In an endeavour to equate the Vaishnava cult with folk religion, I have attempted to present an elaborate analysis in support of this argument in the former chapters. This analysis has been made possible by using methods of anthropology with the help of which non-literate societies can be observed. The establishment of Vaishnava monasteries had given an impetus to latent oral culture to evolve into a literature one; and it is not possible to ignore the parallel growth and interactions of these two cultures. Orthodox Vaishnavism can be regarded as the higher Hinduism if we regard it from the standpoint of literary texts. It can be called popular Hinduism if we regard it from the standpoint of regional selections made from these texts and expressed in ritual and visual presentations. These two categories are the expressions of the Great and the Little traditions and one can see that the second category is the basic feature of this study. Popular Hinduism can be found in various forms throughout regional societies in India and each individual region exposes yet more variations within its rural pockets. Thus the various
levels of beliefs, rituals and textual usages among villages may vary depending on how strong the religious influence is on the area. It is only fitting to maintain the importance of history, which through its search for written evidence, to be found in Vaishnava texts and visual arts, makes our observation and analysis plausible.

The dependence of history and anthropology on each other is highlighted in several works of Levi-Strauss for he finds that the collaboration of these two fields is indispensable when any study of contemporary society is attempted. Elaborating this view he states that:

"The anthropologist goes forward, seeking to attain through the conscious, of which he is always aware, more and more of the unconscious, whereas the historian advances, so to speak, backwards, keeping his eyes fixed on concrete and specific activities from which he withdraws only to consider them from a more complete and rich perspective."\(^2\)

The Vaishnava cult and village culture are both bound by reciprocal values and norms in Assamese society. Historical analysis establishes evidence of Vaishnava religious influence on village life and anthropological

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2 Ibid., p. 24.
analysis establishes folk influences on the Vaishnava traditions. However, the study of Vaishnavism in relation to rural society needs to clearly state the various levels of popularity it enjoys in Assam as a whole. Goswami propounds the idea that Vaishnavism has an all-pervasive popularity in the entire regions of Assam, Goswami's application of the Parsonian concept of culture to the Sattras, and his subsequent analysis makes of this institution 'way of life' and establishes it as a determinant of the joint family, caste and village community. On the other hand he foresees the confinement of the Sattras to rural society as the inevitable result of gradual urbanisation, new constitutional measures and industrialisation. Most traditional institutions suffer a setback when faced with the development of urbanisation and modernisation. A structural change in traditional monastic establishments cannot be explained only by the phenomenon of modernisation but also more significantly by studying changes in ritual expressions between the monastic establishment and the subjects living around it, as well as the inclusion of yet various other traditional

norms and influences which the monastic establishment absorbs with the passage of time.¹

Our concern here is to explain the changing status and the decline of monastries, which from the social point of view has become more 'closed' in terms of its members having few contacts, if any at all, with lay society. The loss of support to the Sattras may be analysed historically from the time of the Ahom kings, the advent of the British rule and lastly the growing interest in modern material concepts.

It is not only the cultural interaction between the Vaishnava cult and the village which has associated Assam Vaishnavism with folk religion. In a negative way the external social events and changes that emerged with the inception of colonial rule further limited the scope of the monastries to function on a broader scale and confined the cult strictly to rural pockets. Political changes, economic disparity and the emergence of the Assamese middle class itself pushed aside the values and concepts of this cult and in the process of acquiring new ideals, it (the emerging middle class), skipped a few

¹ The explanation of these two features is given in chapter I in terms of the various levels of ritual expression in the laity and chapter II in terms of the Shakta cult merging into the Vaishnava influences in the village.
steps ahead to reach out to secular ideas and more popularly to the nationalistic ideas of the Indian state as a whole. This process of modernisation ignores the traditional core of social values which are structurally inherent in society, thus disrupting its equilibrium and seeking to replace at with new roots of yet another separate culture.

The Ahom Patronage:

"Medieval Assam rose from the ruins of an ancient order like a new birth because of the Bhakti movement."  

The first Ahom monarch to take formal initiation into the Vaishnava fold was Jaydhwał Singha (1648-63). From then onwards, Vaishnava monasteries flourished under Ahom patronage and the masses looked upon their gurus with great reverence. Sometimes, "allegiance due to a monarch was considered to be of lesser importance than the respect to which a spiritual head was entitled."  

The most stable period of monastic prosperity is probably the mid-seventeenth and the eighteenth century, depending on

6 S.K. Bhuyan, Atan Buragohain and His Times (Lawyer's Book Stall, Gauhati, 1957, p. 225.)
which particular king patronised Vaishnavism. For instance, the reign of Gadadhar Singh between 1682-95, brought about a setback to monastic power to be again revived by Rudra Singh in 1696-1714.

