

Agriculture-Based Festivals and Rituals of the Mech Kachari Tribe of Assam

Dr. Sabnam Hazarika

Assistant Professor, Lanka Mahavidyalaya

Abstract: *This paper examines the agricultural festivals and rituals of the Mech Kachari community of Assam and highlights their role in preserving cultural identity, social values, and traditional farming practices. The study draws on analytical and descriptive methods to document major festivals such as Bohag, Kati, and Magh Bihu, along with rituals including Aai Puja, Bat Bheta Puja, Mituk Diya Puja, and Barmani Puja. These celebrations reflect the close relationship between agriculture, nature, ancestral worship, and community life. The paper also explains the religious beliefs, folk traditions, and symbolic practices that guide agricultural activities throughout the year. While many customs continue to be observed, changes influenced by education, social transformation, and religious developments have reduced the practice of certain traditional rituals. Even so, these festivals remain an important part of the cultural heritage of the Mech Kacharis and continue to strengthen their identity within the wider cultural landscape of Assam.*

Keywords: Mech Kachari, Agricultural Festivals, Traditional Rituals, Indigenous Culture, Assam

1. Introduction

Assam is a state rich in diverse castes, tribes, languages, and cultures. The colourful art and culture of various communities in Assam have made its cultural background diverse. Each tribe possesses distinct features in their traditions, material culture, and lifestyle. Because of these unique characteristics, each tribe has established its own identity among others. One of the tribes living in Assam through their own art, culture, and traditions is the Mech Kachari. Agriculture is extremely important in the art and culture of the Mech Kacharis, who are known as an ancient tribe and indigenous people (indigenes) of Assam. As an agricultural community, the Mech Kacharis have traditionally celebrated various agriculture-centered festivals and rituals at different times of the year. Through these agriculture-based festivals and rituals, various aspects of the social and cultural life of the tribe are reflected. Folk beliefs and traditions associated with tilling the land, planting and producing crops, and enhancing fertility for agricultural produce have made such agricultural festivals and rituals significant in Mech Kachari society. This discussion paper will examine the agriculture-based festivals and rituals of the Mech Kachari people.

2. Objectives of the Study

The underlying objectives of this discussion on the agricultural festivals and rituals of the Mech Kacharis are as follows:

- To analyze and highlight various aspects of the agricultural festivals and rituals of the Mech Kachari community
- To determine the uniqueness of these agricultural festivals,
- To evaluate the contribution of these festivals to Assamese culture

3. Importance of the Study

Recently, the new sociocultural environment has influenced the festivals and rituals of various tribes. In this context, this study sheds light on the traditions and changes in the

agricultural festivals and rituals of the Mech Kacharis to clarify their contemporary form.

4. Methodology and Scope of the Study

- In preparing this research paper, an analytical/survey method was primarily applied, with a descriptive method adopted where necessary.
- The scope of this study covers rituals directly and indirectly associated with agriculture.

1) Brief Introduction to the Mech Kacharis

From an anthropological perspective, the Mech Kacharis belong to the Mongoloid ethnic group. The language of the Mech Kacharis falls under the Bodo branch of the Assam-Burmese sub-branch of the Tibeto-Burman family of Sino-Tibetan languages. Currently, the Mech Kacharis mainly reside in districts such as Goalpara, Karbi Anglong, Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Sivasagar, and Golaghat in Assam.

According to folklore, many scholars suggest that because the Mech people lived along the banks of the Mechi River in the Terai region, they came to be known as 'Mech' after the river. Another group of scholars believes the word 'Mech' derives from the Sanskrit word 'Mlechchha'. The Aryans used the term 'Mlechchha' to refer to non-Aryan people. It is certain that the Mech are an ancient non-Aryan tribe residing in Assam since before the Aryans.

As a non-Aryan tribe, their primary deity is Shiva. They worship Shiva as *Bathu Bura* or *Sri (Ciri) Bura* and Parvati as *Bathu Buri* or *Sri (Ciri) Buri*, considering them their primal parents. They regard the *Siju* plant (Euphorbia) as *Burhadeu* or *Bathu*. Believing in the cycles of nature, the Mech people—alongside Bathu-Bathuni—worship natural powers such as the Sun, Moon, Earth, and Varuna; Saturn (Sani) as an evil spirit; and the Tiger as the god of the forest.

The Mech Kacharis primarily have three lineages: *Bhauma*, *Bana*, and *Ghatotkacha*. However, based on ritual worship, there are seven *Maharis* (clans).

- 1) **Swargiary:** Those who worship the heaven.

