

CHAPTER - II

Political, Socio-Economic and Religious Condition of Assam upto 18th Century

Political, socio-economic condition and religion of a particular region played an important role in the growth and development of a particular culture in a particular time period. All these bring to us to reconstruct and trace the history of a particular region. Assam history which had been divided into three different periods viz. ancient, medieval and modern is a vast period of discussion. The present study attempted to highlight the political, socio-economic and religious condition of Assam upto 18th century CE.

Political Condition

The earliest ruler of ancient Assam was Mahiranga *Danava*. His successors were Hatakasura, Sambasura, Ratnasura and Ghatakasura. The early kings of Assam belonged to non-Aryan tribes such as Asuras and Danavas.¹ Ghatakasura was supplanted by a prince from Videha named Naraka.² Naraka is mentioned both in the the Epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. *Harivamsa* and the *Kālikā Purāna* have also described the story of Naraka. “He was born to Bhumi (Mother Earth) by Visnu and after giving birth the child was deposited on the sacrificial ground of king Janaka, its head being placed on the skull of a dead man. Janaka brought up the child till his sixteen years of age. Mother Earth impersonated herself as a nurse named Katyayani and looked to the child’s upbringing. Naraka excelled in all the arts which frightened Janaka and the later had misapprehension that this child would one day wrest his kingdom from his sons and usurp the throne. One day Katyayani overheard certain confidential discussions between Janaka and his queen Sumati relating to the future of Naraka. Katyayani determined to remove Naraka from the court at the earliest moment. Katyayani pretended to go out on a pilgrimage to the Ganges and asked Naraka to escort her. Naraka agreed subject to his father Janaka’s permission. Katyayani replied that Janaka was not his father. If Naraka only accompanied her to the river banks, he would meet his real father; Janaka was only his foster-father and would not allow him any share in his kingdom. Both mother and son slipped out of Janaka’s court and came to the bank of the Ganges, Naraka learn the story of his birth

and came to recognize his putative father. They came by water to Prāgjyotisa accompanied by Visnu. Naraka conquered the country from the Kiratas and was installed as king by Visnu. At first Naraka was pious and ruled his country righteously. Later on he became friendly with Bana, king of Sonitpura, and grew irreligious and presumptuous. Possessed by demoniac ideas (*asuram bhavamasadya*) he harassed all. At last he was killed by Visnu in the person of Krsna and his son Bhagadatta was placed on the throne of Prāgjyotisa.”³

B.K. Kakati, places Naraka of Mithila somewhere between 200 CE and 500 CE.⁴ There is some debate regarding the existence of Naraka. The time at which Naraka of Prāgjyotisa belonged can not be said certainly. However according to some scholars there were more than one Naraka flourishing at different times. There is certain reason behind this view point of the scholars. In *Ramayana*⁵ reference is found about one Naraka of Prāgjyotisa who was a contemporary of Ramachandra. According to *Brahamanda Purana*,⁶ another Naraka was killed by Parasurama. *Artharvaveda*⁷ refers to other Naraka who ruled over the same territory. Thus such conflicting account proved the existence of more than one Naraka and different from the one Naraka (father of Bhagadatta) who was slain by Srikrishna. According to N. N. Vasu,⁸ “It seems very likely that all the princes of this place (Prāgjyotisa), from the Treta age down to the time of Bhagadatta, were known by the general designation of Naraka.” This view has been accepted by P.C. Choudhury⁹ and says that “Naraka was a dynastic title.” This view is acceptable as according to literature more than one Naraka flourished and description is made about the same territory. So, it can be said that Naraka was a dynastic title even down to the time of Bhagadatta.

Kālikā Purāna mentions that Bhagadatta was the son of Naraka. Same evidence is found in the Copper Plate inscriptions also. However *Harsacharita* describes Bhagadatta as being in the *anvaya* (line of succession) of Naraka. The name Bhagadatta is frequently mentioned in the *Mahabharata* as a great warrior. He was a “warrior king” and “the mighty king of the *mlecchas*”¹⁰ and is described as “the best wielder of the elephant-goat”, among the kings assembled on the *Kaurava* side in the Great *Mahabharata* war, and as “skilful with the chariot.”¹¹ He got dignified title as “*Śiva's* friend” and esteemed as being not inferior to Sakra in battle.”¹² He is also specially named “the friend of Pandu,¹³ and is referred to in terms of respect and kindness by Krsna when addressing Yudhisthira: “Bhagadatta is thy father’s aged

friend; he was noted for his deference to thy father in word and deed, and he is mentally bound by affection and devoted to thee like a father.”¹⁴ Bhagadatta was killed in the *Mahabharata* war and was succeeded by his son Vajradatta (according to some inscriptions, Vajradatta is called his brother.)¹⁵ The geneology of the rulers after Vajradatta is conflicting. According to one account,¹⁶ “Bhagadatta was succeeded by Dharmapala, Kamapala and others extending for 19 generations with 24 or 25 kings, mentioned by the initial letters of their names. The account given in another manuscript states that Bhagadatta was followed by Dharmapala and Candrapala, whose son was Arimatta who had three daughters, Dharmavati, Avanti and Jayanti. This source has rather mixed up rulers of different families; for Arimatta, as we shall show, belonged to a different family. Epigraphs give a list of rulers of the Pala line after the family of Salasthambha. The Nidhanpur Grant of Bhaskaravarman (7th century CE) records that a period of three thousand years elapsed between the death of Vajradatta and the succession of Pusyavarman (4th century CE), the founder of the new line.”¹⁷ Hiuen Tsiang, the Chinese pilgrim who visited Kāmarūpa in the seventh century, also records that there were a thousand generations between Visnu, the progenitor of Naraka and the birth of Bhaskaravarman, the pilgrim’s patron king.¹⁸

The actual political history of ancient Assam began from the mid 4th century CE and the famous Varman dynasty was the first ruling dynasty of Kāmarūpa. Then the Salasthambha, Pala and Khen rulers ruled upto the advent of the Tai-Shan group which is popularly known as the Ahoms. They came and settled in Assam and established their kingdom and ruled for about six hundred years.

Varman Dyansty

The earliest royal family from which epigraphs have come down to us is the Varman family. The Varmans came to power in ancient Assam from the middle of the fourth century CE. This family is also called the *Bhauma*¹⁹ or the Naraka family and also the *Avanikula* in a more literary way. The history of the Varman dynasty is known from the account of Hien-Tsang as well as from the Nidhanpur Grant,²⁰ the Doobi Copperplate Grant²¹ and the Nalanda Clay Seals²² of Bhaskaravarman. Pushyavarman the founder of this dynasty claimed himself to have been offspring of Naraka-Bhagadatta. Bhaskaravarman, a king of the Varman dynasty recorded his ancestral genealogy in his Nidhanpur Copperplate Inscription where he clearly stated that after

Naraka the king ascended to the throne was Bhagadatta who was followed by Vajradatta after whom a long line of illustrious king ruled the country for three thousand years and finally was succeeded by Pushyavarman. The Nagajari-Khanikargaon Fragmentary Stone Inscription²¹ also refers to Vasundharavarman, a king of the 5th century ancient Assam.

In the Nalanda Clay Seal²⁴ of Bhaskaravarman the ancestral pedigree was recorded from Ganapativarman who mentioned as Ganendravarman in the Doobi Copperplates. The Nidhanpur Grant²⁵ contains the names of thirteen kings and ten queens belonging to Pusyavarman's family. Pusyavarman became king after about three thousand years from the death of Vajradatta. But in the inscriptions of Bhaskaravarman no date or year was mentioned and as such Pushyavarman, the first king of the Varman dynasty has become a problem to ascertain. Bhaskaravarma, the last king of this dynasty was accepted as a contemporary of Harshavardhana, the famous king of Northern India. P.N. Bhattacharya has observed that by reckoning 25 years of reign for each of the king of the Varman dynasty, the reign of Pushyavarman is put to be in the mid of the fourth century CE.²⁶ The most important and powerful ruler of Varman dynasty was Bhaskaravarman. It was during his reign that the famous Chinese pilgrim Hien-Tsang visited Kāmarūpa. It was Bhaskaravarman who has friendly relation with Harshavardhana, the most powerful king of Northern India of that period. After Bhaskaravarman the Varman dynasty came to an end. Hien-Tsang's account, Bana's *Harshacharita*, Bhaskaravarman's Doobi and Nidhanpur Grant and Nalanda Clay seals provided evidences of this period.

Salasthambha Dynasty

Next ruling dynasty of Kāmarūpa was the Salasthambha dynasty. No coming evidence could be found as to who became the king after the death of Bhaskaravarman. According to the Bargaon Copperplate Grant²⁷ of Ratnapala, Salasthambha, the king of the Mlecchas has brought about the end of the *Bhauma-Naraka* dynasty and twenty kings of this dynasty ruled over the kingdom. The reasons how this dynasty became Mleccha was stated in the Hayunthal Copperplates²⁸ of Harjaravarman but unfortunately the first plate of it was found missing and nothing could be known. The grant of Harjaravarman's son Vanamalavarman speak of the descent of the family from Naraka and his son in the style of the records of

Bhaskaravarman. P.C. Choudhury has opined that the ancestors of the Salasthambha dynasty were of Non-Aryan habits or being of Alpine origin or of leaning towards Buddhism or because of all these they could be called Mleccha.²⁹ According to K.L.Barua, Salasthambha was the governor of the Mleccha kingdom and after the death of Bhaskaravarman he caused revolt and declared himself the king. He was perhaps the descendant of the dynasty of Bhagadatta because generally the descendants of the kings were appointed governors.³⁰ Salasthambha is called Lord of the Mlecchas in the Bargaon Grant of Ratnapala which makes it clear that he did not belong to the *Bhauma*-Naraka family of Pusyavarman and therefore apparently an aboriginal chief.³¹ During the early medieval period, the Hinduised ruling families generally claimed descent from a respectable ancestry. B.K.Barua placed Salasthambha in the latter part of the 7th century CE, that is, just after Bhaskaravarman.

There are few records of this family in which some other names appear. An old plate of a grant of Harjjara mentions seven princes, namely, Vijaya, Palaka, Kumara, Vajradeva, Harsavarman, Balavarman and Harjjaradeva.³² The Tezpur Grant of Vanamala, mentions about Pralambha. The same grant also mentions Salasthambha and Harjjara as the ruler of this dynasty. The Nowgong Grant of Balavarman refers to king Jayamala. From these references, the following lists of kings of the Salastambha family have drawn:

Name	Approximate Date
Salasthambha ³³	Middle of the 7 th century C E
Vijaya (or Vighrastambha) ³⁴	Later part of the 7 th century C E
Palaka ³⁵	Later part of the 7 th century C E
Kumara ³⁶	8 th century C E
Vajradatta ³⁷	8 th century C E
Harsa (Sri Harisa) ³⁸	8 th century C E
Balavarman ³⁹	8 th century C E
Cakra and Arathi	Did not reign
Pralambha ⁴⁰	9 th century C E

Harjjara ⁴¹	9 th century C E
Vanamala	9 th century C E
Jayamala (Viravahu) ⁴²	9 th century C E
Balavarman	10 th century C E
Tyagasimha ⁴³	

The dates of some of these kings are known either from their own records or from other sources. Sri Harsha has been identified by Kielhorn with Gaudodradi-Kalinga-Kosalapati Sri Harsadeva of the Pasupati inscription of the Nepal Licchavi king Jayadeva (153 H E-759 CE). Harsadeva gave his daughter Rajyamati in marriage to the Nepal king, and she is also referred to in the epigraph as Bhagadattaraja-Kulaja.⁴⁴ Krishnaswami Ayyengar⁴⁵ and following him K.L. Barua⁴⁶ surmise that Harsaveda of the inscription and the lord of Gauda, Odra, Kalinga and Kosala was the same Gauda ruler who was overthrown by Yasovarman and whose defeat was the occasion for the glorification in the Gaudavaho. N.N. Dasgupta considers that Sri Harsa referred to in the copperplate inscription of the Rastrakuta king Dantidurga (753 CE) and who was defeated by the Kanata King Kirtivarma was none but Sri Harsa of Kāmarūpa.

Harjjara was succeeded by Vanamala, who granted land to a Brahman near Chandrapuri, on the west of Trisrota river (Tista). The Tezpur grant refers to his territory as extending as far as the seashore.⁴⁷ Vanamala abdicated his throne in favour of his son, Jayamala. The Prāᅡgyotisa king referred to in the Bhagalpur inscription of Narayana, and with whom Jayapala, the brother and commander of Devapala, the Pala king of Bengal, had friendly relations, is generally identified with Jayamala.⁴⁸ Jayamala abdicated the throne in favour of his son Balavarman III.⁴⁹ Balavarman was the last important ruler of the Salasthambha dynasty.⁵⁰ Details of his immediate successors are not known to history. It is known from the Bargaon Grant of Ratnapala that twenty one kings from Salasthambha dynasty reigned and the last ruler was Tyagsimha who died issueless and a vacuum set in after the death of Tyagsimha. Such situation often resulted in anarchy and civil wars and it was probably this concern that led to the subjects choosing Brahmapala as the next king. This event has been described in the Bargaon Copperplate Grant (V.10) of his son and successor Ratnapala.⁵¹

Pala Dynasty

The origin of the founder of the Pala line is given in the grants of the family, indicating that Brahmapala was of the same *Bhauma* dynasty, to which Pusyavarman and Salasthambha belonged. This is evident from the Bargaon Grant of Ratnapala, which says that when Tyagasimha, the twenty first king of Salasthambha family, departed from this world without leaving any of his race to succeed him, “the subjects thinking it well that a Bhauma (i.e., Naraka's race) should be appointed as their lord, chose Brahmapala, a kinsman of the deceased ruler, on account of his fitness to undertake the government of the country.”⁵² Thus Brahmapala was elected by his people, an incident which finds a parallel in the history of Bengal.⁵³

From the records of Ratnapala, son of Brahmapala, it appears that he reigned from about 1000 CE. It is to be noted that in the records of his son, Brahmapala is only called *Maharajadhiraja*⁵⁴, while Ratnapala has the full imperial title *Paramesvara Paramabhattacharaka Maharajadhiraja*.⁵⁵ Ratnapala had a long reign is evident from his Sualkuchi grant,⁵⁶ which was made in his 26th year. He removed his capital to *Durjaya*, the impregnable one, which “baffled and struck terror” into the heart of many kings. Bargaon inscription, while emphasizing the excellence of the fortification of the capital city Durjaya, states that its fortifications “were fit to cause discomfiture to the master of the Deccan country.” Ratnapala had a son named Purandapala, who married Durlabha, and through her had a son named Indrapala. It appears from the plates of Dharmapala, a king of the same line that Purandapala did not rule and died as Yuvaraja. Ratnapala was accordingly succeeded by his grandson Indrapala.⁵⁷

Two charters of Indrapala, the Gauhati⁵⁸ and Guakuchi Grants⁵⁹ recorded respectively in the 8th and 21st year of his reign. Though not dated, Hoernle refers the Gauhati Grant “with some probability” to the middle of the 11th century CE.⁶⁰

Indrapala was succeeded by his son Gopala. Gopala's son Harsapala was a weak ruler. Gopala and his son Harsapala probably ruled towards the second part of the 11th century CE. There are also, three charters of Dharmapala, who was the son and successor of Harsapala. Of these three Khonamukhi and Subhanakarapataka grants were issued respectively in the first and third year of his reign. Dharmapala in his inscriptions refers to his great-grandfather, Indrapala, his grandfather Gopala, and to his father Harsapala.