It is predominantly the Sattras of the Brahma sect which grew in wealth and power. In addition, this growth was consequently the result of the tithes, presentations, grants of land and cattle that were donated by the sisyas or disciples. Gosains, Medhis and priests established themselves as landlords indirectly. Their feudal pattern of operating within the monasteries and also their relations with tenants working on their lands cannot be ignored. The strength of membership in these monasteries was numerically higher than the others, not only because of their religious affiliations but also because of the exemption from state service which the nobility granted the priests/bhakats of such monasteries. The exuberance of such monastic abbots is aptly narrated by Bhuyan:

"Their food and garments and their ways of living were of a very simple character befitting holy men and saints. But the articles they used in their audience chambers and prayer halls, the magnificence of their processions when they went out and the reception held out in their honour, and the numerical strength of their devotees and attendants, bespoke the kingly pomp and array."

This description still holds good of the monastic
members and the head of the Auniati Sattra. An informant describes the visit of the Sattradhikar to the oil town of Duliajan in 1979. Thus:

"He came in his own bus with about forty bhakats. He was received here with great felicitations. Gayans and Bayans heralded his arrival with music. The Sattradhikar did not set foot on the ground and gamosas (white handwoven cloth with red floral woven borders used for symbolic and utility purposes) were laid on for him to alight from the bus in which he had travelled, and walk to an awaiting open jeep. When he reached the temporary Namghar, gamosas were red-carpeted on again. About two thousand people went to see him on his four days' visit here. He would only use water from a river, so every day this water was brought from the river Burhi Dihing, about five kilometers away."

The feudal pomp which monasteries displayed on such occasions, created mixed feelings of apprehension among some of the monarchs who thought that the power of the Vaishnavas might endanger their own positions. Evidence of persecution and killing of the priests appear in the chronicles or Buranji of the Ahom courts. Gadadhar Singha was one of the kings to expel married bhakats from the Sattras (celibacy was normally followed in the Sattras), though the higher caste bhakats were left unmolested. The lower ranking bhakats who were believed to have joined the monasteries in order to avoid the compulsory state service were subjected to menial work.
Several kings, such as Gadadhar Singha, welcomed the concepts of the Shakti cult and it is not surprising that the Vaishnava monasteries they patronised had both the essence of feudal and elements of Shakti rituals in them. These 'right-wing' Sattras consisting predominantly of Brahmins, involved themselves with intricate ritual processes and also extended their services to the birth/marriage/death ceremonies of the Ahom kings. The 'left-wing' Sattras of the Kala and Purusha Samhatis were subjected to several instances of humiliation, persecution and physical affliction. With the enforcement of liberal land grants to the Brahmins and their temples including Sattras of the Brahma Samhati, the estate holding class was deliberately expanded where Sattradhikars and petty tribal chiefs were absorbed in the ruling class.7

The humiliation and the periodical persecution that was borne by the left-wing monasteries was keenly felt by religious pontiffs and it ultimately led to a civil war in 1769 popularly known as the Moamaria rebellion. This revolt which was backed by sectarian groups of the Vaish-

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navas not only exposed the antagonism brewing among each other but also the striking, yet subtle, differences of their social status. Sectarian politics played a significant role and the Kala Samhati which spearheaded the revolt carried on for several years.

In the religious sphere, if any signs of this revolt appeared within the sectarian groups, they were promptly crushed. The war resulted in massive depopulation and destruction of property followed by the Burmese attack on Assam in 1817 which dealt a yet greater blow to the already shattered society. It is also the dissensions among the Ahom princes which gave easy access to the Burmese attack on Assam.

Two characteristic features survived in the monastic sphere despite the virtual collapse of the feudal order in Assam. These are the dual role of the Vaishnava literature acting on the a) Ahom nobility and b) the matrix of folk society.

Vaishnava literature constituted the most important channels of knowledge which monastic members of all Samhatis were well associated with. The intense propaganda and literary influence over the Ahom nobility by the 'right-winged' monastic heads brought about a marked change in the Ahom court. In the hands of the Ahoms,
Vaishnava dramatic arts received a great impetus and from being restricted to the Namghars the performers were now also invited to the royal court; such performances were staged on occasions of a royal marriage or victory.

This form of interaction and the gradual influence of literature seen even in the pages of the Buranji, heralded the introduction of the Assamese language into the Ahom courts. The Buranjis are probably the most important surviving texts beside the Katha Guru Carita which depict the Vaishnava social political and religious associations with the Ahoms.

