Chapter IV

Vaiṣṇavism

I

Various literary and epigraphical records of Kāmarūpa indicate that amidst various currents and cross-currents of numerous religious faiths and beliefs Vaiṣṇavism had a distinct course of its own from very early times. In the Baḍgaṅgā epigraph of Bhūtīvarman (A.D. 553-54) the king is mentioned as paramabhaṅgavatā (a great devotee of Viṣṇu).¹ In his Harsacarita Bāna describes Bhāskaravarmā (7th century) as the descendant of Viṣṇu.² The Puṣpabhadra grant of Dharmapāla (12th century) contains an invocation of Varāha-viṣṇu,³ though in his previous inscriptions Śiva was the object of veneration. The image of the Anantaśayi-viṣṇu of the twelfth century A.D. (found at Aśvakrānta), the image of Viṣṇu-Janārdana or Nārāyaṇa of the eighth or ninth century A.D. (found at Śukreśvara), etc.,⁴ are some of the instances that prove the existence of Vaiṣṇavism in early Kāmarūpa. In the Kalika-purāṇa and in the Vojinī-tantra we find detailed descriptions of the rites and rituals connected with the worship of Viṣṇu and some of his incarnations. Thus the various archaeological and literary sources lead us to the conclusion that

². op.cit. (Cowell). pp.211f.
³. op.cit., v.1.
Vaisnāvism was prevalent in ancient Kāmarūpa. The practice of Vaisnāvism in this period seems to be regulated by the Pāñcarātra code. Cow's milk, fish, venison, goat's meat and other offerings were required for the worship of Viṣṇu. This aspect of Vaisnāvism has been termed as Tāntrika-Vaisnāvism as it was mainly based on certain Tāntrika rites.

The metamorphosis of the early form of worship of Viṣṇu came with the passage of time, particularly from the fifteenth century when Śrī-Śaṅkarādeva, the great saint-poet, spearheaded the epoch-making movement aimed at popularising Vaisnāvism. His disciples traversed the country and professed the cult of bhakti (devotion) which tried to resist the sacrificial aspect of worship. The great saint preached the virtues of bhakti to attain the supreme bliss. People of the Vaisnava sect worship Viṣṇu or Kṛṣṇa as the Supreme Being. The worship of any other gods or goddesses except Viṣṇu is strictly prohibited. Offerings to Viṣṇu are restricted to various vegetarian items, such as milk, all sorts of fruits, some kinds of gram, etc. The worship of Viṣṇu is so unostentatious that chanting (kīrtana) of the divine name and listening (śravaṇa) to it, is enough to propitiate Viṣṇu. In order to expound this faith Śaṅkarādeva and other Vaisnava saint poets rendered into Assamese the Bhāgavata-purāṇa and other texts that glorify Viṣṇu. They also evolved a new institution known as sattrā which was used for propagating,

sustaining, and stabilising Vaiṣṇavism in Assam. There are 195 sattras in Kamrup. Besides sattras, nām-ghars or kīrtan-ghars (prayer-halls) were also established in different villages for inculcating and popularising the ideas relating to the worship of Viṣṇu among the common people of Assam. A nāmghar is the place of congregation for listening to religious discourses and offering oblations to Viṣṇu, the Almighty. Besides, a nāmghar serves as the meeting place for the villagers, and a place of amusements where religious dramas are staged and Vaiṣṇava festivals are organized regularly. These festivals directly or indirectly exercise tremendous influence upon the life of the people. Besides the sattras and nāmghars, there are some other religious institutions which acted as a lever to the growth of Vaiṣṇava thoughts and ideals amongst the people. Sacaṇ or satsaṅgī-math and āśramas affiliated to Vaiṣṇavism deserve mention. These institutions sprang up in Kamrup during the later part of the Ahom rule.

The religious observances of the Vaiṣṇavas of Kamrup are marked by prayer-services (nām-prasaṅgas) held in the prayer-hall or in the courtyard of a household. No image is installed on the altar of a nāmghar, instead a sacred book like the Daśama or the Kīrtana-ghosā of Śahkaradeva, or the Nāmāglosā or

8. Pavitra Asam, Intro., p.34.
Ratnavali of Mādhavadeva is kept. In front of the altar an earthen lamp is kept burning until the end of the function. The prayer-service generally starts in the evening with the recitation of some portions from a holy scripture. This is followed by a devotional chorus sung to the beating of cymbals and playing on nāgārās (a pair of drums). The solemn function continues for a few hours, but in some cases the singing groups continue for the whole night. In the sāttras and in some sacaṁs nāmprasaṅga is held thrice a day and in some village nāmghars once a day. The nām-prasaṅga has such a popularity that the non-Vaiśnavas also hold such functions occasionally.

Usually the group of singers sit together and sing holy songs to the accompaniment of musical instruments. There are some styles of holding a prayer-service. One of these is the thiva-nām (standing congregational prayer), which is popular in North Kamrup area. The entire batch of singers stand in a semi-circular line and the principal singer takes his seat in the middle. The jhanā-nām is almost similar to the thiva-nām, but of shorter duration. Yet one more variation is the Daraṅgīvā-nām (possibly originated in the Darrang district) wherein the principal singer stands in the midst of his sitting companions and shows appropriate postures to illustrate the verse which he sings.

9. Infra, 'Daily prayer-services' in the same chapter.
A festival has always been considered the best way to attract attention of the people from all walks of life. The Vaiśnava saints and their followers introduced different festivals through sattras and nāmghars to popularize Vaiśnavism in the land. The fasts and festivals centering around the life episodes of Lord Kṛṣṇa as observed in Kamrup are described in the succeeding pages.

Janmāṣṭami

To most Hindus the āṣṭami-tithis i.e., the eighth lunar days, both bright and dark, are important and sacred, and many religious functions are celebrated on these days. The eighth day of the dark half of Bhādra (August-September) called janmāṣṭami or Kṛṣṇāṣṭami, is regarded as the birth day of Lord Kṛṣṇa. The day is observed throughout India by the Hindus with certain rituals. It may, however, be noted that the Assamese people observe the janmāṣṭami vow on the eighth day of the dark fortnight falling within the solar month of Bhādra even though the non-Assamese people may observe it only on the eighth day of the dark half of the lunar Śrāvaṇa (July-August). According to the system of Kāmarūpīva Dharmaśāstra the birth anniversary of Kṛṣṇa should be observed on the eighth day of the dark fort-

night in combination with Rohinī-nakṣatra, the fourth lunar mansion. In such combinations this vrata may be observed even if the tithi (lunar-day) falls during the malamāsa (intercalary month) in which religious functions are generally prohibited. It is further stated in the Bhavisya-purāṇa that the Kṛṣṇāṣṭamī in combination with Rohinī-nakṣatra is known as javantī and by observing the vrata one can get rid of the sins committed in three previous births.