Another Kāmarūpa king apparently of the Brahmapala family was Jayapaladeva, mentioned in the Silimpur stone inscription of the *Brahmana Prahasa*.⁶¹ He has been taken as the successor of Dharmapala. The Inscription mentioned that *Brahmana Prahasa* did not accept the gift of 900 gold coins and grant of a land in *Pundravardhana* from the Kāmarūpa king Jayapala.⁶² A new chronology in the light of the Gachtal Copperplate Inscription and the Silimpur Stone Slab Inscription is suggested by D.C. Sircar as follows.⁶³

Brahmapala ⁶⁴	900 – 920 C E
Ratnapala ⁶⁵	920 – 960 C E
Purandapala ⁶⁶	did not reign as king
Indrapala ⁶⁷	960 -990 C E
Gopala ⁶⁸	990 – 1015 C E
Harsapala	1015 – 1035 C E
Dharmapala	1035 – 1060 C E
Jayapala	1075 – 1100 C E

Later kings of Kāmarūpa

The Kamauli Copperplates of Vaidyadeva as well as Sandhyakarnandin's *Ramacarita* help us to know about the expedition of Ramapala, a king of Gauda against Kāmarūpa. The defeated Kāmarūpa king was Jayapala who flourished during the second quarter of the 12th century CE.⁶⁹ After the conquest of Kāmarūpa, Ramapala seems to have set up on the throne of Kāmarūpa a vassal named Tingyadeva. This is known from the same Kamauli Grant of Vaidyadeva, which on paleographic evidences has been placed by Venis about 1142 CE.⁷⁰ After this Kumarapala became the king of Gauda. Tingyadeva rebelled but Kumarapala put down the revolt of Tingyadeva. Kumarapala appointed his own minister Viadyadeva as a ruler in Tingyadeva's place. Vaidyadeva marched with his younger brother Buddhadeva against Tingyadeva and after defeating and killing him, Vaidyadeva occupied the throne. The Kamauli Grant was issued from Hamsakonci⁷¹ and it is recorded that two

villages namely Santipataka and Mandara were given as gift. These two villages were situated in the *visaya* of Bada in the *mandala* of Kāmarūpa included in the *Prāgjyotisabhukti*. Vaidyadeva did not remain long as a feudatory of the Palas of Bengal; for within a short time, possibly after the death of Kumarapala, he became independent and assumed the imperial title of *Maharajadhiraja Paramesvara Paramabhattacharaka*, and thus, though only for a short time, established a Brahmana dynasty in Kāmarūpa.

The successors of Vaidyadeva are not known. The discovery of the plates of Vallabhadeva in Tezpur, dated SE 1107 (CE 1185), edited by Kielhorn, reveals the genealogy of a group of rulers such as Rayarideva, Udayakarana and Vallabhadeva. They trace their origin from the kings of Bhaskara's race of the *Chandra vamsa*. Rayarideva, known as Trailokyasimha, is described as the "frontal ornament of the kings of Bhaskara's race. He is said to have defeated the king of Vanga. Bhattasali finds here a reference to Rayarideva's encounter with Vijayasena of Bengal.⁷² Vallabhadeva was also a powerful king, being eulogized as a great hero "who sportively overcome hostile princes, as if they were courtzans." In the Deopara inscription of Vijayasena of Bengal states that he impetuously assailed the Lord of Gauda, put down the prince of Kāmarūpa and conquered Kalinga.⁷³ In the Madhainagar inscription of Laksmanasena (L-32) it has been mentioned that he undertook an expedition to Kāmarūpa towards the end of the 12th century C E.⁷⁴ According to P.C. Choudhury, Laksmanasena defeated Vallabhadeva. Nothing in details about the successor of Vallabhadeva could be known.⁷⁵ According to Kanaibarasibowa Rock Inscription located at North Guwahati, the Turks' attack of Kāmarūpa was completely annihilated on the 13th day of *Caitra* of the *Saka* year 1127(1206 C E).⁷⁶ *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri* refers to the king of Kāmarūpa named Britu or Bartu while, D.C.Sircar mentioned that the Indian form of Bartu or Britu would be Prithu. K.L Barua identified Bartu with Prithu, the king of Kāmarūpa mentioned in the *Yoginī Tantra* and *Kāmarūpar Buranji*. Minhaj has stated that king Bartu was defeated by Nasiruddin in 1228 CE.⁷⁷ The existence of a king named Samudrapala belonging to the Pala family is known from the Ambari Stone Inscription dated *Saka* 1154 (1232 CE).⁷⁸ The evidence is definitely proved the continuation of the rule of the Pala family till at least the time of Samudrapala.⁷⁹ B.K Barua mentions a Pillar Inscription recovered from Gachtal in the Nagaon District which he ascribed to be

issued in 1227 CE mentions the name of king Visva- Sundaradeva.⁸⁰ But on the basis of a new reading P.C. Choudhury holds that the inscription was issued in 1362 CE (1284 *Saka*).⁸¹ In 1275 CE Bakhtyar-Uddin-Yuzbeck-Tughril Khan led an expedition to Kāmarūpa. Sandhya, the king of Kāmarūpa defeated Yuzbeck.⁸² Shortly afterwards he shifted his capital from *Kamarupnagar* to Kamatapur in Goalpara.⁸³

Soon after these invasions the old kingdom of Kāmarūpa seems to have split into small principalities. By the beginning of the 13th century CE the Ahoms entered Assam from the east and a new era in the history of Assam began. The beginning of the thirteenth century is marked by several important events. The dynasty of Brahmapala came to an end with the deposition or death of Jayapala towards the second half of the twelfth century. The kingdom of Kāmarūpa, which covered the greater part of the Brahmaputra valley and parts of North Bengal disintegrated after Jayapala resulting in the emergence of the local kings of whom Vaidyadeva and Vallabhadeva are supposed to have ruled over parts of old Kāmarūpa kingdom during the second half of the twelfth century. Copper Plate grant of the above two rulers help us to place them in the second part of the 12th century.⁸⁴ Thirteenth century began with the invasion of Kāmarūpa by Bakhtiyar in 1205, on his way to Tibet and China. This was recorded as the first Muslim invasion of Kāmarūpa and this invasion was repulsed by the Kāmarūpa king Barthu or Prithu. This Muslim invasion is recorded in the Kanai Barasi Rock inscription of North Guwahati and also in the Minhaj ud din siraj's *Tabaquat -I- Nasiri*.⁸⁵ Another important event of the thirteen century is the immigration of the Ahoms under the leadership of Sukapha to the Brahmaputra valley and their establishment of Ahom kingdom there. The third noticeable event is the shifting of the capital of Kāmarūpa by king Sandhya from *Kamrup-nagara* to Kamatapur probably in the sixth decade of 13th century.⁸⁶ The kingdom of Kamata included Kamrup and Goalpara districts of modern Assam besides a portion of North Bengal in which the new capital was situated. The eastern parts of the earlier kingdom ruled by the Palas along the northern bank of the Brahmaputra became the hunting ground of the power seeking Bhuyans or landlords. Areas covered by the present district of Nowgong and its adjoining parts were also ruled by Bhuyans and petty chiefs.

The Kamata Power

As already mentioned that the capital of Kāmarūpa was shifted to Kamatapur, from that time onwards the kingdom of Kāmrūpa was known as “Kamata” or Kamrup-Kamata. The rulers of Kamata were designated as Kamateshwar or Kameswara (Lord of Kamata). The kingdom of Kamata became much smaller than ancient Kāmarūpa. The extent of the kingdom has been mentioned earlier. K.L. Barua opines that the expansion of the Kacharis from the east compelled king Sandhya of Kāmrūp to remove his capital to Kamata in the western part of the kingdom.⁸⁷

King Sandhya (1250-1270 CE) is stated to have assumed also the title “Gaureswar” or “Lord of Gaur”.⁸⁸ It indicates that Sandhya and his successors were the kings of the kingdom of Kamata, their capital being Kamatapur. Sindhu Rai (1270-1285 CE), Rup Narayan (1285-1300 CE), Singhdhvaj (1300-1305 CE), Pratapdhvaj (1305-1325 CE), Dharma Narayan (1325-1330 CE) respectively ascended the throne of Kamata kingdom. Tamradhvaj, Padma Narayan, Chandra Narayan and Ram Chandra seem to be the other rulers of this line. Durlabh Narayan (1330-1350 CE), the son of Pratapdhvaj ascended the throne of Kamata in 1330 CE. He was the most famous king of Kamata kingdom. According to K.L. Barua⁸⁹ Durlabh Narayan and his son Indranarayana who ruled in Kāmarūpa between 1330-1365 CE have been praised by Hema Saraswati, Kaviratna Saraswati and Harihara Vipra in their poetical works.

Indra Narayana was dethroned or killed by famous Arimatta (1365-1385 CE) who is known in Assamese tradition by his other name “Gajanka.”⁹⁰ Numerous traditions had cropped up round raja Arimatta of Kamata. According to one such tradition, Arimatta is said to have killed his uncle, Indra Narayan from whom he seized the throne of Kamata.⁹¹ Arimatta was a powerful king. He put down the Bhuyan chiefs who rose in rebellion during the reign of his grand-father, Dharama Narayan. After Arimatta there were three kings of this dynasty, viz. Ratna Singha or Sukaranka and Mriganka. The last king of the dynasty was Mriganka who died childless. A Bhuyan chief, who was the vassal of the king of Kamata thereupon, seized the throne and founded a new dynasty called Khan or Khen dynasty of Kamata.

The Khan or Khen dynasty came to power in Kamatapura towards the middle of the fifteenth century who ruled nearly fifty or sixty years in the parts of North Bengal and western Assam.⁹² Only three kings of this dynasty is known to have ruled in the

middle of the fifteenth century to the end of the century when Nawab Hussain Shah of Bengal, taking advantage of the internal dissention, defeated the last king Nilambara in 1498 CE by taking recourse to a subterfuge and occupied the capital temporarily.⁹³ His army occupied the country as far as the river Barnadi in Kamrup but being badly worsted by the rising Ahom power they lost the newly conquered territory.⁹⁴

The Koches

The fall of the Khen dynasty gave an opportunity to the rise of chiefs in different parts of western Assam and North Bengal. These local chiefs were mostly landlords or Bhuyans, hailing principally from the *Kayastha* community. There were also Brahmin Bhuyans but their number was limited to a few.⁹⁵ Taking advantage of the absence of ancestral power, Visu an adventurous youth of humble origin established himself as the king of Kamata kingdom by defeating the powerful Bhuyans of Auguri, Luki, Jhargaon, Karnapuara, Phulaguri, Bejini and Pandu.⁹⁶ After the formal investiture as a king he shifted his capital from Chikana to Cooch Behar. Thus the Koch dynasty came into existence in the first or second decade of the sixteenth century CE. The Koches are one of the earliest settlers of Assam. Their origin and early history are wrapped in mystery. Traditionally it is believed that the Koches belong to the Kshatriya race.

Bisu or Biswa Singha being the founder of the Koch kingdom consolidated his newly acquired kingdom by appointing suitable officers in different branches of administration. He also raised a powerful army to defend his territory. The temple of Kamatesvari was renovated. He was succeeded by Naranarayana whose reign of more than forty years (1540-1584 CE) is notable for military conquest and cultural encouragement.⁹⁷ His brother Sukladhvaja alias Chilaraya, a scholar and an able military commander led a series of victorious campaign against Assam (Ahom territory), Jayantiyapur, Manipur, Cachar (Hedamba), Sylhet and exacted tributes from these states.⁹⁸ His victorious career received a severe set-back when he attacked the Nawab of Bengal. Thus the Koch power having its territory spread over the present districts of Kamrup, western part of Darrang, Goalpara, Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri attained a great height during the reign of Naranarayana. He constructed a highway on the North bank of the Brahmaputra from Cooch Behar to North Lakhimpur covering a distance of nearly 600 kms. He reconstructed the temple of

Kāmākhyā after it had been demolished by Kalapahar and made missionary provisions for the regular worship of the deity.⁹⁹ He was a great patron of learning and literature.

The Koch kingdom disintegrated after Malladeva into two rival powers. The Eastern part included present Kamrup, Goalpara and parts of Mangaldoi sub-division came under the provision of Raghudeva, son of Sukladhvaja and the western part demarcated by Sonkosh river was retained by Lakshminarayana, son of Malladeva alias Naranarayana.¹⁰⁰ The two kingdoms- western kingdom reduced to vassalage under the Ahoms and the eastern under the Mughals. The western kingdom had cultural contact with Kāmarūpa till the time of Prannarayana (1663-1666 CE) after that it drifted away from the cultural current of Assam and became a part of Bengal. So far as the eastern branch is concerned it had to contend with the Mughal forces for nearly twentyfive (1612-1638 CE) years for supremacy in Goalpara and Kamrup which was then known as the kingdom of Koch Hajo.¹⁰¹ During an encounter with the two sisters kingdom's ruler aided one aided by the Muslims and the other by the Ahoms, Balinarayan by getting the Ahom support occupied the territory demarcated by the Barnadi on the north and Asuror Ali on the south bank of Brahmaputra. The Ahoms installed Balinarayan as the tributary raja of Darrang and was renamed as Dharmanarayana. Later on eastern Koch kindom was politically delined with the death of Balinarayan in an encounter with the Muslims in 1637 CE. But his descendants continued to rule as tributary rulers in Darrang till the Burmese invasion.¹⁰²

The Bhuyans

By the beginning of the thirteenth century, along with the Ahoms, the Chutias and Kacharis, a number of petty chiefs called Bhuyans, ruled over some scattered parts of Assam. The petty states of the Bhuyans lay between Kamrup-Kamata or Kamata kingdom in the west and the Chutias and the Kacharis in the east. Thus the rule of the Bhuyans extended to the tract of territory as far as the Subansiri region in the north and the Kapili valley in the south. On both banks of the river Brahmaputra, the Bhuyans' rule stretched roughly over modern districts of Kamrup, Barpeta, Darrang, Mangaldai, Nagaon and a part of North Lakhimpur and Dibrugarh.¹⁰³ The Bhuyans

were nominally feudatories of the Rajas of the Kamrup-Kamata. In fact, they were independent chiefs.

The Bhuyans were always independent of one another. But they occasionally combined themselves within a limited area. Some of them were found to have combined to form a confederacy. The leader of such combination was called “*Gomatha*.”¹⁰⁴ They formed such confederacy to ward off raids from the external powers or any external aggressions. Instances of such raids have been found in the *guru-charitas* dealing with the life of Sankaradeva.

The Kacharis

Another powerful kingdom that rose into prominence after the fall of the Palas was that of the Kacharis, who are known to be the earliest inhabitants of the Brahmaputra valley. “While central Assam on the north of Brahmaputra was entirely dominated by the Bhuyans, the southern bank comprising of the present Nowgong and parts of Karbi Anglong districts was predominantly inhabited by Kacharis.”¹⁰⁵ Regarding the extent of Kachari kingdom from thirteenth to fifteenth century Gait has mentioned that “In the thirteenth century it would seem that the Kachari kingdom extended along the south bank of the Brahmaputra from the Dikhu (Dikhau) to the Kallong or beyond, and included also the valley of Dhansiri and the tract which now forms the north Cachar inhabited by Kacharis appears to have formed part of the Hindu kingdom of Kamata. Towards the end of this century, it is narrated that the outlying Kachari settlements west of Dikhu River withdrew appears to have formed the boundary between the two nations (the Ahoms & Kachari) and no hostilities between them are recorded until 1490 CE when a battle was fought on its bank. The Ahoms were defeated and were forced to sue for peace. But their power was rapidly growing and during the next thirty years and in spite of this defeat, they gradually thrust the Kachari boundary to Dhansiri River.”¹⁰⁶

In the succeeding two centuries the Ahoms gradually expanded their territorial boundary towards the west by pushing back the Kacharis as far as Dimapur, the capital, which was sacked and occupied by the army of the Ahom king Suhungmung Dihingia raja in 1536 CE and the Kacharis shifted their capital to Maibong. The rapid growth of Ahom power forced the Kacharis to retreat further to the south giving the Ahoms a free hand in the valley.¹⁰⁷ However during the reign of Rudra Singha (1696-

1714 CE) both the Kacharis and Jayantia kings were subjugated and were compelled to acknowledge the suzerainty of the Ahom king.¹⁰⁸ At that time kachari king was Tamradhvaj, who formally acknowledging the overlordship of Rudra Singha at Biswanath in 1708 CE shifted his capital from Maibong to Khaspur in the plains of Cachar. Henceforth the Kachari power was confined to the plains of Cachar district and North Cachar Hills.