Parallel to this development is the second aspect of dualism played by Vaishnava literature which contributed equally as much to folk literature and the rural society as it did to the Ahom nobility. The presentation of the Bhaona (dramatic expressions of the Indian epics) and Ankiya Nat (one-act plays) including the impact of Borgeet (devotional songs) brought forth a magnetic identification of the cult with the laity also its acceptance among the people as their own, despite the

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Buranjis written initially in the Tai language, to be replaced by Assamese, were martial in content and written by high military officials of the nobility depicting war tactics, etc. But they also gave valuable evidences of monastic affairs and their associations with Sattradikars and Gosains.
language media of the performers being a mixture of Assamese and Maithili.

The fact that these performances depicted a sacred theme as opposed to later secular literature, the 'folkness' that Vaishnava literature borrowed to pursue a popular appeal, was well synchronised with their dramatic and dance performances. Reversely, folk literature finds its base on Vaishnava themes, Krishnalore and Shaivism. Even the proverbs and aphorisms of everyday language make often lead to humourous references to the smugness of pot-bellied bhakats or their sly manipulations behind their spiritual garb.

These forms of interdependence between the Vaishnavas and the folk expressions would again lend support to the informal monk/laity relationship which I have emphasised in chapter III; the activities of the monastic members and their history cannot deny the strong link between Assam Vaishnavism and the folk religion.

During the Ahom age, the Vedic educational system admitted only the Brahmins, Kayasthas or the members of the nobility, while the masses had had very little access to such benefits in tols and schools run by gurus. While the members of the priestly class could afford education in their homes for their wards or in the tols, the general
source of learning for the rest was transmitted through the agency of Namghars; in the medium of Assamese and through the media of congregational chants and hymns.

The medium of instruction in the tols was Sanskrit and during Rudra Singh's reign (1696-1714) several Brahmin boys were sent to Nawadeep and Kashi for mastering the Sanskrit texts. Rudra Singha managed to bring a Brahmin priest from Nadia (Bengal), to preach Shaktism and the adoption of Shaktism by the Ahom king (though he was tolerant to Vaishnavas) and later princes brought about a note of disharmony amongst the left-wing Sattra and few right-wing ones too.

However the former explanation of the dual role of Vaishnava literature must be distinguished in terms of the right and left-wing monasteries utilising such a media for propagation. This distinction is necessary to trace the beginning of consciousness in the caste hierarchy, caused by the advantageous use that the right winged monasteries made of their opportunities against the other. The latter i.e. the left-winged monasteries were more in contact with the rural inhabitants. There was a gradual tendency to absorb feudal elements in the right-winged Sattras followed by a placid recognition of each others sectarian views by the left-winged Sattras.
"The beginning of caste consciousness in the caste hierarchy" does not in any way imply the establishment of caste antagonism between the Brahmins and the Shudras at this stage. But one can trace the link between this phenomena and the nineteenth century Assamese middle class consciousness which was very much the expressions of a group which considered themselves to be the privileged class of the elite, as we shall see later in this chapter.

Medieval Assamese society was very much under the feudal domination of the Ahoms in which each individual had to serve the state one way or the other. This Jhik system carried on till the British take over in 1826, and all long, the stratification of caste groups was never nearly specified. The absence of clear stratification seems to be natural feature, for even the titles of the peasant and artisan classes did not directly indicate their caste identity. Titles were conferred to people and attached to their name according to the type of work they were made to do under the Paik system.

This is not to infer that the caste system was completely obsolete, but the overpowering feature of the Paik system blurred the existence of the caste system and the entire history of religious, social and economic
events shaped the Assamese society into a partly flexible, partly rigid caste structure. In the later years the Ahoms too, merged into the category of caste Hindus as Kalitas, though a great many claimed to be distinctly Ahoms once they were certain that they belonged to the noble ancestry.

The establishment of Sattras, being divided into the 'have' and 'have-not' category, led to a broader dichotomy in later years during the British rule. For, what we see is the need of the 'haves' to claim higher spiritual authority over a select group of people, particularly the affluent ones and thus identify themselves with the 'elite' - to gain confidence as well as their material benefits. Contrary to this development one can see the slow regression of the 'have nots' where Sattras either perished from the civil war or the Burmese attack. The ones which are surviving till today are living on a subsistence economy but still manage to attract a fair amount of sisyas from the villages. Others have become literally institutionalised with hardly any social or religious functions to contribute or perform.

The Vaishnava centres were practically destroyed by the Burmese invaders before the British took over Assam in 1826. Old manuscripts and valuables belonging
to these monasteries were either destroyed or burnt, though the genealogies and biographies of the monastic heads continued to be written by their scribes, that were secretly preserved throughout those disruptive years.

