CHAPTER IV

MONASTIC ROLE IN VILLAGE CULTURE

With an understanding of the important role played by both bhakats and Brahmin priests, in the previous chapter, we can see an aspect of the scope of folk religion in rural Assamese society. In this chapter I will elucidate the scope of folk religion by analysing various modes of beliefs and customs in rural society which would not only reveal the monastic influence over the village community but a parallel influence of the Shakta cult within it. This elucidation will be confined to two broad dimensions: (a) monastic doctrinal emphasis on caste egalitarianism; and (b) commensal order of Vaishnavas and the relevance of this order among Assamese Hindus.

It is worthwhile to note that these two dimensions are opposing or contradictory to each other because the first one would expose the positive role played by Sattras in propagating the egalitarian outlook of its cult to society, while, the second would convey the orthodox system of commensality which some Sattras have imbibed from 'higher' Hinduism, that ultimately gets activated into village culture.
These dimensions, however, should be viewed on the basis of sectarian values of Vaishnavism. Hence several levels of orthodoxy within the monastic sphere concerned must be assumed from the very beginning. Doctrinal emphasis on caste equality has been a long-term phenomenon on which literary and traditional writings of scribes and 'saints' have been marked through history. One can deduce the semi-liberal ideas of sectarian Hinduism of which Vaishnavism is one such cult. Till today it throws light on the facets of socio-religious features to several rural societies. Bhajans, Kirtans, Krishna worship and stories associated with him are depicted through ceremonies, rites, dramas and folklore.

The Vaishnava cult came as a reforming force to Assamese society. Facets of human actions and thought were carefully dictated by successive monastic heads for the past four centuries. This is not to suggest that these writings were the backbone of the reforming, for cult. Besides accentuating the equality of casteism, several monastic heads started to imbibe the philosophic aspects of commensality and gradually activated them to the lay followers. So theoretically, later Vaishnava texts were no different from the sacred texts of the
Bhagavata and Gita which gave a definite control to human action. Hence various monastic heads till today reveal several degrees of orthodox and liberal values as far as their ideas on casteism and commensality are concerned.

Commensality within the monastic fold is strictly followed especially in the ones where Kewaliya or celibate bhakats reside. The abstinence of various meats or fish and edible bulbous roots convey a streak of orthodoxy and also an indirect acceptance or recognition of casteism. This is because such categories of food are equally resisted by high caste orthodox Hindus. On the other hand, the observance of commensality in monasteries of category B (page 121) shows a fair amount of flexibility where items of fish, meat and onions are included in their diet. Both a blend of orthodox/liberal and conventional ideas of the Vaishnavas have woven a peculiar influence into the fabric of Assamese society.

Before I proceed to analyse the role of monasteries into village culture, I shall explain the composition of a standard Assamese village and its caste system.

Village and Caste Stratification:

Assamese villages are not structured on any parti-
cular model. Neither are they related to any geometric plan. However, special attention is given to the location such as the high land which is situated near the highways and rivulets. Earlier, villages were situated near the rivers, but after the advent of the Ahoms in the thirteenth century, the villages soon came to be established near the highways.¹

A common feature of an Assamese village is that the members of a family live under one roof. The joint family system is not very common nowadays. New houses are immediately built with the increase of family members on occasions of marriage. Now, due to land scarcity, one can see joint set-ups with common kitchens. But the normal tendency is to have nuclear households. The houses generally consist of the dwelling quarters with a kitchen attached to it. A small shed for the cattle (Gohalighar) is normally situated at the back of the house. A little courtyard or Sotal separates the cow-shed from the main living quarters.

It has always been a custom in Assamese villages to set up small houses. This convention has been established even proverbially in village lore that if a house cannot accommodate enough people, it is conducive to build

¹ B.K. Barua, Assamiya Loka-Samskriti (Gauhari 1961), p. 156.
nine more. Normally, no house is built behind any other house belonging to another family. They are well spaced out and set in rows and not in clusters. The villages are separated from each other by large paddy fields, bamboo groves or the village forestry.

The first Hindu immigrants seemed to have entered the valley at a time when the distinctions between one another were not specifically defined. With the establishment of the division of labour, caste groups began to be distinguished according to their birth and inheritance. Numerous new castes and sub-castes had been evolved in relation to the development of different arts, crafts and professions. The literature of Vaishnavas and Ahoms recorded the names of different classes that grew according to the nature of work they did and also according to birth. Besides the presence of caste titles, most Assamese people followed the titles that were designated to them on the basis of their work or offices. As mentioned earlier, the main caste groups in the Assam valley are the (a) Bamuns or Brahmins, Gonok Bamuns; (b) Kayasthas; (c) Kalitas; (d) Keots; (e) Kai-

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2 Ibid.


4 P. Bhattacharya, This is Assam (Gauhati 1958), p. 64.
bartas; (f) Haris/Doms. Between the two broad sub-divisions of cultivators and artisans, the former, to whichever caste it belongs to, claims higher status.  

Generally, rural Assamese society consists of several caste groups living in amity amongst themselves. However, each group confines itself to separate homesteads called suburis. These suburis are similar to those of the para in Bengal villages.  

The Bamuns in Assam are placed highest in the caste hierarchy. Birth, marriage and death rites are performed by them. Within the category of the Bamuns, one finds the family priest who serves the ritual needs of the people. The astrologers who determine the auspicious dates of such rites and ceremonies are known as the Gonoks. There have been instances of lower caste individuals performing rites within their own group. More than their effort to sanskritize themselves, it is probably the system of the paternal village elder and his acquaintance or competence in knowing the Vaishnava literature that he  


gets this response. **Bamuns** in the village are economically better off than the other people of the village. They have a fairly large possession of land which they acquired in return of their services and frequently their land is tilled by their 'customers'. Village-lore and superstitious beliefs on the superiority of **Bamuns** have considerably minimised their labour in the fields. **Brahmins** all over India had kept themselves away from manual labour and confined their activities to religious functions only. The fifteenth century court poets and ministers in Assam were mostly members belonging to this class.

The Varna system in Assamese society is still widely prevalent, but the non-Brahmins are numerically stronger and are socially in close relations with one another. The Kalitas are the most important caste group who are numerically and politically dominant in most Assamese villages. Their numerical strength comes not because they represent a broad standard group but because they are subdivided into various cultural and occupational positions. They are ranked second in the caste hierarchy while the

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Kayasthas are regarded as assimilated with the Bamuns. Cultivators, potters and the artisan class claim the status of Kalitas. The Kalitas are divided into a) a Kali Kalita and b) Soru Kalita. The former word implies superiority over the Soru or Subordinate Kalitas. These two categories of people do not intermarry normally and the Bor Kalitas are understood to belong to the cultivator group. Among the Soru Kalitas are the Kumars/potters, Mali/gardener, Napit/barber, Bez/medicine man and Nat/dancer. There is usually a tendency to drop the functional suffix and adopt the classification of Bor Kalitas.

