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Assamese Bihus and Vegetation Symbolism for the Church

O. M. RAO*

I—THE ASSAMESE BIHUS

The Assamese of North East India observe three nature/fertility agricultural festivals known as *Bihus* which correspond with the three seasons of the year.¹ The word *bihu* is drawn from the Sanskrit word *visuvan* which means "Equinox".² These *Bihus* are:

- i) *Bohag Bihu* which ushers in the New Year is the Spring-time *bihu*. It is also known as *Rangali Bihu* or the *bihu* that cheers. *Bohag Bihu* is associated with the vernal or spring equinox and generally falls in the month of April. As the sun passes at this time from one zodiacal zone to another it is also known as *Domahi* (= two months), while in other parts of India it is known as *Sankranti*.
- ii) *Kati Bihu* is associated with the autumnal equinox and generally falls in the month of October. It is also called *Kangali Bihu* or beggars' *bihu*, for not much is left to eat at this time of the year.
- iii) *Magh Bihu* is the harvest festival *bihu*. It is also known as *Lhogali Bihu* or the *bihu* which one enjoys with feasting. It is associated with the winter solstice.³ Generally it falls in the month of January.

Let us examine these *Bihus* in detail.

* Dr Rao teaches New Testament at Eastern Theological College, Jorhat.

1. Hem Baruah and J. D. Baveja, *The Fairs and Festivals of Assam*, published by C. P. Dutta, Gauhati Lawyers Book Stall, 1956, p. 9.

2. 'Equinox' is the time when the Sun crosses the equator (about 21st March and 23rd September) making night and day equal in length of time.

3. 'Solstice' refers to the time when the sun reaches the maximum distance from the equator. There are two solstices: The summer solstice when it touches the Tropic of Cancer, (about 21st June) and the winter solstice when the sun touches that of Capricorn (about 21st December).

1. Bohag-Bihu

Eohag, or Spring-time *Bihu* falls in April. Its romantic background is well described by P. Goswami :

Trees like the coral, palas and 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...songs seem to spring to one's lips unbidden and if one is young, the heart flutters a little.⁴

This *Bohag Bihu* continues for a week ; the first day is known as *Garu Bihu* or the *bihu* for the cattle ; the second day is known as *Manuh Bihu* or the *bihu* for men ; the third day is known as *Gosain Bihu* or the *bihu* of the gods.

a) *Garu Bihu* is timed to the vernal equinox ; it begins with washing of the cattle, then throwing vegetables like brinjals and gourds at the cattle as they return from washing. The boys also strike the cattle with green sprigs (like *dighlati* and *makhiyati* plants) which is meant to be magical for better progeny.

b) *Manuh Bihu* is observed on the second day of *Bohag Bihu*. As it is spring time, tender leaves of mango and jute mixed with mustard oil and salt are tasted. *Huchari* carol singing starts on this day, beginning from the community prayer hall known as *Namghar*. Games are played with cowry shells (which are supposed to cause rain) and eggs (which symbolise reproduction). Respects to the elders in terms of *bihu* presents known as *Bihuwan* are offered. These presents are chiefly cloth gifts like *gamucha* (towel), *cheleng* (shoulder cloth), *dhoti* (men's wear), *hachati* (betelnut carrier cloth) etc. Sanskrit mantras are written on *nahar* leaves and kept under the eaves of the roof—these are prayers to the god Mahadev seeking protection against storms, lightning, fire, etc.

c) *Gosain Bihu* is observed on the third day. This

4. P. Goswami, *The Springtime Bihu of Assam*, Calcutta : Nabajiban Press, 1966. p. 18.

day is spent in congregational prayers at the community halls, *Namghars*.

d) *Sathibu* or the seventh day of *Bohag Bihu* is the last day. It is customary to eat seven kinds of herbs, *sat saki* (seven sags) which are normally grown after the first showers of rain have fallen at this season. The Rabhas eat a concoction known as *pitahali sak* made of *bhedai lata* (which has a strong smell) and cooked in broken rice and *khar* (alkali made of burnt banana pith).