The attack in general, resulted in a sharp decline of the rural population and the various centres of music, handicrafts and art were led to utter decay. These expressions of a traditional living culture could not recover from the virtual uprootment. Its revitalisation can hardly be accounted for when we look at it from the standpoint of social changes in the society. However, the reconstruction of monastic organisation and function was enforced by some of the affluent monasteries which had their monastic branches all over Assam. The symbolic features of spiritual authority, rich textual evidence of the past, strong links with the ruling class and the continuity of interdependence with their own shakhas (branches), helped to revitalise such monasteries before it was too late. Consequently, they gradually resumed their propagating influence over the laity which survived the Burmese attack.

The Urban Phenomenon:

"Whatever local crafts and seeds of indigenous trading activities survived
the civil war, (e.g. peasant traders dealing in mustard seeds and sending their boats as far as Bengal) were suddenly exposed during the 19th century to large scale trading operations of the Calcutta based British managing agency house and Marwari trading capital in their service. The plantation economy in the region introduced only new complexities and dimensions of underdevelopment rather than removing what was primitive and 'backward' in its medieval social milieu."9

The statement above should give a clear idea of the confusion and chaotic condition of the rural economy. The British period which followed after the subjugation of the feudal order certainly brought about the restoration of peace and gradual development of trade and commerce within the Assamese society. What this era also produced was the emergence of a small Assamese middle class.

Assam came under the Bengal Presidency from 1826 to 1874, after which it became a separate province of its own. The beginning of the British rule ushered into Assam a certain influx of people from neighbouring areas particularly from Bengal, for pursuing administrative

jobs in the British government offices and also for commercial ventures. The paucity of qualified local Assamese people was indeed a major reason why the British administrators welcomed such assistance from outside the Province.

The result of Assam being under the Calcutta Presidency for almost forty years brought about undisputed influence of Bengali culture in Assamese society. The fact that Bengali became the medium of instruction in Assam's schools itself projects the development of such ideas of intellectual conditioning among Assamese children.

Education that prevailed in Assam from the end of the Ahom rule to the first phase of the British domination was imparted through (a) tols, (b) tuition to affluent pupils by individual Brahmins and (c) discourses in forms of music and drama to a collective set of people in the Namghars; this in itself was a tool of education through the form of entertainment. The character of these three categories of education comprised spiritual thought and the mastery of Sanskrit as a language in the case of the first two systems though very few people had access to them.

The period immediately following the British annexations of Assam saw a number of Assamese intellectuals trying to write and contribute articles in journals. They
did so in Bengali journals of Samachar Darpan, Bangadoot and Samachar Chandrika. They wrote in Bengali as there were no publications in Assamese in the early nineteenth century. The British enforced Bengali as the official language to suit their administrative purposes. It also became the medium of instructions in the vernacular schools between 1836-1873 which created the first great obstacle in the path of educational progress. Even the Gauhati English school that was established in 1835 was subject to this change in 1944. There was no secondary school in Assam that provided English education till 1864. It was however the American baptists around 1841 who served the seeds of social consciousness in the Brahmaputra valley. But they also faced some hostility and criticism at a time when mass education was virtually unknown to Assam. At the same time the few newly educated townsmen felt that the Assamese ought to take advantage of the facilities of higher education which Bengalis had already taken and yielded good progress from it.

Secular English education came to be established some ten years after the advent of the British and gradually new schools were established in upper Assam. The

10 T. Misra, op.cit.
untiring efforts of particularly two missionaries, to encourage such education in the rural areas and also to change the medium of instruction from Bengali to Assamese, was conceded to soon after. Yet, the few who were able to acquire a good education, formed themselves into a small elite group and "they were not slow in adopting Bengali dress, custom, usage and even food habits." Despite the increasing resentment against Bengali domination, especially in the areas which offered considerable opportunity for governmental posts and also the use of Assamese language as the medium of instruction, the Assamese gentry did not express strong criticism against the adoption of Bengali ways as long as they did not ape the British pattern of living.

"The worship of the deities like Durga, Kali, Chandi, Annapurna, some of which were introduced even during the later part of the Ahom rule became common not only in public, but also in private residences occasionally to the accompaniment of the jatras or dance drama parties from Bengal." The Assamese middle class took some steps to ensure the growth of local nationalism and frequently fiery

11 Reverend N. Brown and O.T. Cutter were missionaries who also set up the first printing press in 1834 in Assam.


13 Ibid.
speeches were made against the Bengalis. In all, the Assamese intelligentsia were caught in a web of sanskritising themselves chronologically in two phases. Cultural influence of 'Bhadralok' characteristics which they had imbibed, that went along with a strong desire of establishing leadership within the province of Assam, through the literary and poetic expressions on local nationalism. This phase further isolated the Assamese intelligentsia within the province, particularly from the rural areas, because the new ideas and beliefs which the minute section of this Assamese population generated, did not include or mould any form or rural sentiments and popular conventional issues. Dumbeswar Neog wrote much after independence of his concern for the Assamese people who he felt, did not live upto his ideals:

14 The term 'Bhadralok', referred to the elite section of the Bengali middle class who received western education and rose from the ranks of high caste Hindus. See C.H. Broomfield, Elite Conflict in a Plural Society (OUP 1963).