9 Various explanations have been put forward to account for the origin of the Kalitas as a caste group. They claimed to be Rajputs or the Kshatriyas (L.A. Waddell, "Tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley", JASE, 1900, Vol. LXIX, p. 49). It is generally maintained that they are the descendants of a Hindu group which settled in the province a time when the functional castes were still unknown. (Imperial Gazetteer, Vol. VI, p. 45). Yet another hypothesis is that they were the descendants of the Kayasthas who came to the valley to officiate as priests for 'tribes' who were adopting Hinduism.

10 Nat Kalitas are not to be misunderstood with the caste of Nats who originated as a class of dancers and singers from the temples of Hajo and Dhupri. This tradition has gradually been disowned and they often add the suffix of Kalita or drop the prefix of Nat and acquire the name of Kalita.

11 S.N. Ratha, op.cit., p. 156.
The Assamese peasantry follow their traditional profession in cultivation and very few instances of replacing this occupation with a profession of other occupational caste groups have been cited. Even today, to find an Assamese Hindu following the profession even of a napit (barber), not to speak of a musi (cobbler) is scarce among the Soru Kalitas, but practiced for their own purposes. For instance curing skins for drum making, hair cutting and watering are done by them.

The traditional caste occupancy of the Napit, Dhobi, Mali and Musi are found mostly among the Bihari migrants into Assam. This has gradually led Assamese Hindus to look down on such professions as ritually impure. In a certain way, the absence of caste occupational groups such as the ones mentioned above, has made the interaction between cultivating caste groups highly flexible and cordial.

Because of the inclusion of a large part of the occupational classes of people into this category, the Kalitas have been able to wield social and political superiority over the Keots and the lower caste groups.

The Keots are found predominantly in the Brahmaputra valley and like the Kalitas, they are divided into a number of functional sub-castes. It is possible that
Keots and the Kaibartas had the same origin. The two subdivisions in the Keot group are the Haloi (cultivator) and the Jaloi (fishermen). The Halois normally drop the suffix of Keot, and like the Kalita group of cultivators, they too claim superiority over the Jaloi. Titles are changed accordingly which gradually leads to a division in hierarchy. It is only in the occupational level that the change of status is accepted to some extent. This form of acceptance is not general, but particular to the personal history of the individual concerned.

The Koch are semi-Hinduised in the sense that they adopted Hindu rituals and culinary habits by maintaining Brahmin priests and giving up beef eating, though not animal food altogether. They are regarded as low castes and are found mostly in the districts of Sibsagar and Kamrup (See L.A. Waddell, JASB, 1900).

In India Doms are regarded as low and ritually impure because they belong to the profession of carry corpses to cremation grounds and menial jobs. Caste groups like these are considered so low by other Hindu caste groups that they were not allowed to approach the latter within a measurable distance. Because they were

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utterly despised and oppressed by others, the Doms had no
incentive or initiative to join any other profession.\textsuperscript{13}
Some predominantly follow the profession of fishing, selling fish or are involved in making fishing nets. Earlier, in Assam, they are believed to have taken largely to trade and work as goldsmiths. Many of them are known to be Sonari or Goldsmiths.\textsuperscript{14}

Doctrinal Emphasis:

Numerous passages of the Kirtan (a text by Shankardeb) show a distinct emphasis on caste egalitarianism which rural inhabitants are aware of - the awareness comes from their familiarity of the hymns and chants that they hear in their village Namghar. The extent of tolerance and a liberal attitude of Vaishnavas towards other religious cults have given the laity the freedom of choice to follow other forms of worship. In doing so, they have elaborately moulded facets of sectarian Hindu values to their social norms and beliefs. In addition, tribal groups in rural Assam have further liberalised such values.

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{14} B.K. Barua, \textit{Cultural History, op.	extsc{cit.}}, p. 129.
\end{itemize}
My introductory chapter conveys the idea that both Vaishnava and Shakta following can be observed in rural Assamese society. An analysis has to be made as to why both cults are important to the laity. The Krishna cult, which Vaishnavas profess, is predominant in almost all the Assamese villages. Krishna poses as the pastoral god, the miracle child, the Lord. He is the principal deity worshiped among Assamese Hindus. Direct image worship is absent and forms of religious processions (that are seen in Bengal) are not practiced in Assam. The absence of these two features are instances of Vaishnava influence over the people. Broadly speaking, exponents of Shaktism and Vaishnavism made earthly comparisons of love between wife and husband to the love between Parvati/Shiva and Radha/Krishna, in order to explain the meaning of devotion to God. Shaktism in particular conveys that the "blissful state of the worshipper who is finally, through prayer and meditation, united with Shiva, is akin to the ecstasy which Parvati feels in the sexual union with Shiva, her husband."\[15\]

According to Assamese Vaishnavism, devotion is to surrender oneself to the Guru or God. According to this

doctrine God looks on His subjects with equal consideration irrespective of their caste affiliations; Shankardeb's literary expressions of this shows in many of his works such as:

"God is the soul of even dogs, donkeys and outcastes; Knowing this, pay reverence to all living creatures."

In reciprocity of God's view of man Shankardeb explicitly propagated the idea that subjects should disregard all their partial beliefs of casteism and express their devotion to God collectively. He states in a piece of his poetry:

"Why need one be a Brahmin to devoutly recite the name of Krishna? He might be a candal or pariah; But he is far superior to any man Who does not utter the name of God."

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16 R.C. Muirhead Thompson, Assam Valley - Beliefs and...
Shaktism embraces and almost deifies the process of sex and reproduction and it is this fundamental idea of Shaktism that most rural people give great importance to; for it ensures sons to till the land and continue holding the land from generation to generation. Also Shaktism by association implies productivity in the field.

"The magical or religious rites intended to secure the fertility of fields were thought as belonging to the special competence of the women who were the first cultivators of the soil, whose power of child bearing was believed to have a sympathetic effect on the growth of the plant." 17

Hinduism has long recognised the continual process of creation, preservation and destruction of which the Shaktas have laid importance on the creative and destructive processes of power. This has been symbolised by the form of sexual union and the cremation ground respectively.

