

CHAPTER III

THE BIHU FESTIVAL AS A CULTURAL EXPRESSION: SACRED - SECULAR CONTINUUM AND FUNCTIONALITY

Emanating from its multi ethnic, multi religious and multi linguistic matrix, Assam is endowed with varied cultural traditions practiced by the respective communities including : Mising, Tiwa, Moran, Kachari, Bodo, Dimasa, among others as described earlier, which are spread over areas in upper, middle and lower Assam. All the communities across the state celebrate spring-time festival following their own traditions and customs. The word 'Bihu' has become synonymous with all spring - time festivals prevalent in Assam. There are both commonalities and diversity within the Bihu.

3.1 The Bihu: Three Varieties

Bihu, the most colourful and widely celebrated festival of Assam is of three varieties (i) *Magh* or *Bhogali* Bihu, (ii) *Bohag* or *Rongali* Bihu, (iii) *Kati* or *Kongali* Bihu. "Bihus constitute a sort of pattern, a ritual and a festival complex, covering the annual life cycle of the peasantry" (Goswami, 2003: 7).

Bohag Bihu (Rongali Bihu)

Bohagor rongali Bihu, the festival of celebration commences in mid-April. It starts with *garu* Bihu in which cattle are worshipped observing various rituals. It is followed by *manuh* Bihu and *gosain* Bihu. The primary attraction of *Bohag* Bihu is the music and dance part associated with the festival. It is classified into *husori* which is performed by male dancers, *gabharu* Bihu which is performed by female dancers and *deka gabharu* Bihu in which both male and female participate. All the performances were held in agricultural fields in the past times. However, today, it is mostly observed and performed on the proscenium stage in the form of a large community spectacle which also includes various competitions.

Magh Bihu (Bhogali Bihu)

Magh or *Bhogali Bihu*, the festival of harvest is celebrated during mid-January. It starts from the *sankranti* day and the eve of Bihu is called *uruka*, which has a special importance. During this Bihu farmers, after reaping the harvest, celebrate it with mirth and merriment to mark the successful completion of the agricultural cycle and fill the community at large with a sense of joy and fulfilment.

Kati Bihu (Kongali Bihu)

Kati Bihu or *Kongali Bihu* is celebrated in mid-October and also during the mid season of the agricultural cycle when the farmers face a tough time. With scarcity of food items and money the farmers also get concerned that the crops are healthy so as to reap a good harvest. So this Bihu is marked by a sense of reverence as a one-day affair. It is associated with worship of the *Tulsi* plant.

3.2 Ritual Aspects: The Bihu vis-a-vis the Nature

Ritual is an inevitable part of human social existence. “Ritual is often explained by anthropologists and sociologists as a means by which communities define, cement and justify social relations” (Schwartz, 2001: 273). The word ritual in the context of Indian society commonly brings into mind images of social institutions, festivals, beliefs, practices, observances practiced by a community of believers and observers. Individuals in a society are united by certain values and elements received through inheritance. So, it is necessary to understand how rituals have contributed towards well being and nourishment of the social health of a community. Individuals have never been an audience but always participants in the observance of the ritual. Likewise, it is not something that can happen to someone but something that one chooses to be a part of (Rothenbuhler, 1998: 125). It is important to understand why rituals are important in socio cultural life and also how they contribute to the sustenance of the social health. Consequently, festivals, transpiring as some form of performance or social occasion inevitably involve rituals.

3.2.1 Ritual in the context of the Bihu Festival of Assam

The Bihu in all its varieties and colours also entails a series of rituals in varying contexts of its observance. The rituals get multiplied as they are observed in varying degrees among diverse ethnic communities in the course of celebrating the Bihu by

each of these communities in their respective ways. As mentioned earlier in this Chapter, the Bihu originated from the agricultural cycle practiced by the peasant community across the Brahmaputra Valley since early centuries.

The rituals and customs associated with the festival are related to cultivating the land; beginning plantation, nurturing the plants, harvesting paddy crops and raising livestock resulting in agricultural prosperity. Through the passage of history the rituals, initially not directed to any deity or personified gods and goddesses, were absorbed into the web of practicing religious faith, beliefs and customs prevailing among different communities. A number of ethnic or tribal communities, who until a few centuries ago followed animistic or indigenous faith mostly animistic in nature, came to adopt Hinduised faith or continued to follow syncretic Hinduism incorporating some elements of traditional practices. This added religious colour to the rituals associated with the Bihu and resulted in an intricate texture of rituals observed during the Bihu in the multi ethnic matrix of Assam and Assamese society. Be that as it may, the numerous rituals worked as a means of communication and dialogue within various sectors of society, contributing towards understanding and establishing social harmony. Considering that commonality of observing the Bihu by most of the communities, the festival is considered the national festival of Assam. My interest in understanding the rituals of Bihu festival is to examine the dynamics of how these rituals have been undertaken through centuries and how society interacts and exchange ideas through ritualized behaviour. The study is also an attempt to explore the distinctive features of the rituals connected with the festival.

3.2.2 A General Overview on the Rituals of the three Bihus

“The Bihu festival is often associated with the Visuva Sankranti or Vernal Equinox and in Vedic times certain rituals seem to have been performed at this time of the year for the purpose of influencing the movement of the sun and securing agricultural reproduction” (Goswami, 1995: 10). However, in the common parlance it is the natural, environment and fertility which are more in the public consciousness because the religious associations with the Vedic canons or such canonical strictures are not found in application of the rituals. The connection between the sun, seasonality and agricultural reproduction are the foremost points in the public mind. As mentioned above, there are three wings of the Bihu festival with distinct rituals associated with each of them.

3.2.2.1 *Bohag* or *Rongali* Bihu

Rongali Bihu or *Bohag* Bihu is considered as the most colourful and vibrant of all the three Bihus. This Bihu involves a number of ritualistic activities which are an important means of communication and communion amongst the people. People from all sections irrespective of social hierarchy participate in the rituals. The significance of this Bihu is three fold:

First, it marks the onset of a new cycle consisting of ploughing and plantation. Thereafter, it marks the first day of the Assamese New Year according to the Hindu calendar and then, it marks the beginning of the spring festival, amidst nature in resplendence, where one leaves behind the past and beckons the new.

The *rongali* Bihu makes its beginning with *garu* Bihu⁴, followed by *manuh* Bihu⁵ or the day for men and the third day is called *gosain* Bihu⁶ or the day for the deity signifying the caring of all in the household and the surrounding social group who are important for the health in an agrarian environment.

The first day is designated for the cattle when livestock are ritually taken for a bath in the nearby rivers or water bodies. Pastes of tamarind and cereal are ceremonially put on the foreheads of all domestic cattle and their bodies rubbed with it before being taken to be bathed. The left over is used by members of the family before bathing. The livestock are adorned with garlands made of gourd, aubergine, turmeric and bitter gourd taken on a bamboo tray covered by banana leaves and are carried to the river bodies and thrown to the cattle after washing them. The cattle are stroked with twigs of *dighalati*⁷ and *makhieti*⁸ plants. The day symbolizes community caring of domestic cattle that are also tied with new ropes in the evening. The family members take bath and breakfast only after this ceremony is over. The ritualized activities on this day marks the convergence of sacred behaviour and the tradition of giving importance to the care of cattle because cattle form part and parcel of agriculture, family, health and rural economy. Songs are also sung while washing the cattle for their healthy life. People chant in native language:

*lao kha, bengena kha,
bosore bosore barhi jaa,
maar soru baper soru,
toi hobi bor goru*

eat gourd, eat brinjal,
grow from year to year,
your mother is small, your father is small,
may you be a large one (Goswami, 1995: 13).

