CONCLUSION

This study has been made to clarify some of the doubts and queries that I had about Assamese culture and religion. Scholastic works on village India emphasize the structure, functions and politics of the caste system. They view the caste system as a determinant of social culture and religious life of villages. From this juncture, Indian sociology and anthropology have emerged and has remained to analyse Indian rural life as a caste-oriented society. To use a stronger word, they have kept this phenomenon as the 'mainstream' of Indian sociology.

When we look at Assamese society we are confronted with several questions that do not fall in line with the mainstream of village culture. The first question is on the caste system followed by socio-cultural patterns and finally the religious character of Assamese society. All these questions have been attempted and
answered in the thesis through empirical data. But this task was not very easy because one had to rely only on field data and ethnographical accounts of Assam on one hand and secondary sources of Assamese Vaishnavism on the other. It was difficult to find competent sociological and anthropological works of Assamese society. A recent London University publication on the Assamese society, by Audrey Cantlie, is perhaps the only book which has dissected and analysed Assamese rural society to the core. It is sound anthropologically because of its methodology and because of its attempt to study it from the 'mainstream' point of view. The problem faced by scholars who study Assamese society, is the scant availability of data and sociological material.

By studying different analytical works on village India such as casteism, peasantry, women's world, marriage and kinship, I have tried to study the Assamese situation on the same issues and the ultimate analysis that I found was that Assamese society presents a different socio-cultural picture altogether. It is not to be understood as something unique or incomparable. But the phenomena of flexible casteism, popular religion and admixture of tribal/ethnic and caste population has softened the social construct of Assamese
society. With the absence of caste rigidity there is less tension and disharmony amongst Assamese caste Hindus in terms of their occupation, interplay, absorption and adaptation of each other socio-cultural norms, thus making the social system less orthodox and conservative. Popular religion viz., Vaishnavism has given impetus to traditional culture and its arts as well as providing the socio-religious link between Sattriya members and the laity.

The influence of these three situations has determined the social system of rural Assamese society. This study has attempted to elaborate analysis of Assamese Vaishnavism and its present position now. While historical consequences have led monastic members to complacency, the overall attitude of caste flexibility within Assamese society is due to Vaishnavism and its liberal approach. Significantly caste prejudices and hatred are absent even in early Assamese and religious writings.¹

Even if lower castes suffer certain minor social disabilities, the fact remains that Brittials and Kairbartas share with Brahmins and Kalitas their allegiance to Sattras and their spiritual heads. The census people

¹ J.D. Bimail and D.K. Lahiri, Cosmogamy of Caste and Social Mobility in Assam (Mittal Pub. Delhi 1984), p. xii.
also readily allowed the change of caste names in order to democratise caste relations.\(^2\)

What has led Vaishnavism to remain popular in Assam is certainly the simple and modest rites relegated from the bhakats in Namghars. As mentioned earlier, the recruitment of bhakats from rural homes to the Sattra and village Namghars, liberal rules of bhakats who are allowed to visit their homes, have perpetuated a strong link between them and the laity. The use of colloquial Assamese both in Vaishnava chants/hymns and also by bhakats interacting with the laity has further brought Vaishnavism to a closer bay with the latter. But the importance and indispensability of Vedic rituals vis-a-vis a Brahmin priest fulfills the basic ritual needs of the people such as birth, marriage and death rites (which bhakats do not normally perform). Therefore, tradition both in terms of fixed and free forms ply on the same board in Assamese society as far as their religious activities are concerned.

The rest has been subjected to historical changes. Attitudes of the emerging Assamese middle class, the education system and the gap between rural and urban

\(^2\) Ibid.
values led to the stagnation of Sattras that were so much sought after during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Chapter V has dealt solely with the historical changes that took place in Assamese society to assert that Sattras were losing ground in terms of their influential role over the laity. In fact, this chapter is important as it shows the drastic demarcation between the urban/rural phenomena that have driven Sattras to remain identifiable only with village culture. To prove this point I made an attempt to give elaborate analysis of a Sattra's association with village inhabitants. Within this analysis I also described one of the orthodox factors such as culinary practices that are followed by Sattra members. Both these two aspects confirm the continuity of tradition through fixed and free forms.

The Vaishnava monasteries flourished during the Ahom rule in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries not only because of their popularity through the media of dance, drama and music but also of the expanse of literature that was established during this time.³ But

the initiation of some Ahom rulers and nobles into the Shakta faith came as a threat to Vaishnavas. While the Shakta priests interfered in state affairs and kept close contact with the nobility through religious matters, the Vaishnavas kept away from this arena. In consequence, they kept in touch with the people by fulfilling some of their simple needs and hence cementing their close relationship that has lasted till now.