The birth anniversary of Lord Kṛṣṇa is celebrated in the sattras and village nām-ghars and in Hindu households. There is a common belief that by observing the janmāṣṭamī-vrata one can earn piety for all his people and can be happy and prosperous throughout the whole life. He can also attain Vaikuntha after his death. Whoever, observes the janmāṣṭamī-vrata passes the previous day of the vrata in total abstinence and breaks fast in the evening usually taking havisvāna (i.e., rice and ghee). On the janmāṣṭamī day he or she observes a rigorous fast in which even the drinking of water is prohibited. Hence, this sort of fast is known as nirjala-pavāṣa. At mid-night when Kṛṣṇa is believed to have been born coinciding with the appearance of the moon in the sky an idol or Kṛṣṇa is worshipped with sastric rites with the help of a Brāhmaṇ priest. While worshipping the deity, flowers, holy basil, dūrva grass, incense,

earthen lamp, prasāda, etc., are duly offered. Finally the worshippers listen to the vratakathā. The devotee usually does not go to bed that night. On next day he or she feeds the Brāhmin priest and pays daksīṇā. Prasāda is also distributed among the people present on the occasion.

Besides individual vrata, nama-prasaṅga (prayer-services) is also held in the evening of the janmāśtami-tithi by the womenfolk of the village. They sing devotional songs in groups in different house-holds and take prasāda after the prayers are over.

In the sattras as well as in the village nām-ghara the function starts with illumination at evening. Recitation of verses from the sacred scriptures and the chanting of hymns dealing with the birth episode of Kṛṣṇa are performed with the accompaniment of instrumental music produced by conches, cymbals, kettle-drum, etc. In some nām-ghara homa (sacrificial fire) is also performed. In the sattras where image-worship is in vogue, an idol of Kṛṣṇa is worshipped with sastric rites and rituals. In some sattras and village nām-gharas a drama relating to the birthepisode of Kṛṣṇa is also staged. Gopāla Ātā's Janma-vātṛa is one of the popular plays generally staged on this occasion.

Thus, we have four different forms of observances of the festival of janmāśtami. These forms are: (1) individual

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14. Prasāda: A kind of offerings to a deity. It generally consists of husked rice, pulse, ripe bananas and other available fruits.

15. Vrata-kathā or the story relating to the birth-episode of Kṛṣṇa is described in detail in the chapter Vaśiṣṭha-Dilipa-saṁvāda of the Bhaviṣya-purāṇa and in the Bhāgavata-purāṇa, Book X.
fasts and prayers, (2) group prayers in different households, (3) community prayers and homa at village namghars, and (4) formal ceremonies in the sattras.

In this connection mention may be made of some of the local customs associated with purānic rites. We get a typical example of this kind at a village, named Lāupārā, situated at a distance of about 52 kms west of Gauhati.

The village namghar of Lāupārā is called Śrīśrīyāmārāi Gōsāi-ghar. The devotees, male and female (bhakat and bhakatani) assemble in the namghar with necessary preparation for observing the janmāstami day. They make an idol of Baby Kṛṣṇa in coloured dress. The prayers are performed by the women devotees in the afternoon and by the male devotees at night. After that, some sort of dramatic performance is held. A man or a woman, assuming the role of Devakī, the mother of Lord Kṛṣṇa, pretends, as if, she were suffering from labour pain. Then a man appears on the scene in the guise of a medicine-man intending to relieve the pain. His attempts prove to be a failure, he then leaves the place after taking a banana or some other fruits as fee. Like him two or more so-called medicine-men try in vain to bring relief to Devakī, the expectant mother. At midnight a man posing as a surgeon arrives. His services become immediately effective. The baby is born. The moment it is born, the chief priest comes out of the manikūta holding an idol of Kṛṣṇa in both hands almost in a dancing gait and says, "Kṛṣṇa is born, Kṛṣṇa is born." Then all the devotees pay their
respectful homage to Kṛṣṇa and sing hymns in his honour. The priest then returns to the manikūṭa and places the idol on the altar. At the end of the performance the devotees take prasāda.

Another instance of the intertwining of the two strains is found at Barpeta. It has been observed in the Barpeta-sattra that in the first part of the janmāśtami night one Brāhmin priest worships the images of Śyāmarāi or Kaliyā-thākura and Daul-Govinda in the southern part of the kāirtana-ghar according to the janmāś- tami-rūjā-vidhi. The place of worship considered as a maternity home for the birth of Lord Kṛṣṇa, is covered with a curtain. The rituals are completed there just before the mid-night. When the moon rises in the east and the Divine Babe is believed to have been born, the priest makes such sounds as to indicate the coming of the child. At that moment the uruli of women reverberates and simultaneously the musical instruments such as conch, bell, drum, etc., are played. At last the images of Śyāmarāi and Daul-govinda are taken to the manikūṭa and kept in the original place.

On this day a peculiar vow is observed by the unmarried girls of different ages in the Barpeta area. They abstain from

16. The altar is known as an asana (seat) which is made of wood and covered with coloured cloths.

17. The priest moans like a child and the audience accepts that these are the moaning sound of the baby Kṛṣṇa.

18. Uruli (Skt. hulahuli): a sonorous sound caused by the repeated vibration of the tongues of a group of women on joyful occasions.
food, even water, that day. The girls of different localities in different groups arrange mock-marriages with dolls and sing marriage-songs for the whole day. Towards the evening processions are brought out from different parts to the kirtana-ghar of Barpeta. In such procession a young boy of seven to ten years is dressed as a groom. He is led by the processionists to the gate of the kirtana-ghar where he prays to the Almighty. After the prayers, the processionists return to the original place where they pass the time in singing and merry-making until they see the moon in the sky. In the meantime the mock-marriage is held and offerings are distributed amongst the participants. Next day the girls break their fast by taking rice and ghee. It is a common belief that by observing this vow one can obtain a good husband like Kṛṣṇa. So, each unmarried girl observes this vow at least seven times during their maidenhood. It may be mentioned in this connection that some of the young boys of the Barpeta area also observe the janmāstami-vrata.

Nandotsava

Following the janmāstami festival is the day for Nandotsava. This day is marked for Nanda's great pleasure at his supreme luck in having been gifted with the Baby Kṛṣṇa. So Nanda, the foster-father of Kṛṣna, celebrated the festival described in the Bhāgavata-purāṇa (X,5.12-14) with great gusto and fervour. To commemorate that event, the Nandotsava festival is
observed in the sattras and in some village nāmghars. Recitation from the scriptures, chanting of hymns, devotional prayers and orchestral music are the usual features of this festival. At the top of all these, a dramatic performance known as bokā-bhāona is also held. Sprinkling mud (bokā) and coloured water on one another forms a part of the merriment indulged in by the actors. In the Barpeta sattra, besides bokā-bhāona performed by the male devotees, the mock-astrological calculation regarding the life of Kṛṣṇa is also done by one Daivajña-brāhmin who is regarded as Garga-ṛṣi, the noted astrologer of the Bhāgavata fame.

Nandotsava, however, is not as wide-spread as the janmāstami in Kamrup. In some villages instead of observing Nandotsava, the functions relating to this festival such as the bokā-bhāona and mock-astrological calculations are performed on the pācati day.

