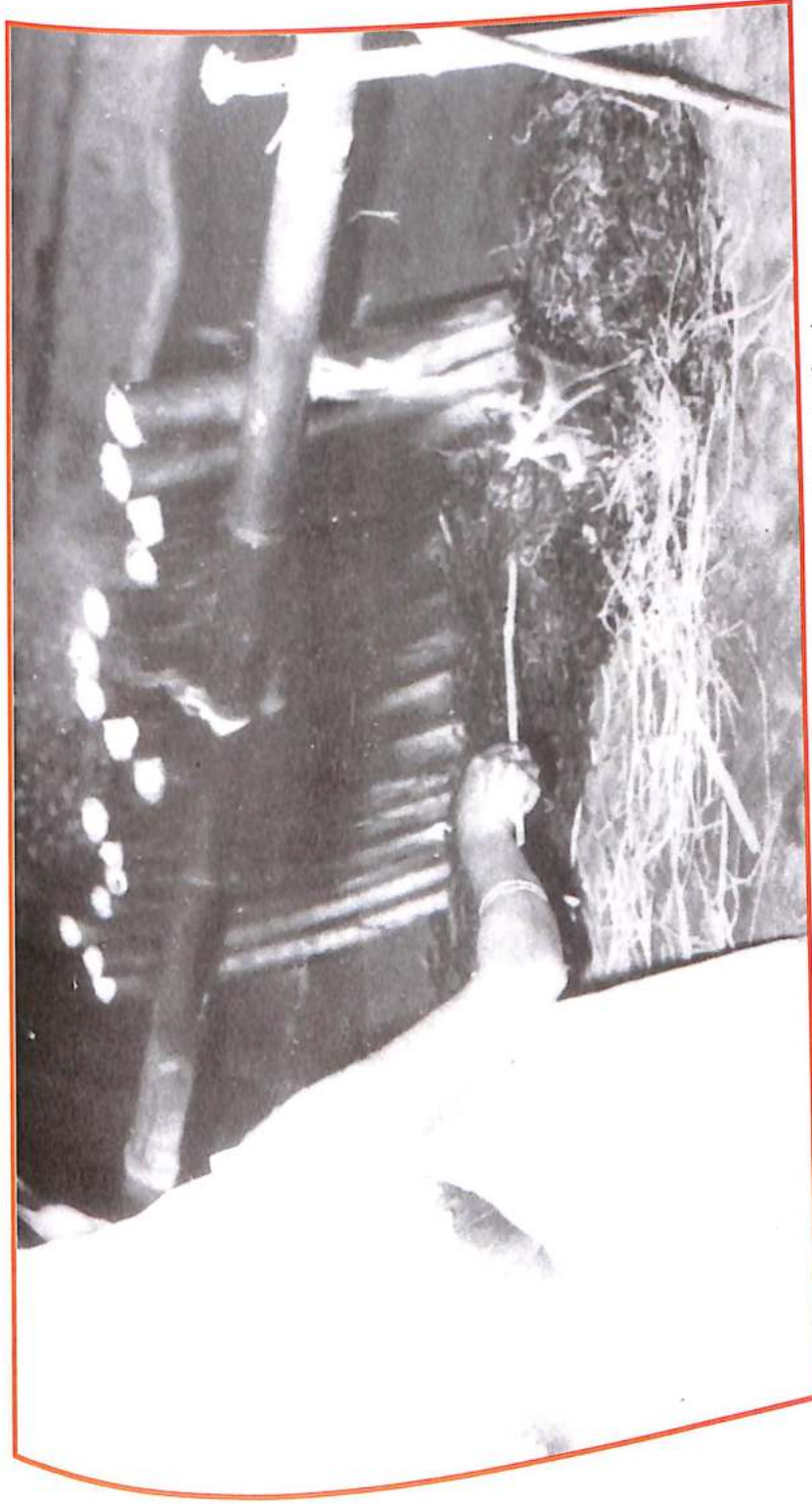
Dance at Bohag Bihu (Modern Type) (Photograph: by Author)



Cattle bathing at Bohag Bihu (Photograph: by Author)