The Ahoms

The Ahoms were a group of Tai-Shan people entered Assam in 1228 CE under the head of Sukapha, who established the Ahom kingdom. He established capital at Charaideo 1253 CE.¹⁰⁹ The Ahoms ruled for a period of six hundred years in Assam. The next important ruler of Ahoms was Sudangpha Bamuni Konwar.¹¹⁰ As he was brought up in a Brahmin family, he had been popularly known as Bamuni Konwar. One noteworthy fact of his rule was that, for the first time Ahom court was influenced by Brahmanical religion. The Ahom power was raised to a considerable height by Suhungmung alias Dihingia Raja (1497-1539 CE) whose reign was eventful with noteworthy expansion and consolidation of the Ahom power as well as for victorious campaigns against the disintegrating and disturbing forces. He created the post of Barpatra Gohain as one of the three Ministers constituting the inner council of the king. He subjugated the Chutiyas and annexed their territory, defeated the Kacharis and pushed them southward and led successful expeditions against the rebellious Nagas. The *Saka* era was adopted in place of Ahom era.¹¹¹

Suhungmung was succeeded by the reign of Suklengmung alias Gargaya Raja and Sukhampha alias Khora Raja. Suklengmung established his capital at Gargaon.¹¹² The reign of both the above mentioned monarch is important for the invasions of Koch under the command of Sukladhvaj. The next king was Susenpha alias Pratap Singha (1603-1641 CE). Pratap Singha's reign is important due to Muhammedan invasions, wars with the Kacharis.¹¹³ Besides this he subdued many other neighbouring powers. His reign is also notable for his constructive activities for the welfare of the subjects. *Paik* system was introduced during his time. Momai Tamuli Barbarua was highly entrusted with *paik* system.¹¹⁴ Next Ahom king was Jayadhvaj Singha, whose reign is noteworthy for Mir Jumla's invasion of Assam. Jayadhvaj Singha was the first Ahom king who formally embraced Brahmanical religion by being initiated by Niranjandeva

and Vanamalideva. Although some of his predecessors occasionally patronized Brahmanical religion they did not formally accept it. The reign of Chakradhvaja and Sunyatpha alias Udayaditya Singha's reign was important from historical point of view. It was during their time that the great battle of Saraighat (1671 CE) was fought between the Ahoms and the Mughals where Lachit Barphukan played the leading role against the Mughal instead of his ill health. Ram Singha led the Mughal army against the Ahoms. And finally Ahoms got the victory.¹¹⁵ From Ramdhvaj Singha and his successor's upto Sulikpha or Ratnadhvaja Singha (1673-1681 CE), there were no any competent rulers of the Ahom dynasty. The rulers were mere with Gadapani's alias Gadadhar Singha's accession to the throne.

Gadadhar Singha ascended the throne in 1681 CE. He was the founder of the Tungkhungia dynasty, the dynasty which lasted till the British advent in Assam. Gadadhar's son and successor Sukhrangpha alias Rudra Singha is the greatest of the Ahom monarchs.¹¹⁶ He was a great patron of the Hindu religion and constructed temples of Jayasagar and Ranganatha, made liberal gifts to the Brahmins and Gossains, maintained Sanskrit scholars and poets in his court and established a number of schools for the spread of education.¹¹⁷ He was a great patron of art and architecture. He subjugated the Cachar and Jayantiya kingdom. With a view to earn goodwill he sent emissaries and good-will missions to Bengal, Bihar and also to Tripura.¹¹⁸ Unfortunately he died in 1714 CE leaving a unified Assam from Sadia in the east to Manah the extreme outpost of the present Kamrup district in the west.¹¹⁹

Siba Singha was the son and successor of Rudra Singha, who was very influenced by the Astrologers. He was an ardent follower of Śaktism and got himself initiated to that cult by Krshnarama Bhattacharya and donated large estates to his religious *guru* both in upper and lower Assam. Moreover, Krishnaram Bhattacharya was given the sole management of the Kāmākhyā temple.¹²⁰ The Brahmins and Mahanta's influenced king Siba Singha to a very great extent. Largest number of land grants to the Brahmins was made by Siba Singha among all the Ahom kings. Śākta Siba Singha's chief consort Phuleswari (Bar Raja) also became Krishnaram Bhattacharyya's disciple. She was a staunch Śākta and more of a fanatic than her husband. Buranji provide the evidence that due to the insult of Bar raja Phuleswari to the Moamaria Gohain, the Moamaria rebellion which started during the reign of Lakshmi Singha(1769-1780 CE) continued for more than a quarter of a century with

varied intensity.¹²¹ It was finally brought to an end during the reign of Kamaleswar Singha (1795-1810 CE). Although the rebellion at the initial stage was of the sectarian nature and confined to eastern Assam it gradually gained dimension and spreaded to Darrang, Nowgong and parts of Kamrup also.¹²² The glorious period of the Ahom reign came to an end with the death of Rajeswar Singha in 1769 CE. The remaining fifty years of their rule upto 1820 were nothing but last flickerings and final extinction of the ruling power. There were repeated invasion of the Burmese and the Ahom rule formally came to an end with the establishment of the British rule in 1826.¹²³

The Chutiyas

Lastly, the Chutiya kings played an important role towards cultural integration of north-eastern part of Assam. The Chutiyas are an Indo-Mongoloid tribe having ethnic similarities with the Bodos. From the thirteenth to the 16th centuries they redided mainly in the north-eastern part of Assam at present covered by the eastern fringe of Darrng district and the entire Lakhimpur district. It is not definitely known whether the Chutiyas were Hindus before their country was occupied and annexed by the Ahoms, but the names of successive kings bearing Hindu names suggest that the Chutiya kings with their capital at Sadiya-ruling from the thirteenth century to the beginning of the sixteenth century were Hindus. The early history of the Chutiyas is not known. It is mentioned in the *Deodhai Assam Buranji* that eleven kings ruled at Sadiya from the beginning of the thirteenth century and the last king Nityanarayana alias Nityapala was killed in the battle against the Ahoms and the entire tract of chutiya kingdom was annexed to the Ahom kingdom in 1523 CE.¹²⁴

Two copper plate inscriptions of Satyanarayana and Lakshminarayana of Sadhayapuri (Sadiya) in *saka* 1314 and 1323 (1392 CE and 1401 CE) in Sanskrit language testified that the Chutiya kings professed Hinduism as these inscriptions indicate that lands was donated to the Brahmins.¹²⁵ The kings ruling in Sadiya also worshipped tribal deities of the Chutiyas at the same time. Noteworthy among them is worship of Tamreswari, popularly known as *Kechaikhaiti* (Eater of raw flesh), as human sacrifice was made annually to the deity. After the fall of the Chutiya dynasty, the Chutiyas were settled in different parts of the Ahom territory. “The royal family with leading men among the Chutiyas were deported to Pakariguri, while a number of

Brahmins and black-smiths and other artisans were taken from Sadiya to the Ahom capital.¹²⁶ Some of the luxurious items used by the Ahom kings and nobles were also taken from the Chutiyas.¹²⁷ The Assamese pattern of house-construction having gables at the two ends was also borrowed from the Barahi Chutiyas.¹²⁸ Gradually the Chutiyas were accepted Brahmanical religion. Some of them were absorbed by the Ahoms, others by the Mishings, some were absorbed by the Barahis and the rest accepted the Brahmanical ways of observing rituals and rites.

Society

Assam in the early period was a homeland of many ethnic groups viz; Austric, Mongoloian, Dravidian and Aryan, who had entered from various passes at different intervals of time and settled in this region. As a result Assam was amalgamated with different linguistic groups of people with different ethnic make ups.¹²⁹ However it is difficult to say that when and how the Aryans entered Assam. The *Satapatha Brahmana* (IV.I) preserves the tradition of migration of Aryans into the East of the river Sadanira.¹³⁰ River Sadanira is identified with the river Gandaki, the modern Gunduck which falls into the Ganges, opposite to Patna and was the eastern boundary of Videha. The story has been dated by Kousambi in the middle of the first millennium BCE.¹³¹ According to Prof. R.S. Sarma¹³² the Brahmanas entered into North Bengal and Assam in the fifth century CE. With the migration of the Brahmanas the Aryan culture also gets introduced in these regions. The most important feature of the Aryan society was the *varnasramadharma*.

The society in the ancient period was mainly based on *varnasramadharma*. Assam describes. The most reliable source for the study of *varnasramadharma* of ancient Assam is the epigraphic sources of both local and those belonging to outside the region. The actual political history of ancient Assam began with the Varman dynasty, followed by Salasthambha and Pala dynasty. Many references have been found about the donation of lands and villages to the Brahmanas by the kings of Varman dynasty, Salasthambha and Pala dynasty of ancient Assam. Silimpur stone slab inscription stated that king Jaypaladeva made *Tulapurusedana* to a Brahmana named Umapati. King Bhutivarman (between 518 C E and 542 CE) is described as *Paramabhagavata* and *asvamedhayayi*. The inscription was inscribed on the occasion of the establishment of an *Asrama* for ensuring well-being and longevity of the king. This reminds us of

the *Ayusyakarma* of the *Atharvaveda*. From the copper plate grant of Bhaskarvarman it is known that the Brahmanical religion enjoyed predominance in Kāmarūpa during his times. In the Doobi Copper plates (1st quarter of the 7th century CE), it is clearly stated that king Bhaskarvarman performed a large number of sacrifices accompanied by a good amount of *Dakshina*. In the same plate it is stated that *varnasramadharmā* and Vedic studies were prevalent in ancient Assam.¹³³

Varnasramadharmā traces its origin from a late hymn of the *Rigveda*, known as the *Purusa- Sūkta*, (*Rigveda*, X). “The Brahmana was his mouth, the Rajanya was his arms, the Vaisya was his thighs and the Sudra sprang from his feet. The belief gradually gained ground that the Brahmanas, Ksatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras issued respectively from the mouth, arms, and thigh and feet of the creator.”¹³⁴ It corresponded to occupational association and status by birth i.e. Brahmanas as priests, Ksatriyas as warriors, Vaisyas as producers or traders and Sudras as performers of manual labour in descending order. Side by side with the *Varna* system sprang up the order of the four asramas, known as *Brahmacharya*, *Grhastha*, *Vanaprastha* and *Sanyasa*.

Here it would be convenient if people are divided into the Brahmana and the non-Brahmana. Because in ancient Assam there were lots of other castes some are professional castes and the some are by their birth.

Epigraphy proves that Assamese Hindu society in general was based upon the same *varnasrama dharma*; but both, as described in the texts, give us an impression of an ideal state of society based upon divine social order; the rulers are said to have been created for upholding that order. Bhagadatta was the leader of all these divisions: (*varnasramanam gururekavirah*).¹³⁵ Bhaskara was created for the proper organization of their divisions, which had become mixed up; (*avakirnavarnasrama-dharma-pravibhagaya nirmito*).¹³⁶ The Nidhanpur plates alone reveal that the kings adopted a systematic policy of settling Brahmanas in the kingdom by gifts of land in the shape of an *agrahara* to further their religious pursuits. The Khonamukhi Plates recorded a gift of land by king Dharmapala to a learned Brahmana, who hailed from Madhyadesa, “the well-known place of residence of Brahmanas who constantly performed sacrifices and were reluctant to accumulate riches.”¹³⁷ According to the Kamauli Grant, “gifts and donations to Brahmanas were regarded as good fruits and

fresh sprouts.”¹³⁸ As appears from the epigraphs, the Brahmana society was based on their *vedasakhas*, *gotras* and *pravaras*, which determined their exogamic marriage relations. Inscriptions also indicate that at least some of the Brahmanas observed the orthodox rules and duties relating to *yajana*, *yajana*, *adhyayana*, *adhyapana*, *dana*, and *pratigraha*. They also followed other injunctions relating to *snana*, *japa*, *sadhya* and other sacrifices.¹³⁹ It appears, therefore, that Brahmanical culture made good progress in ancient Assam and the Brahmanas held a position of honour in the royal court and served the State in the capacity of high officials. They were not only entrusted with the duty of the diffusion of learning but also that they took to other professions. In fact, the Brahmanas of Assam have always followed a rather flexible system, not as strictly rigid as in other parts of India, even in respect of food.

Information is less about the other castes or non-Brahmin castes of ancient Assam. Among the available information the *Karana* and the *Kayastha* were two other castes. Both are however noticed in the epigraphs as denoting state officials. *Karana* occurs as the name of a caste in the old *Sutra* and *Smrtis*, and perhaps also in the *Mahabharata*.¹⁴⁰ *Kayastha* is mentioned as an administrative officer in the *Visnu* and *Yajnavalkya Smrtis*, and in the former, he is taken as a keeper of public accounts.¹⁴¹ The existence of a *Kayastha* caste as early as the ninth century CE is also known from inscriptions discovered in other parts of India. Epigraphs, beginning with the 6th century CE mention *Kayasthas*, *Karanas*, *Lekhakas*, *Daivajnas (ganakas)* and others; but most of them, if not all, were officers and professional classes rather than castes.

“In the Nidhanpur grant, the *Karana* or the *Nyaya-Karanika*, *Vyavahari Janardanasvami*, was a Brahmana, and the *Kayastha* was Haradatta; both the terms *Karanika* and *Kayastha* are used here in the sense of officers and scribes.”¹⁴² The local epigraphs do not definitely mentioned about *Kayastha* as a caste. “If B.K. Kakati’s derivation of the word from the Austric formation like *katho* (to write); *kaiathoh* (to keep accounts) is accepted, *Kayastha* is to be associated originally with the writer. In early Assamese records *Kayasthas* are referred to as *Kath*.”¹⁴³

Modern writers D.R. Bhandarkar and following him Ghose and others are of the opinion that the *Kayasthas* were descended from the Nagar Brahmanas, because of the likeness of their surnames, Vasu, however opposes the theory and says that

“excepting some agreement in respect of surnames, we have got nothing to prove and connection between these Nagar Brahmanas and *Kayasthas*.¹⁴⁴

“Another class of people, allied to the *Karanas* and the *Kayasthas*, used in the sense of a writer, are the *Lekhakas*. Inscriptions clearly indicates *Lekhaka* as a scribe. Sumantu quoted in the *Parasara Madhaviya*, takes *Lekhaka* as a low caste, like an oilman, from whom food cannot be taken by a Brahmana and therefore in that sense *Lekhakas* also stood for a caste. But whether identical with the *Kasyastha* caste is doubtful.”¹⁴⁵

Vaidya, that occurs in the Subhankarapataka Grant, which was composed by a *Vaidya*, named Prasthanakalasa: *Prasthanakalasanama-vaidyenaracita prasasti* (V15).¹⁴⁶ In Bengal the *Vaidya* is taken to be a *Kayastha*, next in rank to the Brahmanas. It is doubtful whether the word was used as a caste name in the said epigraph. Bhattacharya points out that it is not likely that the term was used in so early a time to denote caste.¹⁴⁷ But *Vaidya* as a distinct social group occurs in three South-Indian inscriptions of the eight century CE. The members of this group occupied very high positions in state and society; and Krishna Sastri says that one of them at any rate was regarded as a Brahmana.¹⁴⁸ “The *Bhisaja* again as a class of physicians is mentioned by the local epigraphs.”¹⁴⁹ According to Usanas, he was the offspring of a Brahmana father through a Ksatriya wife and designated also a *Vaidyaka*. A *Bhisaka* maintained himself by studying the Ayurveda in its eight parts, or astronomy, astrology and mathematics. According to the *Brahma Purana* (quoted by Aparaka)¹⁵⁰ the *Bhisaka* lived in surgery and attended upon patients. It is unlikely that the *Bhisaka* of our epigraphs designated a particular caste; the term might have been applied to various *varnas* and stood only for a professional class.

Alongside the *Kayasthas* and the *Kalitas* are the predominant caste of the province.¹⁵¹ “They are now looked on as the purest of the old Hindu people of Assam” “and the only Sudra caste in the valley from whose hands the higher caste will take water.”¹⁵² They claim to same rank as the *Kayasthas* and actually rank next to Brahmanas.¹⁵³ Martin holds the opinion that they were formerly the priests of the Koc, and remarks: “They (the *Kalitas*) no doubt had some science and continued long to be the only spiritual guides of the Koc and indeed in some places still retain by far the chief authority over that people”.¹⁵⁴

About the origin of *Kalitas* of Assam, who are now included among the Sudras, it is discussed in another connection, and have tried to show that they were not pure Aryan Ksatriyas. It is believed that their existence in Assam may be traced back as early as the fifth century BCE, if not earlier, and that they were the remnants of the Alpine priests in Eastern India and Assam who, mixing with the Aryans, were designated as Ksatriyas. It is reasonable to hold that there were *Kalitas* in Assam even before the caste or *Varna* system was introduced into the land, and the term, therefore, denotes an ethnic type rather than a caste name. The *Kalitas* are still given a position next to the twice born classes, and their social relations, marriage rules etc., conform to the orthodox Hindu rules. The foundation of Assamese culture was mainly laid by them, and, like the Brhamanas, they still retain their individual identity.

