CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In the sixteenth century Shankardeb, the initiator of the Vaishnava cult, established monasteries known as Sattra in order to propagate the faith to Assamese society. Sattras are institutions through which religious doctrines and a religious mode of life are practiced.

The study of Vaishnavism vis-a-vis the Sattra or monasteries in Assam, needs to be analysed within the socio-religious influence that operate on rural Assamese society. To talk of Vaishnavism, we have to take into account the historical events of the Bhakti movement that had spread all over India in the medieval period; a movement which was largely responsible for exposing the traditional Hindu concepts to common man.

The study of Vaishnavism in Assam is important in the historical and social sphere, as its emergence brought considerable change into Assamese society. The movement led by mahapurusha Shankardeb (1449-1568), did not differ in essential points from the similar Bhakti movements occurring in medieval India. The movement was certainly derived from non-Brahminic circles as it challenged the complexities
of Brahminic rites and priestly authority. Shankardeb emphasised congregational Nam - kirtana or chanting of the name of God and made available to common man the sacred texts, which were so long the monopoly of the Brahmins, by translating or adopting them into Assamese.

The process of indoctrinating and organizing the Vaishnava cult in Assamese society was initiated by Shankardeb, the propagation being carried out through the recitation, reading of scriptures, media of music, dramatic and dance performances held in the Namghar (prayer hall) of his Sattra (monastery) near Barpeta town (now Barpeta district). His immediate disciples spread his teachings all over Assam and very soon, after his death, the ruling Ahom nobility began to patronize the cult. Of course there are historical events which saw the popularity of Vaishnavas at one phase to be replaced by the popularity of Shaktas in another, depending on the choice and values upheld by the successive Ahom kings.

The Vaishnava cult in Assam came to be known as the Mahapurushia Dharma after Mahapurusha Shankardeb's death, which also saw the emergence of subsects within the cult. The newly established diverging sect came to be known as the Brahma Sambati incorporating observances of the Vaish-

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nava tantras. These Brahmin oriented monasteries enjoyed immense popularity and also economic security from the Ahom nobility. The traces of the wealth of some of the monasteries can still be observed today. The other two subjects, the Nika and Kala Sambati, did not show sharp differences from the Mahapurushia mainstream as far as their doctrine and organisation were concerned.

Several studies have been made on Assam which include areas of folklore, (P. Goswami, 1954), ethnography (L.A. Waddell, 1900) and history (S.K. Bhuyan, 1957: E.A. Gait, 1926). The study of Assamese religious cults and sacred institutions owes considerably to reputed scholars such as B. Kakati, M. Neog and S.N. Sarma whose works on Assam Vaishnavism are laudable. However, a contemporary study of such institutions awaits an anthropological analysis, as proposed by some scholars because most analysis on Vaishnavism has centred around theological, philosophical or historical perspectives. From an anthropological perspective this study will make an attempt to equate

2 R.N. Nath, The Background of Assamese Culture (Shillong 1948).

Vaishnavism/Vaishnava Sattras (monasteries) with folk religion in Assamese society. The first task will however be to clarify the concepts of 'folk', 'religion' and 'tradition'. Culture is the underlying meaning of these terms, for it is through culture or symbols that an individual judges his actions and follows them by interacting socially with other individuals in society.\(^4\)

Culture has been defined as semiotic by Geertz; and in accordance with Weber's opinion of man being an animal suspended in webs of significance, that he himself has spun, Geertz understands culture to be those webs. The analysis of these webs should ... "not be experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning."\(^5\) Consequently, Geertz distinguishes culture and social system as the former being an ordered system of meaning and symbols in terms of which social interaction takes place and the latter being the pattern of social interaction itself.\(^6\) Culture in this sense can be regarded as omnipresent in factors that make a social system.

