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MAGH BIHU OR MAGHAR DOMAHI

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Before you read

*The present essay is an extract from the book *Festivals of Assam* by Praphulladatta Goswami. It gives us a brilliant and an authoritative account of the Assamese festival of feasting known as Magh Bihu. The essay also tells us in passing about the two other forms of Bihu, namely the Bohag Bihu and the Kati Bihu. How is Magh Bihu celebrated?*

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 templelike 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 hutlike 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 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 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 Lentern 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 kettle. 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 as *sunga-saul*, the sticky *bora* 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 boys 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 the 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.



Baking pitha in bamboo tubes
(*photograph : by Author*)



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



I have ignored another Bihu, Kati Bihu, held in 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 the devotees of Krishna.

Another aspect of Kati Bihu is that the 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.



Reading with Insight

1. The *Uruka* happens to be an important aspect of *Magh Bihu*. Give an elaborate account of the celebrations associated with *Uruka*.
2. People do not take the usual rice and curry on the Domahi or Samkranti day for their lunch. What are the different kinds of food items that people have for lunch on this particular day?
3. Although the Kacharis, the most numerous tribe of Assam, have similar customs like the *Magh Bihu*, they differ in certain features. Describe the manner in which the Kacharis celebrate their festival during the time of Assamese *Magh Bihu*.
4. Describe the different kinds of sports and martial games associated with *Magh Bihu*. How did the young people in earlier times prepare themselves for participating in the martial arts?
5. Kati Bihu, according to the author, cannot be called a festival as such. How is *Kati Bihu* celebrated in Assam?