The 'Ali-Ai-Ligang' of the Miris : The Miris found along the banks of the river Brahmaputra and its tributaries like the Subansari and Bharali have their Spring-time seed-sowing festival at this time known as *Ali-ai-Ligang*. They start sowing seed during winter on the sand banks thrown up by the rivers. To celebrate this occasion of seed-sowing, the boys and girls gather in groups and go round from house to house singing and dancing in circles. As they dance they cry out '*Ali-lai-ai*'. *Ali* means 'seed' or 'root'.

Bihu-Thowa or putting Bihu away : *Bihu* symbolises youth and love of the New Year. So it has to be ended with reverence. In the suburbs of Jorhat, the *Huchari* singing goes beyond the allotted seven days. On the last day the singers go outside the village to a field and sing to their hearts content. In the late afternoon men bring banana leaves and putting betel nuts and leaves on nine parts of the banana leaves place them towards the west. They cover the place with *gamucha* cloth and leave some coins on the banana leaf. Then they go home without looking back : this is *bihu-thowa* or putting *Bihu* away.

Among the Miris, the young folk raise a dais in the forest to the *Bihu* god and plant a young silk-cotton tree nearby. The young people dance around it late into the night and at the close offering flowers and money and saying the last prayers they go home without looking back. (the silk-cotton tree around which hide-and-peek games are played in other parts of India may have some

connection with the Miris planting this tree in their final act of worship). To the Miris the silk-cotton tree symbolises long life.

Bihu Fair : These fairs are held for other *Bihus* also. In lower Assam in the first week of *Bohag Bihu* a fair is held. The special feature of this fair is the washing and painting of two selected bamboos and ceremonially planting them in the field. The taller of the bamboos is known as the male *para* or 'pigeon'. A little distance from it is built a small bamboo hut covered with dry banana leaves known as *Batheli ghar*⁵ where money and food are kept. In the evening young boys come and beat this hut shouting '*Batheli* is over' after eating the food and pocketing the money. In south Kamrup it is known as *Sori*⁶. A bamboo with the tuft uncut is placed in the field to mark where the deities of the neighbouring village have to be placed. It is thus known as a *chat* or 'marker'. There are two similar festivals which may be connected with this. The Muslims of northern Kamrup celebrate a mock bamboo marriage called *Bah-Biyah*, between the best bamboo and the others surrounding it. This may have some association with *Indra-dwaji* or the banner of Indra raised in his honour in other parts of India.

2. Kati Bihu

Kati Bihu generally falls in the month of October. This *bihu* is a one day domestic affair. The *tulasi* plant, supposed to be wife of the god Vishnu and the goddess of prosperity is worshipped at this *Kati Bihu*. A small banana plant is planted besides the *tulasi* plant; in the evening earthen lamps are placed at the foot of the *tulasi* plant and on the body of the banana plant. *Nivedya* or offerings to the gods and goddesses are made at this time and *kirtans* (religious songs) sung. This worship or propitiation is done to ward off failure of the paddy field crops.

5. According to Dr. B. Kakati, *Bathelghar* is derived from Sanskrit *Basthalika* which means 'sky region' (as indicated by the bamboo middle post).

6. *Sori* refers to the bamboo used for Tug-of-War during the fair.

The men go to the fields and plant a small bamboo in the fields and set a lamp at its base. *Rowa-Khowa* mantras are recited by them, or a *Bej*, the medicine-man, may be called to cast *Kshetra-bhandan* spells on the fields. He recites these spells seven times over white mustard seed and then sprinkles it on the paddy fields. Some light a lamp and tie it to the tip of a tall bamboo known as *Akash-bati* (sky-lamp) and erect it in the field. This sky-lamp is said to show the souls of the dead the way to heaven.

The Kasharis light lamps at the base of the *siju* cactus in the garden, at the granary or in the fields. (The cactus symbolises their god Bathou or Mahadev).

3. Magh Bihu

Magh Bihu or the harvest festival of the Assamese falls in the month of January. Early at dawn a member of the family ties jute or thatch and bamboo sticks around the trunk of the fruit trees. *Bhelaghars* built of bamboos and dry banana leaves are erected in the fields. These are burnt on the eve of *Daulotsava* (festival of drum beating). First a few hairs of sheep or goat are burnt (*Bhela* means sheep). After spending the night in the make-shift cottage nearby, they set fire to this structure, shouting the name of the god⁷. This is also known as *Meji* (from Sanskrit, *Medhi|Yagna* = sacrifice) in upper Assam.