The objective of our study of the Vaishnava monas-

\(^4\) C. Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures (Hutchinson, London 1975).
\(^5\) Ibid., p. 5.
\(^6\) Ibid., p. 144.
teries is to focus on the Hindu religious tradition in which the underlying values system is seen from the sectarian 'variety' that Hinduism present to devotees and disciples at large. However the principal and most important factor for equating Vaishnavism to folk religion is tradition. The significance of tradition both on religious beliefs and folk culture is, the central theme of this thesis in which variables of change and history will be discussed in order to support our anthropological analysis of folk religion. Empirical evidence is the major tool to render an anthropological perspective to our study.

In the context of religion, the importance of beliefs is that they are the product of the human mind; and this product is expressed in forms of myth and ritual. Religious beliefs are the manifestations of ideas that have emerged from abstract notions of an overpowering force, (or forces), which acts adversely or positively over nature and man. These abstract notions are often revealed through dreams, thoughts or unusual hallucinations experienced by man. Religion in this sense could be termed as a casual phenomenon in the initial stage; though this explanation is rather broad based. It has to be
explained in terms of historical, structural or functional (depending on the nature of analysis), and causal dimensions. The universal power of religion lies in the belief that it satisfies certain desires or hopes in human beings. This idea is accompanied with feelings of awe and fear because it is caused by the expectation of satisfying these desires. Religion permeates the motivational role in individuals to regard it as a necessary, indispensable system. Therefore, expressions of this system in forms of myths, art or music, would directly relate to culture which inform human action.

Several studies on religion and religious beliefs have been made through the analysis of ritual expression, totemism, symbolism and also with the society - 'primitive', popular or higher in context. Cognitive approaches to this field has been made by scholars of anthropology and history, though the analysis of some anthropologists have been adopted from (or more inclined to) a structuralist approach. Here, the analysis of

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religion is to see it as a system of meanings, constituted within the symbols, which are demonstrated in the socio-structural and psychological processes. Such formulations cannot be appreciated fully without mentioning one of the first serious analysts of religion - Emile Durkheim, who established the relationship of religion with science, followed by the two aspects of religious phenomena - the sacred and the profane. The overall implication of Durkheimian thought reveals the significance and importance of religion corresponding primarily to society rather than the supernatural; for religious interests are merely the symbolic forms of social and moral interests.

Analysis of religious behaviour and socio-religious change, especially in the context of developing areas has been made by using Redfield's concept of the great and little traditions. This formulation is useful, in terms of the systematic categorization that it presents, whenever arguments of religion and social change or tradition vs. modernity takes place. In the Indian context too, great and little tradition has its parallels.

9 C. Geertz, *op.cit.*, p. 41.

to 'higher' Sanskrit Hinduism verses 'lower' popular Hinduism. According to this formulation, the great or higher Hinduism constituting the sacred texts, the literary expositions of the Hindu philosophy and the possession of such texts and textual knowledge is limited to the priestly class of Brahmins. This great tradition reaches out to localities and is found embodied in the value system of various caste Hindus. These values are popularly expressed in their proverbs, idioms, music, dance and other forms of social action.

Orthodox doctrines operate even on 'lower' Hinduism in which literary texts have been present for generations, along with an organized system of priests and ritual experts, who transmit knowledge orally to the laity. Such areas may be said to possess elements of the great tradition in terms of the literary texts that they preserve, and at the same time regarded as little tradition, in terms of the regional absorption of these texts expressed in ritual. These expressions demonstrate the diversity and variety on the wider panoramic view; whereas each expression on the micro-level view is independent of its identity and locality.