Pacati

Pacati is the third festival connected with the birth of Lord Kṛṣṇa and observed in all the non-monastic sattras and in some village nāmghars. This festival is generally celebrated on the fifth day after the day of Kṛṣṇa's birth, and hence it is known as pācati or pācati (Skt. pañca). 19 People in some

19. The pācati festival was very popular in Kāmarūpa even before the time of Saṅkaradeva. Reference to the celebration of pācati festival on the fifth day from the date of the birth of Saṅkaradeva is found in the Saṅkara-carita (vv.449-488).
places call it pacati-bhaona as some sort of dramatic performance (bhaona) depicting some episodes of child Kṛṣṇa is held on the occasion. It may, however, be noted that in some villages the festival is observed on different dates.

This festival is exclusively performed by the women-folk in the village nam-ghars. A few days before the festival, contributions in cash or kind\textsuperscript{20} are collected from different households. On the previous day or in the morning of the festival day four plantain trees are planted in the four corners of the namghar and a festoon made of mango-leaves, is kept hanging in the front side of the namghar as an auspicious sign. A big pandal is usually constructed in the precinct of the namghar where sitting accommodation is arranged for the devotees and other visitors. Either in the manikuta or in the namghar (where there is no manikuta) offerings of rice, pulses, ginger, banana and other fruits, and particularly the ewā-lādu\textsuperscript{21} are arranged for the purpose. Earthen lamp, incense and resin are lit. Besides, the flower-shaped gold and silver ornaments are also offered by the individuals with the hope of obtaining desired blessings from Lord Kṛṣṇa.

The congregational songs and prayers continue from noon till evening. During this time a dramatic performance that

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\textsuperscript{20} Generally coin rice, pulses and fruits are collected as subscription.

\textsuperscript{21} Ewa-lādu : A kind of sweet ball prepared from rice-powder immersed in boiling molasses.
highlights the episodes of the early life of Kṛṣṇa is also held. The women play different roles, such as, Nanda, Yaśodā, Garga-ṛṣi, Gopīs, etc. They put on garlands made of papaya stems and fruits. The woman playing the role of Garga-ṛṣi puts on a jāpi (a wicker hat used as an umbrella or sun-shade) on the head, smokes a hookā made of papaya fruit and prepares the 'horoscope of Kṛṣṇa', as it were, on a slate. After the 'astrological calculation' is over, Garga-ṛṣi is given a naivedya and daksīṇā. Some women representing the gopīs and holding an image of Kṛṣṇa with their hands dance and sing the euologistic songs that ex­tol the glory of Child Kṛṣṇa. Some minuets in the dance depict churning of milk. Some children playing the role of cowherds take bows, arrows and sticks for driving cattle, as it were.

In some villages of Nalbari area one special item is added to the above festival. This is known as Vṛndāvana-vātrā. Here, a group of singers take their seats in the centre of the nāmchar. Another group consisting of women and children starts a dancing procession in a circular motion around the seated group. From among the processionists one woman holds the image of Kṛṣṇa with both her hands and three girls carry rice, fruits and earthen lamps in three bamboo-trays (dala). One woman taking a plantain stem between her legs poses like riding on a horse. Some women masquerading as vendors loudly invite customers to purchase oranges or other fruits. Then Yāsodā and other gopīs would come to purchase fruits. But knowing Yāsodā to be the queen of the cowherds the seller increases the price of the
fruits. Yasodā purchases the fruits for her son at the inflated price.

As in Nandotsava, on this occasion too, the devotees of some villages sprinkle coloured water, knead powdered rice and red-powder on each other and join in a sport with mud which is known as dadhi-mathan.

In a few sattras of Southern Kamrup the dadhi-mathan ceremony is held in the month of Vaiśākha (April-May). In this ceremony the symbolic churning of milk by four pairs of small girls, called gōpī and dancing by twelve boys, called gopāla, take place. One of these boys dressed as Kṛṣṇa distributes curd among his friends.

After the dancing is over, gopālas are seated on a decorated seat placed in front of the festival-pāndal. Then all the devotees perform their reverential salutation by offering articles like powdered rice, cake, coins, etc. The gopālas in turn offer blessings to the devotees.

It has been observed in the Laupārā village that before starting the dadhi-mathan function held in the month of Bhādra (August-September) one male devotee takes out the image of Kṛṣṇa along with the seat (āsana) from the manikāta. He then keeps the seat on his head and turns round (pradāksīna) the pāmghar.

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22. In some religious functions of the Hindus pradāksīna or the circumambulation of a temple or a place where the functions are being held, is compulsory. It is believed that the pradāksīna wipes out sins. In his Sātvata-tantra (p.65)
for three, five or seven times. While turning round, he is
followed by a group of devotees, both male and female, and mu­si­
cal instruments, viz., drum, gong, horn, conch, etc., are played.
After this the image of Krṣṇa is kept in the manikūta and the
dadhi-mathan function starts in the precinct of the nāmghar
where a few yards of land are bemired beforehand. Then people
of all categories, irrespective of sex or age, join this sport.
They dance, move and roll on the mud. In doing so, mud is sprin­kled on the clothes of the spectators, but nobody objects to it,
rather they gladly accept it as a token of piety and good luck.
Most of them put on tilakas (mark) of mud on their foreheads.
Within about half an hour they perform this function and wash
their bodies clean. The offerings are then distributed among
the devotees and the spectators.

Very soon the festival turns into a fair. While the
tend to
full throated songs sung by the women devotees rend the sky,
people of all sects assemble at the site. The shops and tea­
stalls are set up for the occasion. They find a brisk business
on this occasion, in and around the pandal. The joyous children
form a crowd around the pedlar who sells toys, or around the
man who holds a monkey that exhibits various tricks.

Bhāgavata Miśra states that Lord Keśava forgives hundred
sins of a person who makes pradaksīna for hundred times
and prostrates before the Lord.
In connection with the pacati festival the rowing and swimming competition is also held in some villages. Here the competitors, irrespective of castes and sects, come from neighbouring villages with their play-boats (khel-nāp) and join the competition. Trophy or medal is awarded to the winning party.

In some villages the pacati festival is concluded with a dramatic performance at night.

Dola-yātra

Dola means swinging. The word yātra has got different meanings, viz., movement, motion, travel, journey, religious procession, fair and festival. In course of time it was also used to mean dramatic and melo-dramatic performances, which were used as the media of propagation of religious precepts. Hence, dola-yātra is a swinging festival in which an image of Lord Kṛṣṇa is swung in a swing. Among the Hindus there are certain religious ceremonies connected with the word yātra, viz., Jagannātha-yātra or ratha-yātra, snāna-yātra, rāsa-yātra, deva-yātra, etc. In ratha-yātra the images of Jagannātha, Balabhadra and Subhadra are taken out in a big procession and a great festival (car festival) is held on that occasion at Puri. A procession of cowherds of Vṛndāvana led to the temple of Hara and Ambikā, is called deva-yātra in the Bhāgavata-purāṇa (Bk.10.34).