Hiren Gohain writes:

"As the urban Bengali bhadralok had nothing but contempt for forms of folk culture, the educated Assamese under his influence cultivated the same scorn for folk elements in his own culture."

Some scholars made "... scornful and supercitions references to institutions customs and manners of the Assamese including cultural items like the Bihu which became for later generations of Assamese the distinctive elements of Assamese national culture."
"The Assamese are still a people of lost self-confidence, frightened at their own shadow. They cannot believe in their own past achievements, cannot think of being associated with anything really great. It has taken them a number of years to overcome even the inferiority complex under "Benglo-phobia" after the usurpation of Bengali in Assamese schools and courts.... They appear to have forgotten that they were the people, the only people in India, who out-witted the seemingly invincible Moghul army for all the time, resisting with patriotism and heroism as many as seventeen of their invasions, and winning unstinted praise even from the enemies. They appear also to have forgotten that Assam was perhaps the only instance of a Province baffling all imperialist attempts to devour her, keeping herself at a safe distance even from the great Gupta and great Maurya empires of old. With the advent of independence Assam is, however, slowly gaining her self-consciousness and is fast coming to her own."15

The second phase is very much a continuation of the first where the Assamese intelligentsia, in later years, gradually seem to have achieved a queer mixture of recognition and identification from and within the entire country through the fervour of 'greater' nationalist ideas as opposed to their earlier zeal towards

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local nationalism. The results of these developments paved the way to wider estrangements between the towns­
men and the rural masses. The emergence of the literary groups, political associations and writings began to ex­
press to common aim of glorifying the Assamese people and their culture; a feature which most regional peoples commonly expedited during their renaissance period. Be­
cause of the visible influence of Bengali culture over the Assamese intelligentsia, the adoption of sophisti­
cated living and departure from the very core of tradi­tional Assamese mores, did not quite stir the imagination of the masses or create an impact within the society (although the intelligentsia did use such concepts in their writings to serve their interests). Anandram Dhekial Phukan (1829–59) was one of the pioneers of Assamese literature who from a young age of eighteen developed the sensitivity of regional consciousness. He was vehement about the dominance of Bengali media and influence in Assam and brought forth several writings and observations of how Assamese language was in no way inferior to Bengali. So powerful was his writings that even A.J. Moffatt Mills (in his Report of Assam) admitted that an error had been made in directing all busi­ness transactions in Bengali. At best, the Assamese
middle class in search of identity through regional consciousness and later 'greater' nationalistic euphoria basically had a single motive - the motive being an economic one of employment.

The Assamese middle class had mainly two sources of employment; a) service in the tea plantations and b) employment as Mouzadars or government agents for collecting revenue in the countryside. Partial employment was accessible in the government offices, though this category was confined mainly to Bengalis in the first part of British rule up till the early twentieth century. A.J. Moffatt Mills felt the concern of Anandram's testimony and also from his experiences about the economic problems of Assam. He had said that:

"A number of Bengalees came into Assam when we took the province and from the uneducated state of the Assamese it was necessary to give them service; but there are now in Sibsagar and Gauhaty many young men of high family and good character who have qualified themselves for employ, and it is most discouraging to them to see most of the high and even some of the inferior offices filled by foreigners."\(^{16}\)

**The Rural Phenomenon:**

Rural society during the inception of British rule

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was already suffering from an extreme state of economic stagnation and depopulation. Economic reorganisation was the immediate need at that juncture at which the British took over Assam's land revenue system and the entire monopolisation of its tea industry. By 1859 the tea industry started flourishing and with this boom, the tea gardens attracted from outside the province more skilled labourers, artisans and tradesmen.

"There was no native capitalist in Assam; the artisan was independent and he supplemented his income with the products of a farm he worked regularly. This explains the monopoly of the Marwari merchants who followed the British into Assam and diligently tapped the few opportunities for money making opened by the British, like money lending, supplying provisions to tea gardens, procuring mustard and later jute for the market outside Assam and meeting the demand for new household implements and articles, cheap and mass produced, that the Assamese soon came to adopt."17

The various changes within the categories of employment, the ryotwari system and education, led to an increasing disparity between the urban and the rural groups of people. The clamour for employment and the sanskritising effects of education led such people to hanker for indi-

17 Hiren Gohain, "Origins of the Assamese Middle Class" in (Social Scientist, No. 13), p. 18.
individual progress at the cost of their own fellowmen.