After the bath, the old ropes of the cattle are discarded indicating the casting off all the evil forces. Then the cattle are set free and let loose in the fields. In the evening, when the cattle return, their feet are washed, they are fed with traditional sweet meats made of rice and then tied with a new rope in the cattle shed.

The second day is *manuh* Bihu, the first day of the New Year and month of *Bohag*. On this day people show respect to their elders and offer love and affection to their younger ones by taking and giving blessings and exchanging Bihu gifts mostly *bihuwaan*, (traditional Assamese towel) and new clothes. *Husori* or carol singing starts on this day in the evening. All the elders and younger ones move from one household to other singing *husori* songs. The celebration is also marked by a community institution of music and dance called *husori* in the evening.

In the earlier centuries of agrarian life young boys and girls assembled in the paddy fields and celebrated the festival with music and dance in a spirit of gay abandon. The nature, content and style of such performances were mostly erotic upholding the joy and beauty of the spring season. The openness of eroticism reflected above gave way in due course to a more refined and socially acceptable and enjoyable event of cultural performance called *husori*, where the whole village inclusive of all ages assemble to make it a community and ritual performance.

The third day is the *gosain* Bihu assigned to religious functions. Congregational prayers are held at the village prayer halls (*namghar* or such sacred sites) where people from all hues assemble and sing devotional prayers for the well-being of the entire village community.

Food is another marker of any festival across all communities. The Bihu, is no exception to this. The *Bohag* Bihu co-inciding with the New Year, spring-time beauty and beginning of agricultural activity, specializes in varieties of sweet meats, milk and curd.

The elements that impart a striking dimension to *Bohag* Bihu among the three festivals is the spirit of gaiety exuding from the natural environment in spring-time that find

expression through spontaneous outpouring of emotion, evidenced in music and dance that resounds across the Brahmaputra Valley. As mentioned, the music and dance find a structured and institutionalized expression in *husori*. The session runs for one hour or so in the courtyard of a household in which, in addition to designated dancers, percussionists and other instrumental accompanists, at times other people also jump in as a sign of merrymaking. They use instruments such as *dhols* (drums), *taal* (cymbals), *taka* (split bamboo clappers), and *pepa* (hornpipes). The session, having a structured format, begins with a ballad like song, sometimes bearing an imprint of Vaishnavite⁹ prayers supported by rhythmic feats of drums and the whole band moves in circle which marks a prelude to the performance. With the end of the prelude the actual session of music and dance opens up with the entry of core groups of drummers and female dancers. As the session gradually comes to a close, the households offer clothes, betel nuts and leaves and an amount of money by way of respect to the *husori* band. The central aim of *husori* singing band is to bless the villagers with prosperity, to uplift their spirits, eradicate all epidemic diseases and to enhance the overall welfare of the villagers in the name of Lord Vishnu.

The Bihu Dance also has ritualistic significance. The dance is related to mother earth and the fertility cult. It has some fixed patterns and seems to have erotic overtones suggesting its association with spring-time fertility. The sound of the drums played in the dance suggests the union of the male fertilizer and female fruitful earth. The songs sung also contain the language of love and have erotic overtones. As all traditions tangible or intangible, material or emotive are subjected to change with change of social history and environment, the Bihu has also undergone remarkable changes. As mentioned above the Bihu, emerging from the agricultural cycle, has risen to be a marker of social merriment and then to social identity (Please see discussion in Chapter IV). Accordingly, the *husori* singing has also moved from the domestic household to the wider community space or proscenium stage with the form and structure more or less remaining the same.

3.2.2.2 Magh or Bhogali Bihu

Magh Bihu also known as *bhogali* Bihu is an occasion of community feasting, celebration and enjoyment. It marks the completion of successful harvesting and merriment, thereafter. The celebration held for 2-3 days, begins with *uruka* which has its special importance. For this day the preparations start early. The male folk of the

village assemble and build a dome-like structure, known as *meji*, in the fields. Adjacent to the *meji* a make shift kind of cottage is constructed to stay in at night known as *bhelaghar*. The *meji* and *bhelaghar* are made of dried banana leaves, straw and bamboo. The male folk stay the whole night of *uruka* at the cottage. That night the males as a mark of pleasantry, steal vegetables, poultry, and even wooden furniture and bamboo gates so that they can stay the night. The wooden furniture, gates etc. are used to make a fire and keep themselves warm in the winter nights. The vegetables and poultry are cooked and eaten during the night stay.

The women folk also start their preparation over a long period of time prior to the day of celebration. They prepare many different kinds of traditional food items like *chira* (rice flakes), *pitha* (rice cake), *laru* (sweets made of coconut), *gur* (jaggery), *doi* (curd). These preparations involve the females to assembling in one particular household to powder the rice in order to bake rice cakes. The powder is made in *dheki*, a traditional wooden pounding instrument to make paste of rice and other cereals. This meeting is a kind of social gathering where they discuss and exchange their news and views with each other. Being a festive time, the women folk also sing and dance in merriment till their turn comes to make rice powder. From there they return and start preparing the traditional food items. The male folk go to a nearby river or pond and catch fish through community fishing. Mutton, duck, local chicken, pigeon are consumed in the grand feast of *uruka* night. After that sumptuous dinner, the males stay up the whole night.

On the *Magh Bihu* day, at the crack of dawn, the family members wake up and tie bands of straws or thatch around the fruit bearing trees hoping they will bear more fruit in the coming days. After that all take a purifying bath and go near the *meji* or *bhelaghar*. As a mark of obeisance to Agni, the fire God the makeshift thatched sheds are set ablaze. The traditional food items and a kind of special mixture is prepared and offered to the deity. The flame gives warmth to the people and the bamboo, when fired, bursts and produces sounds like gunfire. It is believed that the sound chases away all evil spirits. After the fire, the ashes and half burnt bamboo lies scattered in the field. It is believed that the ashes and half burnt bamboo increase the fertility of the agricultural land. That day it is traditional not to light the stove of the kitchen. The leftover food items prepared the previous night are generally taken. Guests visit the households and they are also served with the traditional food items. One reason behind not using the

kitchen may be not to waste food items, as it falls in winter season and food doesn't get stale. Another reason may be that the womenfolk who generally take the kitchen responsibilities are too exhausted for the *uruka* night and they are given rest. In short the *Magh Bihu* with all its arrangement and abundance of food and feasting, is a ceremonial celebration as a marker of the completion of harvest. After the aforementioned morning rituals, people assemble in the community prayer halls (mostly *namghars*) for hymn singing and praying for the eradication of evil forces and betterment of the whole society. Influence of Vaishnavism is clear in this aspect of the *Magh Bihu*.

Another peculiarity of this occasion is that, in some parts of the state, holding of sports like wrestling, racing, jumping, buffalo fight, egg fight, cock fight, nightingale fight etc. are organized indicating the celebratory mood of the festival.

3.2.2.3 *Kati* or *Kongali Bihu*

Like the other two Bihus, *Kati Bihu* is also intricately related to the agrarian culture of the community. *Kati Bihu*, held in the autumn season, can be considered as a solicitation to God and hope for better crops from the plants grown in the field after a period of sweating and toil. It is marked more by a sense of serenity than merriment. An earthen light is lit under the *tulsi* (basil) plant every day for the whole month of *Kati*. The rituals involved with this Bihu such as the lighting of lamps in the crop fields by children are for well-being of the paddy in the fields. That day all the households plant a *tulsi* plant in an altar made of mud and water. The preparations start during daytime. The offerings include some cereals and fruits. In the evening, an earthen lamp is lit at the altar as an offering to the *tulsi* plant and prayers are sung by children welcoming goddess Lakshmi. The whole campus of households is decorated with earthen lamps so that no space remains dark. In a similar manner a small bamboo is planted in the field and a lamp is lit there. It is known as *akash banti* and it is believed that it protects the maturing paddy from the pests in the field.