23. The Ankīya Nāts (one-Act-plays) written by the Assamese Vaishnava dramatists, are also called yātra, viz., Āriyana-bhañjanā yātra by Mādhavadeva, Nrisimha-yātra by Daityari Thākura, etc., etc.
There are three kinds of vātrās or festivals held in sacred memory of Lord Kṛṣṇa in three full-moon days of a year. These are: dola-vātrā in the dola-pūrṇīmā of Phālguna, hindola-vātrā or jhulana-vātrā in the jhulana-pūrṇīmā of Śrāvana and rāsa-vātrā in rāsa-pūrṇīmā of Kārtika.

Dola-vātrā is celebrated throughout India on the full-moon day usually of the month of Phālguna (February-March) but sometimes in Caitra (March-April).

The other terms synonymous to dola-vātrā are phalgutsava and holi. It is called phalgutsava as the festival (i.e., utsava) is held in the spring season (phalgu). The word holi is said to have originated from Holākā or Holikā which is another name of the demon Śaṅkhacūḍa. Holākā was killed by Śiva with a spear given by Viṣṇu in order to regain the lost kingdom of Indra. The victory over Holākā was marked by a festival held in order to honour Kṛṣṇa, the saviour. Thus the festival came to be known as holi. Some writers are of the opinion that Holikā, the sister of the demon Hiranyakaśipu, thought herself to be immortal. But when she leaped into the blazing fire with her nephew Prahlāda, she was burnt to ashes, whereas Prahlāda was found sitting calmly in the fire and uttering the name of Viṣṇu. In memory of the burning of Holikā, the fire festival (vahnyutsava) is celebrated on the first day of dola-yātrā,

and the whole festival is known as holi which may have been derived from Holikā. The above purānic episodes connected with holi indicate the prevalence of the festival from early times.

Holi is also observed as vasantotsava or the vernal festival. The pūrṇimā (full-moon day) of the month of Phālguna is also known as holākā. So, it seems that holi, i.e., the dola-vatra and the vasantotsava (spring festival) were celebrated at the same time. In the spring time when youthful joys and vigour know no bounds, people express their ecstasy by smearing red-powder and syringing coloured water on each other. This sort of festival was afterwards known as Madanotsava. 26

In fact vasantotsava was observed in ancient times in order to worship Madana, the Indian Cupid. It is possible that vasantotsava has its association with Madanotsava but it would perhaps be erroneous to hold that the dola festival has any connection with the latter. According to the śāstric rites Madanotsava was and is still observed usually on the bright thirteenth day (Madana-travodaśī) and sometimes on the bright fourteenth day of the month of Caitra (March-April), 27 but dola-vātra is observed usually on the full-moon day of the month of Phālguna. Moreover, Madanotsava is more or less a festival connected with the purānic episode of the burning of Madana or Kāmadeva by the

27. Smṛti-ivotisa-sāra-saṁgraha, p.5.
wrath of Śiva, but the holi festival is connected with the worship of Visnu in his Kṛṣṇa incarnation.

It is not known when the dola-vātra came into practice. The Skanda-purāṇa refers for the first time to the worship of Daula-govinda by the king Indradyumna. In the Padma-purāṇa (Pātala-khaṇḍa) Paramesvara, i.e., Śiva advises Pārvatī to worship Govinda by installing him in a swing. The Skanda-purāṇa was composed in between seventh and tenth century A.D. and the Padma-purāṇa is dated in between eighth and tenth century A.D. This leads us to infer that the first celebration of dola-vātra in India dates back at least to the tenth century A.D. On the evidence of the Smṛti-sāgarasāra by Dāmodara Miśra, we may assume that dola festival was celebrated in Assam at least from the fourteenth century A.D. From the time of Śaṅkaradeva dola festival gradually became wide-spread in different sattras and became more popular in Assam. The Ahom king Rudrasimha (1696-1714) performed the holi festival and offered alms and bounties at the mouth of the Barnadi near Maṇikarnaśvara.

Before describing the process of celebrating the dola festival in the district of Kamrup, it may be stated that the

term deul or daul (Skt. deva + kula = an abode of god or goddess) is used to denote the dola festival in Kamrup. The primary meaning of the Assamese word deul or daul is a temple. Another meaning of the word is a mound or an elevated place. To the people of Kamrup the word deul carries the second meaning. The deul is a square-sized heap of about twenty feet in height with a series of seven steps from four sides. It is stated in the Śaṅkaracarita that Śaṅkaradeva performed the dola festival of an elevated ground at Bardowa after returning from the first pilgrimage in the first decade of the sixteenth century. Śaṅkaradeva also uses the word daula for several times in Uṛesā-varnana in which it is narrated that the king Indradyunma, ordered the ruler of Kalinga to bring a special type of boulder (bhadratara sīla) from the Vindhya hill to construct a daula. Sankaradeva might have taken the idea of erecting a daul from the episode described in the Uṛesā-varnana. Further, the Indian conception of Viṣṇu is that he lived on the mount Meru. The Uṛesā-varnana narrates that in the beginning of this universe Hari (i.e., Viṣṇu) was sitting merrily on the pinnacle of the mount Meru. The idea of constructing a daul might have originated from such a conception, or

32. Sūryakhaḍi Daivajña, a Court-poet of the Darrang royal family also used the word daul(a) in the sense of a heap while he describes a mythological episode relating to Pāraśurāma who built a daula with the heads of the Kṣatriyas slain by him (Darrang Rāj-vaiśāvali, p.8).


34. pūrvata merura śikhare hari
dasiyā āchanta śānanda kari.
(Uṛesā-varnana, v.25)
it may be that Viṣṇu has been given an honoured position in this festival by placing his image on a high pedestal. The seven steps of the daul perhaps are built to convey the religious concept that Viṣṇu resides on the highest pedestal or pinnacle of glory in the celestial region over the seven regions (santaloka) of the universe. The image of Daul-govinda is placed on a raised seat (āsana) inside the daul made of bricks and roofed by C.I. sheets or R.C. at the end of the seventh step. In places like Hajo, Viṣṇu is placed on a palanquin hung from the roof inside the daul.

This festival is celebrated in some villages as well as in some sattras in the district of Kamrup. Of all the places in the district, Barpeta attracts the highest admiration for organising the dol festival on a grand scale. Special mention may also be made of the festivals celebrated at Sarthebāri, Hājo, North-Gauhati, Kamarkuchi and Madaphata of the district.

Dola festival usually lasts for three days, but sometimes for four or five days. The day before the festival begins

35. In some places like Hājo, however, the number of steps of the daul goes up to nine. But it does not carry the actual meaning of the celestial abode of the deity. It may be noted that the guru-āsana in the sattras of Assam, consists of seven stairs which give the appearance of a ratha representing the celestial throne of Vaikuntha.