The continuity of feudal relations which was explicit in the pre-British days, carried on even after the British annexation of Assam, if not directly, through the Mouzadari system. The Mouzadars were basically caste Hindus with an affluent family background. Their familiarity with writing and accounting made it all the more easy for the British to recruit them as government agents for collecting revenue from Mouzas (revenue villages), and also to appease the suspicion of village inhabitants by recruiting Assamese men as their agents. However these Mouzadars were clearly demarcated from the rest of the village folk considering the pattern of life that they were brought up in. Their caste background conveyed a form of orthodox Hindu living along with their familial tradition of patronising a Brahmin priest and consequently enhanced their belief in and worship of Shakti deities.

The establishment of the land revenue collectors and their authoritative influence on the village might be said to be the cause, if not the partial growth of caste differentiation and prejudices in the loosely structured caste system, already operating in the rural areas. Even early British gazetteers could not specifically classify the hierarchy of the caste system among
Assamese Hindus though their findings have contributed immensely to ethnography.¹⁸ A gradual development of caste and status consciousness entered into rural society in forms of the lower ranking caste groups striving to acquire the higher and the higher castegroups for a more orthodox 'Brahminised' mode of living. Folksongs no longer remained to express devotion to Krishna only but also to a range of Shakti goddesses in particular. Oral transmissions from one generation to the other were modified and readjusted to fit into the current religious and social fabric of rural society. With reference to the rural/urban estrangement, one also notices that peasant uprisings were not taken so seriously by the emerging Assamese middle class. Their indifference can be cited in several opinions of important people of those years.¹⁹ The nature of these peasant uprisings were predominantly against land revenue imposed on them when their economic position was so weak and disorganised.

¹⁸ See L.A. Waddell's, Tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley (JASB 1900, Vol. LXIX); and J.P. Wade, An Account of Assam (ed. B. Sharma, N. Lakhimpur 1927).

On the other hand, Sattras and temples which were given vast amounts of land, continued to go revenue free under British rule too. These revenue-free lands or the Lakhiraj system perpetuated the feudal structure of the monasteries which had affiliated themselves to the Ahom nobility. Under this superficial garb of spirituality, most of the monastic heads ceased to contribute any form of learning or fulfill any social functions to the laity around them. Ultimately, they were led to their own destruction by usurping all the material wealth for their individual needs and choosing to ignore other points of interests beneficial to their institution. Mills shows explicit distaste for temple priests and Sattra members in terms of their holding such revenue-free lands, in 1853:

"The Lakhirajdars are the worst cultivators and rent payers in the district, the revenues of the endowment are universally appropriated to private uses and the holders of the land do nothing towards bringing under cultivation the large tracts of the jungle assigned to them." 20

Efficient cultivation of land was complicated by the primitive modes of traditional cultivation there in use, by the ramification of the three categories of land

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holdings (c.f. Ch. III) and by the fact that these vast lands were in fact untamed jungles which an enervated people could hardly expect to manage and discipline. Thus, the initial stages of British rule saw vast stretches of tilled and untilled lands belonging to the Sattras and temples, classified by the three traditional categories of land-holdings to which they belonged.

One has to look further back in time, i.e., to the decadence that the ammasing of feudal wealth and power had brought about, to account for the inertia which had transformed an initially hardworking and jealous people into a lazy and callous organisation. Mills, in his report, quotes Captain Butler on the priests as the

"... greatest impediment we have to contend with in enlightening the rising generation." For the very great consideration shown these priests by allowing them such an extent of the country... would for any other class of men have called forth the utmost gratitude, but the reverse is the case with these grasping priests; they may truly be said to be the only disaffected subjects of the government in the plains of Assam."21

In terms of education, both the Assamese intelligentsia and British officers paid little heed to the monastic contribution traditional learning, arts and crafts. The

21 Ibid.
literary importance of Vaishnava texts and writings did not quite penetrate into scholars till very very late when Assam saw the establishment of her first university in 1948. The first college came in 1901 and the second in 1930. The gap between the nineteenth and mid-twentieth century saw most Assamese young men going to colleges and universities outside Assam, particularly Calcutta, where the ratio of Assamese students was large enough for them to form associations and discuss problems concerning the welfare of Assam.

It was only with the establishment of Gauhati university in 1948 that the subject of Vaishnava literature and drama began to be studied in some depth. Of course, by then the generation of scholars who represented the Assamese intelligentsia had outgrown their student phase equipped with knowledge of modern literature, science and politics, but not as thoroughly of their own traditional literature and its significance to Assamese society. The absence of familiarity with the localised norms and usages may be a reason why the urban intelligentsia paid little heed to rural culture.