While dealing with the Vaishnava cult and the Sattras

11 S.J. Tambiah, op.cit., p. 163.
in relation to folk society, we find that Sattras possess components of both the great and the little traditional values. The first category emanates from their having textual evidence of high Sanskrit Hinduism, chronological and biographical accounts of their monastic members, genealogies and lastly, their strict adherence to culinary and doctrinal values. The second category comprises popular access to the Sattra and the Namghar (prayer hall) regardless of caste distinctions, high clientele participation to the three sectarian divisions within the Vaishnava cult and the use of monastic ritual expression during any ceremony that may be held by the village individual or individuals. The inward manifestations of monastic life are orthodox. This is demonstrated by strict maintenance of celibacy, day to day monastic rituals, culinary habits and the constant or continual persuasion of learning monastic arts. But the outward manifestation explicitly demonstrates liberal, paternal attitudes towards the laity, even in their culinary and social interaction. The contrast between the formal and informal may reveal the extent of traditional values underlying the social system along with the type of inhabitants that have resided there for generations. 

12 It is perhaps only in the north eastern part of India that we find a tremendous amalgamation of different tribes living together speaking different
is followed by traditional changes that have been determined by socio-historical events. Explanation of tradition both on the religious and societal level is necessary, to give us an understanding of the Assamese social system.

This thesis will attempt to equate Sattra and the Vaishnava doctrine with folk religion through the observance of two roles that Sattras carry in relation to the village 1) their heterodox influence on caste system and 2) their various levels of relationships, other than religious, which has kept the link between monastic members and lay disciples. An elaborate note on the sectarian position of the Sattras is necessary to probe into the differences, of their ritualistic and doctrinal patterns, to evaluate the rise or decline of by following and monastic power within rural society.

The second aspect of analysis concerning the assumption of Vaishnavism vis-a-vis rural or folk religion, will be investigated outside the sphere of the monastic system in order to understand its confinement in rural society rather than the entire Assamese society. The term, "entire Assamese society" will henceforth refer to both urban dialects. What we see of Assam's culture today is surely the blend of their different traits and norms adapted within its system.
and rural areas in the text. This investigation will take into account the external forces which have motivated change on a traditional organisation. This aspect of 'change' will pertain to that occurring between tradition and modernity. Most traditional societies have been undermined in their existing settings by modern forces through the impingement of the former's social organisation and community life. Our concern is to view a religious organization as a structural embodiment of culture, (norms, values, aesthetics) within its sphere, constantly interacting and transmitting such values to society; while being confronted against the currents of external changes and historical events.

The importance of oral tradition may well be highlighted while analysing contemporary popular Hinduism. An order has always been preserved because of the past experiences which continue to supply a standard pattern of living.\textsuperscript{13} Such an order can manifest itself through oral transmissions and direct demonstration in handling down their cultural contents and experiences. It would follow that societies which maintain their social order through tradition, must be, none other than folk socie-

ties. Religious transmission in form of ritual or art,
(music/dance/drama); social transmission in form of
various groups interacting among each other and situa­
tional transmission (layout) in form of the amalgamation
of ethnic and caste inhabitants of a particular geogra­
phical locality, may constitute a folk society in the
context of North-East India particularly. Let me explain
what folk society means in order to see whether Assamese
rural areas, practicing Vaishnavism can be understood to
follow a folk religion.

**Folk Society:**

Folk society may be defined as constituting a
tightly knit familial, caste or caste/ethnic people living
within a subsistence economy, demarcated from the smallest
comforts that organised city life would offer, in terms
of what is available to them in their locality. This type
of economy enhances further, the personal/emotional drive
towards permeating a 'closed' system where religious be­
liefs, norms and social values are upheld, in order to
achieve well-being and security (natural and supernatural).
There has been varied definitions of the word 'folk' and
this has led to juggling with words rather than bringing
out an actual meaning to it. Theorists of 'folk' society
in the nineteenth century regarded it as a people constituting the lower stratum in contrast with the higher or elite of that society. "Primitive" society was regarded as a rung lower to folk on the basis that "primitive" society constituted the pre or non-literate group of 'savages', yet to achieve literacy with the progress of cultural evolutions. Sociologists, such as Redfield, project the continual process between folk society and the city, which is very general, if we keep in view the singularity of its directions from one dimension to the other. His model appears to have temporal and spatial implications. Given the integrative economic structure and stability of the West, Western scholars have tried to find folk elements within city migrants (from rural areas to city) and established them as folk. Some have claimed that folk society could be applied equally well to the synergy of social forces and processes of a larger city. In case of Indian society, one has to break up such elements into several categories to understand folk society in terms of their language, popular beliefs, values and aesthetics among occupational and non-occupa-