36. It is stated in Hari-prasaṅga (p. 680 fn.) that the daul festival of a particular year is called deka-daul (young dola) if it continues for three days, and budha-daul (old dola) if it lasts for five days.
is known as gondh (Skt. gandha) or adhivāsa. On the occasion a rite called mesadaha or vahnyutsava, is performed. Here, a goat (mesa, a ram or a sheep) is usually kept under a temporary shed made of straw. In that evening, the shed is set on fire, and as soon as a few furs of the goat are burnt the goat is released. However, slight variations of the method of observing the vahnyutsava rite in some places of Kamrup are noticed. For example, in the Hayagrīva temple of Hājo, a goat is tied to a post of a temporary hut called bhelāpūli. The image of the Lord called Calanta-mādhava, is taken out of the temple and washed under a curtain, so that nobody can see the washing. After that the image is kept in the hut to be worshipped with the offerings of a looking glass, comb, ghunucā, nhāli, scented oil, etc. A homa is also performed. After the worship is over, the image is taken around the hut for three times and finally installed on the swing. Simultaneously some votaries set the hut on fire and take out the goat which is reserved for a feast. The goat is said to represent a demon called maṇḍhāsura, the symbol of all evils and its burning symbolises eradication of

37. Gandha means diffusing sacred fragrance and making, thereby an auspicious beginning of the main festival. We find the use of the terms gandha and adhivāsa in early Assamese literature in the sense of preliminary function of a solemn occasion:

(a) gandhara gitaka gāi āsilā āpuna ṭhāi.
   (Ramacarana: v.1540)
(b) harara bhailā gandha-adhivāsa.
   (Manasā-kāvya, p.49)

all evils of the world just on the eve of the dola festival. The Smrti-sāgara-ratna-mālā records that once Kṛṣṇa killed a demon who was in the guise of a lamb (mesa-sura) on the bright fourteenth day of Phālguna (February-March). For this feat of valour, a king of the Yādava dynasty adored Kṛṣṇa by placing him on a swing and scattering red powder all around him. The fire festival of the dola-vātrā, mentioned above, is believed to commemorate Kṛṣṇa's victory over the demon.

The ritual of burning a goat is not, however, practised in all places. At Sarthebari an image of Viṣṇu is taken for seven times around a temporary hut. The image is then placed on a decorated diagram drawn beforehand with rice-powder or flour on the floor of that hut. When the hut is set on fire the priest immediately takes out the image and places it on the daul. In the Barpeta sattra only a meji (Skt. madhya, i.e., a pile or a column of straw) is burnt on the occasion. Here the image of Kṛṣṇa, popularly known as Daul-govinda, is taken out from the manikūta by beating cymbals, drums, etc., and is moved around the fire (agni-pradaksina) for seven times. It is commonly believed that the warmth given to the image of Daul-govinda in this manner, dispel cold of winter.

After the vahnuutsava ceremony, fire-works are displayed with great eclat. Simultaneously the image of Kṛṣṇa is taken

39. The actual burning of a mesa on the occasion in whatever places it is done, is unthinkable in pure Vaishnava cult, centering around Kṛṣṇa. It means but incorporation of an element of Tāntric rite into the festival.
around the seven steps of the daul and is installed on a swing. The image is kept there for all the days of the festival. During these days prayer-services, such as ghosā-kirtana, vvāsa-kirtana, pīṇapāli, etc., are held regularly. The recitation of the Uresā- varṇana (retold by Śaṅkaradeva from the Brahma-purāṇa) forms an indispensable part of the prayer-services held on this occasion. Various dance items are presented on different days of the festival by the artists, called gāvan-bāvan of the sattras. The drummers (ḍhulīyā) add to the liveliness to the ceremony. The local operas present specific dramatic performances.

The last day of the festival is known as süwerir-din. In the afternoon of that day the image of Daul-govinda is taken out on a dola (a palanquin) in a procession and is carried round the neighbouring villages. At that time, the musical instruments, such as cymbals, conch, bell, gong, drum, etc., are played. The süweri recalls Kṛṣṇa's coming in procession from the residence of Ghunuca to that of Lakṣmī (described in the Uresā-varṇana by Śaṅkaradeva, and Ghunuca-kīrtana by Śrīdhara Kandali). On the occasion the hilarious people sprinkle coloured water and scatter phāku (red-powder) on each other. So, the festival is also called phākuwā. However, this is popularly known as holi. Most Hindus,

40. The term süwerir-din is derived from Skt. smarāṇa-dina, i.e., a day of remembrance. This day is possibly meant for recalling the episode of Lord Kṛṣṇa coming in procession from the residence of Ghunuca to that of his own (or Lakṣmī).
irrespective of sex and age, whether they perform dola-vātra or not, join the holi festival on this day.

It has been observed that some of the processionists, while carrying out the idol of Kṛṣṇa cut down the wayside banana plants and the branches of the wayside trees. These activities, it is popularly believed, indicate the clearing of the route for procession. The devout villagers do not object to it, rather they reverentially salute and offer coins to the image. In Barpeta sattra the processionists go up to the last terminus at Kanariyā, a place situated about three miles away from the kirtana-ghar of Barpeta. On reaching the place they offer heketā (a kind of wild pulse) as a local custom, to the deity. The reason of offering heketā may be a reminiscent of offering food to Kṛṣṇa by Ghunucā at her residence.

After a little while the procession returns to the original place. Then a mock-fight between two groups, one standing for Kṛṣṇa and the other for Laksāmi is enacted. The people who join the procession belong to the camp of Kṛṣṇa and, the people who remain at the site belong to the camp of Laksāmi. The mock-fight starts with mutual sprinkling of coloured water and scattering of phāku. The fight continues for sometime. Then the first party offers to come to a compromise by paying a ransom. The second party which really acts as a party of gatekeepers accepts the proposal and the compromise is effected. The gates are now kept open for admission. The processionists
enter the temple with the image of Kṛṣṇa. In Barpeta sattra the processionists are seen entering the kirtana-ghar by breaking four bamboos obstructing the entrance. After entering the campus the party walks around the kirtana-ghar for seven times with the image of Daul-govinda which is kept on the original pedestal in the bhāi-ghar (or, manikūṭa) at the end of the festival.

The mock-fight appears to have been a pattern on the quarrel described in the Ghunucā-kirtana of Śrīdhara Kandali. The poet narrates the return of Kṛṣṇa from the house of Ghunucā (called Gundicā in the Skanda-purāṇa) who was newly married to him. Lakṣmī, who is presented here as the first wife of Kṛṣṇa, took her husband to task for his fickleness and levity, and did not allow him to enter her abode. Then Kṛṣṇa had to assuage her misgivings by paying three hundred rupees as compensation.41

Another aspect of the rite is that the dola-vātra has its hallowed literary ancestry in the Skanda-purāṇa (Utkala-khaṇḍa, chs.33-35). But we find no mention of the mock-fight there. Sarma, therefore, observes that this mock-fight bears resemblance to the ratha-vātra of Jagannātha held at Puri in the month of Āśāḍha (June-July).42

It may be mentioned here that the dola-vātra held at Hājo from the second day of the bright fortnight that falls after

41. Śrīdhara Kandali: Ghunucā-kirtana, vv.111-160.
42. N.M.S.T., p.133.
the *dola-pūrṇima* and continues for five days, is called *raia-phākuvā*, because the festival is said to have been introduced by the Ahom king (*raia*) Pramattasimha (1744-1751).