As far as monastic life was concerned, I have already described their fate during the various attacks and civil wars. The entire Sattra institution ceased
to function smoothly. Traces of feudal elements in the Sattras and the British policy of appeasement led the abbots and priests to pursue a placied and unproductive life. The financial status of Sattras consequently declined and with it, the children of successive Sattradhikars switched over to secular fields such as law, employment in the plantations and academic ventures. This is of course a recent phenomenon which emerged during the pre-independence era.

The misuse of wealth in the monastic treasuries, the disruption of certain codes of monastic morality and above all, their indifference to the active propagation of doctrinal beliefs by traditional modes of expression deteriorated and ultimately came to a standstill. However, over the years, these traditional modes of expression had already passed into folk society and been assimilated by it, so that it had become a part of their independent living tradition. Butler's remarks echoes the general opinion of others when he states that the priests:

"possessed a great power over the minds of the people. Bigoted, ignorant and avaracious, they did not in the smallest degree, through the means at their disposal, aid in the education of the people."22

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22 Ibid.
In comparing the popularity of a temple priest and a Bhakat, the former had the advantage because of his knowledge of the calendar. A significant change regarding religious practice is evident between the mid-nineteenth century to recent times. The practice of Shakta following such as performing Durga and Kali puja, became larger in comparison to the Vaishnava following. Structurally, the population of sisyas or disciples remained undisturbed in the monastic fold, though the same sisyas started to adopt the pattern of acquiring a house priest to look after their clandrical requirements. As the monopolist of the horoscopic calendar and the Brahmin fulfilled a very fundamental function in Hindu society. They normally conducted birth, marriage and death rituals and even decided auspicious days and prescribed dates for performing such rituals.

Kamakhya temple may be regarded as the most significant Shakta temple where yearly tithes from townsmen and several sub-urban areas are collected. This practice has become more popular now with the increasing expansion of villages into townships and towns into cities. Sibsagar is probably the only district comprising a large Assamese population in the village level. This district is one of the important places where Vaishnavism was pro-
pogated to plains tribes like the Moran, Mataks and Lalungs. The strongest Moamaria Sattras were established here despite the fact that Sibsagar was the most important headquarter of the Ahoms, who also set up various Shakti and Siva temples in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.²³

Folk culture conforms essentially to rural and religious institutional character reflecting primarily the solidarity of the moral order. For the study of folk culture there is considerable scope for research in Assamese society. A theoretical framework of folkways of Assam has to be supported by a tremendous amount of field work and empirical study. No village in Assam consists of a single unit of a homogenous caste group. Moreover, practically most Assamese villages have rural inhabitants comprising distinct racial, linguistic and several tribal cultures besides traditional caste groups.

Recent interviews reveal the 'closed' feature of the Sattra institutions from the outside world. They indicated a lack of public interest and government aid which is necessary to develop monastic arts and crafts. Personal interviews gave vent to the sectarian divisions among monasteries which have resulted in a failure to

²³ See Appendix II.
integrate all the Samhatis together.

The years of the thirties in the twentieth century brought about an emergence of a small group of Vaishnavas who professed the tenets of Shankardeb's Mahapurushia cult as the sole religious determinant of the Assamese. The Shankar Sangha, as this group calls itself, have totally demolished the participation of the Brahmin priests in the affairs of the Sattra and its various ceremonies.

Chapter III describes the basic ideas of Shankardeb where the importance of the Brahmin priest becomes secondary in his doctrine. But he never denied the profession of the Brahmins as ritual experts. This is evident when the 'homa' (fire ritual) is performed in Assamese marriage system conducted by Brahmin priests. A marriage ceremony in 1976 was observed in Letugram Sattra (Purush Samhati), Potiagaon, Jorhat, where the bride and bridegroom belonged to Sattriya families and their wedding ceremony was held according to Vedic rituals outside the Namghar but within the Sattra premises. The Shankar Sangha refutes this system of working without any exception, which allow the functioning of Brahmin priests irrespective of which Samhati they belong to. The recent development of this Sangha is that
it has earned the sympathy of several villages and a large number of people in towns like Tezpur, Nowgong and Jorhat. The professed aim of this Sangha is to rid monastic institutions of Vedic rituals and Brahminical rites and through their demolition, bring about the integration of the entire monastic institution.

The main reason why Shankar Sangha emerged was because of a number of Assamese non-Brahmins who took an exception to their normal practice of observing 30 days' ritual impurity till shraddha as against the Brahmins who practiced only 11 days' ritual impurity on the occasion of a death amongst their caste group. The primary question asked was why the Brahmins should have fewer days than them. This argument gained ground of popularity because Assam has a large non-Brahmin population. Moreso because it was initiated by prominent men in the eyes of the public around the 1930s. Accordingly three reform groups were set up:

1) **Egharadiniya** - people choosing 11 days of ritual impurity like the Brahmins,

2) **Teradiniya** - people who observe 13 days ritual impurity conforming to the Kshatriya status; and

3) **Haridhaniya** - the most radical and extreme group who have sought to demolish any rituals
and mankas that involve the performance of Brahmin priests.