According to the popular belief, the *Kalitas* were Ksatriyas, who fled from the wrath of Parasu Rama, who was determined to exterminate the Ksatriyas. They fled from home and conceal themselves in the forests of Assam. So, they are *Kula*-(caste) *lupta* (gone) or *kalita* (degraded caste). But this seems to be a bit of false- etymology.

“Next to the *Kalitas* were the Koches, who even to-day form a large portion of the population of Assam. In earlier times the inhabitants of the province were, therefore, distinguished as *Kalitas* (Aryans) and Koches, who probably belong to the Mongolian stock.”¹⁵⁵ The Koches are mentioned as *Kuvacas* in the *Yoginī Tantra*. “The name (Koch) in Assam,” remarks Gait, “there is no longer that of a tribe, but rather of a Hindu caste into which all converts to Hindus from the different tribes Kachari, Garo, Hajong, Lalung, Mikir, etc., are admitted conversion.”¹⁵⁶

Details regarding regarding other Sudra castes and classes are lacking. Inscription mentions a class of people called the *Kaivartas* or fishermen who also helped the state by collecting tolls.¹⁵⁷ As found in the Tezpur Rock inscription of Harjaravarman, the expression is *kaivarta-nau (ku) ksisvabhaksa-sadhani*, which literally means “the eater of the property in the interior of boats”. They are associated with water and boats. In the *Smrtis*, the *Kaivartas* are taken to be mixed caste, and Manu uses the term to mean the offspring of a *Nisada* father by an *Ayagava* mother.¹⁵⁸ “According to the *Brahmavaivarta Purana*, a *Kaivarta* is born of a Ksatriya father and a Vaisya mother. Whatever their origin, it is certain that the *Kaivartas* were non-Aryans, and their economic pursuit consisted mainly of fishing.”¹⁵⁹ Epigraphy also indicates that

some *Kaivartas* took to agriculture. In Assam they are now divided into two sections: *Halova* (those who work with ploughs) and *Jalova* (those who are actually fishermen).¹⁶⁰ It appears certain that they were depressed classes, who having adopted Hinduism, followed the general rules of Hindu society and were, therefore, included within the Sudras.

Of the other professional castes, there are references to *Kumbhakara* (potters), *Tantuvaya* (weavers), *Nauki* (Boatman), and *Dandi* (towers of boats). Usanas takes *Kumbhakaras* as the offspring of a Brahmana by a Vaisya woman. Vaikhanasa adds that such an offspring becomes either a *Kumbhakara* or a barber. Vedavyasa Devala include the *Kumbhakaras* among Sudras.¹⁶¹ In modern Assam, the potters are known as both *Kumaras* and *Hidas*; but in their origin, the *Hidas* appear to be more degraded than the *Kumaras* and were allied to the *Kaivartas*. They gave up their original profession of fisherman and took to the making of pottery. No intercourse has been allowed between the *Kumaras* and the *Hidas*.¹⁶² The Puspabhadra grant refers to a degraded people and mentions *Dijj-Ratihadi* in connection with boundary of the land granted.¹⁶³ Perhaps the *Hadis* were more or less allied to the *Hidas*, though not to the fishermen. As they have taken to various professions in course of time, such as trade, agriculture, working in metal like gold, etc., sub-classes came into being;¹⁶⁴ but at present no inter-caste marriage takes place between these various sub-groups.

The *Tantuvayas* are regarded as Sudras by the *Mahabhasya* of Patanjali and as such, excluded from sacrificial rites.¹⁶⁵ As noted there are several references to *Tantuvayus* in the epigraphs. They, however, do not indicate any distinct caste, but only a professional group, for in Assam; all castes including the Brahmanas take to weaving.

There is a single reference to the *antyaja* (low castes) in the Puspabhadra Grant of Dharmapala. In describing the boundary marks of the land granted, the epigraphs refer to *Dijja-rati-hadi*, whose land marked the east-south boundary.¹⁶⁶ *Hadi* may mean here the hari caste of today. The *Hadis* as *antayajas*, are connected with the *Doma* and the *Candala*. In Assam their position has of late years much improved; many of them now describe themselves by euphemistic terms expressive of these occupations such as *Brttiyal* and *Sonari*.¹⁶⁷

At the time of the advent of the Ahoms, the people of the Brahmaputra valley were composed of two broad divisions-the Hindus and the non-Hindu tribes. The former

included the Brahmanas, the caste-Hindus, the Hinduised royal families and other converts, whose members were gradually on the increase. All the non-Brahmanas were called sudirs (Sudras). The non-Hindu tribes living in their respective sanctuaries had formed the mass of the subject. The Brahmanas continued to enjoy their old privileges as members of the priestly class. Among the non-Brahmana castes, mention may be made of the *Kayasthas*, *Keots*, *Kaivartas*, *Barias*, *Suts*, *Yogis* or *Naths*.¹⁶⁸ Besides these; there were many tribes like the Chutiyas, Kacharis, Marans and the Barahis. The Ahoms who were the Tai-Shan group of people formed the population of Medieval Assam. There were seven main Ahom clans or 'Phoids' commonly known as "Satgharia" Ahoms or the Ahoms of the seven houses.¹⁶⁹ They were Bura-Gohain, Bar-Gohain, Bar Patrogohain, Duara, Dihingia, Lahan and Handiqui. The Deodhai, Mohan, Bailung and Siring were the Ahom families of priests and astrologers. Besides these, some lower Ahom families included Chaodangs, Gharphalias and Likchows. The Ahoms of the seven families did not marry within the same family. They also did not intermarry with the lower families.

Some of the professional communities are those of the Bantias (traders), Tantis (weavers), Hiras (potters not using the wheel), Sonowals (gold washers), Telis (oilmen), Nadials (fishermen), Haris (Scavengers) and others but only a few like the Hiras formed a real caste. The Saru Kalitas (inferior Kaitas) were engaged in the professions like goldsmithy, blacksmithy, pottery, dancing, garland-making while there were also Bar Kalitas (superior Kalitas).¹⁷⁰

Certain communities of people entered Assam in the later part of the Ahom rule. They were the Manipuris, the Sikhs, and the Rajputs. In the the later part of the eighteenth century, some Shan tribes like the Khamtis Phakials, Aitonias, Turungs migrates to Assam. Besides, there were people skilled in various arts and crafts, some of whom came here in search of livelihood, whereas others were imported. Some people belonged to Muslims community also shone in arts and crafts, which gave them a social distinction and enabled them to get offices in the Ahom administration.¹⁷¹

Social Institutions and Customs

There is meagre knowledge about the family and nature of inheritance of this period of ancient Assam. Hindu life in general has been based upon the joint family system. The smallest unit of society was probably the joint family or large household,

comprising the patriarch of the family, his wife, his unmarried daughters, and his sons with their wives and descendants. This is clear from the Nidhanpur Grant where half or more shares of land were granted jointly to several brothers of a family (*bhratrtrayena ekamsah; bhratra sahardhamsah, etc.*).¹⁷² The division of joint property among brothers is also indicated.¹⁷³ A good evidence of the joint family system is found in the Parbatiya plates of Vanamaladeva, under which the four brothers Cudamani, Detobha, Garga and Sambhu lived together. Though the grant was made to the eldest brother, it was meant to be enjoyed by them all, and it appears that there is an indication here of the acknowledgement of the right of the sons to demand partition of the family property, as provided under the *Mitaksara* system.

In regard to adoption, there is no good evidence, but it may be held that the same practices were followed in Assam as in other parts of India. The tribal family system has been based upon quite different principles, and their society shows traces of a matrimonial system, and in some cases indicates a transition from matriarchy to patriarchy.¹⁷⁴

In the medieval period also normally joint family was in practice like the ancient times. Patriarchal pattern was followed and daughters did not get right to their father's properties. She had, however, her claim to the bridal gifts and presents and was entitled to maintenance, after the death of her husband, by her sons or by the brothers of her husband. At the death of the father when separation and division took place, in case of common people, preference had given to the youngest son in choosing his own share. If it is among the noble class people, the usual practice was to hold the land in joint partnership and divide the profits at the end of the year.¹⁷⁵

Inscriptions are silent regarding the Assamese dishes of our period, and literature gives only incidental references. Rice, fish, meat, fruits and vegetables constituted the chief articles of food. Climatic conditions and the nature of her inhabitants determined their diet. Dietary practice, like the *varnasrama* system in Assam, has been based on a spirit of liberalism, and this continued even under Vaisnava Reformation. The earlier literatures make mention of twenty-five and fifty kinds of special dishes (*vyanjana*) prepared with vegetables, pulses, fish and meat. Spices such as *asdraka* (ginger), *jiraka* (cumin), *pippaliyaka* (long pepper), *marica* (pepper), *karpura* (camphor), *sarisa* (mustard) were used in these preparations.¹⁷⁶ *Yoginī Tantra* recommends in

most emphatic words the eating of meat and fish in Kāmarūpa (*Kamarupe na tyajet samisam*). Sacrifice of various kinds of animals was considered very meritorious. Both the *Kālikā Purāna* and the *Yoginī Tantra* describe in details the nature of the merits of such animal sacrifices. Among the animals whose flesh the *Yoginī Tantra* recommends are ducks, peacocks, tortoises, and wild boars (*hamsa-paravatam bhaksyam kurmam varahameva ca kamarupe parityagaddurgatistasy sambhavet*).¹⁷⁷ Meat of goats, deer, rhinoceros, etc. was also taken. A later source refers to the use of pork, which with the soft roots of the plaintain tree, made a good preparation.

The favourite curry of the Assamese has been an alkaline preparation from plaintain trees¹⁷⁸ and certain water herbs, used also as a substitute for salt, mixed with fish. Sour curry preparations were made from various fruits, all mixed with fish. One special preparation of the Assamese was, as now *payasa* (rice pudding), prepared with milk, rice and sugar. Many words like the *Kālikā Purāna* (70/16-18) refer to the varieties of food preparations of the Assamese; the *Yoginī Tantra* in particular mentions milk of cows, goats and various preparations of curd, ghee and other sweets from buffalo's milk.¹⁷⁹

Home-made liquors, rice-beer, or the '*laopani*' of the tribes were used as drink. The evidence from ancient Assam is very little. Bana states that Bhaskara sent to Harsa "cups of ulluka, diffusing a fragrance of sweet wine".¹⁸⁰ The *Kālikā Purāna* (49/9; 54/18; 60/45-46; 70/14) refers to *modaka*, *pistaka* and *payasa* along with *madhu*. *Yoginī Tantra* mentions wine in connection with the worship of Kamesvari: (*rudhirairmamsa-madyasca pujayet Paramesvarim*).¹⁸¹ Another favourite habit of the Assamese was the chewing of betelvine and nut (*tambula-pana*). The abundance of areca-nut and betel vine in Assam is evidenced by both epigraphy and literature. The use of these articles particularly by women is given in the *Yoginī Tantra*¹⁸² which speaking of women in general states thus: *na sukradarsanam strinam tambulasa sada bhavet*.

People of medieval Assam had rice, pulses, fish and milk as the staple diet of both the aristocracy and the commoners. The *Kumar Haran* of Ramananda Kayastha provides information about the varied delicacies of the upper strata of the society. The aphorism of Dak also gives information on their cooking process; some are applicable to the common people as well. The Hindu caste people did not like to take liquor.

Shihabuddin Talish referring to the dietary habits of the commoners observed: “And all the people of this country, not placing their necks in the yoke of any faith, eat whatever they get from the hand of any man, regardless of his caste. They do not abstain from eating food cooked by the Muslims and non-Muslims and partake of every kind of meat, whether of dead or of slaughtered animals, except human flesh. It is not their custom to eat ghee, so that if any article even savours of ghee, they will not eat.”¹⁸³ The practice of chewing unripe areca-nut with betel vine also attracted the notice of the Persian chronicler. Neo-Vaisnavism of Sankardeva brought some changes in the food-habits of the people, so that taking of meat of certain animals and birds traditionally considered unclean by the Hindus were becoming a general taboo.¹⁸⁴

The Hindu social structure and its solidarity were based to a great extent on the institution of marriage, having social and religious sanction. The Sastras recognized eight modes of marriage. They are i) *raksasa* or *ksatra vivaha*, where the bride is carried off by force; ii) *paisaca*, a secret elopement; iii) *gandharva*, a secret informal union by copulation; iv) *asura*, acquirement by purchase; v) *brahma*, where the bride is freely given to a worthy bridegroom with due ceremony; vi) *daiva*, where she is married to a priest; vii) *arsa*, in which the bride’s father, in giving here away, receives from the bridegroom a formal gift of a pair of oxen; and viii) *kaya* or *prajapatya*, in which the proposal comes from the side of the bridegroom. In the law-book the first three of these modes are recognized as peculiarly appropriate to Ksatriyas, and the fourth is allowed only to Vaisyas and Sudras. The remaining four modes are regarded as particularly suitable to Brahmanas. The *brahma* form was widespread among the Brahmanas of our country.¹⁸⁵

Normally among the higher classes, the institution of marriage has been based on formal rites according to the *Prajapatya* type. The Puspabhadra Grant throws some light on the actual rites with which this form of marriage was attended. It has recorded the marriage of Bhaskara to Jiva in the following words: *tasyah karena sa karam jagrhe grhasthadharmmaya kankana-dharam dhrta-kankanena*.¹⁸⁶ This grant throws light on the marriage of what is called *panigrahana*. The traditional secret marriage of Aniruddha with Usa suggests a marriage of the *gandharva* or even *paisaca* kind. The marriage of Krsna with Rukmini, described in the *Visnu Purana* (v, xxvi; *Rukmini-Harana*) is an instance of the union of the *raksasa* type. Another kind of marriage,

called *svayamvara* is mentioned in the *Rajatarangini* in connection with the marriage of Amrtaprabha to Meghavahana of Kashmir.¹⁸⁷

Child marriage, except among the Brahmanas and Kayastha who practice it even today, was perhaps as rare among other classes as widow re-marriage among the former. Though the endogamy has been the general rule, cases of inter-caste marriages, particularly among the lower classes have not been rare, and polygamy and widow re-marriage have been almost a universal practice. There is no instance of Polyandry in ancient Assam except among some tribes. It has been a universal practice to take or demand a dowry from the bride's father. Instances of paying some sort of bride's price by the bridegroom's parents were not rare, and this has a parallel in the marriage by purchase, found so commonly among the non-Aryan tribes in Assam.¹⁸⁸

The practice of *sati* and concubinage was probably known. Bhaskaravarman's name is associated with concubines. The prevalence of the system is known from the *Yoginī Tantra*, which enjoins upon Brahmana widows to burn themselves on the funeral pyres of their husbands; Vaisya and Sudra widows were also allowed to do it if they moved by a deep sense of love for their husbands. It was prohibited for unchaste women and those having many children.¹⁸⁹ Chastity and devotion to their husbands were the main qualities of Brahmana women who are mentioned in the epigraphs. Motherhood was one of the outstanding aims in married life; women are therefore represented as mothers of ideal sons. Jivada, the mother of Harjjaravarman is described as being like Kunti, the mother of Ydhisthira, and Subhadra, the mother of Abhimanyu. The Nidhanpur plates describe Yajnavati the mother of Mahendrarvarman as resembling the sacrificial wood which produces fire.

Some details of the life of town women as well as of the secular and sacred courtesans can be gleaned from the epigraphs. Capriciousness is said to be a trait of the women of the town.¹⁹⁰ The *purdah* system was unknown and women used to bath openly in rivers.¹⁹¹ The Bargaon grant mentions the *vesya* and *varastri*, both meaning courtesans, who generally resided in the streets of the city. The Puranas have laid down that the woman who lends her couch to five husbands is called *vesya*.¹⁹² The custom of appointing women as dancers and courtesans in connection with temple services which probably came into vogue in India about the third century CE¹⁹³

became quite common in Assam. Vanamala in his Tezpur Grant made gifts of *vesyas* to the temple of Hatakesvara Śiva.¹⁹⁴ These women dedicated to temple services were usually known as *Nati* and *Daluhangana*. According B.K. Kakati, *Daluhangana* is an Austric formation from *daluha* (temple) and *angina* (women).¹⁹⁵ Their duties were to fan the idol with camara or Tibetan ox-tails,¹⁹⁶ to prepare garlands, and to sing and dance before the god.