Volume 15 Issue 7, July 2026

Fully Refereed | Open Access | Double Blind Peer Reviewed Journal

www.ijsr.net

- 2) **Basumatary:** Those who worship the Earth.
- 3) **Daimary:** Those who worship water.
- 4) **Baghlary:** Those who worship tigers.
- 5) **Khakolary:** Those who worship trees and plants.
- 6) **Hajowary:** Those who worship stones/mountains.
- 7) **Champachary:** Those who go door-to-door to perform rituals.

At present, due to the influence of Hinduism and Bhagavati Vaishnavism, the strict rules of these clans have faded, although the rituals remain intact.

Agriculture-based Festivals of the Mech Kacharis

Agricultural festivals and rituals hold a distinct place in the social life of the Mech Kacharis, who survive through agricultural traditions. From the commencement of farming to its conclusion, the Mech people observe several seasonal festivals and rituals. These are discussed below.

2) Bihu

Bihu, the primary agricultural festival of Assam, has been celebrated by the Mech Kacharis since ancient times. They observe Bohag, Kati, and Magh Bihu through their own distinct characteristics and social customs.

Bohag Bihu: They begin preparing for the spring festival, *Rongali Bihu*, from the month of *Chaitra (Chot)*. As the month begins, young men and women gather under trees at night to practice Bihu performance. Villagers repair old houses in advance, weave new tethering ropes (*pogha*) for cattle, and prepare various delicacies, traditional snacks, and *Jou* (rice beer). There is a custom among the Mech people to send an advance gift of boiled corn to relatives' homes for Bihu.

They officially observe Bihu starting from the *Dumahi* (eve) of the month of *Chot*. On that day, they worship the cow, which is the mount of their revered deity *Bathu* (Shiva). Early on Bihu morning, they wash the cattle in the river with black gram and turmeric. They make a three-pronged ring resembling Shiva's trident (*trishul*) and hurl pieces of bottle gourd, brinjal, *thekera* (garcinia), bitter gourd, etc., at the cattle while offering blessings for their long life. In the evening, they smudge the cowshed with smoke to ward off insects and tie the cattle with new ropes.

The Mech people celebrate the first day of Bohag as *Manuh Bihu* (Human Bihu). On that day, everyone bathes and seeks blessings from parents and elders. This tradition of youngsters showing respect and elders giving blessings is referred to as '**Biyohuwa Bihuwa**' Bihu by the Mech Kacharis. During Bohag Bihu, there is a tradition of gifting a cloth called '*Cherche*' to elders or loved ones. Snacks, *Jou*, and other offerings are consumed in conjunction with the festival.

In the evening, lamps are lit at public prayer halls (*Than-ghor* or *Namghar*), and Bihu singing begins. Young men and women perform *Husori* from house to house, carrying drums (*dhol*), horn-pipes (*pepa*), *jam*, cymbals (*taal*, *kartal*), flutes (*sifung*), and *thorka*. Formerly, Mech Kachari people used a type of drum made of cane called *Harimala* during Bihu, though its usage has largely declined today. At the conclusion of the performance, the householder offers betel nut, *Gamosa*,

rice, and money to the performers, who in turn offer blessings for the household's prosperity. The Mech Kacharis refer to this Husori Bihu as *Magan Bihu* or *Bhiksha Bihu*.

On the seventh day, a tradition continues where the Mech people gather at the house of a *Hudonggara* or on a riverbank to sing Bihu songs, make merry, share a community feast, and bid farewell to Bihu. A stanza from a popular traditional Bihu song among the Mech Kacharis goes:

*Where has the master of this house gone? A pair of birds is plowing under the pretext of giving alms, and he peers through the fence.
Huroi hurui huroi rangali...*

Kati and Magh Bihu: The Mech Kacharis also celebrate Kati and Magh Bihu with great enthusiasm. During Kati Bihu, they light lamps at the base of the Tulsi plant, near the entrance gate, inside granaries, cowsheds, and paddy fields to welcome the Goddess of Wealth, Lakhimi. Similarly, Magh Bihu is celebrated in a manner similar to general Assamese tradition. However, it is notable that before celebrating any of the three Bihu festivals, the Mech people follow the ritual of offering food/ prayers to their ancestors, known as '**Mituk**'.

3) Aai Puja

Every year, right before starting the agricultural season—during the first week of the month of *Jeth* on a Saturday and Tuesday—the Mech Kacharis organize the **Aai Puja**. Because it is held during the spring season, it is also known in some areas as the *Basanta Sabah*.

