The traditional festival of Assam known as Bihu is an essential ingredient of Assamiya identity. The very mention of the word Bihu arouses lofty sentiment. With the advent of urban environment new patterns have emerged. The author who is a technocrat by profession, has great interest in the matters related to art, culture and literature. In this article he shows his understanding of the significance of Bihu. Three kinds of Bihu festivals are observed every year. The author has described the features of each festival in this article.

The development of culture in a society is normally expressed through the activities in the society. It is closely related to the art and practice of living in a particular place. As per the census of 1991-92, more than 62.5% of the population in Assam were engaged in agriculture or related activities. In the seventies it was nearly 70%. Hence, the society of Assam with geographical area covering from Sadiya to Dhubri were mostly engaged in agriculture in the earlier years. The cultural offshoots emanating from such a society must therefore possess an agriculture bias. BIHU is such a cultural offshoot and is bound to be related to agriculture.

When the Sun crosses a Zodiac sign, a specific month is supposed to start and the day of conjunction is called Sankranti. Sankrants are supposed to be the days auspicious for festivals. In the 25th brahmana of the SAMA VEDAS, the whole year is shown divided into three parts. The number of days in each sector from beginning to end is 180. The centrally located day is called Vishuv. Al-Biruni called this day as Bikhu. To many scholars, this is supposed to be the concept of the current KATI BIHU. When the first wave of Aryan culture invaded Assam sometimes in 2200 B.C., the Aryans tried to mingle their culture with the Assamese. They tried entrance through a harvesting festival of the Assamese. The harvesting festival on the last day of Ahin (Ashwin) was known to the Assamese as Dwishu which is our present Kati Bihu. “The tradition of the observance of the last day of Ashwin by the Assamese people on Dwishu day (KATI-BIHU) entitles them to the tradition of Aryan culture of about 2200 B.C. when perhaps the first wave of Aryan culture spread into Assam.” Thus observed Late Raj Mohan Nath, the famous historian.

It has already been indicated that, for the Hindus, according to Al-Biruni, the 10th century visitor astronomer to Assam, the day of the VERNAL EQUINOX which is called Bikhu or Shibu is very auspicious. On the occasion, the Hindus offer scarifices to fire. This occasion is Magh Bihu and is popularly known as Uttarayan Sankranti or MAKAR Sankranti.

The Sankrants of KATI (Kartik), Aghon (Agrahayan), CHOT(Chaitra), BOHAG (Baisakh) and BOHAG- JETH (Jaistha) are together called VISHNU SANKRANTI. These Sankrants also have the following names:

AHIN-KATI : Jalavishuv Sankranti
CHOT-BOHAG : Mahavishuv Sankranti
POOH-MAGH : Uttrayan or Makar Sankranti
Months, days of the week, seasons have names backed by original Sanskrit names. Pronunciation varied due to change to local tongue.

The different conditions of environment (Nature) are depicted by the seasons. The concept of the seasons is Vedic. This again is directly related to cultivation, production and harvesting of crops. In Assam, rice is the main staple food. This is why Bihu celebrations are always related to paddy.

The main Bihu, if permitted to say so by the elders, is the one celebrated from the last day of CHOT to about 6th of Bohag. This is known as Rongali Bihu or Bihu of Joy. The first day is called Goru Bihu or the Bihu of the cows. This day really depicts the importance of the cows in practising agriculture. No tilling can be effectively done without them. No production of milk can be thought of without the cows. Hence, the first day of Rongali Bihu is devoted to the worship of the cow in order to increase their physical strength and production of milk.

In practice, a tripod of Bamboo strips is made into a Kabab like device to fix raw pieces of Bottle Gourd, Brinjals, bitter gourds and other vegetables fitted with betel nut and leaves (offer respect). Ladies prepare tumeric and gram paste and rub the same on the Cow's forehead and body. A bunch of mosquito and fly repellant herbs consisting of Dighlati, Makhioti, Narasimha, Dhopat tita decorated with wild flowers is carried along with and all the cows in the village unit are taken to a nearby river, pond or similar water bodies for a thorough bath. After completing the bath, the materials from the bamboo tripod (Chat) are gently thrown at the cows for eating with song meaning:

*Eat the lawe, kerela and begnena
Grow faster and bigger than your parents
We kill all the flies and mosquitoes with the Dighlati and Makhioti
Grow larger still!*

A few slices of raw vegetables which are left, are brought back home to be cooked for the cows as well as for others. The cows are then left at the field to graze. The lassos for the cows are prepared with Jute and Tara plants. In the evening, the cowshed is fumigate with special herb smoke. Taking the cows to be the prime mover of economy, this function appears appropriate.

The second day of Rongali Bihu, also called the Manuh Bihu (Human Worship) people wear new clothes. The Assamese Gamocha, a piece of decorated cotton fabric in the shape of a towel, is woven by ladies in their household handloom. On the day of Bihu the younger ones pay reverence to the elders by offering a Gamocha. Ladies prefer to wear the dress of magical fabric of golden Muga silk and white mulberry silk. Thus the excellence of weaving practice in Assamese women is aptly depicted on the day. In addition to this, the first few days of Bihu are also associated with eating of some local preparations like Doi-poita – a form of water-soaked curd rice, playing with eggs and many other local games which, unfortunately, have been vanishing from the scene slowly.