During the Ahom rule, womenfolk of Assam were freer than their counterparts of India in the middle-ages. The *pardah* system was unknown. According to Shihabuddin, the wives of the kings and the peasants alike never veiled their faces any body and they moved about in the market places with bare heads.¹⁹⁷ The self-immolation of widows was not wide-spread in Assam. However in the medieval biographies some cases of self-immolation were found. A widow was not allowed to *samisa* food. During the days of *ambubachi* she was allowed to take fruit only and no cooked food was permitted. This austerity was observed by the Brahman widows and not obligatory to widows of other castes. The *Kayastha* widows, however, passed their days like the Brahmana widows.¹⁹⁸

The Assamese people in the medieval period performed their marriages according to Vedic rites. In the observance of the social rites of the ceremony, however, tribal or local influence is still discernable. The traditional rites are performed by the tribes who accepted initiation from Vaisnava pontiffs. *Chaklang biya*, the traditional Ahom marriage custom was practiced by the Ahoms according to their own rites. When the Ahom king married a Hindu girl, then Vedic rites were observed.

However there was no prevalence of dowry system at that time. Rather, there was the practice of paying bride-price (*ga-dhan*). Among the Brahmanas and *Kayasthas*, there was no practice of child marriage. Among the tribal communities, girls could chose her own husband and her consent was always accepted. Widow marriage was prevalent but not among the Brahmanas and *Kayasthas*.

Literature, epigraphs and the sculpted remains provide the evidence of the types of dress and ornaments used by the Assamese both-males and females. *The Kālikā Purāna* (Ch. 69) states that Assamese garments were known as *vastra* or *acchadana*. In the same *Purana* (969/2) it is mentioned that both stitched and unstitched garments were used. As appears from the sculptures, the male dress consisted of a *paridhana*,

described in detail in the *Kālikā Purāna* (69/5), like the present day ‘dhoti’ or undergarment, worn round the waist, held tight by a parivesa in the waist and with folds in the front, hanging down to the knee or just below it. Bana states that Harsa gave one parivesa to hamsavega.¹⁹⁹ The same authority mentions leather *parivesa*. The upper garments called *uttariya* were specially used by the higher classes. The males of distinctive status used a head dress, ordinarily called *paguri* (turban).²⁰⁰

Women had distinctive garments according to their status, married and unmarried. Generally, women appear to have worn two garments, the upper and the lower. The lower garment descended from the stomach to the ankles and was fastened by means of nivibandha. The complete dress consisted of a gridle (*mekhela*) worn round the waist with a ‘*riha*’, worn round the waist and breast and a ‘*cadara*’ (upper garment), one end of which was coiled round the waist just over the ‘*riha*’ and the other end placed across the breast and a shoulder behind. The garments were usually ornamented with embroidery and a particular dress indicated one’s status in the society. Married women wore veils and took particular care of their hair dressing with the help of combs, made of ivory, wood and bamboo, called in Assamese ‘*kakoi*’ (*kankatika*). The Bargaon grant refers to the use of jeweled mirror (*manimaya-darpana*) by women in their coqueties. The ‘*tilaka*’ (a mark, made of red paste) on the forehead between the eye-brows including that on the hairs above indicated their married status as well as feminine grace.

The existing materials refer to the use of cotton, varieties of silk, woolen and leather garments, both simple or dyed and embroidered. The *Kālikā Purāna* (68/12; 69/2) mentions varieties of garments, made of *karpasa* (cotton) *kambala* (wool), *valka* (bark), *kosaja* (silk from cocoons) and hemp cloth (*sanavastram*): *valkalam kosajam vastrametattrayam matam / romajam kambalancaitadanena tu catustayam //*. The use of garments, made of fibres or barks of trees has been most common among the tribes. Females of higher and wealthier classes wore both pat and muga during festive seasons or occasionally as these clothes are fine and costly. Use of edi clothes during winter season is also known in the period.²⁰¹ *Harsacharita* mentions some painted and variously dyed clothes, which includes some of them among the presents of Bhaskara to Harsa.²⁰² The *Kālikā Purāna* also mentioned about the coloured garments.

The use of ornaments in ancient Assam is proved by both literature and sculptures. The *Kālikā Purāna*²⁰³ gives an extensive list of Assamese ornaments made of gold, silver and other metal, used by women from head to foot. The ornaments were usually made of gold and silver, and the main designs were worn in the feet, fingers, arms, wrists, neck and forehead. The sculptured specimens testify to the use of necklace (*hara*) of beads in particular; sometimes a pendant was attached to it in the middle; a flat necklace was called *galpata*. The *keyura* and *angada* were worn on the upper arms. The bracelet was known as *kankana*. The use of *kundalas* (ear rings), *nupuras* (anklets) and bangles were known to the people of Assam. The Tezpur grant mentioned that unmarried girls wore *kinkini* attached small bells.

The use of perfumes and cosmetics is also indicated by some sources. *Arthasatra* also mentioned different varieties of sandal and aloe wood from various places of Assam. The same source gives an exhaustive list of perfumes (*taila-parnikas*) from Assam. This is supported by *Harsacharita*. The *Kālikā Purāna*²⁰⁴ further points to the use of various perfumes. The use of scented oil by women and men before and after bath has been a common practice among the Assamese. The Tezpur grant²⁰⁵ (v. 30) mentions that women used scented oil and anointed their breasts with odorous substances.

Another favourite practice of the womenfolk, as given in the *Yoginī Tantra* was the coloring of their teeth, like the use of *anjana* for their eyes.

Of the articles of luxury, mention may be made of fans, made particularly of bamboo, cane and date-palm tree, garlands, foot-wear, umbrellas, *japis* (sun-hats) prepared from date-palm trees etc. The grant of Vallabhadeva refers to sandals with leather straps.²⁰⁶ Umbrellas were usually made of cotton cloth. With these few articles of luxury and necessities of life, the Assamese people lived a simple life.

The Ahom kings were fond of games and amusements. The *Deodhai Asam Buranji*²⁰⁷ gives details of different pastimes organized for the amusements of the royalty and the nobility but open to the public as well. These were the fights of animals like elephant, bull, buffalo, tiger, bear and crocodile and birds like cocks and hawks, between their own species or with others. Catching and hunting of elephant was one of the favourite pastimes of the Ahom kings. However, other pastimes like wrestling, jugglery and acrobatic feats were imported from Bengal. Besides these, there were

some organized pastimes which included swimming, rowing, playing a kind of small ball called dhop, kite-flying, dice, etc.

Bhawnas was one of the new sources of entertainment to the villages which brought refreshment to the life of the people. *Bihu* was the most popular and important festival. Other festivals like Rashjatra, Doljatra, Janmastami, Durga puja, Śivaratri etc., were performed in different institutions scattered all over the kingdom. *Bihu* dance, *Ojapali*, *Sutradhari*, *Dasavatar*, *Krishna-Nritya* and dances and music of various tribes were prominent. Horns, flutes, trumpets, tabors, drums etc., were the most common musical instruments of the time. The religious mendicants used to play on lute. In the temples and Satras, other musical instruments like cymbals, special and different kinds of drums were used; in later period Mughal musical performance like *Nageras* under royal patronage were introduced.

King Rudra Singha had high regard for Mughal music and sent Assamese musicians to Delhi to learn the playing of instruments like Pakhaj. Further, it is learnt that on the occasion of Tripuri envoy's visit to his court, Tripuri musicians performed dance and music in their own style.²⁰⁸

Economic Life

Neither literature nor epigraphy depicts the economic pursuits of the people of Assam in the period before the arts of cattle-rearing and cultivation was known. As in other parts of India, Assam no doubt passed through various economic stages. It is worth nothing that the stage of hunting was not entirely over among the tribes in Assam until comparatively recent times, and we find traces of it even now among some of those of the inaccessible hills. The art of cattle-rearing along with cultivation, for which the land was privately owned, was therefore, an early institution in Assam.

Cultivation was carried on in the beginning by a crude method of '*jhuming*'. But with the knowledge of the use of hoes and ploughs, people took to a more complicated process of cultivation. This method of the cultivation of land particularly in the agrahara settlements is proved by the grants. Extensive cultivation of paddy, at least from the 6th century CE, is proved by the fact that the areas of all donated lands are expressed in terms of the measures of paddy they produce. The *Yoginī Tantra* mentions a number of varieties in connection with the worship of different deities.²⁰⁹

The cultivation of sugar cane is indicated by the presents sent to Harsa by Bhaskara where *guda* (molasses) prepared from sugarcane in earthen pots is mentioned.²¹⁰ Cultivation of pumpkins is also mentioned by the literature and records. Bana mentions among the presents of Bhaskara pumpkin gourds, containing painting materials.²¹¹ Bargaon grant also mentioned about the cultivation of gourds. The cultivation of various vegetables is mentioned in many works.²¹²

Besides these, the cultivation of fruit trees is especially prominent in the inscriptions as it is, also in the contemporary literary records. The inscriptions mention *kantaphala* (jack fruit), *Amra* (mango), *Jambu* (*Eugenia jambollana*), *Sriphala*, *Dumbari* (fig), *Sakhotaka* (walnut), *Badari* (jujube), *Lakuca*, *Amalaka* (a kind of bread-fruit tree), *Betasa* (gamboze), *Puga*, (betel nut), *Coraka* (a kind of wild palm tree), *Rudraska* (bead tree) and many sour fruits, such as ‘*Au*’ (*dillenis indica*) ‘*Tenteli*’ and others. The *Fathiyah-i-Ibriyah* abundance of jack fruit and coconut is evidenced by Yuan Chwang who states that in Kāmarūpa “the jack fruit were in great esteem though plentiful.”²¹³ There are also coconut trees, pepper vines, areca trees and *sadiji* (*malabothrum*) in great plenty.²¹⁴ Areca nut and betel vine is supported by a number of literary sources and epigraphy. This is mentioned in the Apsad inscription of Adityasena,²¹⁵ Nowgong grant (V.5), *Harsacarita*,²¹⁶ *Yoginī Tantra*,²¹⁷ Qazim,²¹⁸ and other sources. Black pepper²¹⁹ was an extensively cultivated product of Assam like lac.²²⁰ The production of *tejpat* was extensive in Assam, which has been rightly a point out by Watt. The abundance of *tejpat* is also testified by Qazim.²²¹

Inscriptions of ancient Assam refer to the hunting of animals for meat and also for pleasure. As already mentioned that people of Assam constituted both Aryan and non-Aryan who were both meat and fish eaters. Both fishing and hunting constituted one of the important occupations of the people. But the existing materials do not show that a considerable section of the people depended entirely on these pursuits. Epigraph mention a class of people called *Kaivartas*, whose main profession was most probably fishing. Various articles such as traps, bamboo rods, armed with iron nails; another device, consisted of poisoning the river or a pond with a kind of herbs. No evidence of angling is found from our period.

Like the ancient period people of medieval Assam was also mainly based on agriculture. All the people from noble downwards were connected with agriculture

directly or indirectly. Cultivation was done through ploughing in the valley but in the hills, people resorted *jhumming*. In course of time, there grew a wealthy people, who carried on considerable amount of trade, both internal and external. But then also, there never developed an urban economy brisk with industrial and commercial pursuits at the popular level. The rest of the people lived neither in plenty nor in poverty because their wants were very few. Cultivation was extensive throughout the country and except during war times and natural calamities, people did not suffer from acute scarcity of food-stuffs. Regarding the population of the country, no accurate information is available although from the time of Pratap Singha Ahom kings conducted census and survey of land from time to time.

Agriculture was the mainstay of the people of Assam. Rice being the staple food of the people, the paddy cultivation was the main preoccupation of the agriculturalist. The *Yoginī Tantra* gives a list of different varieties of paddy which are suitable for offering in *sraddhas* and religious ceremonies. As this *Tantra* was composed in medieval Assam, so the different varieties mentioned must have cultivated during that period. Md. Kazim and Shihabuddin, the two Muslim historians of the seventeenth century have testified to the extensive cultivation of rice and edible fruits. Shihabuddin Talish writes, “In this country they make the surface of fields and gardens so level that the eye cannot find the least elevation in it up to the extreme horizon.”²²² “The chief crop of the country is rice, but the thin and long varieties of the grain are rare. Wheat, barely and millets were grown but not extensively.”²²³ The statement of Shihabuddin that the finer varieties of rice were rare is only practically true in view of the fact that early Assamese literature, even prior to the seventeenth century has mentioned the sweet smelling *jaha* on several occasions. Madhav Kandali of the 14th century has mentioned *kharika jaha* a thin and long sweet-smelling finer variety of rice.²²⁴ Contemporary sources evidence the cultivation of different varieties of pulse-crops, oil-seeds, vegetables and spices.

Regarding horticulture, there are enough evidences furnished by the literatures from the fourteenth centuries. References of varieties of fruits and fruit- gardens were occurring in medieval literature. Assam has been known for varieties of fruits, especially citrus fruits and they were found in every homestead garden. Mention of varieties of citrus fruits are found scattered over the entire medieval literature in Assamese.²²⁵ As regards of trees and flowers, all these were grown in the medieval

period mentioned in early Assamese literature. A list of trees that grow and found abundantly in Assam is given by M'cosh in his *topography in Assam* (1837) where he describes ninety varieties of trees with their girth and usefulness. All kinds of flowers mentioned in classical literature as well as some local varieties of flowers were reared in Assam and most of them have found places in Assamese literature.

There was cultivation of poppy but it was used mainly as a drug and its consumption was confined to the kings and the nobles.²²⁶ Extensive sugarcane cultivation was done in the medieval period. Areca-nut and betel vine were indispensable part of Assamese hospitality. Their extensive use and cultivation are supported by epigraphic and literary sources of medieval Assam. There were also different varieties of bamboos which were grown in Assam, both wild-grown and cultivated. These were used for various purposes according to their length, girth and durability. Ornamental umbrellas made of bamboo and leaves of *takau plant* (*Corypha taliera*) were one important article of trade.

In Kāmarūpa reference has been made about various craftsmen. There are records of references to weavers, spinners, goldsmiths, potters and workers in ivory, bamboo, wood, hide and cane. Since early period Assam enjoyed a reputation as producing silk of a high degree of perfection. The antiquity of the silk industry in India is not known clearly, but the weight of evidence seems to be in favour of its importation from China. Probably it was imported by way of the Brahmaputra valley.²²⁷ Pliny shows some knowledge of the silk trade that was carried on through Assam.²²⁸ The Muhammedan historians noticed that the silks of Assam were excellent and resembled those of China. Tavernier writes of Assam silk “produced on trees” and adds that “the stuffs made of them were very brilliant.”²²⁹ The royal presents which Hamsavega carried to Harsa included “silken cloths (*Jatipattikah*) somooth as birch bark” “sacks of woven silk”, “wrappers of white bark-silk’ and various kinds of smooth-figured textiles.

The three varieties of Indian silk generally known as *Pat*, *Endi*, and *Muga* are specially associated with Assam. The names *Pat* (*Pattaja*), and *Endi* (*Eranda*) no doubt originated from Sanskrit, but *Muga* seems to be a characteristically Assamese name. The rearing of silk worms, even to-day, is the main occupation of many castes

of Assam.²³⁰ Assam was probably known even in the time of the *Ramayana* as a country of “cocoon rearers”.

A considerable amount of cotton is even now produced in Assam, and the art of making cotton cloths has reached high perfection.²³¹ Skill in the art of weaving and spinning has always been held to be one of the highest attainments of an Assamese woman. Almost all the terms expressing excellence of attainments in a woman can be traced to this idea of skill in spinning and weaving.

Another important ancient industry was gold-washing and manufacture of jewellery. Gold was found in abundance in many of the rivers of Assam,²³² and there is an indication in the *Periplus*, as Schoff supposes, of Assam gold being brought to market-places near the Ganges delta. The Tezpur grant of Vanamala states that the river Lauhitya carried down gold-dust from legendary gold-bearing boulders of the sacred kailasa mountain. According to the Silimpur inscription (V.1) king Jayapala offered a gift of gold equal to his own weight (*tulya purusadana*) to a learned Brahmana, over and above nine hundred gold coins.