The half-burnt ashes are brought and thrown in their fields and gardens for fertility. Then they hold *kirtans*, recitations of religious songs, which begin from the eve of *Uruka*⁸. No meat or fish can be eaten on the *Sankranti* day.

The Abors of Arunachal Pradesh observe a harvest festival called *Solung*, which need not necessarily synchronise with *Magh Bihu*. After harvesting the village performs *Kumchang pipak* or the worship of

7. The young people shout '*Hari bolo*' or '*Rama bolo*' as they set fire to the structure.

8. *Uruka* is the first day of the *Bihu*.

goddess Paddy. (The Garos of Meghalaya celebrate the *Wangala* which seems to combine the harvest festival feasting and the merriment of the Spring festival).

II—JEWISH ADAPTATION OF CANAANITE AGRICULTURAL FEASTS

There are at least three major Jewish festivals which show the adaptation of agricultural festivals.

i) *The Feast of Unleavened Bread* (Lev. 23 : 6-8) was a continuation of the Feast of Passover. It began a day after the Feast of Passover, Nisan 15th, which fell in March/April. This continued for a week after the Passover, ending with the Sabbath. The Israelites in their wilderness journey did not have time to cook in the normal way of leaving the dough overnight before making bread in the morning. This Feast reminded them that once they were wanderers or nomads before they settled down in Canaan. This corresponded with the spring festival. The Jews hurriedly made unleavened bread out of the just ripening barley harvest and ate it for seven days. (This corresponds with the Assamese *Bohag Bihu*).

ii) *The Feast of Pentecost* (Deut. 16 : 9-12) occurred seven weeks (forty-nine days) after the Feast of Passover. Pentecost, derived from Greek, refers to the fiftieth day, counting from the day of the departure of the Israelites from Egypt. It usually fell on the Sabbath. It was the custom to perform kind deeds on this occasion (Deut. 16 : 9). It also commemorates the giving of the Law at mount Sinai, where the Israelites encamped on the fiftieth day after they left Egypt. This also marked the end of the prolonged harvest since the unleavened Bread. This was the wheat harvesting time so the Israelites offered the first grains of wheat to God. This was also called the Feast of Weeks. (This corresponds with the Assamese *Magh Bihu*).

iii) *The Feast of Tabernacles or Sukkot Festival* (*sukkot* means 'booth') fell in the middle of October. This was the time when the Jews made booths from branches of trees outside their homes and lived in them for seven days. This was to remind themselves of the forty years

wanderings of their fathers, at which time they had no permanent dwelling place. This was the time when grapes were harvested, for which reason it is also known as the Feast of Ingathering. Four kinds of twigs are offered before God during this feast: *hadasim* (myrtle), *obot* (willow reed), *etrog* (citron), and *lulab* (date palm) Lev. 23: 39-40). I noticed while in Israel in 1978 a two foot citrus twig sold for IL 3,00 (around Rs. 1,000) during the *Sukkot* marketing time. (This autumnal festival corresponds with the Assamese *Kati Bihu*).

In all these Jewish festivals we notice how the agricultural feasts of Canaan were adapted into their feasts of redemption. H. Wheeler Robinson, rightly observes, commenting on the *Sukkot* festival (the last one), "This festival is one of the three Agricultural festivals adapted from the Canaanites after the settlement of the nomadic Israel in Canaan".⁹

III—CHRISTIAN ADAPTATION OF THESE AGRICULTURAL FESTIVALS

When the church in Assam celebrates the New Year's day of the Gregorian calendar (1st January) the harvest festival is tagged on to it. At Jorhat Baptist church the produce of the field and poultry brought on the New Year's day is auctioned at the end of the worship service. The paddy is harvested by then. This corresponds to the *Magh Bihu* of the Assamese.

The Passion week (or Lent period of forty days observed in some churches) which falls in March/April corresponds to the *Bohag Bihu* of the Assamese.