14 A. Dundes, Essays in Folkloristic (Folklore Institute, Meerut 1978).
Folk society is associated with such people whose beliefs and social values relate to the immediate requirement of what nature presents to them, in the context of their life and well-being. (For it is the cultural process that determines the actions of individuals with other individuals); availability of resources are determined by the locality of nature. These are the positive variables which influence beliefs and values of a people. Hence the argument whether folk society is non-literate or literate is irrelevant when we look for a deeper meaning to it. Folk society includes non-literate, semi-literate and literate inhabitants all at once. Factors such as myths, religious and social values (results of nature and culture) drive the folk mind into believing that it understands the world around them better — and

See T.K.N. Unnithan, Indra Deva and Y. Singh, Towards a Sociology of Culture in India (Prentice Hall, Delhi, 1965). These writers define folk culture as a part of a substructure which interacts with the elite traditions. Indian culture has been viewed by them in three perspectives - 1) Elite traditions i.e., aspects of the great tradition; 2) Folk; and 3) Tribal traditions. Elite tradition has been referred to as the Brahminic and Sanskritic aspects of which the Vedas and the great epics have their hold in the villages of India. Folk literature, art and music all possess strong tracts of this elite tradition. Single village studies may provide some valuable material for the study of folk culture. But they are inadequate because one should also understand the variation of its application in different re-
hence we can infer that oral traditions in folk societies seem more legitimate to inhabitants than any urban social norms which are influential with the tide of urbanisation. Tradition is regarded as sacred and observed at every step of their social and religious life. Urban influence of political and governmental factors into folk society is regarded within the periphery but never accepted in the domain of folk aesthetics or the 'closed' system. In their own terms tradition and its expressions may be upheld as supreme. Hence traditional religious values and myths which are continuously expressed in folk society became a central point within folk mind and emotion. In this thesis an enquiry into the religious influence of rural Assamese people will be sought in order to equate the Vaishnava cult with folk religion. 17

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It is a widespread phenomenon cutting across many linguistic regions. Yet one can see that even when the outer expressions appear to be varied the spirit and the basic patterning in most aspects of culture is fundamentally the same (ibid., p. 27).

17 Folk culture conforms essentially to rural and religious institutional character reflecting primarily the solidarity of moral order. This is because it derives its social character from societies that mature their folkways, mores and laws into cultures reflecting homogeneties of structure with the individual inseparable from the group. (See H. Odum, "Folk Sociology as a Subject Field for the Historical Study of Total Human Society and the Empirical Study of Group Behaviour". (Social Forces, March 1953, Vol. 31, No. 3).
Oral transmission, therefore, may be used as a reliable source while using the anthropological approach to religion in the Indian context. Of course, the use of this source will not reveal the chronological events of religious development; but it will expose the flow of continuity that Hinduism has maintained from the ancient to the modern age. However, tradition presents another role as far as its influence over Indian society is concerned. The vast domain of Hinduism demonstrates both liberal as well as highly orthodox thought, the result of which is the establishment of the caste system resulting from the orthodox; a system which has been maintained since the ancient times, supported by the philosophy of birth and rebirth.

In the Indian context, oral tradition operates to ensure cultural continuity from generation to generation, emphasising conformity to the accepted cultural norms and through the validation of social institutions. So does it strengthen the caste system operating in Indian society.

"The Hindu's acceptance of the differences in the social codes of different castes and ethnic groups springs not so much from a spirit of tolerance, but from the conviction that there is no universal morality equally applicable to all human groups. The Hindu takes it for granted that other castes observe customs different from his own
Caste and such divergence seems to him neither shocking nor undesirable, but inherent in the world order.  