An idea of the variety and excellence of the ancient jeweller’s skill may be derived from a perusal of the list of presents to Harsa from Bhaskaravarman as described by the court poet Bana. Bana mentions the exquisite ornamented *Abhoga* umbrella with the jeweled ribs: ornaments which crimsoned the heavenly spaces with the light of the finest gems: shining crest jewels: pearl necklaces which seemed the source of the milk-ocean’s whiteness: quantities of pearls, shell, sapphire, and other drinking vessels by skilful artists (*kusala-silpilokollikhitanam*), cages of coral and rings of ivory, entrusted with rows of huge pearls from the brows of elephants.²³³ The inscription of Ratnapala mentions the existence of a copper mine within his kingdom which the king worked with profit.

The list further mentions a number of different types of craftsmen such as basket-makers, wood-workers and painters. The description of the artistically carved, painted and decorated boats in Vanamala’s Copper-plate itself bears ample testimony to the high proficiency of the early wood-carvers in their craft. Mat-making was another allied art. Early literature refers to the well-decorated and coloured *sital patis* (cool mats) used by the rich people.

Of the other important crafts mention may be made of engraving, with special reference to royal charters either on stone or copper-plates, brick-making²³⁴ and stone-carving. The extensive remains of temples and buildings give ample evidence of working on stone and brick. The art of making pottery was known from very early times. The Nidhanpur grant mentions *kumbhakaragarta* (potter's pit), and the Kamauli grant refers to the *kumbhakar*s, who were professional pottery makers. All these prove that varied industrial arts were developed in Assam at an early period and were continued to be practiced till recent times.

Textile industry in Assam under the Ahom government reached a very high point of perfection. Tevernier writes that silk was produced on trees and the stuffs made of them were very brilliant. Since ancient times Assam as well known for her silk fabrics. The three varieties of silk –muga, endi or edi and pat were produced. The *muga* silk was an article of trade in Bengal as well as in the Coromandal and Malabar coasts in the early 17th century. *Muga* silk was also the most important article of trade with countries like Tibet, China and Bhutan. Kamarkuchi was famed for the best kind of cotton woven with a kind of locally made thread called *murakata suta*. In Nowgong also, this special thread was made for weaving royal garments.

Woodcraft, in general, did attain some degree of excellence although wooden articles used by the people in general were simple both in type and design which did not require specialized training, tools or technology. An abundant supply of timber wood made it possible for the Assamese to build numerous boats, both in the ancient and in the medieval times.

In metal-casting, Assam reached a high degree of proficiency under the Ahoms. Many articles were made of gold, silver, copper, bell-metal and iron by professional communities like the *Sonaris*, *Kanhars*, *Moriyas*, *Kamars* etc. Many people in Assam were engaged in ivory industry. Rudra Singha sent mats, fans and chessmen made of ivory as presents to the Mughal Emperor at Delhi.

Assam in the ancient period had commercial relation with the neighbouring provinces through various trade routes. The excellence of Assam's water communication is evident and it certainly facilitated trade in every direction.²³⁵ The main route from Kāmarūpa to Bengal, Bihar and Orissa was by the rivers Brahmaputra and Ganges. The most intimate contact was with Magadha. The earliest mention of the trade route

between Kāmarūpa and Magadha is found in the *Arthasastra*. In the middle of the seventh century, when Bhaskaravarman invited Hiuen Tsang to Assam, the pilgrim started from Magadha, passed by Campa (modern Bhagalpur), Kajangala (Rajmahal) and Pundravardhana (Rangpur) and so going eastward reached Kāmarūpa.²³⁶ This must have been the usual route from Magadha. When Bhaskaravarman was alarmed at having angered Harsa by refusing to part with the great Chinese teacher, he hurriedly availed himself of this route to meet Harsa on the bank of the Ganges near Kie-shu-ho-ki-lo (Kajurgira-Kankjal, Rajmahal).²³⁷

The cultural and commercial contact between ancient Assam and China both by land and sea routes is shown by a number of sources, which support our contention that both the lands contained some elements of common culture, as China supplied some earlier racial elements that contributed to the development of the indo-Chinese culture in Assam. The earliest reference to commercial relations between India and China through Assam-Burma routes is found in the accounts of Chang Kien (200 BCE). A detailed description of the Assam-Burma routes to China is given in Kia tan (8th century CE). At a subsequent time numerous other routes were opened into China through Burma, Bhutan and Tibet, and not only the people from plains but also the hill tribes, the Abhars, Daflas and the Mishimis in particular, were responsible for these early commercial contacts. These trading routes confirm our belief that ancient Assam had regular commercial transactions with China and the Far East through Burma, Manipur, Patkai and other passes of Assam in the north and the south-east.

People of medieval Assam carried on trade with Mughal India through Bengal. There were four routes from Bengal to Assam, one by water and three by land. For conducting trade with Bengal, choukis or outposts were established at important centres and placed under the control of officers called Duaria Barua or Chakial Barua. The most important chouki was Kandahar or Hadira, usually called Assam chouki by the British. Export from Assam were stick lac, *muga* silk, *muga* cloth, madder, black pepper, cotton, Ivory, bell-metal vessels, mustard seed, iron hues, slaves, thaikal fruit. Import to Assam from Bengal were salt, ghee, fine pulse, sugar, stone beads, corals, jewels & pearls, cutlery & glasswares (Europeans), spices, paints, copper, red lead, English woolens, tefetas, Benares silk (kingkhap), satin (cloth), gold & silver cloth, shells, muslin. This gives an idea of Assam-Mughal trade. The above list of

commodities have been supplied by Buchanan Hamilton as it had been in the first decade of the nineteenth century.²³⁸

Though the above noted resources directly reflect the state of affairs in the first two decades of the nineteenth century, they nevertheless represent to a certain extent similar conditions obtaining in the previous two centuries also. Evidences furnished by literary and other sources give some indications of the commercial dealings, both internal and external, of the people of Assam from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries.

Trade was also carried on with the Himalayan regions like Tibet and Bhutan through the *duars* or passes of which eleven existed on the northern frontier of Bengal and Cooch Behar and seven on the northern frontier of Assam. The exports from Assam were lac, madder, silk, erendi silk and dried fish. The Bhutias imported woolen clothes, gold-dusts, salt, musk, horses, the celebrated Tibetan Chowries and Chinese silk.²³⁹ The Bhutanese and the Tibetan traders transacted business in cash as well as kind. Import from Tibet consisted mainly of woolen clothes, gold dusts, salt, musks, horses, chowries and Chinese silk. The protracted internal trouble in the last two decades of the eighteenth and of the first two decades of the nineteenth centuries considerably affected the trade through Kuriapara pass. However it should be noted that the accounts of commercial transaction left by the European writers are related to the last phase of the Ahom rule.

It is not known when coins were for the first time used as a medium of exchange in Assam. In early times, when the value of an article was measured in terms of commodities, all business transactions were no doubt carried on by a system of barter, and as in other parts of India, as shown by early literature, animals like cattle, animal skins, garments, rice, cowries, etc., were used for barter. There are reference to the use of gold coins in the Silimpur inscription (11th century CE), as discussed earlier. The earliest reference to the use of cowries is found in the *Harsacharita*; Bana states that Bhaskara sent to Harsa “heaps of black and white cowries” as presents.²⁴⁰ The use of cowries is further proved by the Tezpur Rock Inscription of Harjjara.²⁴¹ The earliest reference to a silver coin probably from Kāmarūpa is noticed in the *Arthasastra* which mentions it under the name of Gaulikam.²⁴²

The medieval works, particularly chronicles, *vamsavalis* and bio-graphies of religious preachers, contain reference to the use of media of exchange including the barter system and coins, both silver and gold and also cowries (*kadi*). According to Shihabuddin Talish, currency in the Ahom kingdom consisted of cowries, rupees and gold coins. *Buranjis* make reference to mohar (coin),: aka, sicca rup or rup (rupee), adhali (half-rupee), siki or maha (quarter rupee), as-maha (one eight of a rupee), chartatiya (one sixteenth of a rupee) and kara or kari (cowrie). *Ad-maha* and *charatiya* were minted for the first time during the reign of Gaurinath Singha (1780-95 CE). Koch coins called *narayani* were also accepted in Assam. In western Assam this *narayani taka* were mostly used in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In central and eastern Assam the Ahom coins and cowries served as media of exchange from the seventeenth century till the end of the Ahom rule.²⁴³ However it is noticed that coins did not play a major role in ordinary day-to-day transactions, rather cowries and the barter system played the conspicuous role. The Ahom kings used to mint coins to mark special occasions of their reigns, such as formal coronation, performance of the *Rikkhvan* ceremony and similar other occasions.

With the increase of external trade since the reign of Rudra Singha, there was a corresponding increase in the circulation of money. The land-grant Copper-plate inscription (Siddeswara temple) of Siba Singha of 1723 CE²⁴⁴ and an inscription of 1739 CE provided the price list of some of the items in the early half of the eighteenth century. Though earlier barter system was prominent but with the changing time money became the medium of exchange.

Religious Life

Brahmanical Religion

Religion played an important role in shaping the destiny of human life. Ancient Assam witnessed a rapid cultural transformation at the advent of the Aryans. Their migration to this region made a deep impact on the religious outlook of the people. This province was first referred to in the Epics, and in connection the story of Amurtarajas in the *Ramayana* is very significant as it seems to refer to the Aryanisation of the country by a prince of Madhyadesa. The inscriptions also contain references to immigration of Brahmanas to Assam from Madhyadesa (Middle Country), as well as immigration of Assamese Brahmanas to other provinces. The

system of settling Brahmanas in Assam was continued right upto the Ahom period. The incomplete set of Nidhanpur Copperplates alone bear the names of no less than two hundred and five Brahmanas of various *gotras* and Vedas, to whose families Bhutivarman (600 CE) granted land in the Mayurasalamala *Agrahara*. Such Brahmana settlers doubtless spread the Vedic culture in the province. The settlement of Brahmanas with the support of the kings, the movement received a great impetus from the 4th century CE.²⁴⁵

No less important is the account of the Videha Prince Naraka who established himself as the king and conqueror of Kāmarūpa. It is also mentioned in the Epics and the Puranas that, the country had been originally inhabited by the Mlecchas and the Kiratas, who were driven by Naraka to the hills and the marshy region near the sea (*vidravitah kirataste sagarantam samasritah; sarvan kirtan purvasyam sagarante nyavesayat*).²⁴⁶ The religious leaders responsible for the import of the Vedic religious system were the Brahmanas. The type of religion propagated by them may be designated as the Brahmanical religion. The origin of the Brahmanical religion goes back to the Vedas. It consisted of the worship of the elements of nature, but later on it was developed into the worship of personified deities, but in the midst of which something like a doctrine of monotheism was worked out with many philosophical ideas.

The Brahmanical culture and religion had gained a firm footing in ancient Assam at least from the 5th century CE. The use of Sanskrit language in the Nagajari-Khanikargaon Stone Inscription and donation of land to the Brahmanas, the mention of *Bhagavan* and the reference to *Balabhadrasvamin* in the Umachal Rock Inscription of Surendravarman, the establishment of an *asrama* by Avaguna as mentioned in the Barganga Rock Inscription of the time of Bhutivarman and a reference in the same inscription to the performance of the *Asvamedha* sacrifice by the same king proved this fact. Hien-Tsang's statement that he saw hundreds of *Deva* temple in Kāmarūpa is a definite evidence of the spread of the Brahmanical religion in ancient Assam.

A salient feature of the Brahmanical religion was *Vrata* or fasting. The Nowgong Copperplate Grant (V.17) refers to king Vanamala who got absorbed in the spirit of Mahadeva by committing religious suicide by fasting unto death. Such art of self

sacrifice are met with in the contemporary epigraphic records of other provinces also.²⁴⁷

Danas formed a very important aspect of the Brahmanical religion. The earning of merit through charity, as enjoined by the *Smritis* and the *Puranas* was common practice. Verses regarding *dana* were cited in the inscriptions of the land grants from the *Mahabharata* and the *Puranas*. These Verses affirm from the beneficial nature of the gifts and proclaim the merits accruing therefrom and condemn those who deprive the grantees of land to future evils.

From the beginning of the thirteenth to the end of the seventeenth centuries may be called a period of expansion and consolidation of Brahmanical religion as the dominant religion of Assam. Although all the historical dynasties and kings professed Brahmanical religion and strived utmost for the maintenance and spread of it, yet the bulk of the population being ethnically non-Aryan remained outside the pale of Brahmanical religion till the beginning of the thirteenth century.²⁴⁸ As a result of the patronage of the kings and missionary activities of the Brahmins, the Brahmanical influence gradually perlocated in the entire valley. Ruins of Hindu Art and architecture of the pre-Ahom period and the stone images of the Hindu Gods and Goddesses of the same period discovered at any places amply prove how powerfully Brahmanical religion exerted its influence among the people.

Śaivism

Śaivism, the worship of Śiva prevailed in Assam from the remote past and popular among both the aboriginal and the Aryanized people. This is shown by literature and archaeology. In the *Kālikā Purāna*, reference of various sacred places of Assam are given and among those the number of sacred places connected with Śiva worship is larger than that of places associated with Vishnu or *Devi* worship. The *Kālikā Purāna* mentions fifteen centres of the faith (*Kalika Purana*, Chaps., 81,82) and describes that before the introduction of *Devi* worship in Kāmākhyā by Naraka, Śiva was recognized as the guardian deity of the land, which was his own domain: (*sa ca desah svarajyarthe purvam guptasca Sambhuna*).²⁴⁹ In *Assam Buranji* by Gunabhiram Barua, it is stated that Śiva worship was first introduced in early Assam by Jalpesvara, a king of north Bengal (Jalpaiguri) which was formerly included in the kingdom of Kāmarūpa. The same king is said to have founded the temple of Jalpesvara at

Jalpaiguri. B K Kakati considers that Śaivism in some gross form with wine and flesh was the prevailing religion of the aboriginal *Kiratas*.²⁵⁰

The inscriptions contain definite references to the worship of Śiva. The earliest inscription referred to Śiva is the Dubi Copperplate Inscription of Bhaskaravarman. The grant (V.I) refers to “that God Sasisekhara who is to be meditated upon, who wears the moon as the crest jewel, who is lovely, who holds the Pinaka bow and whose body is bedecked or besmeared with ashes”. This is repeated in the Nidhanpur Copperplate Inscription of the king also.

The inscriptions of the Salasthambha dynasty also give us an idea of the concept of Śiva prevalent at that time. The Grant of Vanamala, while recording the incident of *Krsna*’s bestowal of the kingdom of Kāmarūpa on Bhagadatta states that Bhagadatta worshipped Śiva with great humility and penances.(V.5). His successor Bajradatta was devoted to Śiva (V.8). In the Gachtal Grant of Gopala (V.3) the river *Lauhitya* (Brahmaputra) in spate is compared to Lord Śiva dancing the tandava. The Bargaon Grant (V.2) refers to the auspicious power of *Sankara* engaged entirely on the annihilation of the column of sin, while verse 11 refers to Śiva as *Hara* who is capable of conquering enemies in battle single-handed.

The *Harsacharita* mentions that Bhaskaravarman from his childhood firmly resolved “never to do homage to any being except the lotus feet of Śiva”. The pre-eminence of Śiva worship is clearly indicated by the prasastis found in many of the copper-plates of the period. Besides, the kings in these records described themselves as *Parama Varaha* and *Parama Mahesvara*, which clearly illustrate that they were unquestionably great champions of Śiva.

The Gauhati Grant of Indrapala (V.1) refers to Śiva being defeated by *Gauri* in the game of dice and being taunted thus, “Oh gambler, I have today won in gambling all your belongings, such as the club, axe, the bull, the crescent moon and the like but I return to you all these; only let only Ganga remain as my slave for fetching water”. The same Grant in verse 14 refers to *Parvati* as Śiva’s devoted wife.