The erotic aspects in this context are not explicit or predominant in Assam and also the amorous traits of Krishna is minimal in the Vaishnava literature. Caste

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Customs of the Assamese Hindus (Luzac & Co. Ltd. London 1948).

groups who adhere to this Vaishnava/Shakta belief in Assam do not show much knowledge or acquaintance with the erotic depiction of their deity. Goddesses are portrayed as Earth Mother; and identified with the fertility of fields. As a symbol of fertility the Goddess is associated with menstruation, symbolised in the Ambubashi festival and also with the earth and fertility as symbolised in blood sacrifices. The Ambubashi festival is current in Assam and Bengal which falls in the lunar months of June/July lasting three days. During this period the earth is believed to be going through its menstrual cycle and none should till or plough the land in this period. All kitchen wares are taken out of the cooking quarters and washed thoroughly. Such customs are followed strictly. An instance of social boycott has been cited in Darrang district against a Kalita who trod on the field in Ambubashi period. It is principally fear and awe towards such worship that they abide in, lest destruction falls on their homes and their young ones. The concept of the destructive element in such deities is more known than of procreation.

In short, worship of deities has an ulterior motive by which the worshipper hopes to gain some form of material benefit. **Sakam** (motivated) is believed to be an
important aspect of deity worship, and in return for offering the best and most elaborate of pujas, the deity may bestow the best of favours on the worshipper. Hence the process of worship becomes ritually intricate, rigid and expensive. In this way, domestic and mundane problems of the village are sought to be solved through the worship of Durga and Lakshmi. Diseases which are ever rampant in rural Assamese society have churned out folk-songs in praise of similar goddesses such as that of small-pox, (Ai-nam) which would appease her and save the village from such a curse.

In contrast to Shakti worship, Vaishnavism, with its integral expressions of congregational prayer and singing is not consciously result oriented; if at all it is, the expectation is spiritual rather than material. This form of action is Niskam (non-motivated). Because deity worship is result oriented as believed and practiced by people, the Shakta following is as large or may be more than Vaishnava following if we consider the entire region of Assamese society - urban and rural.

In India, rituals are associated with most of the life activities of particularly the rural people. They have been prescribed for auspicious days and also for the star of a new season. They are one of the significant
features and act as the religious form by which the purity of individuals and their social life is guaranteed. Rituals do play an important part in Assamese villages but they vary in degrees of rigidity/flexibility depending on the caste stratification and the social mobility of the particular village and its inhabitants. For instance, rituals can be very strictly followed in a caste Hindu village of Kamrup district not only because it comprises cultivator caste groups and traders (Baishyas) but because of the population's familiarity with Shakta and the Kamakhya temple. (The village in this context is situated Tokradia, 40 kms. from Kamakhya). These rituals point dominantly towards the life cycle of the peasantry and also their land. Vedic rituals are to be found explicitly in Assamese marriages, conducted by Brahmin priests.19

Shaktism survives in certain areas of peasant life through the hold rituals have on them. But Vaishnavism is identifiable with the basic fabric of peasant life


19 Assamese marriages are monogamous, though instances of polygamy are present. Most of the wedding customs are run by womenfolk. Child marriage, to some extent, is prevalent among Bamuns and Kayasthas.
and norms of the community. Villages in Darrang and Sibsagar districts follow the Vaishnava cult in which the influence of ritual is relatively minimal underlying the supreme pervasiveness of congregational prayer. Rituals are not a major concommitment of the Vaishnava cult. Hence, their role, in relation to social implications that influence people to do something and abstain from the other, is virtually absence. (Compare marriage, life cycle, household rituals and social mobility of North Indian villages with North Eastern rural society. See Oscar Lewis or William Wiser's books on the rural life of North Indian villages). Nor do we find any form of Vaishnava rituals pertaining to agni and mantras acting on rural society, though, some aspects are present in the Brahmin monasteries. However, the conventional obligation of paying a visit to the Namghar after occasions of marriage, death and birth has become almost customary among rural inhabitants. Congregational chants and hymns extracted from the Kirtan may be regarded as the ritual expression which is all pervasive in village life and village lore.

Just as Shaktism fulfills its role in Assamese society, the Vaishnava cult metes out a social function to rural society in terms of its welfare. The Bor sabah
(great congregation) is organised in Namghars where prayers are offered for the welfare of the peasantry. The Gorokhia Sabah (cowherd's gathering) comprises hymns and prayers for animal welfare. The third form of congregation is the Pal Nam sung out for the welfare of the entire humanity. Both the first two congregations are concluded with the performance of the Bhauna (dramatic expression of the Mahabharata and Ramayana), which continues till the early hours of the morning. The hymns are extracted from the Kirtan while the Pal Nam comprises extracts from the four major Vaishnava texts, viz: The Kirtan and Bhagawat of Shankardeb and the Namghosha and Ratnavali of Madhavdeb.

These congregations are vitally important to rural society and may be more significant than the role of Shakti cult as they not only act as the educative instrument of popular Hinduism but also as a supporting tool of folk tradition. This has been explained in chapter II.

Borgeets are sung in a mixed Maithili - Assamese language. They are sung in religious gatherings in a

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20 Pal Nam, as mentioned earlier, has different styles of expression in different monasteries and villages. But the basic meaning of the term Pal, is followed universally where the participation of each individual in the gathering is compulsory.

21 Hem Barua, Assamese Literature, op.cit., p. 63.
simple sonorous voice. They are composed broadly accord-
ing to **ragas** of classical Indian music; yet they are a  deviation from the normal **ragas** of both Hindusthani and Karanataka schools of music. All borgeets with the ex-
ception of three have no 'talas', (time beats). Time need not always be kept while singing a borgeet. The singer does not generally submit himself to the control of keeping the 'tala', it is the voice which changes its accents while expressing the given lyrics of the melody. The reason why the borgeets are different from Northern and Southern classical music is probably because of the above explanation and also because no stringed and wind blown instruments are used in Vaishnava music. Some scholars feel that there is no notational records of training in this field and hence the difference.

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23 A borgeet may be compared to the 'Dhrupad' style. Usually a borgeet and Ankiyageet have two parts of the raga music: Alap and the gita. In the alap words like Hari and Govinda are used. The borgeets have depictions of Lord Krishna's sports, his early life and his childish pranks. However they are free from the erotic sequences of the Radha/Krishna lyrics of Northern India and also from the velocity of the Kheyal type of music.
It has to be conceded that borgeets and other Vaishnava music like Kirtan-ghosa, Oja-pali and Ankargeets are variations on the common Indian musical theory.\(^{24}\)

These melodies developed their own characteristics owing to the local influences and the speech habits of the people.\(^{25}\) S.K. Chatterjee has also specified that the musical modes and time beats which are found in borgeets are common to the Maithili and Bengali lyrics and therefore there was a common system of musical form current in the whole of Eastern India.\(^{26}\)

With the growth and spread of the Sattras, the popularity of borgeets increased and became a regular practice in the prayer hall to begin the daily services with a borgeet. Music and histrionics were taught to those having an aptitude for either of the two in the Sattras.