Caste rules cover more spheres of social life in which the individual is bound to his caste group, along with its prescribed dietary, occupational and social rules. His individual freedom is limited in order to preserve the status quo of his caste group. However his views on religious beliefs and worship are not strictly watched as compared to his social activities. This is because of the broad-based sectarian Hinduism and the paraphernalia of numerous gods and goddesses; which at once represent the Hindu triad, (Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva, their incarnations and Shiva's consorts) or, in some way related to each other.

Thus, tradition has established the underlying orthodoxy or rigidity of casteism as well as flexibility or heterodoxy of sectarian beliefs in Indian society which is best expressed while observing live religion within a rural society. Assamese society not only includes caste groups but also ethnic groups, mainly Assamese speaking, who have separate ideas of what Hinduism is. The growth and popularity of Shaktism and Shakta temples have almost an equal, if not more, influence in

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18 C. Von Furer Haimendorf, South Asian Societies: A Study of Values and Social Controls (Sterling, Delhi 1979).
some aspects of social and religious values in Assamese society. Various stages of developments and phases have determined the popularity and influence of both Vaishnava and Shakta values over Assamese society.

Our analysis of projecting the flow of social and religious interaction between Vaishnavas and the folk society, can be made possible, by looking at some elements of tradition itself. Oral transmissions between the two have been significant historically and sociologically. However the deeper meaning of tradition, which actually maintains continuity of a system for generations, is to be conceptualised. Vansina's analysis of tradition puts forward the argument that tradition can be regarded as a legitimate source of the historical past, even if it happens to be verbal. He distinguishes between two types of tradition, a) fixed forms where people learn many of their religious or mythical lore by heart in forms of chants or poetry; and b) free forms where transmission is fed by personal interpretation, while maintaining the basic meaning in context. Hence ritual experts and priests have been able to transmit their knowledge quite efficiently to their disciples, who

in turn, express full consensus and legitimacy to such transmissions, even if they have had no direct access to the texts. Ancient and medieval Indian history may legitimately be studied by the use of oral sources, found in chants and hymns or narrations which temple priests transmit to pupils. The tradition of transmitting knowledge (teacher/pupil and preceptor/disciple) has been continuing since the middle ages. It is believed that certain religious texts which were written down in the middle ages brought about vehement opposition among the whole tradition of Brahmins in view of desecration of the holy word. However, transcriptions of the early Hindu literature, which were discovered in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, were found to be transcribed with "highly treasonable collaboration of certain Brahmin priests". It follows that oral transmission projected much more reliability and legitimacy than written texts that were reinterpreted in later years.

Sattras in Assam may be regarded as permeating its influence on folk society through the transmission of an oral tradition along the 'fixed' form, as categorised by Vansina. The 'free' form may be applied within the frame-

21 S.J. Tambiah, op.cit.
work of folk society which would expose the variety of beliefs and notions that emerges from religions, social and situational interactions.

In view of this format, the thesis will make an attempt to assess the role of monasteries from above, to the village. The two roles of the Sattras (already mentioned), will analyse the degree of continuity of tradition as seen during field study along with a socio-historical perspective of the contributions of Vaishnavism to Assamese society. This would lead to an interpretation of the contemporary situation of the entire Assamese society which would explain lay attitude towards Vaishnavism and monasteries, and the latter's confinement only to rural society.