3.3 Characteristics of the Rituals of the Bihu Festival

As already mentioned in Chapter II, Catherine Bell observes that ritual is communal and involves groups of people. Second, rituals are traditional that have been handed down through the ages. Third, rituals are rooted in beliefs in divine beings. These three characteristics are rightly seen in the rituals of the three Bihu festivals. All the rituals

which are performed throughout the ages involve smaller or larger congregations of the whole community and are not performed at an individual level. They are concerned with a belief in its sacred entity even though it may differ from community to community. Catherine Bell further suggests there is no such distinction between sacred and secular rituals and approached rituals as “genres of ritual action” (Bell, 2008: 128). Bell listed these genres: rites of passage, calendrical rites, rules of exchange and communication, rites of affliction; feasting, fasting, and festivals and political rites. These ways of acting range from the “religious to the secular, the public to the private, the routine to the improvised, the formal to the casual, and the periodic to the irregular” (Bell, 2008: 128). Bell further explains five characteristics of ritual-like activities demonstrating that rituals are strategic process and flexible. The rituals connected with the Bihu can be seen in the light of the above observations as well as characteristics mentioned below:

- a. “Formalization is the degree of formality in dress or speech that marks an activity as ritual like” (ibid :128). Formalization is evidently visible in rituals of the Bihu festival. On the first day of *Bohag* Bihu all the communities observe it with merriment and good will. Everybody wears new clothes on that day. It has become by and large an established habit to buy and wear new clothes, especially among the younger ones. For the elderly people, also they at least take a new *bihuwaan* on that day. Along with that both men and women wear the traditional costume during those days. During the *Magh* Bihu time also, there is a formalization in terms of dress code primarily among the elderly people. So there is formality in dress code and presentation while performing the rituals.
- b. Traditionalism or “We have always done this” (Bell, 1992:150) appeals to cultural pattern. All the rituals of the Bihu festival are handed down through the ages and are traditional. Be it *garu* Bihu of *Bohag* Bihu or community feasting during *Magh* Bihu or lighting of *akash banti* during *Kati* Bihu as mentioned above, rituals are traditional inheritance. In the changed circumstances too, these practices although at times appear out of place and socially of not of much relevance are observed ritually with an amount of religiosity.
- c. Invariance emphasizes that actions are performed exactly the same each time. There is no change in performance of the rituals. During the *Kati* Bihu every

year an earthen lamp is lit at the base of a *tulsi* plant for a month in anticipation and praying for a good crop as well as for the well-being of the family. There has never been a change in the entire process for the believers.

- d. Rule governance: Rituals are governed by rules that guide and direct, especially emphasizing what is allowed and what is not. Rule governance, “holds the individual to community approved patterns of behaviour” (Bell, 1992:155). There are distinct patterns of behaviour in the Bihu festival also. Most of the rituals connected with these seasonal celebrations, as discussed earlier, are distinct and governed by laid down rules and norms.
- e. Sacral symbolism refers to people or objects that become sacred through ritual acts or ritual - like acts that create them. The cattle worshipped during *garu* Bihu, the *tulsi* plant, the *meji*, the *bihuwaan*, *husori* carol singing etc. become significant and symbolic through the process of ritualization.

3.3.1 Ritual as a Form of Communication

Rituals by nature are important means of communication and communion. Rothenbuhler (1998: 4-5) observes “rituals are types of symbolic behaviour in social situations”. Ritual always accompanies voluntary communication between or among individuals of the society. Emile Durkheim’s notion of ritual as communal means by which the beliefs and ideals of a culture are communicated to the members of a particular society, can also be taken into account while discussing the Bihu Festival. Rituals performed in all three Bihus can be viewed as means of communication which involve the believers as practitioners as well as the performers. There is a flow of information among people through rituals. Through the acts and prayers chanted while performing the rituals on various occasions of the festival, one finds a sacred communion with the supreme power.

3.3.2 Ritual as an Action Oriented Performance

All rituals involve performance. Rituals or ritual - like activities do not exist outside the performance. “Ritual is performed, performance being an aesthetically marked and heightened mode of communication, is framed in a special way and put on display for audience” (Bauman, 1989: 262). Ritual is always a pre-conceived notion and is shared

through the members of a society being a part of the performance. Most of the rituals involve the entire community. It almost becomes a duty for the individuals to attend the ritual performances as direct or indirect participants summoning overall involvement of the whole community. The question of social hierarchy is not much adhered to as each and every individual of a community participates in all the rituals. These rituals are handed down through ages and are performed till today with the same sanctity and honour.

3.3.3 Rituals Related to Natural World

The tradition of the Bihu festival deals primarily with the practices related to cultivating the land plantation, harvesting and raising livestock. The rituals associated with it are mostly for agricultural prosperity. All three Bihus as referred to earlier are associated with the annual cycle of agriculture. The *Bohag* Bihu is the crop planting season, *Kati* Bihu, when crops are growing and *Magh* Bihu is the end of the cycle culminating on a successful harvest. The rituals involved also revolve round this cycle. Cattles form an important part of this process and act as an important source of energy for agricultural activity and the community at large. Thus both *Bohag* and *Magh* Bihu include an important ritual of bathing and tending the cattle called *garu* Bihu. Cattles are given an elevated position and are viewed as auspicious. On the eve of *Magh* Bihu straw is tied to base of fruit bearing trees and plants wishing that it will bear fruit in abundance. During the *Kati* Bihu, planting of the *tulsi* plant and lighting lamp under it and also lighting lamp at the fields are meant for obtaining good crops. The festival as a whole thus is dependent in the seasonality and the natural world. So, a strong connection is found between the rituals involved and the natural setting. A deep concern for the environment is thus inherent in the entire series of rituals of the Bihu.

3.3.4 Rituals of Worship

The relationship between worship and ritual is prevalent in the Bihu festival. It involves prayer and actions which reflect devotion to the almighty. In the Bihu festival there is no particular or singular deity that is worshipped. Being an agrarian festival, natural world as a whole finds prominence in the rituals. Along with that the God of Fire is worshipped during the day of *Magh* Bihu by burning the *meji* along with chanting of

hymns, another practice observed during the *Bohag* Bihu is the writing of Sanskrit prayer to Lord Mahadeva on the leaves of *nahar* or ironwood tree as a symbolic means of protection against storms, lightning and fire and keeping them on the roof of the house. In the *Kati* Bihu, the *tulasi* plant is worshipped, considering it to be a form of Goddess Lakshmi by chanting prayers and devotional hymns. In addition to the conventional rituals, chanting of hymns and invocations are also included. A pantheistic outlook seems to prevail in the entire range of rituals with an interwebbing of man, nature and divinity.

3.3.5 Rituals related to Social Well Being

Rituals are part and parcel of the daily life of people in any society. In the context of Assamese society ritual permeates almost through all aspects of life. Ritualized behaviour develops an environment and atmosphere conducive to the well-being of both individuals and the society at large. In other words, as Durkheim observes, social life - whether in traditional or modern society is inherently religious, for “religious force is nothing other than the collective and anonymous force” of society (Cited by Hamilton, 1995, 120). Except for the *Kati* Bihu, almost all other rituals of *Magh* and *Bohag* Bihu demand a larger congregation of the whole community. These gatherings to conduct rituals bring a sense of harmony among all sections of society. The ceremonial bath of the cattle on the *garu* Bihu involves the whole community and village. The gestures of respect by exchanging *bihuwaan*, taking blessings from elders, community feasts, the gathering at the Bihu functions and also the prayers, chanting of hymns on the occasion, are for the welfare of the larger society. Rituals are practices that can unite a social group regardless of individual differences in beliefs. Symbolization is also a ritualized practice. Durkheim says, “Without symbols, social sentiment could have only a precarious existence” (Cited by Hamilton, 1995: 119). In the Bihu festival wearing of the traditional dress on the day of Bihu identifies them as a member of a community with a shared identity. Most importantly these symbols and other such objects are capable of calling and reaffirming shared meaning and the feeling of oneness in the community through the ritual acts.