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24 Kirtan-ghosa is a form of congregational singing amongst male members of the village performed with the accompaniment of drums. Oja-pali comprises of the village choral singers in groups of four or five. The leader is called oja, and the supporters are the palis. He performs with dancing gestures addressing the audience as a story teller and the palis sing the main body of the verse. Ankargeets are like borgeets except that they are always accompanied with 'talas'.

25 H. Neog, Sankardeva and His Times, op.cit., p. 276.

26 Hem Barua, Assamese Literature, op.cit., p. 63.
The method of playing the instruments, singing and dancing were extended to the Namghars besides other fields of learning. Hence it served as a centre of training to the village community. It can be said that whatever musical accomplishments of the classical order Assamese villagers did possess or are still possessing, it is because of the influence and training form the Sattras and Namghars. 27

Borgeets have not only influenced the Assamese folk songs but also many art songs. 28 The folk theatre in Assam too is adopted through the Vaishnava media. All Vaishnava literature, lyrics, drama and verse being of traditional literate culture branch is the only probable explanation which led to the establishment of Assamese folk art and culture. But this is not to say that Assamese folk songs are permanent and unchangeable. They are oral like folk songs as in other parts of India. In recent times folk songs have been composed which depict the...


28 A folk song differs from art song not because it is devoid of any artistic beauty: but art music is the work of the individual and he expresses his personal ideals and aspirations. It is composed and committed to paper and forever fixed in an unalterable form. These art songs are a part of Assamese literature and one can trace the influence...
parting of friends, attraction of town life and imprints of town behaviour amongst some village youths and many such instances. These songs are sung under the same melodic Bihu tune.

Bihu as I have already mentioned is a very important festival in Assam. It is in this festival that one can witness the display of Assamese folk dances and songs. This festival was made extremely popular as it received the royal patronage of the Ahoms in the later years of their rule. (Late eighteenth century). In fact through the royal enthusiasm and encouragement Bihu became a national festival of Assam. Bihu songs and dances began to be staged in the 'Rangghar', (the king's palace) for the nobility and the masses and thus became a specific force in unifying the people. 29

The tradition of Assamese music had to be borne and carried through the centuries by religious circles viz: Vaishnavism. With the decline of the Ahom dialect, the Ahom nobles and princes became patrons of Assamese literature and arts. They adopted the Hindu customs and

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of the borgeet melodies and also their lyrical verses, literary in content. For details see: Cecil Sharp, English Folk-Songs. (London 1954), p. 15.

manners and it was but natural that they encouraged and welcomed the Vaishnava fields of culture. The conventional feature of large gatherings in the Namghar followed by collective singing and ultimately the content of the hymns (e.g. depiction of Krishna as a child and then of a cowherd) has churned out a belief among the rural subjects of identifying themselves to the Krishna cult, through generations. Therefore the gathering, the chant are associated with the matrix of village affairs and hence determines the essence of folkness in village life.

Reversibly, the inclusion of Vedic rituals in rural marriages, for example, and similar ceremonies express a colossal almost alien feature to the village individual. These rituals are beyond their understanding and therefore the acceptance of perpetuating such rites are recognised by the village individual along with a feeling of awe and fear for the Bamun priest. The closeness and familiarity to Vaishnava ritual expressions are almost treated on cordial terms.

The members of a village are bound together by ties of mutual and reciprocal obligations. Interpersonal and intergroup relationships in several spheres of village affairs are governed by establishing usage and social ethics.30

The Commensal Order:

The significance of preserving facets of commensal values by Hindus indicates their moral implications to commensality. The importance of regulations on the consumption of food has been an established phenomenon since ancient times. Regulations in consuming food, like social control, decreases in orthodoxy the lower the caste hierarchy descends. The choice of diet is restricted amongst higher caste groups and the more one abstains from some forms of food and alcohol, the more does he achieve social approval and honour.

Food cooked by a lower caste which might be transmitted to a Brahmin makes the latter acquire the former's status. Food plays the moral role among caste Hindus and any major interruption on disregarding this aspect leads to a breach in the caste regulations. Food has been classified into three spiritual categories. They are - a) Sattvik (related to goodness), b) Rajasik (related to mundane luxuries), and c) Tamasik (related to excitable sexual temperament). Some of the forms of food categorised in these three classifications indicate the gradual advancement from 'cool' food (Sattvik) to the 'hot' of the Tamasik which is believed to excite the body and mind. In Assam the food prescribed are:
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sattvik</th>
<th>Rajasik</th>
<th>Tamasik</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Milk/milk products</td>
<td>Fish</td>
<td>Alcohol</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rice</td>
<td>Meat</td>
<td>Beef</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fruits</td>
<td>Duck flesh</td>
<td>Pork</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vegetables</td>
<td>Onion</td>
<td>Tobacco</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pulses (Mogu, But or Moong, Chana)</td>
<td>Garlic</td>
<td>Pulses (Masur).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Raw foods or Kesa are ritually pure compared to cooked or Paka which goes through various processes of cooking, pickling, frying, roasting, etc. Any item of food which is regarded as ritually impure is known as Suwa amongst the Assamese. The Bamun normally accepts only greens such fruits and vegetables from the lower castes. Articles of food which are soaked in water is Kesa and accepted. But instances of Bamuns refusing this form of food is evident as the acceptance of water by them from a lower caste is not popular.

Audrey Cantlie has made a special mention of the significance of rice for consumption as well as it being a part of ritual activities among Assamese Hindus.  

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she mentions that boiled rice or bhat is connected to the meaning of life food or Anna and is identified with Brahma. Bhat is consequently the object of religious act of which its preparation is carried out according to several rules of ritual purity.\textsuperscript{32} Hence, boiled rice is considered to be a valuable and important aspect of life to an Assamese. Stale food is regarded as Tamasik and in this context, the remains of cooked rice, which is left over from the consumer's plate, convey the same meaning as the waste of the body in relation to the digestive process. This form of ritual impurity is called suwa. Suwa actually refers to several forms of impurities and is a common usage in the Assamese language. Nonetheless, suwa in this context would apply to ritual impurity only. "This antipathy appears to rest as an equation between food remains and excrement derived from the assimilation of cooking to the actions of the digestive system."\textsuperscript{33}

Assamese cultivators depend entirely on the rice crop for their livelihood. Climatic conditions, i.e., humidity and heavy rainfall, are conducive to this crop and hence a number of rituals are associated with the

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., p. 49.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., p. 53.
paddy crop.