Change is a continual process which can be viewed in different levels. In India it is seen through a common tradition of castes, tribal groups, regional units and sacred communities, each having its independent, though similar, backgrounds. Both 'change' and 'tradition' are conflicting variables when we look at them broadly. But their adaptibility can be seen within a micro-analytic framework. For instance, variants of 'change' such as economic and social within the monastic system (landholding and ownership) will result in change of relationships between the monastery and the immediate dis-
ciples, though the deep, underlying psychological link between preceptor/disciple, orator/audience, and beliefs remain the same. Change is conspicuous in the periphery of a traditional structure, while tradition persists within the system. Therefore, the sectarian position of the Sattras, their economic standing and their relationship with the laity, will be analysed again to understand change as being a peripheral feature working within the monastic system. Urbanization is an important variant of change which has led to a decline of interest in monastic values. This is not to say that the cause is entirely because of the movement of rural masses to towns, but because of the general economic and political changes, which lead to a decrease in traditional occupation within the village level.

The use of ethnographical material is important while studying elements of folk society. It has been applied particularly to study the ethnic/tribal population of the Brahmaputra Valley which has shown the flow of interaction and influence between Assamese caste Hindus and the plain tribals. Tribals living in the plains of Assam constitute a fairly high population as 'backward Hindus' and also as Christians. The process of acculturation with respect to these tribes is so rapid in Assam that Kacharis and Lalungs have come to be known as 'caste tribes'. The importance of ethnography lies in the fact
that it stimulates a different interpretive approach while studying anthropology. Not only should interpretive anthropology provide answers to our deepest question but also make available to us answers that others have given and thus include them on the consultable record of what man has said.  

Empirical survey reveals the flexibility of the caste system in Assam and hence a loosely structured social system within the entire Assamese community. This is because of the polarization of orthodox values among caste groups, liberalised by sectarian Vaishnava influence and further liberalised by tribal norms.

To elaborate on the last point it can be noted that Assamese language has Sanskrit base while some features of Assamese culture show variations because it is effected by racial fusions. Though Tibeto-Burman dialects are in use among Assamese tribes, much of their words and even grammatical forms have influenced Assamese language. Much of the tribal pattern of agricultural methods, livestock care, use of bamboo crafts such as bowls, knives, bows and arrows, food habits, flexible forms of marriage and the dominance of village assembly are followed among the Assamese caste Hindus too. Assamese village prayer

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23 C. Geertz, *op. cit.*

halls or Namghars functioned as courts of justice and their success is a positive reflection of tribal councils which worked efficiently in the plain and hill areas of Assam.

With the second point as our tool of analysis, we will attempt to expose its impact on Assamese society and also its influences which have merged into rural life to make it a folk religion. Traditional modes of entertainment and ritual expressions not only acted as a medium of education but also as an instrument of the village individual's personal and spiritual world.

The following chapters will give an analysis of the role of monasteries and monastic members which operate on the rural level in Assamese society. Chapter II however will confine itself only to a narration of the meaning of Assamese Vaishnavism and a brief explanation of its establishment in Assam. Chapter III and IV deal with the central theme of our study, i.e., the continuity of a tradition through the 'fixed' and 'free' forms by illustrating the internal functions of two monasteries, each belonging to two different sects and also their relationship with the lay disciples. An elaborate description of monastic discipline in terms of their culinary and doctrinal values has been put forth to analyse the internal orthodoxy within the system while exposing the external
heterodox attitudes as far as their interaction with lay disciples is concerned.

The final chapter will show the second aspect of our investigation into the external social changes that have confined monasteries to the premise of rural society only. The historical perspective has been applied to expose its importance while making an anthropological analysis of a traditional system. Although the anthropologist applies his analysis primarily to the unconscious elements of social life ... he cannot remain indifferent to historical processes and to the most highly conscious expressions of social phenomena for ... the two approaches are inseparable. 25

There has been frequent mention of Vaishnava music throughout this study. But there is no separate chapter or elaboration of it. It is unfortunate that I was not able to do any field work and gather material on hymns such as Borget or any other Sattriya music. Collection of such material, analysing them and understanding them in relation to Assamese social structure and Assamese folk music would have been very interesting. But it has been regretted that my field work could not find enough time to get into this venture. It is hoped that in the

near future such an analysis can be done with sufficient field data.