3.4 Interpreting Rituals of the Bihu festival

The Bihu festival has always featured rituals at domestic or community level in an elaborate way marked by a sense of sophistication and elegance. Each of the Bihus being seasonal festivals, are observed at a particular time of the year integrating more people into the celebration and also contributing largely to the socio cultural life of the Assamese community. In observing the rituals starting from the individual to the collective level, rituals always follow a social order. These observances of the rituals make the individual feel connected to their respective communities and the process brings in a sense of belongingness.

3.5 The Phenomenon of the Sacred and the Secular

From the above discussion, it can be surmised that the Bihu has a strong ritualistic fervour. However, although sacredness permeates this ritualistic fervour, secularity there is also an element to them. Both the sacred and secular are interwoven with each other. Bihu is celebrated by all castes and creeds in Assam without any discrimination. It is a festival with strong ritualistic observances at the same time free from a religious rigour. In fact, the rituals are such that they don't infringe on the faith of any religious denomination and such a liberal outlook allows the rituals to be observed according to one's own religion. It is both rigid and fluid at the same time. Nowadays, the Bihu is mostly celebrated as a community event by holding Bihu *Sanmilanis*¹⁰ in almost all parts of the state. Those Bihu *sanmilanis* are organised by a local committee comprising members of all religions, castes and creeds of that particular locality and the performances are also witnessed by all.

3.6 The Bihu: Aspects of Material Culture

“Material culture is the study through artifacts of the beliefs-values, ideas, attitudes, and assumptions - of a particular community or society at a given time” (Prown, 1982: 1). The statement finds validation in the material aspects of the Bihu festival. The festival brings to fore a large gamut of material objects and artifacts. And these objects and artefacts collectively symbolize the nuanced behaviours connected with the festival. “The term material culture thus refers quite directly and efficiently, if not

elegantly, both to the subject matter of the study, material, and to its purpose, the understanding of culture” (Prown, 1982: 2). Without its material aspect the festival would lose its significance and colour. As has been pointed out by J. D. Prown the significance of studying material culture lies in the following three points:

First, the most obvious cultural belief associated with material objects has to do with values associated with the occasion.

Second, objects created in the past are the only historical occurrences that continue to exist in the present.

Third, objects are used by a much broader cross section of the population and are therefore potentially a more wide-ranging, more representative source of information than words.

These significant aspects, find an apt relevance in the material culture associated with Bihu festival. Material culture of any social occasion, and more particularly of a festival, necessarily includes food, dress ware or specially designed costume, jewellery, musical instruments and also agricultural implements which find a valued space on such occasions. “Social or objective identity, referring to a person’s belonging to various social groups and distinguishing socially relevant features of such belongings, for example like gender, social class or ethnicity” (Woodward, 2007:134). The Bihu, being a celebration of varying situations within the agricultural cycle in keeping with seasons of nature, brings to fore the importance of material objects under various categories:

Food

Rice plays the central role in a range of food products prepared and consumed in the routine or calendar festivals in Assam including the Bihu. As mentioned earlier, in all three of the kinds of Bihu, rice is the driving force around which all activities including rituals take place. Rice is also the main item in community feasting, domestic chores in preparation of varieties of dishes and sweetcakes for the festive occasion. Among most of the ethnic communities, rice in addition to being staple food is also the basic component in preparing the traditional rice beer in the respective manner of each of the tribes in the hills and plains of Assam.

Traditional Costumes

“Folk costume is that form of dress which (i) outwardly symbolizes the identity of a folk community and (ii) expresses the individual’s manifold relationships to and within the community” (Yoder, 1982: 296). Handloom, like agriculture, traditionally forms one of the basic domestic chores in Assam across castes and communities including tribes. Eventually the entire range of dress materials, be it for routine usage or specially designed colourful ones for festive occasions including the Bihu, come from the looms operated by Assamese womenfolk. “Folk costume in the present context means the dressing of the rural population in the time before the changing of the dress costume in the nineteenth century, which at that juncture erased the difference between town and country, between higher and lower estates” (ibid). The costumes worn during Bihu festival by the male and female dancers are different and unique. The costumes are traditional and indigenous in nature and are also a marker of identity of the Assamese community or smaller ethnic groups. Some of the important material used as dress ware include the following:

Chula(Shirt)

Earlier the male Bihu practitioners used to wear a shirt kind of attire for the upper body called *aenga chula*¹¹ in their daily life. The colour of the shirt is between white and cream in colour. In the lower body they wore a white *dhoti*. *Gamocha* was used to tighten their waist so that the dance moves are more prominent and a *gamocha* was worn on the head tying it on the right side. As has been collected from the field, when the Bihu began being performed publicly for an audience, a refinement came into the attire. Male dancers and performers started wearing an inner garment or *genji*. Further refinement took place and for that reference was taken from some Bihu songs where it is mentioned that the front colour of the shirt should be beige (*muga*) and black at the back. Mention may be made of the Bihu song:

kala sula kuruta
godan maro pasota
pakhila ura di ure
nasani sokule saboke noaro
jalok jalakia dhare (collected from field)¹²

black shirt kurta
fasten with five buttons
flies like a butterfly
cannot see to the eyes of nasani
flames like pepper chilli

The material is cotton which is quite affordable. However, with changing scenario and situation the costume is changed and getting more and more display oriented with bright colours. In the present day, the male Bihu dancers wear a complete *muga* (Assam silk) shirt with beautiful traditional designs on it. It is said that these kinds of shirts are tailored specially for the purpose or stitched out of long fabrics. One reason¹³ for wearing *muga* shirts is that while a farmer works in the field or ploughs land with cows the cows used to sprinkle mud on the farmer and that colour is also similar to that of the beige.

Gamocha

Gamocha is a long cotton or silken cloth woven by local weavers. The *gamochas* are generally of approximately five feet in length and three feet in breadth. Traditional motifs of flowers, creepers, trees, peacock, are embroidered into it on both the ends. Simple red borders are woven on two sides. The male Bihu performers wrap the *gamocha* round the head and the waist. It is generally believed (and is prevalent in Bihu songs) that the dancemaids weave the *gamocha* herself and presents it to her lover, the *bihuwa*. The *gamocha* is hence called as *bihuwaan* also. It is also presented by the younger one to their elders as a token of respect.

Dhoti/Churiya

The *dhoti* is a traditional waist cover of the menfolk in Assam across all communities. With length and breadth of different sizes the uses also vary on different occasions. While the upper castes and the elites wear them flowing down below the knees the farmer and the low castes wear up to the knees. The male Bihu performer's from early years wear *churiya* or *dhoti* and no major change has come in this. It is a single piece of cloth. The material is either cotton or *muga*. The cloth is worn in a special way. The *dhoti* is equally divided into two parts, with the middle portion from both the sides tied on the waist. One part is again inserted at the back of the waist whereas the other part

remains loose in the front. During Bihu and *husori* performances the *churiya or dhoti* is worn in a way that covers the whole leg. However, sometimes the dhoti is worn covering it to the knee of the leg.

Tangali

Tangali is a red coloured cotton cloth wrapped around in the waist part of the male Bihu dancers. This is a long piece with minimum breadth. The *tangali* is adorned with beautiful traditional floral designs on both ends and the body of the *tangali* has appliquéés. As has been collected from field, in Assamese there is a famous saying about *tangali*; *kokalot tongali bandhi judhole jabole saju ho*¹⁴ (Fasten *tangali* around your waist and get ready for war). And if we minutely observe the statue of Lachit Barphukan, the great warrior and general of the Ahoms (17th century), we see that he also tied *tangali*, but that on the left side. The *tangali* in Bihu performance is however tied to right side. This particular cloth and the way it is tied helps a male Bihu performer to dance properly as it helps in making the dance gestures involving the pelvic part look more prominent.