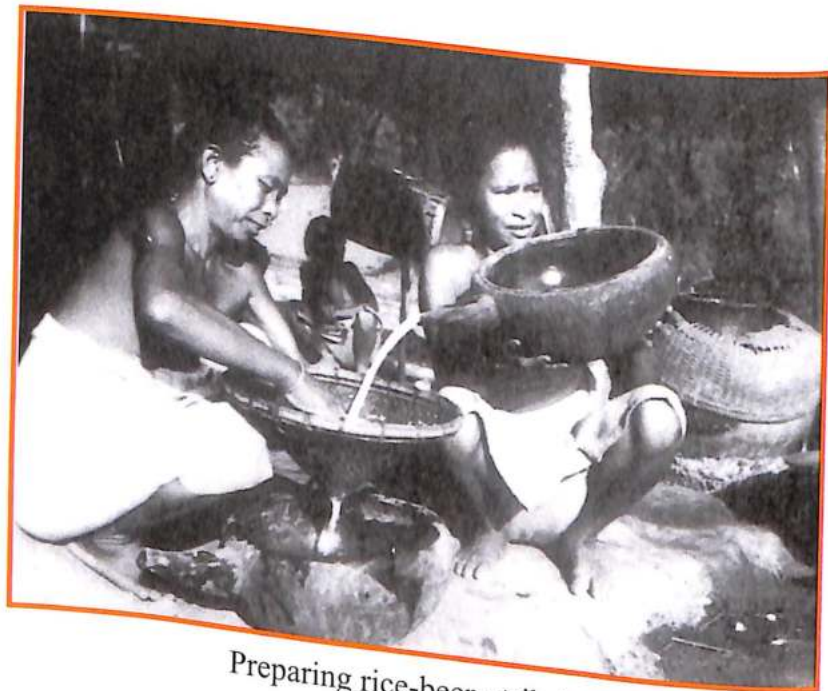
Elephant fight at Bihu (Photograph: by Author)



Baking pitha in bamboo tubes (Photograph: by Author)