The Christian church has no festival corresponding to the *Kati Bihu* of the Assamese, though the Jews had the *Sukkot* festival at this time. In a sense *Koti Bithu* is not a major festival like the other two in Assam. Baruah and Baveja hold "The Kati Bihu is the most insignificant of the three nature festivals in point of colour and ceremony."¹⁰ E. T. Dalton rightly comments "The

9. H. Wheeler Robinson, *Religious Ideas of the Old Testament*, London: Duckworth, 1952, p. 137.

10. Baruah and Baveja, *The Fairs and Festivals of Assam*, op. cit., p. 10.

Magh and Baisakh Bihus are the two national festivals of the Assamese". He shows that even these two were purely agricultural festivals at the beginning before being turned into religious Hindu festivals: "The observances connected with these festivals have nothing to do with Hinduism".¹¹ He cites the two great festivals for *Buddha-Pocham* and *Pochi*—observed by the Buddhists residing on the borders of Assam (Burmese, Shans and others) which correspond with *Magh* and *Bohag bihus*. Baveja supports this view, "The Bi-hu festival as a matter of fact, is an enactment of the primitive urge in man that seeks expression through rites and rituals, songs and dances, of a natural fact". He adds "The Aryans who subsequently came to this land introduced a religious and spiritual motif into the Bi-hu festivals, and associated them to certain items of worship".¹²

If it is clear that Jews and, to some extent, Christians, have adopted the agricultural seasons in their respective religious festivals, then the final question to consider is "How much of this vegetation symbolism is used by them?"

Jesus, the connecting link between Judaism and Christianity, used much vegetation symbolism in his teaching: the mustard plant (Mk. 4. 30-32), wheat (Jn. 12 : 24 ; Matt. 13 : 29), the fig tree (Matt. 24 : 32-33), the vine (Jn. 15 : 1ff) etc. In St. Paul's letters, in line with Rabbinic tradition, the olive tree is used prominently (Rom. 11. 17ff). This tree was regarded as the king of the trees (Jude 9 : 8)—its oil was a staple food product and used for the sacred temple lamps (Zech. 4 : 2-3). But wine is an important drink on their tables and symbolised gladness ("Wine gladdens life" Eccl. 10 : 9). In the Old Testament the people of Israel were referred to in the symbolism of the vine. (Jer. 2 : 21 ; Isa. 27 : 2-6 ; Ps. 80 : 8-13, etc.). The prophet Isaiah even sang a song for the people of Israel using the vine metaphor, though with negative emphasis, (Isa. 5:1ff). The only difference between these three is that the olive and the fig are trees while the vine is a creeper.

11. E. T. Dalton, *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*, Calcutta : 1872, pp. 80f.

12. Baruah and Baveja, *The Fairs and-Festivals of Assam. op. cit.*, pp. 11, 13.

The Temple of Solomon at Jerusalem, though built by Hiram of Tyre, used the symbolism of vines, pomegranates, etc. During the time of Christ, Herod's temple had the vine creeper decorating the entrance to the temple. Jewish and even Christian catacombs express such tree symbolism.¹³

Cecil Hargreaves interestingly highlights this tree creeper symbolism in his book, *Asian Christian Thinking*¹⁴. He talks of root and branch spirituality of depth and hope, the sweet potato vine and mission, the banyan tree and the church and her ministry, the sprouting of tree stumps and worship, etc. If we look to the Hindu background we find a number of examples of vegetation symbolism like *peepul* and *bel* connected with Siva worship, *tulasi* with Vaishnavism, banyan with Ganesh worship, and the lotus with goddesses like Laksmi and Swarati.

A good adaptation of banyan symbolism appears in an article by E. Sundar Raj titled 'The Banyan Tree', in the *Mitra Samachar*, the news bulletin of the Friends Missionary Prayer Band. He uses this symbolism in the context of the Church-mission relationship. "Every mission grows to produce churches and every church grows to produce missions. This is spiritual procreation."

Sundar refers to the first missionary of the Brethren church who, like a prophet planted a banyan sapling in his compound at Valsad, Gujarat, while opening the mission field there and stated "Let the church in south Gujarat grow like this tree."

Now the banyan graphically describes the mission-church life line. A banyan tree begins to grow from the trunk (the church), spreads out large horizontal shoots of branches (missions) which put down roots to the new ground which make new trunks (churches) which in turn shoot forth branches (missions) and so on and on.

Standing under a huge Indian banyan tree one

13. Jack Finegan, *Light from the Ancient East*, Vol. 11, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974, pp. 76ff.