Hasati

Hasati is a red cotton cloth tied at the wrist of the male Bihu performers. The *hasati* is adorned with traditional floral motifs. Tying the *hasati* to the wrist helps better movement of the hands. The *hasati* is also worn by female dancers by inserting a red piece of cloth into the waistline. The *hasati* carries betel nut and *paan* and a knife to cut it. It signifies the importance of betel nut and the way female dancers have it in intervals of their Bihu performance.

The female Bihu performers also used to wear some traditional dress like the male Bihu performers. Their dresses also have undergone through considerable changes and refinement to appeal to larger crowds under changed environments. Female Bihu performers in earlier times used to wear cotton *gat lua kapur* or *kapahi kapur*¹⁵. At that time *mekhala sadar* was their only dress. The female folk, after finishing their household chores, used to go for the *rati* Bihu, as they were at home, without changing their dresses. However, in the present day festive atmosphere changes have come in and female dancers have started weaving *muga mekhala sadar* when they perform for larger audience. At one time, males used to adorn like females and perform with the

husori team. More recently, female performers entering in to the *husori* and male female Bihu performers perform together.

Reeha

Reeha is a long piece of cloth draped by female Bihu dancers (also called *bihuwatis*) to cover the upper part of the body. *Reeha* is generally worn in a special way by young girls while performing Bihu dance. These are half the length of a saree. The material is either *muga* or cotton. *Muga reeha* have a maroon or black border on the sides and a rectangular box kind of design at the both ends.

Mekhala

Mekhala is the traditional skirt kind of attire worn on the lower part of the female body. *Mekhala* is worn in a special manner making pleats which face the right side whereas in sarees it is in the left side. *Mekhala*s are woven by local weavers who produce many traditional designs. During the 1990s only small red flowered *mekhala*s were preferred. The fabric of *mekhala* is either *muga* or cotton.

Jewellery

Jewellery, associated with any festive occasion and used for adornment - more particularly by females - also forms an essential segment of traditional Bihu decorations. Jewellery used in Bihu Dance is mostly worn by the female Bihu performers. Popularly known as traditional Assamese jewellery they are made up of either gold or a silver kind of material and gold plated over them. In earlier time only one necklace adorned female dancers, known as *jonbiri*, with *thuria* or *keru* as earrings and *gamkharu* in the hand. Nowadays dancers wear other Assamese jewellery such as *dhul madali*, *dugdugi*, *golpota*, *powalmoni* and *japifuli* as earrings and *muthi kharu* in hand. *Dhol madali* is worn by male Bihu dancers also¹⁶.

The female dancers make a bun of their hair and garland it with seasonal flowers especially by the *kopou phool*. The bun is also classified as *kaldilia khopa*¹⁷, *negheri khopa*¹⁸, *udhonia khopa*¹⁹, *ghila khopa*²⁰ and they put a *bindi* with vermilion in the forehead and put *barham thuri*²¹ (bark of *Magnolia Hodgsonii* tree found in forests of Assam) as lip colour. The colour red also symbolizes love and erotica. The female dancers also paint their palms with *jetuka*, which symbolizes love and romanticism.

3.7 The Bihu: Aspects of Music and Dance

While the aforementioned garments and jewellery are external adornments of the Bihu performers, it is the music and dance which have taken the Bihu from the paddy field to the present day status and public acclaim across the country and beyond. The resounding beats of multiple drums with other accessories along with the soft, brisk and circular movements of the dancing maids invariably change any given environment with redeeming joy and beauty. The percussive and other instruments that lend speciality to any Bihu performance are as follows:

Dhol (Drum):Membranophone

Dhol is the most vital part of Bihu music and dance as well. The sound produced by beating of the *dhol* is believed to invoke the Rain God and considered one primary reason behind the growing popularity of Bihu. The sound of *dhol* has a different pitch which resonates and excites all. In Assam there are a large variety of cattle drums played for a number of occasions among different social and ethnic groups. Every community has its own *dhol* played during its own festivals. The Bodos call it *kham*, Karbis call it *cheng*, Misings call it *doom doom*, Dimasa's call it *khram*, Tiwas call it *pati dhol*, the *dhol* used in *deodhani* dance is called *joidhol* and for *mohkheda geet* the *dhol* used is called *dhepadhol*. The difference is in the shape and size, process of making and in sound production. Here mainly concentration will be put on the Bihu *dhol* and the *oja dhol* performances as they are played during the *Bohag* Bihu.

The *oja dhol* and the Bihu *dhol* though they look similar, the process in making of them is slightly different. As stated by Somnath Bora (Oja)²² “The *oja dhol* or the Bihu *dhol* is unique and cannot be compared to any other drums. Both Bihu and *oja dhol* produces sound of unique significance. The leather used in Bihu *dhol* is thicker than *oja dhol*. This is because the beatings on the Bihu *dhol* are quite strong and hard-hitting whereas *oja dhol* also known as ‘Talking Drum’ is played in a malleable manner. Apart from that the making process of both the *dhols* are same”.

The *oja dhol* and its *malita's* (ballads) are played solo. Specialised training is required for an *oja dhol* performance. It is seen that more than one *dhol* can be or is played in *oja* performances. These performances are often accompanied by singing of *malita* (ballads). The *oja* also recites mnemonics (syllables) along with traditional verses remembering various gods and goddesses. The ballad also narrates the myth of the

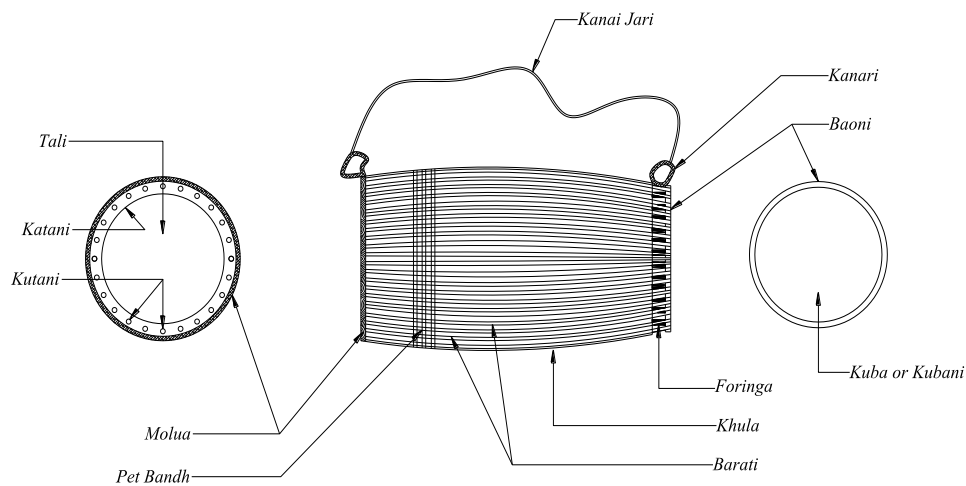
origin of *dhol* along with its oral transmission. At present mimicry is also performed on the *dhol* and producing sounds of machines, birds and animals. The beatings of *oja dhol* are known as *haat*. Different sounds are produced through these *haats*. Some of the popular *haat*²³ that are played by *ojas* are:

- *Tamul paanor jonmo manoni haat*
- *Guru maan dhora*
- *Raijok maan dhora*
- *Meghe goja haat*
- *Rail sola haat*
- *Sipini buloni haat*
- *Kopah dhuna haat*
- *Teltupi sorai haat*
- *Rupohi botah haat*
- *Dhulia botah haat*
- *Thunuki botah haat*
- *Naga petuluka haat*
- *Fesu botaah haat*
- *Gagana haat*
- *Negera haat*
- *Tukari haat*
- *Serenda haat*
- *Khanjari haat*
- *Tabla haat*
- *Dubi teleonga haat*
- *Maasor Bibah*
- *Motsyo buloni etc.*

On the other hand, the Bihu *dhol* is performed with Bihu dance and *husori*. The beats and their supporting songs played in Bihu performances can be improvised depending on occasions and the environment. No set rule is followed in the beatings of the Bihu *dhol*. The common set of syllables beaten as part of Bihu performance sessions can be mentioned as:

- *Kachari seu*

- *Burha seu*
- *Hurali seu*
- *Dhemelia seu*
- *Suti seu*
- *Khora seu*
- *Digholia seu*
- *Dumuni seu etc.*



(Fig. 2: Diagrammatic representation of Bihu *Dhol* with its parts)

Dhol is played with the help of a stick on the right hand side called *kuboni* (made of oxen skin) and the left side is beaten by hand called *tali* (made of young cows skin). The wood used for making of a Bihu *dhol* or *oja dhol* is from jackfruit tree, or mango tree (sour mango). The length of the *dhol* should be 18 to 20 inches. The process of making a *dhol* is quite long. Nowadays in the market a *dhol* costs around INR 3000-5000²⁴. As has been told by one informant²⁵ engaged in commercial enterprise of *dhols*, he sells around 400 to 500 *dhols* in a year. We find mention of *dhols* in Bihu songs that are handed down for generations.

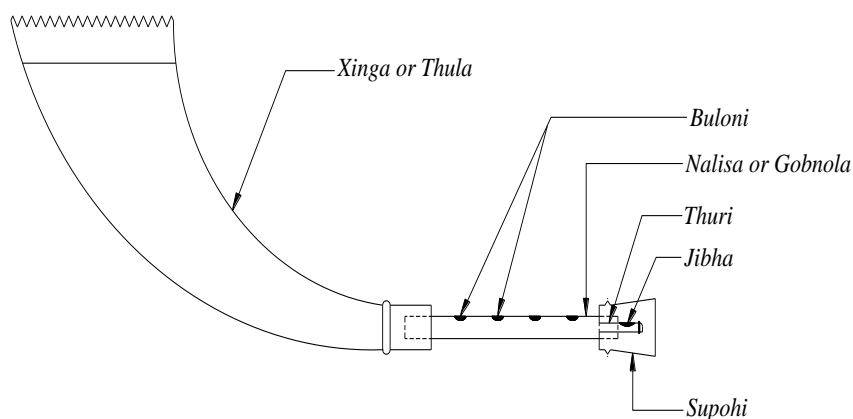
dholor sapar suni nasani olale
sotalat boi asilo tat
hatare makuti talate parile
khabale nahale bhat... (Hussain, 2009: 79)

Dancing maid came out hearing the beatings of dhol
 was weaving in the yard
 the shuttle falls from hand
 could not have meals...

Mahar Singar Pepa or Horn Pipe (Wind Instrument)

Mahar singar pepa is another important instrument used in Bihu dance and songs. The sound produced by this instrument is very unique and alluring. It is made up of the horns of a buffalo. Earlier, as has been gathered from the field, it was single *pepa* or *etiya pepa*. The horn from which it is prepared is called *thula*, then a bamboo pipe called *gaphana* is attached with four holes. A cover is attached to the bamboo pipe that is called *muri* or *muriya*, Underneath it there is another bamboo pipe called *supohi*. Nowadays, after years of creative effort double *pepa* or *duitiya pepa* has been evolved to add weight to the sound. However, for that both the horns should be tuned in a single scale.

These horns are mainly available in Sivasagar, Dibrugarh, Duliajan, Namrup etc²⁶, where there are wetlands, and buffaloes can be reared. The informant²⁷ has contact with Muslim community people who often take buffalo meat and they supply the horns to the makers. The horns are dipped into water or mud for around 10-15 days, and then exposed to sun for drying up, and then it is cut according to the required size. After that the raw horns are polished more and more. Again it is boiled in hot water to get the actual shape. The cost of a raw horn costs around INR 50 - 200.



(Fig. 3: Diagrammatic representation of Pepa or Hornpipe with its parts)

Horn pipe can be made out of horns of goat, cow, methon, bamboo etc. However, the sound of *mahar singar pepa* is considered to be the best for Bihu performance²⁸. The commercial shops sell around 4000 to 5000 such hornpipes in a year and costing around INR 1500 - 3000 for single *pepa* and INR 3000 - 7000 for double pipes. The cost depends on its quality.

Mention of *pepa* found in Bihu songs like,

mahar singar pepati nobojaba kokaiti
tihitilau tihitilau kore
pepar mate suni roboke nuaru
haator maku sori pore... (collected from field)²⁹

do not play the buffalo horn pipe
produces tihitilau tihitilau sound
can't stay calm listening to the sound of horn pipes
shuttle falls down from hand...

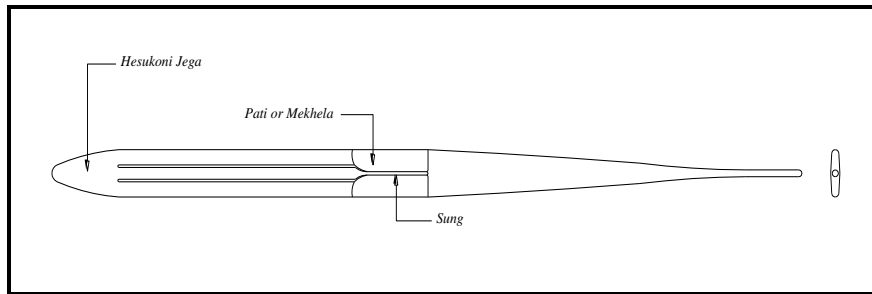
***Gagana*: Wind Instrument**

Gagana is another significant wind instrument used in Bihu dance and songs. It is a harp kind of instrument. It is a simple instrument made of bamboo of any kind. However, the ones made of *jatibaah* (bamboo) produce the best sound. The sound of *gagana* resembles the sound produced by male and female frogs during the rainy season. There are two kinds of *gagana*: *lahari gagana* and *ramdhan gagana*. *Lahari gagana* is played by females³⁰ and *ramdhan gagana* is played by male³¹. It is observed that female Bihu dancers also play *ramdhan gagana*, as the sound of *ramdhan gagana* is more soothing than that of *lahari gagana*. It has also been found that there is another kind of *gagana* called *saliki thutiya gagana*³² played by married women while they assemble for marriage or other merry making occasions.

Gagana is played by placing it in the mouth, between the lips and twanging the tongue to produce the sound. It is like a dumb person speaking inside the mouth without making any sound. The tongue twangs up and down and the air is pushed outside eventually the sound is produced. The sound produced by a *gagana* is of the following kind:

titau titau tau khiti khiti tau
tau khiti khiti tau titau titau tau ³³

(These are simple mnemonic syllables sounded in the instrument)



(Fig. 4 : Diagrammatic representation of *gagana* and its parts)

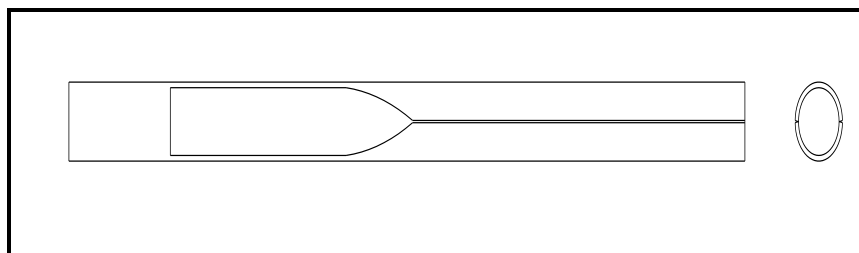
A piece of *gagana* costs around INR 50 – 300 in today’s market. Bihu songs on *gagana* like,

aagali bahore lahari gagana
bohi tatar patot bau
aahe ki nahe oi
mure dhan senai oi
siri pati mangalkhon sau... (collected from field)³⁴

lahari *gagana* of soft bamboo
 play sitting at the weaving desk
 my beloved will come or not
 try to check in the horoscope

Taka

Taka is a traditional instrument made of *jati* bamboo or *bogoli* bamboo. A round shaped bamboo is cut in between till a point and then both the sides are stricken to produce the sound. *Takas* are of two kinds *mati taka* or *bar taka* ³⁵ and *hat taka* or *pati taka* ³⁶. It is played by both male and female Bihu dancers. It costs around INR 50 - 200 in today’s market.