Silsako Village:

Silsako village has been selected for study because it furnishes several variants of social and religious norms, including the large population of caste groups belonging to lower levels of the hierarchy. The involvement of these groups to commensality and with their Sattra are the principal features of this study.

The Silsako village in North Guwahati (Kamrup district) has a population of 14,000 of which 40 per cent are Kaibartas, 35 per cent Kalitas, 15 per cent Bamuns/Kayasthas and the remaining groups Koid and Keots. The predominance of the Kaibartas is because of the village being situated by the bank of the Brahmaputra river and the major transaction of business and trade being that of fishing and sale of fish.

The village in general appearance is congested with rows of houses on either side of a metalled road. Adjacent to the houses are a number of shops selling general goods, as small fish market and three stalls. The Dihing Sattra is situated directly behind the shops separated by a fairly large field. The Auniati Sattra is barely a

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34 Dihing Sattra belongs to the Kala Samhati and con-
kilometre away from the Dihing. These two Sattras are divided by a hillock. There is no hard and fast boundary line, but one does see the differences of the homesteads around each Sattra.

The Dihing Sattra has 25 Kaibarta houses to its east, 40 Kalita houses on the western and southern side and the Keot and Koch households on the northern side of the Sattra. The Auniati is surrounded by Brahmin households with the exception of three Kaibarta houses which are situated just in front of the monastery. These three households have combined to make a small shop which sells some fruits, caneware and general provisions.

At a glance the village appears to have characteristics of a suburban area. But the layout is strictly rural when one moves further into the interior. The communication system from the village to the other side of the bank, where the city of Guwahati lies, is well connected by steam and river boats which ply to and fro

Cont'd... f.n. 34

sequently has been known for its acceptance of the lower caste groups into its fold. Besides, it was closely associated with the Moamaria group of Vaishnava which grew to be the stronghold of non-Brahmanical ideals. However the Dihing Sattra and its branches broke away from the Moamaria group at a later stage of their rebellion against the Ahom nobility in the eighteenth century.
every hour. Locally made country boats are seen practically every minute taking passengers to their destination or with Kaibarta men fishing. A bus service is available, though travelling through the land route proves to be time-consuming as compared to the steamer trip which takes fifteen minutes or so.

The houses in Silsako consist of the dwelling quarters and the kitchen along with the weaving loom. Most of the houses are surrounded by betel nut groves and the absence of separate households behind others is marked being the feature of the standard structure of Assamese villages.

The three caste groups under study are the Kalitas, Kaibarta and the Bamun. However I shall deal with the Kalitas and Kaibartas more in detail as they exposed interactions and activities among themselves and with the Dihing Sattra during my investigations. They also form 75 per cent of the population in Silsako. Bamuns in Silsako live in a separate hamlet near the Auniati. Majority of they are government officials or doctors; and their association with the other caste groups who belong to the low income level is visibly nil. Their houses are made of better building material where six houses of the ten I observed were concrete structures.
The remaining four were rural in character and resembled the household of the other two caste groups. Business and social associations among these Bamuns are stronger with the city than among the village inhabitants. Majority of the Bamuns in Silsako are Shaktas and all their religious activities were seen to be confined to the Kamakhya, Umananda and the Dol-Govinda temples. These three temples are very significant of which Kamakhya is the most important and known to Shaktas all over the country. Despite their affiliation to Auniati as Sisvas/disciples, the Bamuns association with it is formal.

The Bamuns commensal relations with the Kalitas and the Kaibartas is almost absent. Each member of the Bamun households have no social, religious or economic association with the other groups except their formal interaction with the Kalitas on the occasion of Kalita marriages only. This occasion is witnessed by the male members of the Bamun family. The womenfolk therefore have no social relationship with the Kalita households except with their Kayastha neighbours. Hence the question of the Bamuns patronising the Dihing Sattrā does not arise.
The Blessed Food of Dihing Sattra:

Dihing Sattra is the only place of religious activities for the people of Silsako village. It has a Sattradhikar or the high priest who resides within the monastic premises with his family. The other priests living in the premise are his kinsmen and the sisyas or disciples comprising the village inhabitants who perform different roles in the Namghar according to their caste category. Therefore Dihing Sattra draws predominantly more people than the Auniati which is autonomous in its own sphere.35

Commensal relations amongst various caste groups are not followed strictly in Assamese rural society. This feature depends largely on the caste and social structure of the village. However commensality in terms of consuming the blessed food or prasad during congregational sittings in a Namghar shows a fairly high degree of heterodoxy between the Kalitas and the Kaibartas.

35 The Dihing Sattra in appearance is totally dilapidated and uncared for despite the regular flow of villagers who make this monastery the seat of their meeting place in times of feasts and ceremonies. The contrast between the Dihing and the Auniati is so sharp that any lay observer would maintain that the latter receives more support and reverence from the people at the first instance.
Barmans normally do not attend such congregations and even if they do, their sitting arrangements and partaking of the prasad is done independently and in isolation from the other caste groups.

The Vaishnava form of prasad constitutes the Sattvik classification where soaked pulses of mogu and but and also fresh fruits are offered to the gathering. These three items are the principal forms of prasad. By mantras, each of the ingredients is converted into the name of God and distributed to the sisyas after the conclusion of the Nam.

Despite the prasad being categorised into the Sattvik classification the distribution of this form of prasad negates the concept of Faka and Suwa as soaked pulses and fresh fruits are regarded as ritually pure and hence its distribution to all caste groups, short of any prejudicial transmissions. The sitting arrangements are duly made according to the caste categories in the Namghar and the server is normally the priest who presides over the particular congregation, but sometimes it is a single person organising such a congregation in offering to God and he takes over the charge of 'hosting' the crowd. A person of a fairly high economic background may add white sweetmeat, mithoi or payas (rice cooked in milk and sugar). Normally the 'host' in the form of a
single person or a group of persons is affiliated to the working of the Namghar or attached to the caste group committed to its maintenance and welfare. That it is customery to choose the distributor from the highest caste in the congregation so that there can be no objection to taking food from his hand, cannot be an established belief, as seen in the case of Kamalabari Sattra, Auniati and Dihing Sattras. Auniati, being a Bamunia Sattra, has a Kalita for a server and Kamalabari, being predominantly affiliated by Kalitas, has a Keot as the main or Ghai Deuri.