14. Cecil Hargreaves, *Asian Christian Thinking*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1972.

cannot quite spot which is the original trunk and which is the original branch. (The classic example is the one in the botanical gardens, Calcutta, which is around two hundred years old and with over 230 trunks.)

This illustrates the ecumenical (universal) nature of the church and its mission, geographically and lineologically.¹⁵

The Banyan tree at Bodhgaya, the rallying place for all Buddhist leaders, may have some significance, in addition to the enlightenment which Buddha received under it, to the spread of Buddhism throughout South East Asia.

It may be asked if the two huge banyan trees planted by the missionaries at the Mission compound at Tura, Garo Hills, Meghalaya, carry any such significance; at least we know that the local Christians held the trees planted by the missionaries in esteem.

It may also be asked in the context of the Assamese *Bihu* festivals, if some such vegetation symbolism can be used effectively by the Church in this part of the country. As we have seen, the bamboo takes prominence at *Kati Bihu* — a small bamboo is planted in the field and a lamp set at its base, and in some areas a 'sky-lamp' *Akash-bati* is tied to its tip. At *Bohag Bihu* especially in lower Assam (Kamrup, etc.) two bamboos are planted, the taller of which is called the male *para* or 'pigeon'. Some see in this the influence of the setting up of *Indra-dwaja* the banner of the god Indra, and some the mock marriage, *Bah-Biyah* celebrated by the Muslims of N. Kamrup. The bamboo grows in these regions and in the whole of south East Asia and it is a multipurpose tree, which has an important place in the economy of the people. In fact the present Mizo National Front (MNF) in Mizoram started as a Famine Relief Committee. This particular famine was caused by the flowering of the bamboo which it is said occurs only once in fifty years (the rats feed on the flowers and multi-

15. E. Sundar Raj, "The Banyan Tree", *Mitra Somachar*, Oct-Dec., 1980, p. 2. One could also point out a secular use of this imagery: the United Nations symbol for the 'Year of the Aged', 1982, was a banyan tree, symbolising longevity, self-reliance and community confluence. (*CCA News*, July 15, 1982).

ply and destroy the crops, thus causing famine). A book on Mizoram by J. D. Baveja is aptly titled *The Land where the Bamboo Flowers*¹⁶

Here in Assam, in fact in the whole of North-East India, we need 'Bamboo theology': its height for the link between heaven and earth (the sky-lamp idea of *Kati Bihu*), its knots for the multi-phased ministry of the church; its clusters for the fellowship and growth of the churches. In an article titled "Where Asia Wears a Smile"¹⁷ written in connection with her visit to the Philippines, Chiara Lubick, the Founder of the Focolare Movement, gave a sketch of a bent bamboo and a fruit-bearing banana plant with this comment "You must always look at the bamboo: Bend yourselves with your brothers, but never break, to make yourselves one with them" then added some more comment on the banana plant. This was in relation to St. Paul's advice given in I Corinthians 9:19-23 by way of his testimony that he made himself one with all.

We have to recognise that the *Bihu* festivals are fertility festivals. The bamboo tree and the banyan tree along with the red *Riha* or breast cloth of the young girls, are used in the *Bihu* songs to symbolise the ripeness of young girls who have reached mature age¹⁸. We could very well use this symbolism for the maturity of the church and its expansion through its mission.

To some extent the symbolising of the silk-cotton tree which the Miris plant for the *Bihu* god symbolising long life, could be used to convey to them the idea of eternal life; the *siju* cactus symbolising the god of storms for the Kacharis can well be used to symbolise the justice of God; the banana plant (as well as the betel leaves and

16. J. D. Baveja, *The Land where the Bamboo Flowers*, Gauhati: Publication Board of Assam, 1970.

17. Chiara Lubick, "Where Asia Wears a Smile," *Focolare News*, Vol III, June 1982, No. 6. p. 6.

18. H. Baruah and Baveja *op. cit.*, pp. 18-19, "the straight and lucious bamboo with its bending curves, as used in the Bihu songs, is a symbol connoting young girls: it is the body of the beloved" (H. Baruah). He cites a *Bihu* song referring to the banyan symbolism which I quote below:

"The banyan tree attires itself with new leaves;

My darling shines in radiant beauty,

and she wraps a red riha round her body".