(Fig. 5 Diagrammatic representation of *taka*)

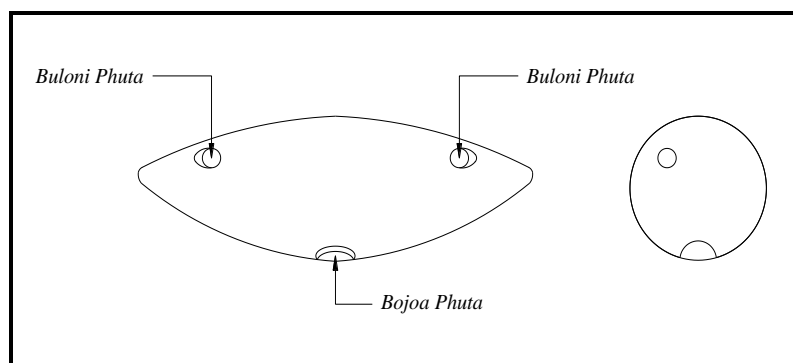
Bihu songs mentioning about *taka*:

oure gasate moue bahe lole
kakai pari diya khau
bahore takati saji diya kakaiti
bihu mariboloi jau... (collected from field)³⁷

Bees took resort in elephant apple tree
grandfather brings us to eat
dear brother make me a taka of bamboo
shall go for bihu performance...

***Sutuli*, Wind Instrument**

Sutuli is yet another traditional instrument made of black mud that is also used by artisans to make idols. Nowadays *sutuli* is made of wood and bamboo also, so that it can be used for the purpose of practice. Otherwise, the *sutuli* made of mud is easily breakable. It is moon shaped and it has three holes to produce the sound. One hole called *bojua futa* is used to put the air inside the *sutuli* placing it near the mouth and the other two holes called *buloni futa* are used for regulating the air while going outside through these two holes and producing a soothing sound. It produces sounds of birds like cuckoo and nightingale that sing during the spring season. *Sutulis* cost around INR 30 per piece.



(Fig. 6 : Diagrammatic representation of *Sutuli*)

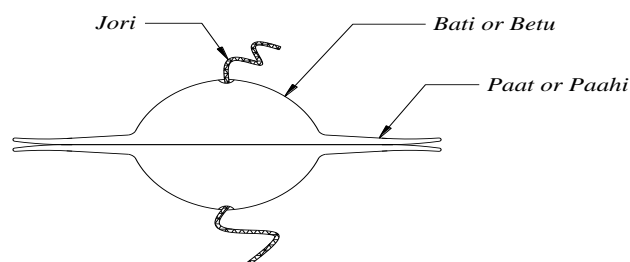
Bihu songs mentioning *sutuli*:

kinu di umolam tomak hera nasani
kinu di umolam tomak
matire sutuli banai loi aanisu
*take di umalam tomak (collected from field)*³⁸

How to make you happy and gay dear nasani
how to make you happy and gay
have made a *sutuli* of mud
shall make you happy with

***Taal* or Cymbals**

Taal or cymbals are a set of solid instruments used to support the rhythm in percussion. In earlier times it wasn't used. Its use is a new inclusion in Bihu dance and song. *Taal* produces very high pitched sound and usually accompanies the Bihu *dhol*. Without *taal* the *dhol* sound seems somewhat void. Two pieces made of brass material make a pair of *taal* which is generally played by male musicians.



(Fig. 7 : Diagrammatic representation of *Taal*)

Other instruments that are used in Bihu are (i) *Bin* (veena), (ii) *dhurtong* & *mridang* (another form of percussive drum), (iii) *bahi*, etc. and we find mention of these above mentioned instruments in the age old Bihu songs. For example:

(i). *bisari bisari bai jao tukari*
jukari bai jao bin

tomar padulite tamolti kati jam
bakolit thoi jam sin (Hussain, 2009: 83)

Searching and searching play the tukari
shakingly also play the bin
shall cut the beetul nut in your gate
and leave mark in the cover of it

(ii). *aah haero lahariya*
khelu ami lahariya
phutukona mridanga
bojai de dhurtong aah ho naas ho lagariya (collected from field)³⁹

Come my friends
shall play lahariya
phutukona mridanga...
play the dhurtong come and dance my friends

(iii). *dholor mate baliya kare mor senaiti*
bahirmate baliya kare
sunile pepar mat thakiba noaro
tomaloi manate pare... (Hussain, 2009:83)

The beating of dhol makes me insane
the sound of bahi makes me insane
can't stay calm hearing the sound of pepa
and remember you

The above Bihu songs establish the point that *bin*, *dhurtong*, *mridang* and *bahi* are used in Bihu in some particular places and not in general. *Bihu Suraksha Samiti*⁴⁰, Assam, an apex organisation comprising members who are Bihu practitioners and have experience in the field approves of only five musical instruments i.e. *dhol*, *pepa*, *gagana*, *sutuli* and *taka* that are used⁴¹ in Bihu song and dances. However, during the course of field work analysis of the Bihu songs the aforementioned instruments are found to have been in use in earlier times and are still prevalent. As referred to earlier,

the Bihu songs and dances seem to differ from place to place and from community to community, offering multiple versions and texts.

Bihu Songs

Bihu songs are another inherent part of the festival. Bihu songs are not only entertaining but have an intrinsic relation with nature, social causes, environment, material aspects of the festival, folk cuisines, appreciation of beauty so on and so forth. These Bihu songs are oral in tradition and transmitted through ages. George List states,

Genuine folk music exhibits a number of traits in addition to that of aural transmission. One criterion frequently applied is that the origin of the melody must be unknown to its performers. Music that originally appeared in published form can be considered folk music if it has been passed on by ear and memory until the performer is no longer aware of its origin. Such music is said to have entered the oral traditions. A second requirement applied is that the melody exists in variant forms. As it is transmitted from one individual to another and diffused from one conscious and conscious modifications of the melody occur (1982, 363-364).

These songs are a popular genre of music in Assam. Bihu music or songs are inherent to any public cultural event. It is rooted in the lives of people due to its varied appeal to various aspects of life. People can relate their life through the songs. Another reason for its popularity is tone, lyrics, rhythm and the not so difficult *sur*. Anybody and everybody can learn it and perform. No training is required to sing Bihu songs.

Bihu Dance

“Dance is the only means of affective expression that exists in both time and space, and it is the only activity that so completely involves mind body activity. It probably always has been and probably will always be the most totally satisfying activity for the largest number of people both as participants and, vicariously, as observers” (Kealiinohomoku, 1982: 398). Kealiinohomoku describes folk dance as “a vernacular dance form performed in either its first or second part of its little tradition within the great tradition of a given society. It is understood that dance is an effective mode of expression which requires both time and space. It employs motor behaviour in redundant patterns which are closely linked to the distinctive features of musicality” (ibid.)