Borgeets or hymns were composed by Shankardeb. It is believed that they were composed towards the end of the fifteenth century. According to some scholars, Shankardeb's first composition of a Borgeet came about in 1490, just when he went on his first pilgrimage to a place called Badrikashram. His compositions were predominantly philosophical and their spiritual content depicts man's relation to God. Borgeets are sung in the Braja-bali dialect. This dialect developed in Assam centuries back and its inclusion in these Vaishnava compositions have embraced the hearts of the people because of the simplicity and commonality of the language.

Shankardeb had composed two hundred and forty Borgeets in his lifetime. But the manuscript in which the entire collection of Borgeet was written down was reduced to ashes when a fire broke out in the house of one Kamala Bayan, who had borrowed the manuscript for singing some of the pieces. There could not have been more of a loss than the loss of this invaluable collection which occurred


27 Ibid.
during Shankardeb's last years of his life. As a result, whatever Borgeets remain today are the ones that Shankardeb's devoted disciples could recollect and hand them down from one generation to the next. Consequently, there are a less number of Shankardeb's Borgeets to Madhavdeb's composition and Madhavdeb's Borgeets are indeed superb and they are innovative where he explicitly depicts Krishna's childhood pranks besides other stages of Krishna's life. Shankardeb's Borgeets stresses the idea of submission to Lord Krishna through which there could be salvation from pain and illusion.  

It is perhaps important to mention in this chapter (though repeated in later chapter) the significant two way process of literary contribution between the Ahom and Vaishnava cultural media. Regarding the encouragement forwarded by the Ahom nobility to folk art and literature in Assam; explanation can be made in the sphere of their tolerant attitude towards other religions in Assam. This is the root cause however.

The Ahom religious, literary and linguistic fields were gradually becoming obsolete. Free of caste preju-

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28 Ibid., p. iii. It is worth mentioning that tales of the Jatakas and Panchatantra have had a wide impression in various parts of India and abroad. These tales have been utilised by religions instructors. In Assam we see an anthology of religious Maxims which are often drawn from the Panchatantra. This anthology is called Phakara.
dices they gave due honour to the Vaishnava cult and its literary elements. But this was limited to a few kings only. Yet their general attitude towards Vaishnavism and Islamism was one of tolerance. The Assamese language was maintained by them to communicate with their subjects. Furthermore, the richest cultural traits prevalent during the Ahom period was that of the Vaishnava culture. In comparison to Ahom literature and music, Vaishnavism achieved the highest place. 29

Ahom kings welcomed performances of Vaishnava musicians and singers. Crowds would gather to watch these performances and very often they were sought after the most during royal marriages. 30

The period of Ahom administration had to a great extent brought the tribal people in close assimilation with the peasantry, in terms of marriage and common citizenship. The reason is basically economic on the part of

29 The greatest contribution made by the Ahoms to the culture of the Assamese people was their compilation of chronicles written both in Assamese and Ahom. There were also elaborate records on the construction of tanks, temples, maintenance of elephants and horses. See S.K. Bhuyan, Studies in the History of Assam (Gauhati 1965).

30 These instances are to be seen in the chronicles or 'Buranjis' written by the Ahoms. Here, Vaishnava dramas such as the 'Bhaona' were looked upon as state functions.
the tribals and administrative on the part of the Ahom nobility. The tribals communicated with the village folk initially through trade and thereby satisfying their wants and bare necessities. From the Ahom's point of view the tribals were welcomed to work under their administration and were given full fledged citizenship. Friendship with them was cultivated as the tribals lived in the strategic passes of Assam. Furthermore, most of the Ahoms went into wedlock with both tribal and Assamese women as they had not brought their women when they conquered Assam initially in the thirteenth century. All this contributed to the solidarity of the Ahom region which ruled over Assam for six hundred years till the nineteenth century.

Hence tribal peasant culture prevails in the Assam valley. Folk theatre, songs, drama, tales and dance are still present though traditional touch of the practice is languishing.