The inscriptions indicate that quite a number of the kings of the ruling dynasties of ancient Assam were devotees of Śiva. In the Tezpur Grant (V.5) there is a reference to Bhagadatta worshipping Śiva after attaining the overlordship of Prāgjyotisa by

penance or meditation (*tapasya*). But in the Parbatiya Copperplate Inscription (V.5) of the same ruler, there is a reference to Bhagadatta's brother Vajradatta who "going over to the forest propitiated Isvara (Śiva) by penance." This clearly indicates that the deity was worshipped in the forest through penance. In the *Sankara-Narayana* image from Deopani, which begins with an invocation to Omkara (the manifestation of the supreme self), there is reference to "singing the name of *Narayana* and *Sankara*, the spouse of *Gauri*". However, at the same time the deity was also enshrined in temples. The Tezpur Grant (V.24) clearly refers to the "Himalayan-high temple of Lord Hatakesvara at whose feet bow with devotion the host of the best of Gods", while verse 29 refers to the *Kamakuta* mountain on the peak of which Sri *Kamesvara* and *Mahagauri*, their feet placed on the foot-stool glowing with mass of rays from hemlets of the Gods and demons are residing..'. Again in the Gauhati and Guwakuchi Copperplates (V.15) of Indrapala, refers to images of Śiva being installed in white washed temples. While demarcating the boundary of the land granted in the Guwakuchi Copperplate Grant, there is a reference to lands granted to (temples of) *Mahagauri* and *Kamesvara*. In the Copperplates of Vallabhdeva there is a reference to the establishment of an alms-house for the distribution of food (*bhakta-sala anna sattra*) near a temple of the God *Mahadeva* (Śiva) and the endowment of a number of villages for its maintenance. The Tezpur Rock Inscription refers to Harjaravarman as being devoted to Lord *Mahesvara*, while in the Hayunthal Grant the king's epithets include *Paramesvara*, *Paramabhattacharaka* and *Paramamahesvara*. In the Tezpur Grant Vanamalavarman is described in the lines following verse 29 as "Śaiva to the core, with his mind devoted to *Paramesvara*.' Thus it is apparent that both these rulers were devotees of Śiva who is also regarded as the Supreme Being or *Paramesvara*.

Inscriptions further testify to the widespread of the faith and the worship of Śiva in his different mythological manifestations. He was also conceived both in his abstract and concrete forms, to some of which have already been mentioned. The concrete representation will also be evident from the study of his sculptures.²⁵¹ As has already been indicated he stood both for creation and destruction, explained by his various names. He is *Aideva* (Khonamukhi grant, v.1), *Paramamahesvara* (Tezpur Rock Ins. L.2), *Mahesvara* (Dubi grant, v.55; Nidhanpur grant, v.2), *Isvara* (Tezpur grant), *Mahadeva* (grant of vallabhdeva, v.13), *Śiva* (Tezpur grant, v. 5; Kamauli grant v.

20), *Mahavaraha* (Gauhati grant); *Prajadhinatha* (*ibid*), *Sambhu* (*ibid*, v.10), *Sankara* (Bargaon grant, vv. 1-2), *Pasupati* (Gauhati grant, vv.1-2), Bhava (Nowgong grant, v.12), Isa (*ibid* v.8), Pinakapani (Dubi grant, v.1; Tezpur grant,v.2), Rudra (Nowgong grant, v.1), Hetuka Sulin (Tezpur grant, v.24), Gauripati (Grant of Vallabhadeva), *Hara* (Bargaon grant), *Kamesvara* (Tezpur grant; Guwakuchi grant), *Padmanatha* (Kamauli grant, v.26), Kitava (Gauhati grant, v.1) *Ardhnarisvara* (Khonamukhi grant, v. 1: Dubhankarapataka grant, v.1) and others.

“The worship of Śiva in his various forms is confirmed by the extensive ruins of temples and icons of the deity, found throughout the state. The evidence shows that as early as the 5th century CE, if not earlier, he was worshipped by his iconographic representations in temples and the faith was popular among all classes of people.”²⁵² Although iconographic representations of Śiva in his various forms are discovered in Assam, it appears that he was chiefly worshipped in the form of *lingam*, an upright pillar or rod of stone erected on a pedestal called *yoni*. The *Yoginī Tantra* states that the number *lingas* in Kāmarūpa exceeds in million.

Like the ancient period, people of medieval Assam were also worshipper of Śiva. Different tribes, which remained outside the pale of it, followed their respective religious beliefs and practiced traditional customs and practices unhindered by chief ruling powers. Śaivism which was the dominant religion of the ruling dynasties and also of the Hinduised population upto the twelfth century CE continued to receive homage from tribal communities and ruling dynasties before Neo-Vaisnavite movement. The Bodo-Kacharis worshipped a god called *Batho*, *Bathau*, *Bathau-Brai* or *Bathau-Siv-Rai*²⁵³ who was identified with Śiva, according to their tribal rites. The Brahmanised royal families worshipped Śiva according to Brahmanic rites but honoured tribal rites as well. This is clear from Naranarayan’s worshipping Śiva according to tribal rites with sacrifice of birds and animals, at the instance of his soldiers, before his starting on an expedition against the Ahoms in 1546 CE. Further it is mentioned in the *Darrang Rajvamsavali* that Naranarayan issued an edict by which he had legalized the tribal form of Śiva worship amongst the Koch, Mech and Kachari people, inhabiting the area to the north of the Gohain Kamal Ali.²⁵⁴ The Ahom king Pratap Singha with a view to securing the support of the tribal people built Śiva temples at Dergaon and Biswanath. Later, numerous Śiva temples

were built in different parts of the kingdom under the patronage of Tungkhungia line of the Ahom kings.

Śaktism

Śakti, the mother Goddess conceived as power both creative and destructive has been an object of worship in India from early times.²⁵⁵ The cult of fertility or the worship of the phallus, *linga* and *yoni*, personified later on as Śiva and the Mother Goddess or *Devi*, which formed the basis of Śaktism and Tantrikism, is found not only in the prehistoric finds, such as Neoliths and Megaliths which are so extensive in Assam but also from the Indus Valley remains.²⁵⁶ During the Indus Valley civilization, the worship of the female principle appears to have been in vogue among the Harappans as has been proved by the terracotta images of the Goddess and the ring stones.²⁵⁷ The Śakti as a cosmic energy, personified as a female, is one of the oldest faiths in India, and some of the names of the Goddess like Durga, Kali, and Uma occur in the Vedic literature.²⁵⁸ But it is almost certain that Śaktism had a non-Vedic origin and Uma or Kali was probably a female mountain ghost, which was later on identified with the wife of Rudra, or brought into line with the Brahmanic thoughts.²⁵⁹ The Epics and the Puranas are mainly responsible for the consecration of this female entity in Hindu pantheon and unfolding her diverse aspects supported by various myths and legends.²⁶⁰ The different female divinities such as Uma, Ambika, Durga, Parvati, Haimavati, Kali, Mahakali, Bhadrakali, Karali etc. came to be associated with the wife of Śiva²⁶¹ and the relationship between the Śaiva and the Śākta cults grew up. The Śākta cult rose into prominence in the early centuries of the Christian era.

The *Devi Purana*, a work composed about the end of the seventh or the beginning of the 8th century CE states that the *Devi* was worshipped in her different forms in different places, for instance in Kāmarūpa, Kāmākhyā, Bhottadesa, etc.(Chap 39.v.14 and chap 42, v.9). In his *Vishnu Purana*, Wilson remarks that Assam, or at least the north-east of Bengal (Kāmarūpa), seems to have been the source from which the Tantric and Śākta corruption of the religion of the Vedas and the Puranas proceeded. “Śaktism”, says Eliot, “in the sense of a definite sect with scriptures of its own, if not confined to the north-east corner, at least have its head-quarters there”.²⁶² Traditionally the Śākta cult is considered to have its centre in Kāmarūpa with its chief temple at Kāmākhyā. But strangely enough, in the inscriptions there is no trace of

Śakti worship, except the veiled references in the inscriptions of Vanamala and Indrapala to the temples of *Kamesvara Mahagauri*, and *Maha-gauri Kamesvara*.

The name of Goddess Kāmākhyā, does not appear in the early literature and the word according to B.K. Kakati, is non-sanskritic in origin, an Austric word meaning ghost or dead body. Kāmākhyā formerly a Goddess of ghosts and spirits was worshipped in a *smasana* or cremation ground. Throughout the medieval period, even down to the 18th century, the leading religion of Assam, however seems to be Śaktism.²⁶³ Kāmākhyā was the most holy and famous shrine of the sect and with its worship was associated the various rites, *mantras*, *mudras* and sacrifices.

Kāmarūpa was important centres of *Devi* worship both in her symbolic and iconographic representations under various names and along with her companion Śiva, is proved by literature and archaeology.

The extensive ruins of temples dedicated to *Devi* and different aspects of Śakti along with Śiva and their icons have been noticed from a number of places in Assam. This confirms our belief that the faith had an important stronghold in the land from early times.²⁶⁴

The existing materials, both records and remains, therefore, point to the widespread prevalence of the faith,²⁶⁵ even after the vaisnava reformation a great bulk of the population remained Śāktas, and the temple of Kāmākhyā is still one of the great centres of Hindu pilgrimage for all sects from all parts of India, and hundreds of animals and birds are sacrificed at the alter of the *Devi* in the name of religion.²⁶⁶ With the incorporation of later Buddhist ideas into the system, Kāmarūpa remained a noted centre of the Tantric-Buddhist faith.

The fertility Goddess worshipped by the tribes was accepted by the Brahmanas as Śakti and as stated earlier, since ancient times, Assam had been the important centre of Śakti worship. In the medieval period also *Devi* was worshipped in various forms by constructing numerous temples. The Chutiyas worshipped a Goddess called *Kechai Khaiti*, whom some scholars have identified with Goddess Dikkaravasini of the Tantras. There are also reasons to believe that the Sanskritised Goddess Kāmākhyā was originally a tribal deity, Kamakhi or Kamalakhi of the Bodos or Kamoi or Kamet of the Austriacs. The early Koch kings, including Naranarayan were

worshippers of Durga and the Ahom king Suklengmung *Gargaya Raja* evinced interest in Śaktism after his defeat at the hands of the Koches. Pratap Singha also encouraged the worship of Śakti with a view to improving his relations with the tribes, mainly the Koches, the Chutiyas as well as the Jayantiyas, who were votaries of a Goddess called *Jayanti* or *Jayanteswari*. He had Karmachand, son of the commander of an invading Mughal army, named Satrajit, sacrificed before Kāmākhyā²⁶⁷ not only to display Ahom power but probably also to placate the Koches and the Chutiyas.

A tribal Goddess called *Marai*, Hinduised as Manasa, was also worshipped in an elaborate way in some parts of the country in times of pestilence and disease. Another tribal deity Hinduised as Sitala was *Ai*, the Goddess of small-pox, who was adored with songs called *Ai-nam*.

Tantrikism, which had already secured a foot-hold in this land under the Pala kings of the ancient period gained wide popularity. Keeping the door open to all, irrespective of caste or sex, it recognized equality of right to worship and attracted thereby innumerable votaries. The Tantrik ritual admitted the five *M's* which we have discussed earlier. The sect was therefore denounced both by the Brahmanic school and the Vaisnavite for its depravity. Yet it was this cult which grew in “deliberate opposition to the orthodox Brahmanical rituals” and “the Brahmanical ordering of society” that suited to the spiritual needs of the tribal people most effectively. Numerous references associated with this cult are found in contemporary sources. The *Katha-guru-charita*, for example, describes how a votary worshipped the *Devi* at the cost of all his belongings and then used to offer his own blood to the deity, as a result of which his body turned cotton white.²⁶⁸ Human beings were sacrificed at the temples of Kāmākhyā, *Kechaikhaiti* and *Jayanteswari*. When the first two temples passed to the control of the Ahom kings, they also propitiated the goddess with human sacrifice and it is learnt from a buranji that twelve and double of that number of human beings were annually sacrificed before Kāmākhyā and *Kechaikhaiti* respectively,²⁶⁹ till the practice was stopped by Gaurinath Singha towards the close of the 18th century. Regarding Śakti worship, in the next chapter it will be discussed broadly.

Vaisnavism

Vaisnavism signifies the particular theistic religion of which Visnu is the chief deity of worship.²⁷⁰ The worship of Visnu was evidently prevalent in Assam from early times, as the kings of Kāmarūpa traced their lineage to Visnu through Naraka. There are literary and epigraphic evidences to prove the prevalence of Visnu worship in early Assam. Bana in his *Harsacharita* describes Bhaskaravarman as a descendent of the Vaisnava family (*Vaisnavavamsah*).²⁷¹ The association of Visnu-Krsna with Prāgjyotisa is well-known. In the *Mahabharata*, Visnu is called Prāgjyotisa jyestha.²⁷² The *Kālikā Purāna* describes in detail about the worship of Visnu-Vasudeva with the rituals (Chs. 78-80,88), and mentions as many as five incarnations of the deity as being worshipped in different places of Assam. These are: *Hayagriva*, worshipped in *Manikuta* (Hajo); Fish incarnation, worshipped in the *Matsyadhavaja* mount to the east of *Manikuta*; *Madhava* in the form of *bhairava*, named Pandunatha in Raksakuta; the Boar incarnation in the Citravaha mount and Vasudeva-Krsna in the *Dikkaravasini* region.²⁷³ The *Yoginī Tantra* gives a different story of the origin of *Hayagriva*-Visnu worship, particularly in the *Manikuta*.²⁷⁴ The work also describes the mode of worship in a number of *Visnu-pitha-kunda*, including that of Pandunatha-Visnu.

The earliest recorded reference to the worship of Visnu in Kāmarūpa occurs in the Badaganga Rock inscription (554 CE). It hails king Bhutivarman as *Parama-daivata Param-Bhagavata*. It appears, however, that during the subsequent centuries Vaisnavism occupied only a subordinate position. Bhaskaravarmana is said to have been created by (Brahma), the holy lotus, issuing from the navel of Visnu, (Nidhanpur grant, L.34). Ratnapala is compared with Rama, Krsna, Purusottama and Janardana, (Gauhati grant, v.9; Bargaon grant, L.46). The assumption of the epithet 'Varaha' by that king, (Gauhati grant), like Harshapala (Khonamukhi grant, L.10) and Dharmapala (Puspabhadra grant), points to the fact that they were devoted to Visnu. All records of the period refer to the Boar incarnation of Visnu (Nidhanpur grant, v.4; Tezpur grant, vv. 3-4; Puspabhadra grant, v. 1), but also of *Hari* (Gauhati grant, vv. 4-5; Bargaon grant, v. 3; Nidhanpur grant, v. 19), *Upendra* (Nowgong grant, v. 3), *Narayana* (Khonamukhi grant, v.2), *Achyuta* (Gaukuchi grant), *Krsna* (Tezpur grant, vv.4-5) and others. But, there is no particular invocation of Visnu, except in the Puspabhadra grant of Dharmapala, which opens with an invocation of the Boar incarnation.

Vaisnavism prospered fairly well from the 7th century onwards can also be learnt from the sculptural representations discovered in the province. K.N. Dikshit has drawn attention to an inscribed Visnu image of the 9th century CE. The inscription, though greatly mutilated, refers to the setting up of this stone image of divine Narayana: *bhagavato narayana (sya) saili pratima bhattyantam (bhaktanam)*.²⁷⁵ The same authority has proved the existence of a fairly large Visnu temple, dating approximately from the 10th or 11th century CE on the evidence of images and sculptural fragments collected from ruins in the neighbourhood of the Sibsagar town.²⁷⁶

There are extensive archaeological remains of temples dedicated to Visnu and his incarnations and icons of the deity throughout Assam. The remains show that beginning at least with the 5th and 6th century CE,²⁷⁷ Visnu was worshipped in his iconographic representations, and Vaisnavism was widespread in the land.

It is already mentioned that in the early period, the dynasties of Pushyavarman, Salasthambha and Brahmapala were Śaivites but Dharmapala seems to become a Vaisnavite as evidenced by his Puspabhadra grant. The other two kings of the same century, viz. Vaidyadeva and Vallabhadeva were worshippers of Vasudeva.²⁷⁸ The *Kālikā Purāna* though a Śākta *Upa-purana*, exhibits a catholic outlook by eulogizing Visnu in many places and the opening lines of the work indicate that the writer was probably a Vaisnava by religious faith. Vaisnavism prevalent in Assam before the advent of Sankaradeva was mainly the Vasudevism affiliated to the Pancaratra cult. There are information from the *Kālikā Purāna* about the worship of Hayagriva-Madhava, Matsya-Madhava, Pandunatha Varaha-Madhava and Vasudeva at different places of Kāmarūpa.²⁷⁹ The same purana provide evidences regarding eight syllable, twelve-syllabled and eighteen syllable *mantras* of the Pancaratras for the worship of Hayagriva-Madhava. The Pancaratra Vasudevism was a Tantric Vaisnavism where *mantra*, *yantra* and other tantric procedures were employed. According to *Kālikā Purāna* (ch. 18) Vaisnavism disappeared from Kāmarūpa as a result of Vasistha's curse upon Ugratara.²⁸⁰

The Copper Plate grants dating 1392 CE and 1401 CE issued by king Satyanarayana and his son Lakshminarayana of Sadhyapuri in the modern Lakhimpur district of eastern Assam furnish evidence of the cult. The inscription making a gift of land to

one Narayana *Dvija*, begins with invocation to Vasudeva *Isana* and *Amba*. The second grant describes the donee as a worshipper of Vasudeva.²⁸¹ The name of Gopala *Ata*'s forefathers as noted by the *Katha-gurucharita* signify the popularity of the Vasudeva cult in the north eastern region of Assam. The name of the same forefathers, like Vasudeva, Samkarsana, Kamadeva indirectly point to the prevalence of the Vasudeva cult in Assam prior to the advent of Sankaradeva.