A cloth bound around the mouth of the server can be observed in some large religious congregations in the Namghar. This probably holds two functional points; that of preventing impurities being transmitted from the server's mouth while distributing the prasad or the server himself preventing any ritual impurities coming from the group of several castes while being in close contact with them. No rational explanation was given by any of the informants though the majority of them gave the first point of explanation.

The idea of removing any barriers between caste groups in the form of serving the prasad is peculiar to Assam only, for temples of large parts of India distribute sweetmeat. Vaishnava priests usually accept un-
boiled milk or *ewa gakhir* and also curds and ghee. Usage of unboiled milk and milk products is accepted by them and ghee when heated does not become *suwa* or *paka* as milk is a product of cows and hence sacred. Contrary to not accepting *paka* food, the fried flour cakes or *lusi* is offered as well as accepted in all homes and among all caste categories.

Caste in itself might be rigid among the high castes but malleable amongst the lower. The women in most Assamese villages participate in group fishing and the only distinction between the high and the low caste groups is noticeable by the dress they wear during work. Beneath this observance lie various other economic and social factors which have brought the assemblance of several groups together. Bamun womenfolk are confined to their own group only.

The Kalitas and Kaibartas live with a certain degree of solidarity and in several aspects they depend on reciprocity of meting out social functions within the village. Both the Kalita and the Kaibarta groups have given up their traditional occupation of cultivation and fishing, though this would apply only to the younger persons between the age group of 23 to 45. After an interview of ten Kaibarta households it was observed that each member was either an automobile mechanic or public transport driver. The Kalitas similarly fall into the category of this low
income group though they strictly maintain their social/ritual superiority over the Kaibartas. The Kalitas are either office clerks or workers. Their educational backgrounds are slightly better than the Kaibartas and this has enabled them to get better jobs. However, the paucity of funds to maintain large families is striking among the Kaibartas and two Kalita households (see figure 2 and 3).

Despite the suburban characteristics of the Kalitas and Kaibartas, in terms of their jobs and occupations; in spite of the village being engulfed by a major city, their religious values and affiliation to the Dihing Sattra and also their maintenance of commensality and commensal divisions are strictly preserved. This is not to imply that their social relations are subject to orthodoxy because of their preservation of commensal values. Empirical analysis on the contrary, reveals the folk element of this village which formally maintains the important social customs and values from generation to generation. The presence of the Sattra is a marked variable which reveals the preservation of such norms despite its general decline in lay support.

Another factor that exposes the freedom of choice in religious rituals is the observance of household acti-
### Figure 2

**Occupation and Income of Kalita/Kaibarta Caste Groups**

#### Kalitas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Earning/Dependents</th>
<th>Earner's Occupation</th>
<th>Total Income</th>
<th>Average Income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>2 5</td>
<td>a) Watchman; b) Electrician.</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>1 3</td>
<td>Cultivator.</td>
<td>500/600</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>1 4</td>
<td>Assistant Supervisor of a firm.</td>
<td>450</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td>2 4</td>
<td>a) Clerk in a newspaper agency; b) Mechanic.</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Cultivator with 4/5 Poverty bigha land.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI</td>
<td>2 4</td>
<td>a) Cultivator; b) Shopkeeper.</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII</td>
<td>1 5</td>
<td>Clerk in a private firm.</td>
<td>650</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIII</td>
<td>1 5</td>
<td>Transport mechanic</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IX</td>
<td>1 6</td>
<td>Section assistant of P.W.D.</td>
<td>700</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>3 6</td>
<td>a) Transport clerk; b) Shopkeeper; c) Tea stall owner.</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Most women in both Kaibarta as well as Kalita households are not bound to religious or ritualistic norms. For instance, the washing of utensils is not subject to strict divisions or boundaries of location between these caste
groups. Women of two caste groups may be seen washing their utensils side by side on the river bank. But no Brahmin woman can be sighted doing this job because they are financially better off to afford servants and Brahmans are traditionally not 'suited' for menial jobs outside the house. In Mongoloid-based society women do not suffer from many restrictions. Because of women's traditional involvement with weaving and selling their products, both social as well as physical mobility for them is much greater than the women of north-Indian villages. Secondly, Assamese women do not maintain the purdah system - and with the leniency and secular approach of the Vaishnava cult, Assamese women enjoy greater mobility and choice of interaction among themselves and other caste groups.

The functions meted out in the monastery are fourfold. They are the - a) Udash, b) Kirtania or Sattriya, c) Goya-banua and d) Sohoriya. The term Udash refers to one who renders services to the Dihing Sattr a and this category is open only to the family members of the Sattradhikar, who is a Kalita but add, the suffix of Goswami or Gosain to his name. These two are titles given to Brahmans. Gosain also refers to a Vaishnava priest.

The second category of Kirtania belongs to the Kalita caste who do the work of initiating the congrega-
tional hymns and distributing the prasad to the people seated in the prayer hall. The third category of Goyabansu comprises the Kaibarta caste who are normally entrusted the work of bring and arranging the necessary items for ceremonies/congregation and also heralding the arrival of the Sattradhikar when he travels from one place to the other. **Sohoriya** refers to the Sisyas who reside in the city or the towns. They rarely visit the Sattra but do send a yearly tithe of Re. 1.50 to the monastary.

The execution of the services designed for each caste group can be observed only during occasions of auspicious ceremonies in the Sattra. In case of a shraddh or post death ceremony, Nam-kirtan is sung in the house of a Kaibarta family; but offerings in the form of Kesa and a little sum of money is given to the Dihing Sattra to honour the departed soul. Yet, the forms of food offered to the Sattra during auspicious ceremonies represent a mixture of Sattvik and Rajasik items. They are rice, meat

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36 Notice the feudal element of work patterns in the Sattra which strikes a resemblance with Auniati Sattra. This form has been followed on the original working pattern of the Ahom royal courts. After the victory of the moamarias over the Ahoms the former resorted to the luxurious mode of living their captors had enjoyed. However this form has become obsolete in the Dihing Sattra. It has survived only in the Auniati.
fish and cooking oil or mustard oil to be precise. These items are offered in an uncooked form.

Commensal flexibility among the Kalitas and Kaibartas is rather interesting as all sorts of vegetarian and non-vegetarian food is accepted by the Kalitas with the exception of cooked rice. When a Kaibarta wedding is held and the usual forms of rice/pulses/fish/meat are served, the Kalitas accept only tea, sweet meats, vegetables along with lusi and not the items which they would have otherwise accepted in the Namghar. This peculiar feature is the result of no other probabilities but that of the cultural changes within the spheres of social ceremonies, such as marriages for one which has been borrowed from the urban society, as a Kalita in Silsako remarks:

"We Kalitas can even share the prasad with the Kaibartas in the Namghar because it was Shankardeb's wish to do so; but we cannot eat together in their house (or our house, as the case may be) because we have not done so for generations. But we do not mind our children playing with the Kaibarta children."