As mentioned earlier, Rongali Bihu is celebrated up to the 6th day of Bohag. This period is mainly dominated by taking out a group of song and dance called Huchari. This group includes both young and old of both sexes. Knowing Bihu dance, Bihu songs, beating of drums, playing horn pipes and cymbal are the criteria of entry into this group. This unit visits each house in the village, bless the family and sometimes collect money for the purpose of school or community hall construction.
There are several types of huchari. In some, ladies and in the others gents participate alone. The Bihu songs sung by the youths are amorous and, normally, the elders do not participate. Bihu songs are not normally written by famous poets. They are vocally transferred from one generation to another.

The Assamese month of Magh is the period of influence of Mogha constellation. Magh’s literal meaning is plentiful and sacrifice. In this month offering of food as sacrifice is taken to be a pious deed. In Assam, paddy from the fields fill the granaries and people perhaps thought it proper to celebrate the Bihu which is known as Bhogali Bihu, the Bihu for eating and comfort. Food items mostly of rice powder, rice, jaggery, sesame, coconut etc., are prepared and on the day of Bihu it is ceremoniously offered to fire. Later people enjoy through public feasts and distribution of local cakes and cookies like Tilpitha, Ghalapitha, Fenipitha, Malpoa and many others. The human touch earlier found in these preparations are missing after these have started becoming market commodities. However, there are other aspects also for consideration before arriving at any conclusion.

*Rigved Samhita* mentions about six seasons in the first *mandal* itself. The name of the seasons at that time were madhu, madhav, sukra, suchi, nava and navasya. These are determined by the movement of the Sun. At that time, the New year started from the sankranti of Ahin and Kati. The words Madhu and Madhav express nature’s expressions during the period. Nowadays also in Astrology, these months are known as Madhu Mas. Vishnu is the governing deity of the Madhu Mas. In *Rigved Samhita*, it is mentioned that during these months the Earth is full of nectar, the Sun with Divine light and the Moon is happy with the environment. The Earth conceives at that time. The joy brings life, sustains it and sees through its end.

As a thanks-giving occasion to God and in anticipation of better crops next, the Assamese celebrate Kati Bihu. As there is not much of fanfare of eating and merry making, the Bihu is called Kongali Bihu. Meaning bare Bihu.
In Kati Bihu members of the family light earthenware oil lamps in the crop fields and below a newly planted Tulsi plant and seek blessings of the earth in harvesting and exuberant crop.

All the three Bihus, by and large, depict an image of Assamese culture. Financially, culturally or otherwise a society may consist of different layers. Once upon a time the elites did not have a good social tie with the Agriculture group and they could not appreciate the importance of Bihu. It happened in Assam also where many such modern educated elites cried down the concept of Bihu itself. The scene slowly changed when people came to realize that the group of people engaged in Agriculture could actually ascertain the destiny of the state. Studies were made and the people found an elevated platform for Bihu in the society. This is a subject which needs further studies.

Another change has taken place in regard to Bihu. A fraction of the Bihu, mainly the song and dance part, has been taken to stage in the urban localities Many cities call it an attempt to preserve Bihu culture, but we must realize that in the process, the original concept of Bihu cannot be neglected. Exodus of dance to the city platforms can only be taken as an effort to preserve the culture which was having a tendency of slow disappearance from social scenario. This, however, cannot allow the concept of Bihu to develop as a meaningful whole in a socio-cultural set-up.

The general transformation of the society is allowing the Bihu to be an instrument for business enterprises. The demand of gamocha is more than that of local supply. It has become a commercial proposition to market the different pithas, rice, cakes preparations for everybody to relish which of course should have been done long back.

People cannot spend much time in deriving the taste of a culture. It appears to be a rational and pragmatic proposal in developing Bihu tourism for a week starting, say, January 13 near Magh Bihu. The Rongali Bihu time may not be comfortable from weather consideration. It is high time the economic and commercial factors were developed as resources and utilized as early as possible. It may act as a booster for Assam.

In order to redevelop a refined Bihu culture, one must forget or try to eliminate some bad elements. It must be made known that collection of Bihu donation on the highways from vehicles and exhibiting some odd dance and acting like beggars in city shops do not depict anything of Bihu. These need to be stopped forthwith.

The author of the article is a well known educationist & technocrat of Assam. Some of the important positions held by him were – (a) Professor and Principal of Engineering Colleges of Assam, (b) Director NERIST, (c) Advisor and Consultant on Technical Education, North Eastern Council, Govt. of India.

References:
Background of Assamese culture by Raj Mohan Nath.
Bishnupadi Sankrati by Sri Trailokya Bhattacharyya. PRANTIKA 1-15 April 2005
Editorial of PRANTIKA 1-15 April 2005
Bihu, Arthaniti aru amar sopon by Debojit Phukan