The practice of observing *holī* is very popular in villages and towns alike. The hilarious Hindu boys come out in batches with *ābir* (a kind of red powder) in hand and carrying syringes of perfumed coloured water. The elders, and occasionally women also move around in batches to play *holī*. In their exuberance of high spirit these batches spare practically none of their sex and age, so long as the stock of *ābir* is not exhausted and the syringe of coloured water is not emptied. This goes on from morning till late afternoon.43

**Jhulana-yātrā**

The *jhulana-yātrā* or the hindolotsava, i.e., the swing festival of Lord Kṛṣṇa begins on the eleventh day of the bright fortnight and concludes on the following full-night usually of the month of Śrāvaṇa (July-August) and sometimes of Bhādra (August-September). Though a Vaiṣṇava festival, the *jhulana* is celebrated only in a few Brahma-saṁhāti *sattras*.

43. It is customary that while playing with elders, *ābir* is to be sprinkled by the younger on the feet of the elder at first. However, the practice of throwing *ābir* sometimes degenerates into mud or rubbish throwing. This act of diabolical vandalism mars the solemnity of the festival.
It is not known when the *jholana-vāṭrā* came to be observed in the district of Kamrup. We find no mention of the festival in the writings of the Śrauta writers of Kāmarūpa like Dāmodara Miśra and Pitambara Siddhānta-vāgīśa. It may be pointed out that the Vaiṣṇavism of Bengal admits *jholana-vāṭrā* as a regular Vaiṣṇava festival. Towards the beginning of the seventeenth century a few followers of Vaiṣṇavism of Bengal came to Assam and settled in the land to propagate their faith. In course of time their descendants established a few *sattras* like Kalābāri, Tamolbāri, Kahuṭāli and Nārayanpur in the district of Kamrup.\(^\text{44}\) So, it may be assumed that some of these *sattras* of Bengal Vaiṣṇavism might have introduced *jholana-vāṭrā* in the district in the seventeenth century. This festival, however, has not spread to the rural areas up till now though it is becoming increasingly popular in the towns of Assam. *Jholana-vāṭrā* is widely celebrated in northern India including Bengal, whereas in Assam it is observed mainly by the Rajasthanis and the Bengalis. In this festival the images of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa are kept together on the swing. But in the *sattras* only the image of Kṛṣṇa is placed. It may be mentioned here that *jholana* is originally connected with Kṛṣṇa engaged in swinging activity with the gopīs at Vṛndāvana. But the scope of the festival was later widened, and the votaries of Rāma began to observe the festival placing the images of Rāma and his consort Sītā on the

\(^{44}\text{N.M.S.T., p.134.}\)
The argument offered for the inclusion of Rāma in the festival is that Rāma and Kṛṣṇa are both incarnations of Viṣṇu.

In all the evenings of the festival period worship of the images and illumination take place. The swing with the images is moved to and fro by pulling a string. The colourful decoration of the temple enhances the beauty of the festival.

The interest in the jhulana festival is steadily on the increase particularly among the young people living in the towns of Assam. It is noticed that the children of one or more families organise this festival jointly as a means of entertainment and amusement. Here, there is no scope for any solemnity, and formal worship is totally absent. Children take delight in placing the images of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa on the swing kept on a verandah or under a temporary shed, and making some artistic decorations there. Elderly people also visit the sites in order to encourage the little children and share the joy and merriment of the occasion.

The Rajasthanis and others began to settle in Assam from the later part of the nineteenth century. They started the celebration of the festival right from the time of their arrival. It is gathered that the present Sītārām Thākurbārī of Fancy Bazar, Gauhati, was constructed in the first decade of this...
century. Jhulana is being regularly celebrated in this temple since its inception. It is one instance from which we may assume that the jhulana festival began to be celebrated widely in the urban areas of Kamrup at least from the last part of the nineteenth or from the beginning of the twentieth century A.D.

Rāsa-yātra

The rāsa-yātra, an important Vaiṣṇava festival, is held in the full-moon night of the month of Kartika (October-November) in honour of Kṛṣṇa's amorous dalliances with the milkmaids (gopīs) of Vṛndāvana as described in the Bhāgavata-purāṇa. The festival is celebrated in some sattras and important public places in Kamrup.

The rāsa-yātra is generally considered to be the festival held in the full-moon night of Kārtika. But in actual practice this festival continues to attract and delight the people from three to fifteen days according to the festive mood and organising zeal of the people in a particular place. At Nalbari, for instance, the festival continues sometimes for fifteen days, whereas at Palashbari it lasts for seven days.

The festival is observed in the sattras with devotional functions consisting of the recitation from the Rāsa-pañcādhyāya of the Bhāgavata-purāṇa and the elucidation of the verses recited. Boys are dressed as gopīs and engaged in the dance
performance. The dance is followed by a theatrical performance. The drama Keli-gopāla by Śaṅkaradeva is usually staged on the occasion.

Unlike the sattra festivals, the public festivals are devoted to the worship of Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā taken together. In the public festivals one finds a plethora of images clustering around/images of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa. The other images displayed, are of all the important gods and goddesses, saints and sages and the milk-maids. These images are installed in the rāsa-māndana (pandal) along with the images of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa placed on the same pedestal. The purpose of installing so many images is to show that all the gods, goddesses and sages are watching, as it were, the rāsa-performances of Lord Kṛṣṇa.

Besides the images mentioned above, other images, such as, ten incarnations of Viṣṇu and the images depicting different

46. N.M.S.T., p.134.

47. In the Daksinpat sattra of Sibsagar district, however, the duel-worship of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa takes place on the occasion of the rāsa-festival. (Vide, Benudhar Sarma: Daksinpat Sattra, p.25.)

48. It is stated in the Bhāgavata-purāna (X,33.3-4) and in the Kirtana-ghoṣā (of Śaṅkaradeva) that all the gods with their spouses appeared on the occasion, covering the whole sky with the innumerable chariots in which they came. They evinced keen interest in the rāsa festival. The jubilant gods and goddesses showered flowers upon Kṛṣṇa and played a special musical instrument, called dundubhi, from the sky. Śaṅkaradeva described in the Rāsā-kṛṣṇa episode of the Kirtana-ghoṣā thus:

āsilā sabhārye yata devagāna māne, juriya ākaśa āsi asṁkhya vimāne. 132
mādhavara rāsakṛṣṇā cāwe eka dṛṣṭi, bāwe deve dundubhi kariya puspa vrṣṭi.
mythological episodes, are also placed in different stalls erected in different sides of the festival ground. The impressive array of images includes some of those which highlight the important aspects of social and political life, but these are kept in separate stalls. The multiplicity of the images makes the festival attractive.\(^{49}\)

On the rāsa-pūrṇimā day the images of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa are worshipped according to the rites prescribed in the Rāsaṭ-sava-vidhi.\(^{50}\) Brilliant fire works constantly sparkle in the evening sky. This is followed by nāma-kīrtana in which the musical instruments like cymbals, nāgārā (drums) and khol are played. The dramatical performances held at almost all the nights enhance the attraction of the festival. The fair held on the occasion also adds colour and gaiety to the festival.