As a middle-age Kalita office-goer says:

"Yes, we can eat together with the Kaibartas in the Namghar; but it is not right for them to serve parts of the blessed food and other items which holds traditional and ritualistic implications; for we must eat and make
merry the way people in the city do in their marriage ceremonies.

Despite few comments on commensality, the general tendency of commensal relations between the Kalitas and the Kaibartas seemed very easy among the younger group of people. This category of people play their monastic role only on important occasions and the Tithi of Shankardeb and the previous Sattradhikars of Dihing Sattra. Disciples of Dihing Sattra give a yearly tithe of Re. 1/- and it can clearly be deduced that the collection per year within the village is not more than Rs. 500/-. In general, lay following in Dihing is dying out.

Another reason for the decline in the flow of membership to Dihing Sattra is because of the Sattradhikar's rift with his uncle some eighty years back. Thus two Sattras under the name of Dihing is run by two cousins in the Silsako village. One Kalita householder gave his version as to why the disciples of the old Dihing Sattra (not under this study) does not visit their monastery:

According to those people, any priest who has had an attack of small-pox, is debarred from becoming a Sattradhikar. Our Sattradhikar has had this attack in his childhood and with the performance of Ai-puja he has managed to become the Sattradhikar. They suspect him of performing the Tantric rites which are required for accomplishing the Ai-puja. But this is not so; and we shall keep up the tradition of rendering our services to this Sattra only.
The Ai-puja (worship of the Goddess of small-pox) is often associated with Tantric practices to chase away the bad spirit causing the disease. But this opinion is not an established fact as numerous other forms of chasing away the evil spirits associated with the fields/diseases and domestic quarters are practiced in villages without tantric rite.  

Silsako inhabitants are more susceptible to external changes which is gradually taking hold of their social life and status. But religious beliefs vis-a-vis their social values seems more inherent in their culture and this has perpetuated because of their liberal values. Monastic influence is not regimented in their daily activities, but their need to maintain a flexible harmony among each other has been reciprocally couched by the Sattra.

**Position of Women:**

Social and religious norms can be analysed if we look at women's status, lifestyle and even their work involvement within and outside the domestic sphere. In

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37 See Benudhar Rajkhowa, op.cit. For details of 'spirits' existing in Assamese folk beliefs.
a recent article written by Misra, it was argued that one of the principal features of Assam's tribal culture in earlier times was the position of importance occupied by women. One of the reasons given is because of the widespread practice of worshipping the Mother Goddess in various forms. Misra carries on to say that the social position of women declined because of economic reasons such as the growing profitability of rice cultivation leading to the need of permanent places of residence and the increase in the Ahom royal patronage. She puts forth a third point to say that the 'final' elimination of women from all important positions in social and religious life for five centuries was effected by Shankardeb, the Vaishnava saint. He showed no tolerance to women despite his egalitarian views. He felt women to be an evil influence on male devotees whereby he advised his followers to avoid much attachment or closeness with women.

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38 Tilottama Misra, "Social Criticism in Nineteenth Century Assamese Writing - The Orundoii" (Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. XX, No. 37, September 14, 1983).
39 Ibid., p. 1559.
40 Ibid.
The assertions made by Misra has developed from primary and secondary data on the history of Assam through gazetteers and journals. But they do not hold much depth as women's position in Assam has been far more liberal and upheld with more respect than any other women in the rest of India even till today. The Mother Goddess cult - influential as it may have been, was not a powerful solitary cult of its own. It had strong influence of tribal and animistic rituals of which both men and women looked at it in terms of their domestic and pastoral well-being. Women's position in the north-easter region has been one of importance because it is a rice-belt region and their participation in agricultural work is indispensable. Of course, at one level one cannot be proud of this fact because women's work becomes a drudgery not only with the heavy burden of domestic work but also with agricultural work. Nevertheless, her position is held at high esteem and one of the reasons can be seen in their marriage systems such as bride price and the absence of dowry.

Misra also agrees that the intermixing of culture between tribal/ethnic/caste categories contributed largely towards preventing some despicable Hindu practices such as Sati, infanticide, Kulinism and dowry system. Furthermore the absence of the purdah system is itself a reward-
ing picture of women's mobility. Even when we speak of
Assamese Hindu women of the Brahmaputra valley, we see
their relatively high position in comparison to women of
other parts of India, namely Bihar, U.P. and Rajasthan.¹⁴¹

Sociologically speaking, women's involvement in the
religious sphere is minimal in Assam if we are to compare
them with north-Indian women. The relatively low pro-
file in religious activities would reveal their importance
to external work and activities rather than their depre-
vation when we see that Assamese women are not allowed in
to some Sattras. Rather, it should be a revelation that
women in Assam enjoy a fairly high degree of mobility —
of involving themselves with matters other than religious.
Their importance is measured in terms of their work such
as their capabilities in running a household, how well
they weave or how well they care over family stability
and so on.

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¹⁴¹ Hiren Gohain, while discussing Misra's paper, com-
mits that the Ahom closed door policy was in a
way favourable to Assam because majority of the
people remained free from the more monstrous forms
of degradation of women. Assam's relations with
the rest of India was restricted and opinions vary
whether this strategy was good or negative for the
progress of Assam. See Hiren Gohain, "Colonial
Perspectives?" (Economic and Political Weekly,
M.N. Srinivas speaks of women being important and central in all domestic rituals and that rituals are important because they provide women with occasions for socialising with their peers and superiors. He finds that preoccupation with ritual provides them with power over men. This sort of analysis is justified because women of northern and central India involve themselves primarily with rituals in the domestic sphere and family welfare. In the village of Karimpur in Mainpuri district, Uttar Pradesh, I observed the daily chores, daily rituals and norms that women follow within their homes along with song genres that go along with such rituals. Caste divisions and restrictions are understandably the obvious reasons which confine these women's lives to isolation. Because of this, their time spent in and around the courtyard or angan is the key of analysing and observing their actual lifestyle and perceptions.

Most ritualistic performances, certain positioning or placement of utensils are carefully followed because of women's concentration in the courtyard and their direct


authority over such items. Religious songs, marriage and Jaccha (post-natal) songs play an integral part in women's lives because they are sung in the angan amongst a large gathering of women or just the female family members. The intricacies and detailed lyrics of each song mark the importance and the depth of meaning is enough to prove how personally these songs are regarded.