Those who chose to continue the old custom of observing 30 days ritual impurity are known as Mahakiya. Though all three groups have been following the same pattern of socialisation within the rural complex, the Haridhaniyas are certainly falling out of the socio-cultural norms, in the sense that they themselves claim a separate identity of following the monatheistic principle. I have mentioned earlier in chapter II that both caste and sect norms are seen operating on parallel levels in rural society. Both systems are complementary to each other rather than contrasting syndromes in which no villager feels any discomfort by it. However, the Haridhaniyas, in an attempt to isolate themselves from village norms and values (that very often involves rituals), are suffering a setback as they do find it extremely difficult to excommunicate themselves from non-Haridhaniyas.

If the Shankar Sangha had maintained a balance of view in terms of limiting Brahmin imposition of complex rituals and shortening the days of ritual impurities till Shraddha, it would have certainly become a far more influential and powerful socio-religious group.
But it took a step further of dis-associating itself from the Sattra system and Sattradhikar of which its effects boomeranged negatively on the people. Initially the Sangha was formed with the support of a number of Sattradhikars for the obvious reason that Brahminism and Brahmin priesthood was becoming far too powerful. They frequently referred to and quoted the ideology of Shankardeb to strengthen points upheld by the Sangha. Districts of Sibsagar and Dibrugarh have a large number of Shankar Sangha supporters comprising Ahom and Koch people.

It should be understood that people belonging to the Shankar Sangha are divided between the moderate and the extreme group. There are a number of Egharadiniyas and Teradiniyas who agree with the Sangha's views of limiting Brahmin rituals etc. But they do not favour the exter nation of Sattras and Sattras which Hari-dhaniyas have been seeking to do since their inception.

The Assamese population at large are quite confused about the ideology and doctrine of the Sangha as they have not been able to differentiate the presence of a moderate group from the extreme group within the Sangha. Thus, while the Sangha has been frowned upon
by very many who I have interviewed, it seemed as if their distaste was over the Haridhaniyas rather than the other two groups without really knowing the differences. Some people think it to be the most destructive, anti-democratic and biggest threat to the traditional structure of norms of Assamese culture and religion. On the other hand, people who have knowledge of the Sangha's ideology have commented of its good points such as minimisation of Brahmin rituals, the check on wastage of money over such rituals and also recognising the declining position of Vaishnavism.

Audrey Cantlie has asserted that there are two reasons for the development of Sankar Sangha and other reform movements: (1) Development of education, and (2) Spread of the Congress movement. People started acquiring jobs in government services, teaching and law. The universal franchise system of the more to uplift scheduled castes and tribes came as a favourable change to lower castes.24 These two factors are valid to some extent though not fully. I say this because the Sangha is an outcome of the personal reactions and resentment that its leaders have experienced sometime in their lifetime. The development of the Haridhaniyas are perhaps

24 Audrey Cantlie, op.cit., p. 273.
similar whereby they took an extreme stand against the practical norms of village life. It is also the socio-cultural mechanism within rural Assamese society that has been responsible for the popularity of the Shankar Sangha rather than education or the influence of the Congress movement. This is because of the monothestic principle centred around caste egalitarianism, absence of *ja`manti* relations or absence of adequate number of professional people that has made rites and rituals for more simple in rural Assamese society. The mobility of certain acts like bowing to Gods and Goddesses other than being only in Namghars has an explanation which is exemplified above.

A Kalita villager working in small town said:

> We go to Namghar and Krishna is our God, but if we pass through a temple of Lakshmi, Kali or Shiva we will bow to them too. This is because they are also Hindu Gods and Goddesses. They fall within the Hindu religion.

Here are some of the responses that I got when I enquired about the performance of rituals by Brahmins during occasions in rural Assam.

A Kalita lady from a village in Sonitpur district said "we go to the Namghar once in a while. We also work to see to our domestic and family well-being. But
Brahmans - do they think they can go straight up to heaven by sacrificing a goat or a pigeon?"

Another Kaibarta woman said:

"I am a widow and have a young son. I weave all day to earn some money. I don't do puja at all. But my son has taken saran in our village Nanghar so that I can seek help in case I need it during bad days. Getting a Brahmin to fulfil some work always means more money and buying expensive articles for him."

A bhakat of Koliabar was seen wearing a purple bordered gamesa instead of the normal red bordered one. He told me that the colour red represents the colour of blood and only Shaktas can be identified with blood because they perform animal sacrifices. Vaishnavism should nowhere be connected to it and hence the symbolic change of the traditional red floral bordered gamosa.