From the above description one question may arise as to why the duel worship of Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa, which is strictly prohibited in the neo-Vaiṣṇavism, is performed in the public places of worship? It may be noted that monotheism is admitted in the neo-Vaiṣṇavism preached by Śaṅkaradeva in Assam. According to this sect Viṣṇu or Kṛṣṇa is regarded as the Supreme Being. So, the worship of Rādhā with Kṛṣṇa in the rāsa festival is not performed. As already stated Vaiṣṇavism affiliated to the Caitanya sect of

\(^{49}\) It is gathered that the rāsa festival celebrated at Nalbari is the largest of all those held in other parts of Kamrup, nay of Assam. As many as 247 images were exhibited in the rāsa festival at Nalbari in 1966. The position is more or less the same in other years too.

\(^{50}\) P.D., pp.189-197.
Bengal has its votaries in Assam too, and a few *sattras* were established by this sect in Assam. According to this sect Rādhā has been given the equal status with Kṛṣṇa, and the worship of Rādhā together with Kṛṣṇa is the accepted mode in the *rāsa-vātṛā* of Bengal. This leads us to conclude that the worship of Radha and Kṛṣṇa prevalent in the *rāsa-vātṛā* of Kamrup or of Assam, may be traced to the practice found in the Gauḍīya-Vaiṣṇavism of Bengal.

III

**Worship of Viṣṇu in different manifestations**

We have discussed above the different festivals observed in Kamrup in connection with the life-episodes of Lord Kṛṣṇa, an incarnation of Viṣṇu. Śaṅkaradeva mentioned as many as twenty four incarnations (*caturvimsati-avatāra*) of Viṣṇu in the *Kirtana-ghosa* (vv.1-14). These incarnations are regarded with much esteem by the Vaiṣṇava saints, but we have no records of fasts and festivals celebrated in honour of all these incarnations in Assam. For example, the episodes of the *Rāmāvana* are very popular in Assam, but the Assamese people do not celebrate festivals connected with the episodes of the *Rāmāvana*.

(103)

(e.g., Rāma-navāmī and Hanumān-jayantī) as observed in different parts of India. On the other hand, there are a few other deities who are regularly worshipped and there are some others whose worship is only occasional. These manifestations are: Vāsudeva, Jagannātha, Satya-nārāyana and Śālagrama. The fasts and festivals celebrated in honour of these manifestations including Hayagrīva-mādhava have been described in the succeeding pages.

Hayagrīva-mādhava

Hayagrīva-mādhava is the presiding deity of the ancient temple situated at Hājo in the district of Kamrup. The Hindus worship the deity as an incarnation of Viṣṇu. The Lama Buddhists who visit the temple annually in the winter season to offer their prayers to the deity regard him as Mahāmuni. Thus Hayagrīva-mādhava is the deity of the Buddhists as well as of the Hindus.

Hayagrīva is a very popular deity in the Buddhistic tantra. Dalton remarks that the image of Hayagrīva at Hājo is the image of Buddha covered with cloths and masks.52 Chaudhury surmises that the shrine of Hayagrīva-mādhava might have been built on the relics of the Buddha or of Padma-sambhava, a Buddhist saint of the seventh century. In support of his view he refers to the famous Buddhist mantra om mani padme hum inscribed

with the figure of a four-armed Viṣṇu on a rock at Hajo. Kakati holds that originally Hayagrīva was not a Hindu god, but a god of different origin.

It may be pointed out that Hayagrīva is mentioned as a form of Viṣṇu in the Hindu scriptures like the Mahābhārata (Śānti-parvan, ch.347), Devī-bhāgavata (1.5), Kālika-purāṇa (chs.40.63, 78), and Yogini-tantra (II, 9). The Kālika-purāṇa (78.77-78) states that there is an image of Hayagrīva-viṣṇu in the Maṇikūṭa-hill (at Hajo); Viṣṇu took the form of Hayagrīva, killed two demons, called Jvārsura and Hayagrīva and resided in the Maṇikūṭa-hill. The Yogini-tantra (II, 9.123) also holds that Viṣṇu resides in the Maṇikūṭa hill as Hayagrīva.

It appears from the account given in the Yogini-tantra (II,9) that Hayagrīva was worshipped according to some tantric methods. The Yogini-tantra gives a long list of offerings which may be classified in different categories, viz., fruits (e.g., wood-apple, plum, pomegranate, banana, etc., 246-247); vegetables (e.g., radish, garden-spinach (pāldhī) etc. 248-249); varieties of paddy (e.g., somadhāna, brhatdhāna, raktasāli, etc.:252-253) and flesh of birds (e.g. hen, peacock, dove, cuckoo, etc.:257-259). Among the offerings milk, fish, deer, goat and venision are very much delectable to Viṣṇu (255). The worshipper is expected to be well-versed in mantra and tantra (265).

54. The Mother Goddess Kamākhya, p.70.
The above account clearly indicates the tantric influence on the worship of Hayagriva in early times. But when a wave of neo-Vaiśnavaism swept the land some of the Vaiṣṇava rites and rituals crept into the mode of worship of Hayagriva. From the accounts given in the Maṇikāta composed by Rāmacandra Barpātra in 1608 (śaka) and in the Laksminat-caritra of Jaya Nārāyaṇa composed in the early eighteenth century, it is evident that the Vaiṣṇavite rituals like the congregational prayers, chanting of hymns, recitation from the Gītā, Bhāgavata and Kīrtana, and the offering of vegetarian articles to the deity were practised in the temples. It is stated in the Assamese biographical literature that Mādhavadeva, the chief apostle of Śaṅkaradeva, visited the Mādhava temple and recited various ślokas in honour of the deity. Nīlakaṇṭha Dāsa records that Dāmodarādeva visited the temple where he recited and explained the Gītā. Dāmodar's father Satānanda also recited the Bhāgavata. Two elder brothers of Dāmodarādeva were appointed as readers of the Bhāgavata in the temple. This clearly indicates the Vaiśnava influence on the Mādhava temple at Hajo.

At the present time Hayagrīva-mādhava is worshipped daily as a form of Viṣṇu with the offerings of mung pulse, purākal

56. Ibid., pp.962-973.
57. Dāityārī, vv. 1090-1091.
(a kind of banana) and śūrdasopacāra. The daily offerings are known as nitva-bhoga. There is also nitva-homa or a custom of lighting sacred fire daily. In every evening ārati-bhog, a preparation of powdered rice, ghee and molasses, is offered regularly. During the time of worship the musical instruments like conch, bell and drum are played by a section of people called bājanīvā. The devotees perform prayer-services by chanting Hariṣūpa (glories of God) with the accompaniment of musical instruments. Recitations from the holy scriptures are the main item of the daily services.