Preparing for Bihu (tribal) *(Photograph: by Author)*



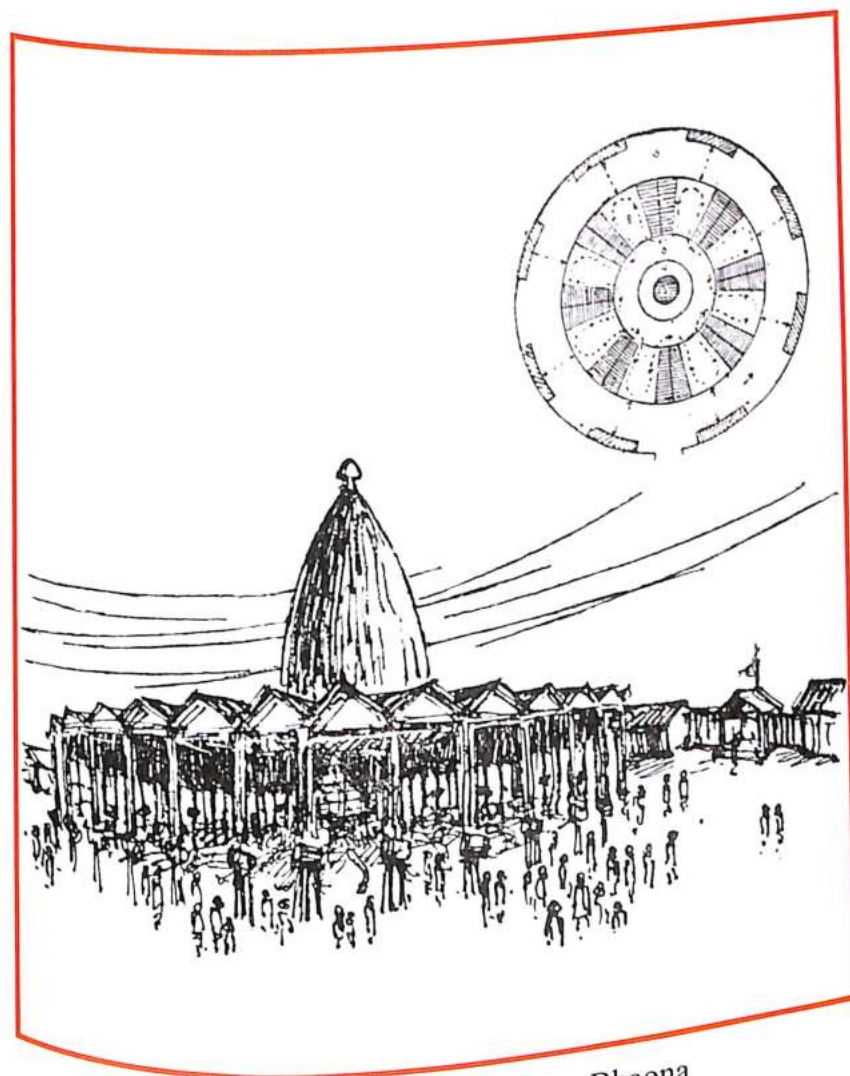
Preparing rice-beer : tribals



Oja and Daina Pali of the Biyah type



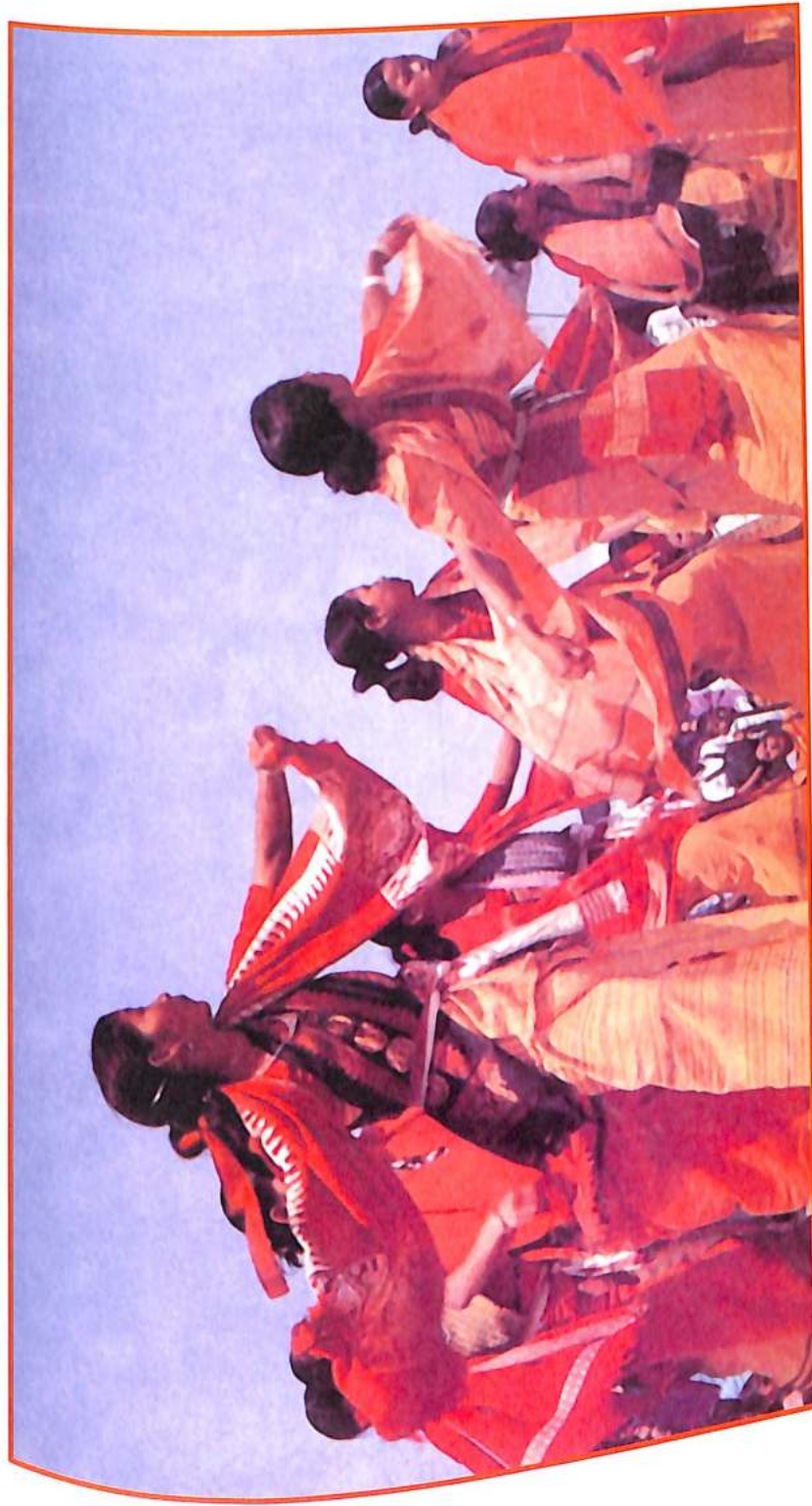
A scene from the Ankiya Bhaona (Photograph: by M. Saadulla)