In addition to the Vasudeva cult, Assamese verse rendering of some episodes of the two great epics by poets like Madhava Kandali and Harivara Vipra contributed to the diffusion of the Vaisnava literature and ideals among the masses in the fourteenth-fifteenth centuries. A large number of Visnu images recovered from different places of Assam, which on the basis of iconographical style, could be placed between the 8th and 14th centuries of the Christian era prove conclusively that Vaisnavism, along with Śaivism and Śaktism flourished parallelly in Assam during the first five hundred years of the second millennium CE. The digest writers of Kāmarūpa on *dharmasastras* discussed some Vaisnavite rites and rituals in their *smṛti-nivandhas*. The people could not involve themselves directly in any of the major three religious faiths without the intermediary service of Brahmin priests or religious *gurus*. As a result, the ordinary ignorant people could not derive pleasure of the sense of participation in religious observances. This absence of the sense of direct participation was removed by Sankaradeva in the early decades of the sixteenth century.²⁸² Sankaradeva by his new faith wanted to bring into one fold all the caste and creed irrespective of their differences. There was no caste barrier in his new faith. He wrote many dramas and translated many works. In order to spread his religion *Namghars* and *Satras* institutions were introduced. Though in his lifetime there were only few number of *Satras* as it did not grow to a full-fledge religious institutions. But nearly fifteen years after his death it got institutionalized form. Contribution of his followers viz. Madhavadeva, Damodardeva and Vamsigopaladeva as well as the royal patronage extend its sphere of influence on the villages.²⁸³ Within a century and a half of its foundation, the institution multiplied by leaps and bounds and by the end of the seventeenth century its number increased to a few hundred all over the valley. However, after the death of Sankaradeva two sub sects of Vaisnavism emerged. Later on these sects again got splitted and all of them established many *Satras* over the Brahmaputra valley.

Other sects

Ancient Assam was a great centre of later Buddhism is shown by a number of sources. This was known as Vajrayana or Tantrik-Buddhism and grew as a result of the incorporation of Śakti worship into Mahayana. In the opinion of the Vajrayanists, it is coextensive with 'Dharma'.²⁸⁴ The expressions *Dharma* and *tathagata* which occur respectively in Bhaskaravarman's and Indrapala's grants have led some scholars to believe that Buddhism did exist in Assam at an early period.²⁸⁵ But except for surmise on these terms, the epigraphs are not very expressive, neither has archaeology produced any evidence of importance.²⁸⁶ In his account of the kingdom of Kāmarūpa, the Chinese pilgrim Hiuen Tsang remarked that the people had no faith in Buddha and hence from the time when Buddha appeared in the world to the present time (7th century CE) there had never, as yet been built one Sangharama as a place for priests to assemble.²⁸⁷ There is a legend that Lord Buddha died at Hajo near Guwahati. The Hayagriva temple at Hajo is a place of pilgrimage to the Tibetan and Bhutanese Buddhists. There are historians who believe that the place occupied by a Hindu temple. In different places of Assam images of Buddha have been found. It shows that the Buddhists of Assam belonged to the Mahayana School.²⁸⁸

Besides these sects, there are some references to other Puranic Gods and Goddesses whose sculptural representations are also found in the province. The images of such gods as *Ganesa*, *Kartikeya*, *Indra*, *Agni*, *Kuvera*, *Surya*, etc., from the 6th century onwards have been found but there is no definite knowledge of their cults.

Inscriptions of ancient Assam throw light regarding the prevalence of the Sun worship in ancient Assam. The inscribed Sun image from Narakasur hoard states that "this illustration and magnificent (image of God) Aditya Narayana was made during the reign of the king Harjaravarmanadeva". This inscription suggests that during the reign of Harjaravarman (855-835 CE) the Sun image was made for the worship of the Sun God.²⁸⁹ The inscribed Sun image from Kaki²⁹⁰ states that in the reign of Sri Vanamaladeva the Sun image was given over to Bhatta Ravi who was the grand son of Vasistha. This inscription proved that during the reign of Vanamalavarman Sun worship was prevalent in ancient Assam. Another inscribed Sun²⁹¹ discovered in Titabar where the name of the sculptor was inscribed. All these images assigned to the 9th century CE.

Literary and archaeological finds prove that Surya worship was prevalent in ancient Assam. Quite a number of Sun images have been noticed in Assam. Majority of these images belonged to the 10th -12th century CE.²⁹² From the inscriptional and iconographic evidences, it seems that majority of the cult existed from the 8th century to 12th century CE. As majority of the images belonged to the 10th -12th century CE the cult seems to have more popular during that period.²⁹³

Ancient literature contains reference to the popularity of Sun worship in ancient Assam. The *Markandeya Purana* refers to Prāgijyotisa as *Udacula*, the land of sunshine, wherein stood a temple of the Sun. The *Kālikā Purāna* refers to two important seats of Sun worship.

The Lord of *Ganas* is one of the important members of the *Panchadevatas*. Quite a number of images of Ganesa have come to light in Assam, belonging to a period from 6th to 12th century CE or still later. Almost all the temples have the images of Ganesa particularly on the door lintel. Besides these, stray icons and rock cut images of Ganesa were discovered in large numbers.²⁹⁴ The epigraphic as well as the iconographical evidence may indicate that the worship of Ganesa as a major cult was more popular during the 11th to the 13th century CE under the patronage of the Kāmarūpa rulers.

The *Kālikā Purāna* also refers to the worship of most of these gods and describes in detail the procedure of their worship.²⁹⁵ The *Kālikā Purāna* (79.1) refers to a temple of *Kuvera* situated on the Darpana hill. It is enjoined that *Kuvera* should be worshipped in the first day of the *Suklapaksa* of the month of *Kartika* (79.6). As lord of the *Yaksas* and *kinnaras*, *Kuvera* seems to be very popular among the semi Hinduised people of the province. As a village deity, he is even today worshipped under different names, such as *Jal Kuber*, (the lord of water), *Thal Kuber* (the lord of earth) and so forth.²⁹⁶ The Bargaon Grant (L.34) compares the city of *Durjjaya* with the peak of the mount *Kailasa* inhabited by the god *Kuvera*.

Indra is the god of thunder, lightning and rainfall. In the inscriptions of ancient Assam valour of the kings was compared with Indra. The Doobi Grant (V.3) states that Naraka defeated Indra in the forefront of a battle field and snatched away the ear-rings from his mother. V.2 of grant refers to Vajradatta who was as powerful as Indra, the holder of the bolt. V.V. 18-19 of the grant states that, “Kalyanavarma who...was

equal in strength to Indra...and retired in course of time to become the guest of Indra...". V.31 of the grant refers to Mahabhutivarman who was like the king of Gods, famous for his valour and after having performed a horse-sacrifice, retired to the abode of Indra. Thus Indra became a symbol of power and valour for the Kāmarūpa kings. In the Bargaon Grant of Ratnapala (L.43) Durjjaya is compared with the abode of Vasava i.e. Indra. In the Uttarbarbil Grant of Balavarman (V.30) the gift is recorded to have been made at the time of the annual worship in connection with *Sakrotthana*. *Sakrotthana* or the *puruhita* was a festival, celebrated in honour of Indra. The *Kālikā Purāna* (V.79, 46-48) gives the *dhyanamantra* of Indra and then devotes a whole chapter (Ch.87) to the description of the procedure and efficacy of the *Sakrotthana* festival. The Guwakuchi Grant (L.64) refers to Indrapala as 'Vipksabalabhit' which means an Indra to the enemy. Another title mentioned in the grant (L.60) is 'Uddhatabhrdasanipata' which means 'like the thunderbolt (Indra) destroying the flying mountains, he is a thunderbolt like destroyer of the arrogant.'²⁹⁷

The Khanamukh Grant (V.4) compares Bramapala as *Kulacala* and states that he was similar to Indra (*Pracipati*), *Pracipati* is an epithet of Indra. Indra as one of the eight *dikpalas* (or masters of the quarters), is the Lord of the eastern quarter (*pracidik*).²⁹⁸ Verse seven of the grant refers to Indrapala who became the foremost among the successful persons by performing sacrifices which gladden Indra. Verse seventeen of the grant refers to the grandfather of the donee as a great performer of sacrifices like the agnistoma in which Indra was the most important among the prescribed series of gods and the midday *Savana* belongings to him exclusively.

The Copperbell Inscription of Srikumara who was like Indra and the killer of Indra became the protector of the worship of Indra and the bell was given by him (the king) for the use in the worship of the deity. Thus the references to Indra in the inscriptions and the Copperbell Inscription which belonged to the 8th century CE indicate the worship of Indra in ancient Assam and royal patronage for performance of the worship.

The worship of Indra is supported by the two handed rock cut image of the deity at Pandu and an image found at the Chatrakara temple at Guwahati and the bronze image found at the Narakasur hoard. The elephant depicted in the seals of the

Kāmarūpa kings may also be suggested as an imitation of the *Vahana* of Indra, the *Airabata*.

The Khanamukh Grant (V.9) refers to Sarasvati (i.e., Bharati, the Goddess of learning). The Nidhanpur Grant (L.134) refers to the Lord Brahma who was born of the lotus and the cause of the origin, arrangement and destruction of the Universe. The Tezpur Grant (V.17) refers to Brahma as *dhata*. In the Guwakuchi Grant (V.21) Brahmana Somadeva was said to be an incarnation of Lord Brahma himself. The Puspabhadra Grant (V.19) refers to *Satadhrti* which means the creator. *Satadhrti* is a rare word which is also not noticed even in the Amarakosa. The Gachtal Grant (V.1) refers to Lord Visnu as *adirghadeva* who is the source of the whole creation as *Padmanabha*, i.e., Brahma.

The Tezpur Rock Inscription (L.6) compares the speed of the boats of stationed at Haruppesvara with the consorts of god *Pavana*. The Ulubari Grant (V.26) compares the luster (*mahasa*) and the divine splendor resulting from the knowledge of the Vedic lore (*dvijavarccara*) he could laugh loudly at (i.e. could surpass) even the Fire god (i.e. *Jatavedas* or *Agni*). The Gachtal Grant(V.14) of Gopaladeva refers to Indrapala of wonderful and awful luster got engaged in repeatedly uprooting the family of the enemies at ease with the arrows that pierce through the temples of the elephants, those rows of (chopped of) heads falling on the broad white umbrellas behaved, as it were, as an offering of (red) lotuses in silver plate to the god of death i.e. *Yama*.

Alongside the organized religious practices mentioned above, there were wide-spread practices of magic and incantation, and people at large, including those in ruling authority, were swayed by their influence. It was believed that those who possessed magical power were able to propitiate the deities as well as the demons representing forces of innumerable nature.

The above discussion indicates that Assam was ruled by various political powers since mid 4th century CE. The powerful dynasties in ancient Assam were the Varmana, Salasthambhas, and Palas. At the beginning of the 13th century one of the most powerful dynasties in Assam was established by the Ahoms under Sukapha, who were a Tai-Shan group of people. They ruled about six hundred years in Assam. Besides them there were other political powers such as Chutiyas, Kacharis, and Koches etc who ruled at different places in Assam. Society in ancient Assam was

based on *varnasramadharmā*. Brahmana occupied the principal status. However there were other professional castes that emerged according to their professions. However in the medieval period many more professional and royal castes emerged. People of Assam were the believer of Śaivism, Śaktism, Vaisnavism and many other minor deities. Buddhism was also to some extent existed but not so popular.

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Suvarnaśrngah suśrīmānagādhe varunālaye ||
Tatra prāgjyotisāam nāma jātarūpamayam puram |
Yasmin vasati duṣṭātmā narake nāma dānavah ||
(4/42/30,31)
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138. Barua, 2003, *Op.Cit.* p.120
139. Bargaon grant; Nowgong grant, V 32; Subhankarapataka grant, V 11.

140. Barua, 2003, *Op. Cit.*, p.125.
141. *Ibid.*
142. Choudhury, P.C., *Op.Cit.*, p.514
143. *Ibid.*; also see Barua, 2003, *Op.Cit.*, p.202
144. Barua, 2003, *Op.Cit.*, p.126.
145. Choudhury, P.C., *Op.Cit.*, p.315
146. Barua, 2003, *Op. Cit.*, p.127.
147. . *Kāmarūpasasanaṅvali*, *Op.Cit.*, p.150.
148. Barua, 2003, *Op. Cit.*, p.127; also see *Epigraphica India*, VII, p.317-321, XVIII, p.291-309.
149. Nowgong grant of Balavarman, V 21; Choudhury, P.C., *Op. Cit.*, p.315.
150. *Ibid.*
151. Barua, 2003, *Op.Cit.*, p.127.
152. *Ibid.*
153. *Ibid.*, p.128; also see Census of India, 1891, Assm, Vol.I, p. 211.
154. *Ibid.*, p.128.
155. *Ibid.*, p.130.
156. *Ibid.*
157. Choudhury, *Op.Cit.*, p.317
158. *Ibid.*
159. Barua, 2003, *Op.Cit.*, p.131; see *Brahmavaivarta Purana*, X. 34,
160. Choudhury, P.C., *Op.Cit.*, p.317
161. *Ibid.*
162. *Ibid.*
163. *Ibid.*; *Kāmarūpasasanaṅvali*, *Op.Cit.*,p. 181(f.n.3); Puspabhadra grant (line 50)

164. *Ibid*; Asaam Census Report, 1891, I, Pp.277-78.
165. *Ibid.*, p.318.
166. *Kāmarūpasasanavali, Op. Cit.*, p.181.
167. Barua, 2003, *Op. Cit.*, p.132; Census of India. 1891, Assam. Vol. I. pp. 277-278
168. Barua, S.L., 2013, *Op.Cit.*, p.414
169. *Ibid.*, p.415
170. *Ibid.*
171. *Ibid.*, p.416
172. *Kāmarūpasasanavali, Op. Cit.*, p.181.
173. Subhankarapataka grant, V 22
174. Choudhury, P.C., *Op. Cit.*, p.321.
175. Basu, N.K., 1970, *Assam in the Ahom Age*, Calcutta, p. 208.
176. *Ardrakam lavanacaiva jirakam pippaliyakam-Yoginī Tantra Tantra 11/7-186. Haladi marica hingaka diya.....Ada longa jani jira machara pabita –Kumara Harana*, v. 207
177. *Kumara-Harana*, V 208
178. Hodson, T.C., *Journal of Assam Research Society*, XXXVI, Pp. 92,103
179. *Yoginī Tantra*, II/5/275
180. Cowell, *Harsacharita, Op.cit.*, p. 213
181. *Yoginī Tantra*, II/7, 19
182. *Yoginī Tantra*, I/6,
183. Barua, S.L., fifth reprint 2013, *Comprehensive History of Assam*, Guwahati, Pp.420-21
184. *Ibid.*, p.421.
185. Barua, B.K., *Op.Cit.*, p.133
186. Pushpabhadra Grant, V.15

187. P.C. Choudhury, *Op.Cit.*,p.323
188. *Ibid.*, p. 324.
189. *Ibid.*
190. Bargaon grant.
191. Grant of Vanamala.
192. . Barua, 2003, *Op.Cit* p.137.
193. Altekar, A.S., 1949, *The position of women in Hindu Civilization*, Banaras, Pp. 214-215
194. Tezpur Grant of Vanamala, V.24
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203. . *Kalika Purana*, 69/17-23
204. *Kalika Purana*, 69, vv 37-53; 86/39
205. Tezpur Grant, V.30
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208. Bhuyan, S.K. (Ed.), 1938, *Tripura Buranji*, Guwahati, p.2

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