Aai Puja is an agricultural festival. This is because, just prior to initiating farming activities, this ritual is performed to satisfy the nine forms of the Goddess (*Aai*) so that villagers and livestock (cattle and buffaloes) are protected from various diseases, epidemics, and misfortunes that arise in spring. Even if individuals host Aai Puja privately, they ultimately gather publicly to conduct *Aai Bhagawati Puja*.

The custom of fetching water (*pani Tola*) begins seven days before the puja. Under the guidance of a *Dheuchi*, a lead singer (*Bor-namati*), an assistant singer (*Pali-namati*), and three unmarried young girls, wear pure white attire. Accompanied by women (*Gopinis*) and drummers/cymbalists, they fetch water from seven river ghats and store it in pots for the day. On the day of worship, this collected water is used as holy/purifying water (*Santibani*).

For Aai Puja, the Mech people construct a boat (*bhel*) using banana plant trunks. This boat is beautifully decorated with oars, white flowers, banana blossoms, white cloth, and vermilion dots and is placed to the east of the altar. Women sing *Aainam* (devotional songs to the Goddess) to appease Goddess Bhagawati. *Deodhas* (shamanic dancers) dance to the rhythm of the drums. Alongside this, the *Dheuchi* offers goats, ducks, pigeons, etc., brought for sacrifice in front of the altar. During the sacrifice, a female shaman (*Deodhani*) drinks the sacrificial blood in the name of Mother Bhagawati and dances. All attendees kneel and pray for forgiveness for their misdeeds.

After all the rituals are concluded, two men carry the raft (*bhel*) on their shoulders and circle the altar seven times. After the community pays respect with flowers and leaves, the raft is set afloat in the river amidst devotional singing and drumming.

4) Bat Bheta Puja

Another important ritual among the Mech Kacharis is **Bat Bheta Puja**, which is indirectly related to agriculture. It is performed on the last Saturday or Tuesday of the month of *Chot*, right before entering the new year (the month of *Bohag*).

The altar was arranged facing south. This ritual is conducted to block (*bheta*) any obstacles, ill-fates, or misfortunes from entering the village or fields in the upcoming year. Because they block the path (*ali/bat*) to conduct the worship, it is called *Bat Bheta Puja*.

For this ritual, a bamboo pole is shaved in reverse like a spear, fixed with two posts on either side, and a crossbeam on top, and marked with vermilion dots. Two banana blossoms and the worn-out iron blade of an old plow are planted on the bamboo. Offerings are placed on fresh banana leaves on both sides. As offerings, two bottles of *Jou* (rice beer) and two red roosters are dedicated. The sacrificed rooster meat is roasted and eaten as *prasada* at the venue.

Certain folk beliefs are associated with Bat Bheta Puja. Before the sacrifice, the rooster is offered rice grains and dough. If the bird eats the grains, it is believed that no danger will befall the village. Conversely, if it refuses to eat, it is believed that trouble lies ahead. However, nowadays, Bat Bheta Puja is observed only in specific regions or localities.

5) Mituk Diya Puja

A significant ritual among the Mech Kacharis is the **Mituk Diya Puja**. *Mituk Diya* means giving offerings to the deceased/ancestors (*Mrtak*); *Mituk* is the dialectal pronunciation.

Generally, the head of the household performs this ritual, although in their absence, the next in line may perform it. The location for *Mituk Diya* is always fixed: near the right side of the hearth (*udhan*) in the kitchen, facing east, a small area of earth is raised, plastered, and cleaned. Two woven mats (*dhara*) are kept beside this mound. When offering *Mituk*, these two mats are spread over the mound. If one of the parents is still alive, only one mat is used. These mats are not used for any other purpose.

Women do not perform the *Mituk* ritual; it is exclusively performed by men. However, women light lamps and offer prayers at the *Mituk* site morning and evening before starting the hearth fire.

The site is thoroughly cleaned during the ritual. The dedicated mats are spread out, and a new *gamosa* is laid on top (and hung nearby after the ritual). They light lamps and incense sticks in front of the mats and offer a pair of betel nuts and leaves to the spirits. Four banana leaves were laid out. A brass bowl is placed on the leaf to the far right, and on another leaf (leaving one blank), another bowl is placed. *Jou* prepared in

advance in the name of the deceased is poured into these bowls. The remaining two banana leaves receive cooked dishes made of fish and meat.

The exact offerings for *Mituk Diya* vary depending on the occasion. For example, during Bihu, snacks, delicacies, and pork are offered. In other events, there are no rigid rules, and families follow their traditional customs or instructions left by ancestors prior to their passing.