The Bihu, the origin of which is often traced to pre-historic time with references like “Sculptures considered to belong to the ninth century and depicting a type of dance which looks like that of the Bihu have been found near Tezpur in the Darrang district” (Goswami, 2003: 38). This speaks to how old the Bihu dance tradition is. As has been found from field work, male dancers used to perform Bihu in the sequestered forest areas where they could not be seen or heard by anyone. It was a spontaneous overflow of their spring - time joy and celebration of bountiful occasion. The songs they used to perform had sexual overtones so they are called *habigeet*⁴². They were accompanied by an elderly male member named as *deka bora*⁴³, who used to look after so that nobody else, specially the women folk, could see them perform or hear their songs. On the other hand, females used to finish their daily chores and go to a secluded place and dance Bihu in joy and gaiety. And that Bihu is called *rati Bihu*. They were also accompanied by an elderly female member called *gabharu bora*⁴⁴. They were also careful of not being seen by anybody.

In those years of performing Bihu under the cover of privacy, Bihu was often looked down upon as something derogatory and not accepted as a welcome social occasion. However, during the spate of the Bhakti movement led by Srimanta Sankaradeva the influence of the message of Bhakti percolated down to such levels that traditions, beliefs and practices and artistic expressions which were outside the spell of Vaisnavism also gradually got permeated with it. Bihu, the spring - time festival of Assam centering round the agricultural cycle has also been influenced by the rites, rituals and customs of the Bhakti faith. The music and dance charged with sexuality came refinement and found their way to be performed in front of an audience with spells of Vaisnavism more particularly in respect of the male performers, while the female continued dancing Bihu in a sequestered part of a field or forest underneath a tree away from society’s influence or onlookers.

So, eventually it paved the way for *husori* as an institutionalized form of Bihu music and dance. In earlier times, *husori* carol singing, composed of a team of members of the village, used to go by the village roads singing Vaishnavite prayers or balladic verses followed by sets of seasonal Bihu songs. They used instruments like *dhols* (drums), *taal* (cymbals) *taka* (split bamboo clappers), and *pepa* (hornpipes). Earlier “The huchari bands of young and middle aged men are symbols of the raji or community and is an obligation to secure their blessings” (Goswami, 2003:40). During the reign of

Ahom kingdom, the *husori* singing tradition moved from the village roads to the premises of the Ahom palaces. On the *Bohag* Bihu day the *husori* singing teams bless the king and the royalty singing some prayers and hymns. It gradually became a tradition of singing *husori* at the courtyards of all domestic households blessing all the officials like the *dangoriyas*, *barbaruas*, *rajkhawas*, *phukans* etc (Gogoi, 2010: 11). Slowly and steadily it spread all over, *husori* was sung at the courtyards of all the village families. Today in the urban areas *husori* singing is mostly seen as a distinct set of performance on the stage in a stylized way, whereas in the villages the tradition continues to be in practice.

Later on the male used to dress like females and perform Bihu dance. They started performing it in the courtyards of the village families. Till then no females danced Bihu in public. It has not been many years that women started dancing with men together.

“The Bihu dance as seen among the Assamese has a few fixed patterns and seems to have a sexual basis, thus indication of its association with some springtime fertility cult of ancient times” (Goswami, 2003: 38). The major distinctive feature of Bihu dance is the swaying of the pelvic region according to the beating of the *dhol*. And, as has been commented by many scholars, it has sexual overtones. In the field it is found that the male dancers have only three major dance steps,

- a. To move both the hands forward and give them a shape of the buffalo horns and moving the hand inward and outward synchronising it with the *dhol* beating.
- b. To wave the pelvic region of the body in and out with hands wide open.
- c. To move the hands forward front and back several times. The wrist would break in rhythm of the *dhol*.

And for the female the dance is said to have five major steps⁴⁵ and from that set many other dance steps have arisen. The basic essence of a female Bihu dance is *lasya* (soft and supple).

- a. To wave the pelvic region of the body in and out with hands on the waist. Both the hands will also sway accordingly. Along with that slight movement is also seen in the shoulders and the hand.
- b. To swirl like a *takuri* and take circular movements with hands wide open.

- c. To swirl and twirl with hands wide open and just as the branches of tree churn due to windy season. The wrists of the hands also break rhythmically in and out to the beating of *dhol*.
- d. To move both the hands forward and give them a shape of the buffalo horns and moving the hand inward and outward synchronising it with the *dhol* beating.
- e. To place both the hands in the bun or *khopa* just above the neck line. And there is movement in the shoulder and the swaying of the waist and pelvic part of the body.

Apart from these moves some other dance moves are also seen which (as found in the field) are collected from other ethnic communities like Mising and the Tiwa. These dance steps are ingrained into⁴⁶ the Bihu dance of these two. Some of them are:

- a. To entangle both the hands to make moves that resembles sea waves in front of the bosom. It is believed this dance move has come from the Mising dance.
- b. To show steps of weaving, dance moves depicting activities in agricultural fields have also come from the Mising dance.
- c. To bend forward and move both the hands forward and swaying of the wrists in and out have come from the Tiwa community.

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BIHU DANCE GESTURES BY A FEMALE DANCER



Fig. 8 Dancing with open arms, 06.05.2017



Fig. 9 Dancing with a hand in the waist and another in the bun, 06.05.2017



Fig. 10 Swaying of the waist line, 06.05.2017



Fig. 11 Dancing with hands on the hair bun, 06.05.2017



Fig. 12 Dancing with both hands entangled in the front, 06.05.2017



Fig. 13 Dancing with both hands in one side of the waist, 06.05.2017



Fig. 14 Dancing like the horns of buffaloes, 06.05.2017



Fig. 15 Dancing with hands on the shoulder, 06.05.2017

BIHU DANCE GESTURES BY MALE DANCER



Fig. 16 Swaying of hands to the front and back, 06.05.2017



Fig. 17 Dancing with open arms, 06.05.2017

MALE AND FEMALE BIHU DANCER DANCING TOGETHER
(DEKA GABHARU MUKOLI BIHU)



Fig. 18 Mukoli Bihu by male and female dancers together, 19.04.2011



Fig. 19 Mukoli Bihu by male and female dancers together
Ref: www.assamtimes.org

MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS USED IN BIHU DANCE AND MUSIC



Fig. 20 Single and Double Hornpipes, 12.07.2016



Fig. 21 Century year old outer shells of dhols, 12.07.2016



Fig. 22 Bihu *dhol* with a *gamocha*, 12.07.2016



Fig. 23 Wind Instrument *Ramdhan gagana*, 12.07.2016



Fig. 24 Wind Instrument *Lahari gagana*, 12.07.2016



Fig. 25 Wind Instrument *Sutuli*, 12.07.2016



Fig. 26 Making of *Bahi* and *Sutuli* by a local artisan at Sivasagar, 12.07.2016



Fig. 27 *Taal*, Cymbals, 18.07.2016



Fig. 28 Taka, Hand clappers, 18.07.2016



Fig. 29 Traditional Assamese Jewellery, 19.09.2015



Fig. 30 The rituals of *Garu Bihu*
 Ref: www.xobdo.org



Fig. 31 Offerings to the cattle on the *Garu Bihu* day along with *diglati* and *makhieti* leaves, 13.04.2015



Fig. 32 Dheki a traditional rice pounding machine, 10.02.2015



Fig. 33 Meji and Bhelaghar made during bhogali Bihu
Ref: www.pratidintime.com



Fig. 34 Traditional food items during *bhogali Bihu*
Ref: www.festivalsofindia.com



Fig. 35 Making of traditional *sunga pitha*
Ref: www.flickr.com



Fig. 36 Lighting lamp at the paddy field during *Kati Bihu*

Ref: www.travelguru.in