The case is quite different among women of Assamese villages. In the five villages that I have so far visited in the district of Sonitpur (comprising caste-Hindus in two villages, scheduled castes in one and Bodo-Kacharis in two), Bihu songs ranging from daily instances of rural life to amorous compositions and also to the changes that have influenced village life are very common and popular. But I was not able to observe songs that are sung specially by womenfolk (except Biyanam or marriage songs) on pre-and post-natal occasions, which is so very strong a subject in villages of U.P. However, congregational Nam-Kirtans are sung by women in tehars.

Work in terms of house work as well as for family consumption is solely run by women in Karimpur village. Household work would mean:
**UTTAR PRADESH**

- Working on the grindstones
- Preparing food
- Child rearing
- Sweeping/washing
- Plastering house walls and floors
- Preparing fodder for animals

**Inside Work**

- Collecting cowdung for fuel
- Making and mounting of cowdung cakes
- Fetching water
- Winnowing and cleaning most of the agricultural yields that men bring from the fields*

**Assam**

- Preparing food
- Child rearing
- Sweeping/washing
- Fetching water
- Weaving
- Looking after ducks
- Fishing
- Rearing silk

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General Work</th>
<th>Outside Work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

There are several more functions that women involve themselves in, but the points mentioned above are the daily functions of women in Karimpur. In villages of Sonitpur district, Assam, women do similar work as Karimpur women.

*This can be done inside the house provided the angan is big enough, otherwise just outside the house which normally has a verandah-like place.*
with the exception of collecting and making cowdung cakes. Wood is used as fuel for cooking while a very small quantity of cowdung is mixed with clay for plastering floors of their homes. The method of rearing cattle is totally different in these two regions. Knowledge of cattle care amongst rural Assamese is not as central to their lives as it is with Karimpur inhabitants. This is because the importance of cattle produce both as a ritual as well for consumption is so crucial to the Karimpur inhabitants.

Cowdung is indispensable for family consumption because of fuel for cooking, plastering of houses and even as partial income when cowdung cakes are sold or traded in exchange of grain. So close is the relevance of cowdung with the matrix of the household, that there can structurally be no taboo against doing outside work for women in terms of handling cattle. Winnowing agricultural yield, cutting the wastes for fodder, cowdung for fuel and cooking for food - all these items are handled solely by women which gives a cyclical pattern of function that becomes integral to women's work. There is an abundance of song meters which depict Krishna as a cowherd and care that should be given to cattle. These songs are sung by women in Karimpur. Men, of course, attach as much importance to the welfare of animals as women do. Very often,
the loss of an animal could mean a total financial breakdown for a family.

In Sonitpur villages, betel nuts are an important source of livelihood besides rice cultivation for men and women. But the use of handloom for weaving is indispensable to women as a traditional craft as well as economic source. Because of the loom, women's mobility automatically unwinds. Their knowledge of communications and locations, buying the yarn and marketing their products within or outside their village surely brings in a broader outlook and understanding of their society and themselves. One does not notice this phenomena with women of Karimpur.44

The fact that women of northern and central India have 'power' over men during religious occasions/rituals, seems somewhat ambiguous because it is men who predominate on rituals concerning creation of alliances and links between kin groups.45 This is again typical of caste-

44 Many Assamese women involved with earning livelihood through weaving may be regarded as representing symbols of achievement and success. However it is not so because they do so to bring in a stable income. Symbols of mobility at one level are merely symbols of poverty. That is perhaps the reason why a woman is respected - because she acts as the cornerstone of family stability.

ridden communities which try to safeguard their occupational interests and purity. Catherine Thompson has worked on the religious rituals of a village in Madhya Pradesh and she finds that women's religious rites are muted in various ways: (a) that men gain spiritual strength through seminal retention, (b) that women's access to wealth and land authority is limited and (c) that women have split loyalties between their natal and conjugal homes. Therefore, what the traditional Indian woman can do at best, is to worship and pray to God regularly for the welfare of her husband and the family. Praying and fasting incentive is high because

"...myths accompanying these festivals show the great benefits that can accrue to the family and the women who observe these fasts."47

It would only be fitting to agree with Srinivas when he says that one of the features

"..... of Hindu ritual is the manner in which it meshes in with the pursuit of material ends and offers solace to secular failures..."48

In the context of analysing women's position in rural Assamese society one gets into the perspective of reli-

46 Ibid., pp. 124-25.
48 Ibid.
gion, social sanctions and economic factors that operate within the social system.

Women are not initiated in the Vaishnava system. The rationale behind this is because they should regard their husbands as their God and are therefore incapable of having the guru/devotee attachment. This question was very much a part of my interviews with village respondents and bhakats. A bhakat of Natun Kamalabari Sattra said:

"Women are not initiated because they marry. They may marry within our sect or outside. It does not matter where their marriages are arranged. My sister has got married to a person who is a sisya of Letugram Sattra of the Purusha Samhati."

Another bhakat of a village Namghar in Sonitpur district said:

"Women do not get saran/initiation. This has been going on since Shankardeb's time. They can get married to people from any other Samhati. Women are meant for domestic care, i.e., looking after her children till they are big and to see that they do not take the wrong path. I am a married man - while I was chanting the name of God my wife was doing work that was of more utility."

It is worth noting that as far as religion and women are concerned their influence and involvement over each

49 Audrey Cantlie, op.cit., p. 175.
other are borne not so much out of formal indoctrination of philosophy as they are out of popular beliefs and mores that have been existing in each region of India with its peculiar local features. Textual sources have been modified and reinterpreted across generations to add the weight of religious sanctions for their reaction way of functioning in family and society. Popular myths of Hindu spirituality has not only concealed the fact that Hindu ritual and religion are closely linked to worldly interests, but also the underlying subordination of women in the Hindu social system.

It is only because of the absence of a rigid caste system and its socio-economic matrix that has thankfully spared Assamese society from functional subordination of women. This can be seen by the absence of purdah system, greater mobility of women and tribal influence. When women are not initiated to Vaishnava system it does not mean that they have been deprived or discriminated. It only means that they have less to do with conservatism and orthodoxy and more to do with the practical realities of life. It should be remembered that only some Sattras deny entering of women in their Namghars. One such Sattra is the renowned Barpeta Sattra. The popular

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50 H.N. Srinivas, op.cit., p. 17.
legend reveals that a woman had entered this Sattra during her menstrual cycle thereby polluting the Namghar area. Since then women have not been allowed to visit the Namghar of Barpeta Sattra. There have been few instances in recent years of women protesting against this issue and it is through some of them that I heard of this tale. This is not an authoritative source. But the fact that other Sattras have no such provision of obstructing women's entry to their Namghars does give some legitimacy to this popular belief regarding Barpeta Sattra.