All acts of *Mituk Diya Puja* are performed using the **left hand** (or the right hand in reverse). After arranging the items, all family members bow down to pay respect. Subsequently, *Jou* is offered to the parents using the left hand or in reverse using the right hand, pouring it onto the ground. The remaining cooked items are shared and eaten by the family members.

Although *Mituk Diya Puja* is not directly an agricultural festival, it precedes every agricultural festival celebrated in their society. The Mech offer *Mituk* during all three Bihu festivals. Only after performing *Mituk* do they visit others' homes, eat elsewhere, or participate in festivities. During planting season, when sowing the first saplings, people are served rice alongside *Mituk Jou*. Similarly, before tasting new rice, *Mituk* is offered before transplanting paddy seedlings. When harvesting crops and partaking in new rice (*Na-Khowa*), the Mech offer food to *Mituk* first before eating. If the *Na-Khowa* feast cannot be held within the month of *Aghun*, they do not hold a feast later, but simply offer it to *Mituk* before consuming the new harvest.

The Mech also hold an annual festival to consume the new season's grain (*Na-Purushiya Chaul Khowa*). The head of the house proceeds with other tasks only after offering *Mituk Puja* first. Thus, while *Mituk Diya* is not directly an agricultural festival, it is intricately linked with every agricultural celebration of the Mech people.

6) Barmani Puja

The Mech Kacharis also refer to **Barmani Puja** as the *Kechaikhati Puja*. It is performed on the eve of the new harvest festival (*Na-Khowa*), usually in the month of *Aghun*.

The Mech hold this worship at a fixed site or beneath a specific tree, as described below. Three portions of offerings (*prasada*) are presented on fresh banana leaves in the names of *Barmani*, *Bishahari* and *Palipahari*. Mustard oil lamps and betel nut bundles are offered on the first two leaves of the tree. A monetary contribution of five rupees in the name of the Guru and one rupee twenty-five paise for the lamp is offered in this bundle.

Vermilion is essential for the Barmani Puja. Ducks, chickens, goats, and other animals brought for sacrifice are marked with vermilion dots prior to slaughter. Additionally, vermilion is applied to the sacrificial machete (*da*). The person performing *puja* bathes and carries out the ritual wearing wet clothes. Prayers are offered for the well-being of households, families, and agricultural endeavors.

5. Other Practices

In addition to these major events, the Mech Kacharis observe several minor rituals related to farming. Like other ethnic communities, they organize "Frog Weddings" (*Bhekuli Biya*) during droughts to appease the Rain God Varuna, holding the belief that when frogs croak, rain arrives.

To seek community assistance in agricultural activities, they follow the custom of calling a **Hauri**. For tasks such as plowing, transplanting seedlings, and harvesting paddy, villagers are invited as *Hauri* and entertained with food and drinks.

6. Conclusion

From the discussion on the agriculture-based festivals and rituals of the Mech Kacharis, it can be concluded that while they celebrate the main Bihu festivals similarly to other communities in Assam, they also retain several unique rituals. It is worth noting that in modern times, some customs of Mech Kachari agricultural rituals have begun to disappear, particularly sacrificial practices. Factors such as Mahapurushiya Vaishnavism and modern education have contributed to these changes. Nevertheless, these agricultural festivals and rituals continue to accord the Mech Kachari community a distinct cultural identity.

References

- [1] *Mech Janagosthir Tathya Samkalan*, Mech Kachari Development Council, p. 124
- [2] Ibid, p. 118
- [3] Pramod Mech, *Mech Kachari: Kichu Aitihāsik Alochana*, p. 46

Bibliography

- [4] Gait, Sir Edward: *A History of Assam*, Lawyer's Book Stall, Guwahati, 2013
- [5] Barua, Gunabhiram: *Assam Buranji*, Assam Publication Board, Dibrugarh, 2013
- [6] Mech, Nitul: *Salastambha (Souvenir)*, 2nd Mech Kachari Cultural Festival, Golaghat, 2012
- [7] Mech, Pramod: *Mech Kachari: Kichu Aitihāsik Alochana*, Amal Publication, Duliajan, 2013
- [8] Mech, Bipul: *Mech Janagosthir Tathya Samkalan*, Mech Kachari Development Council, 2014
- [9] Rajkumar, Sarbananda: *Itihase Sowara Chhashota Basar*, Banalata, Dibrugarh, 2013

Informants

Name	Location	Age	Occupation / Designation
Kailash Mech	Jaipur Faltutula Village	45	Farmer
Mina Mech	Jaipur Faltutula Village	40	Anganwadi Worker
Dipali Mech	Jaipur Faltutula Village	35	Member, Mech Kachari Development Council