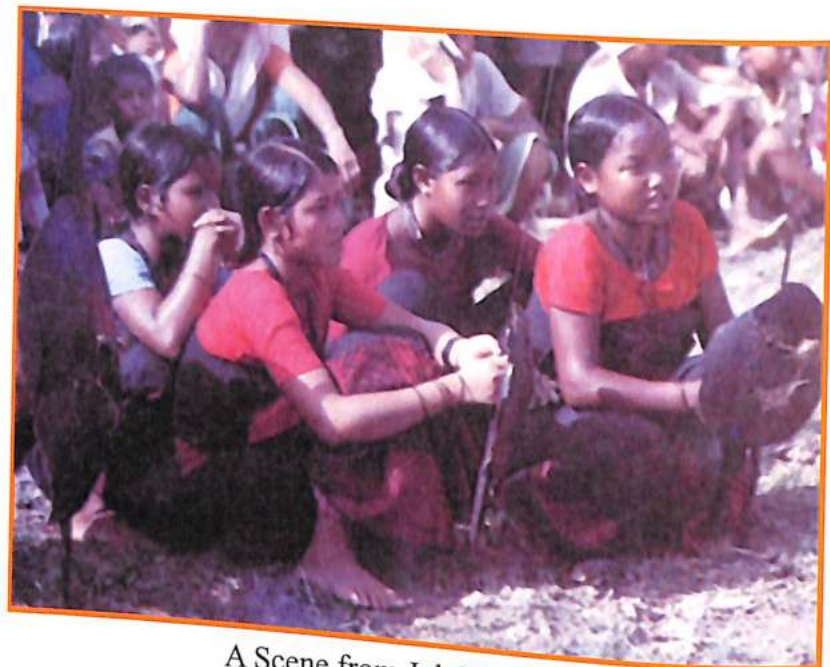
The stage of Bareshahariya Bhaona
Courtesy of Ram Goswami



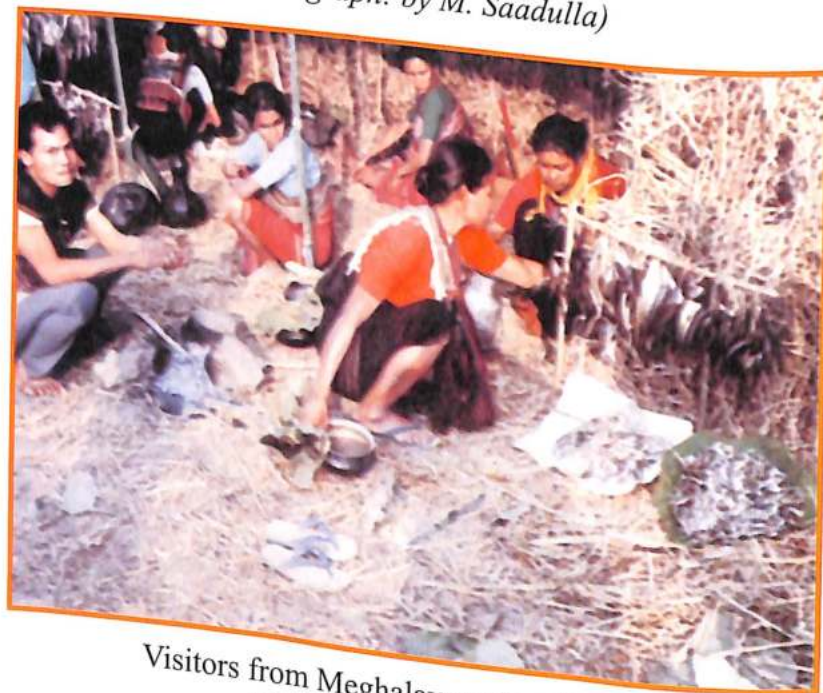
A Scene from the Bareshahariya Bhaona (Photograph: by Aswini Kr. Deka)



Bagroomba Dance of Bodos



A Scene from Job Bil Mela
(Photograph: by M. Saadulla)



Visitors from Meghalaya at Jon-bil Mela
(Photograph: by Author)



Bodo, Kherai Dance (Photograph: by Padma Pator)



Participants in Karbi Chomangkan Festival (Photograph: by M. Saadulla)



A Scene from the ME-DAM ME-FIE (Photograph: by M. Saadulla)



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Praphulladatta Goswami

(1919-1994) who chaired the Department of Folklore Research, Gauhati University, for about a decade (1972-1981) was also a Visiting Professor of Indian Folklore, Indiana University, Bloomington, U.S.A. A pioneer of modern, scientific studies in Indian Folklore, his numerous publications include *Folk-literature of Assam* (1954), *Bihu Songs of Assam* (1957), *Ballads and Tales of Assam* (1960), *The Springtime Bihu of Assam* (1966), *Songs and Tales of North-Eastern India* (1976), *Tales of Assam* (1980), *Essays on the Culture and Folklore of N.E. India* (1982) and *Bohag Bihu of Assam and Bihu Songs* (1988). Professor Goswami was also the co-author of *Folktales Told Around the World* (1975) and co-editor *Folktales of India* (1987), both published by the University of Chicago Press. The last four years of his life saw him actively associated with the Anundoram Borooah Institute of Language, Art and Culture, Assam.



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