betel nut) used for auspicious occasions, can be used to symbolise joy, though Chiara Lubick sees in the banana a self-giving and sacrificial nature : "Like the banana plant, when it bears fruit, the trunk dies ; similarly we must love our 'cluster', ready to die for them."¹⁹

The supreme trees symbolism from the beginning of the church is the 'calvary tree'. In I Peter 2 : 24 we read 'He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree' (*epi tou Xylon*). The Greek word used here is *xylon* instead of the regular word for the cross, *staures*. *Xylon* refers both to 'gallows' and 'tree'. This goes back to Old Testament times when hanging was done using a strong branch of a tree (Deut. 21 : 21-23 in the LXX version uses the word *xylon* with such associations. See also Acts 5 : 30 ; 10 : 39 ; 13 : 29 for *xylon* used to signify the cross).

The same word is used in Revelation 22:2 to refer to the 'tree of life', (*xylon zoës*). It seems to show the regaining of the *xylon zoës* of Genesis 3 : 22 which man lost due to his sin and now through the redemptive work of the 'Cross-tree' we regain it. In this context I think John 3 : 14-15 should be understood. It is possible that tree-shaped crosses in churches point to this symbolism found in the New Testament²⁰.

This vegetation symbolism we are discussing has a deep cultural orientation. While I was at the Ecumenical Institute at Tantur, Jerusalem (Israel), a Japanese scholar read a paper in one of the colloquia on 'Christianity according to the Japanese novelist Shusaku Endo'. Endo wrote a historical novel called *Silence* (1966) about the Church in Japan, which compared the church to the young sapling planted by St. Francis Xavier in 1549. His theme was the question whether Christianity can ever take root in a culture such as that of Japan. He thinks it is dying in the mire of Japanese soil, which is not conducive to this new sapling brought from the west. I am reminded of the saying of D. T. Niles that the

19. Lubick, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

20. Hargreaves, *op. cit.*, pp. 168f.

church in Asia is like a 'potted plant', that is, unless it takes root in the soil of Asia it cannot thrive.

The majority of Christians in the plains of Assam are drawn from tea-labour settlers from Bihar, Orissa or Andhra. As more of these Christians become literate, a tea shrub theology should develop from their experience of picking 'two leaves and a bud'. I have come across cases where in some of the village churches a tea decoction *pika cha* was used for wine in the communion service. So it would not be very difficult to replace vine symbolism of Jewish background with tea symbolism in North East India. If tea plants form a major element of their lives why not use this cultural rootage for the expression of Christian faith ?

I wish to caution here that this is not a 'throw back to animism—spirits living in the rocks, trees or rivers and so needing to be venerated or propitiated. This would be going back beyond Jewish national religious development of monotheism to their nomadic state of what Henry Smith calls "A vague polydemonism"²¹ that is, the tree itself has supernatural power or the deity is present in that particular tree (Eg. the oak of Mamre or the tamarisk planted by Abraham or the oak of Shechem of Jacob, Gen. 13 : 18 ; 18 : 1-4 ; 14 : 13 ; 21 : 33 ; 35 : 4 ; Jos. 24 : 26 ; the oak of Gideon, the oak of the Diviners of Moreh, or Deborah's oak etc.—Judg. 6 : 11, 19 ; 9 : 37 ; Gen. 12 : 6, Deut. 11 : 30 ; Gen. 35 : 8, etc., might have some relation to such a conception).

In simple terms it is letting the potted plant be taken out and get deeply rooted in the cultural milieu of a particular people. In that condition alone the sapling of the Gospel thrives well. Vegetation symbolism is one aspect of such expression.

In passing I would draw attention to the games played during *Bohag Bihu* time with sea shells and eggs, the former meant to cause rain and the latter symbolising reproduction. As this spring-time *Bihu* corresponds with the Lent season culminating in the triumph of Easter

21. Henry P. Smith, *The Religion of Israel*, New York : Charles Scribners, 1914, pp. 16ff.

and we already have Easter egg symbolism for the Resurrection in the West, why not contextualise it to the region of Assam, making the necessary adjustments and theological interpretations ?

I think the time has come for the church in Assam to adapt the rich heritage of vegetation symbolism found in Assamese agricultural festivals like the *Bihus*.