In view of the last five chapters, explanation has been possible of the folk traditional culture. Given the situation that both the Sattra and the village community are components of folk culture because of their indespensable ties and interactional patterns between each other, one must question their present status whether they are still traditional folk cultures or not.

There has been a considerable decline of the folk culture as far as the traditional aspect is concerned. This is but obvious, what with the altered patterns of social code of law, justice and of course urbanisation. Though India is still a country of peasants and predo-
minantly agrarian in nature, the increasing industrialisation has definitely shaken village cultures. Most of the villagers suffering from natural calamities and material needs are often driven to towns to become the
cheapest kind of drudge labour in the country.\textsuperscript{4} Again, with the expanding population of the villages, many of the younger people have set out to the neighbouring towns to seek their livelihood.

Given this situation in the peasant communities there is bound to be a decline in their folk cultural aspects, folk verse, songs and theatre have to an extent lost their original colour and form which had thrilled every individual of the village. Folksongs for instance, which had been a product of the people, reflecting feelings and tastes more communal than personal in content, has declined in number. It is true that every age has produced its own type of music and it is very difficult to assign a date to folk music because, in a way it never grows old. But folk songs nowadays do not have the same form of expressions and the age old proverbs and phrases no longer bear a firm relevance on the newly composed melodies.

Folk songs at present depict current topics sung with the same folk melody. Assamese folk songs have evolved under the influences of the local customs, festivals and economic disparities; significant enough was

\textsuperscript{4} D.D. Kosambi, \textit{op.cit.}, p. 2.
that of the melodies which were basically derived from the Vaishnava hymns - the Borgeets. The source of folk songs in Assam are to be traced to these influential devotional hymns. Numerous are the similies, metaphors, alliteration and the poetic flow of speech used in these hymns making them appealing.5

Bihu songs are normally sung extempore and the custom of improvisation still continues. With compositions now, the towns in Assam have gradually developed the staging of Bihu dances and songs held on the basis of competitions. Yet these performances do not reflect so well the ethos of 'folkness' because they are grafted on to an urban way of life.

While the towns have been made conscious of folk tradition, most have a rather hazy idea of what folk music really means. "Folk songs come within the reach not as it was originally created in its natural form, but rather after it has been modified by the men in music business who take the advantage of its popularity and demand .... the result is a hybrid one that can neither be termed 'folk' nor 'classical'.6 Any type of

5  B.K. Barua, History of Assamese Literature, op. cit., p. 31.
intellectual achievement coming mainly from members of the village community hardly have an enduring character. The only explanation that can be forwarded is that the very act of 'performing' in front of an 'alien' audience who are paying for the show, destroys the essence of folk tradition which originally arise out of natural surroundings.

An important consequence of the oral transmission of culture has been declining in the public memory and new terms, customs and songs have begun to oust the older ones and ultimately, despite long co-existence in some cases, has completely replaced them. The Borgeets in particular cannot be said to have declined either in character or existence. These hymns with the firm background of Indian classical scales have remained as fresh as when initially produced. Because of their religious colouring and content, they have been looked up with dignity. Furthermore most of them were systematically written down; hence, no modifications in their contents unlike orally transmitted songs were possible.

It is worth mentioning that the Assamese version of the Mahabharata is not a literal rendering of the original epic. Through many ommissions, alterations
and innovations it projected a more mundane and direct, simple narrative to the village people. Furthermore the Assamese recension took on the character of the Vaishnava Sastra as it was translated by Vaishnava poets. Most of the sections conclude with passages stamped with Vaishnava tenets, legends and traditions.⁷

This study can be made part of a greater quiry. The quiry is: will socio-religious norms remain uninterrupted despite the changes brought by external forces? Government policies, urbanisation and influence of the media are strong factors of change. However, when we know that a sixteenth century movement has remained and survived three centuries of political strife, social change and war, we can see that it is some link and influence that struck the roots of rural society. Many Sattras have stopped functioning. But the inner mechanism and infrastructure will exist because of the monk/laity bond and the ramgharia congregation in Assamese rural society. So long as this link exists, popular village religion or popular Vaishnavism will remain to be a live religion in rural Assamese society.

⁷ B.K. Barua, History of Assamese Literature, op. cit., p. 55. See Appendix IV for an idea of Vaishnava scripts and miniatures.