It may be pointed out that the dance performance was formerly held by the male and female dancers in the temple.59

Nidhi Levi Farwell, an Assamese Christian, records in 1852 that dances were performed regularly in the Mādhava temple. But now the practice is completely obsolete.

Vāsudeva

Lord Kṛṣṇa, being the son of Vasudeva, a scion of the Yādava dynasty, is also called Vāsudeva. Vāsudeva is regarded as a manifestation of Viṣṇu. There are different varieties of images of Vāsudeva under different names in some sattras of Kamrup, viz.,

59. Vide, Lakṣmiṇīpati Carita in Asamīyā Sāhitya Cānecki, p.965; and Hayagrīva-mādhava in Asamīyā Sāhitya Cānecki, p.842.

60. The Arunodāv, an Assamese Monthly, Vol.VIII, Pt.9, 1852.
Śyāmarāya at Barpeta, Ananta at Hāladhibārī, Govinda at Āunīfātī, etc. Moreover, there are images, called Vāsudeva, in the nām-ghar of Bālikariyā village near Nalbari and in the Vāsudeva thān of Na-sattā near Barpeta. The images are daily worshipped with due offerings. In some sattresas of Kamrup vegetarian cooked victuals are offered to the deity and homa is occasionally performed. The Vaiṣṇava fasts and festivals like the dola-vātṛā and janmāśa-ṭami-vrata, are also held in these sattresas. These clearly indicate the Vaiṣṇava influence on the worship of Vāsudeva.

But it is to be noted that before the spread of neo-Vaiṣṇavism Vāsudeva was worshipped in Assam according to the Pāncarātra system. The Kālikā-purāṇa (80.143) propounds the mode of worship of Vāsudeva corresponding to that of Pāncarātra system. The text records that the place of worship of Vāsudeva was Dikkaravāsinī, situated in the eastern part of ancient Kāmarūpa. According to the method of worship a diagram is to be drawn first with powder of different colours. Vāsudeva is to be worshipped along with his weapons, ornaments, a pentad of deities, viz., Śambhū, Gaurī, Brahmā, Rāma and Kṛṣṇa with vegetarian offerings such as paramāṇa, milk, curd, etc. According to the Kōrini-tantra Vāsudeva is to be propitiated with the offerings like

62. K.P., 80.175.
63. K.P., 80.122, 181-186.
64. II.9.255.
fish, goat, venision and hare. Thus we find that there was an infusion of the tantric elements into the worship of Vāsudeva in Assam. Looking at the adoration of Gaurī of the pentad, the female attendants (yogini) and also the nāvika (the female complement) to Vāsudeva, we can accept the view of Kakati that "in the Vaiṣṇavism of Vāsudeva worship the shadow of the Mother is there." 65

But it may be noted that the monotheistic Vaiṣṇavism as propounded by Śaṅkaradeva in Assam in the sixteenth century completely roots out the influence of the Mother and other associated deities of the Vāsudeva cult based on the Pāñcarātra system. The neo-Vaiṣṇavism recognises only one god who as Viṣṇu or Nārāyaṇa, assumes different incarnations from time to time, and Kṛṣṇa is an incarnation of Viṣṇu. According to the Vyūha doctrine of the Pāñcarātra Samhitā there are four forms of Viṣṇu, viz., Vāsudeva, Śaṅkaraśaṇa, Pradyumṇa and Aniruddha. In his Assamese version of the Bhāgavata Śaṅkaradeva refers to the four forms as manifestations of Kṛṣṇa and attaches more importance on Kṛṣṇa. 66 From this it may be assumed that under the levelling influence of neo-Vaiṣṇavism in Assam Vāsudeva of the Vyūha group merged in the form of only one Supreme Deity and Vāsudeva is, therefore, worshipped today in Kamrup not as a member of the

66. yāra cāri māhā mokṣa mūrti anupāma
rāma kāma aniruddha vāsudeva nāma,
hena bhagavanta kṛṣṇa devatāro deva.
(Śaṅkaradeva's Bhāgavata, X, 651).
Vyūha group but also as the Supreme God being the son of Vasudeva.

Jagannātha

Jagannātha, meaning the Lord of the universe, is the presiding deity of the historic temple at Puri bearing the name of the Lord. Different scholars hold different views on the origin of the Jagannātha cult. Some traced its origin to the Jaina or Buddhistic sources, while others ascribed it to the philosophy of Vaiṣṇavism. Whatever the origin Jagannātha was afterwards regarded as one of the forms of Viṣṇu and the glory of Jagannātha was widespread throughout India. The old Assamese biographical literature records that Śaṅkaradeva and some of his followers visited the shrine of Jagannātha in the last decade of the fifteenth century and stayed at Puri for more than a year. It is very likely that after their return from Puri they popularised the glory of Jagannātha among the people of Assam. Moreover, the two old Assamese poetical works, viz., Uresā-varṇana of Śaṅkaradeva and Ghunucā-kīrtana of Śrīdhara Kandali also made the people familiar with the episodes of

68. Skanda-purāṇa, Utkala-khaṇḍa, chs. 33-35.
69. Daityāyī, vv.69; Rāmānanda Dvija: Śrī-guru-carita, vv.238; K.G., pp.29-33.
Jagannātha. It is stated in one Assamese chronicle\(^{70}\) that the Ahom Commander Chankham Ghar-sandikai went to Puri to offer oblations to Lord Jagannātha in the Śaka year 1405 (1483 A.D.) for the welfare of the Swargadeo Dihinglā Raja. The Yoginī-
tantrā\(^{71}\) makes an attempt to establish a link between the image of Hayagrīva at Hājo with the icons of Jagannātha temple at Puri. Daityārī Thākura records\(^{72}\) that at the instruction of Śaṅkaradeva, an image of Jagannātha was made by Karalā Bāñhai, an artisan, and was installed at Dhuwānāt. Thus the cult of Jagannātha became so popular in Assam that the Assamese women-folk not only composed prayer-songs eulogizing the glory of Jagannātha, but also performed the mock-marriage and other ceremonies of Jagannātha. Such ceremonies performed in the district of Kamrup are described below.

Jagannāthar nām:

Jagannathar nam is a kind of prayer-service, in which songs of Jagannātha are sung by the women-folk including girls in every evening of the whole month of Vaiśākha (April-May). In some villages the ceremony continues up to the ambuyāci day in the month of Āṣāḍha (June-July). The popular belief as manifested in the songs is that in the beginning of the year, i.e., in the month of Vaiśākha, Jagannātha pays them a visit to look after their welfare. The Lord prevents outbreak of epidemics and

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71. II.9.220-245.
rescues people from their financial hardship. His very presence brings prosperity and happiness to the royal family and common people as well. So, for his propitiation the prayer-service is usually held in the beginning of the year.\textsuperscript{73}

The ceremony is held by the road-side under a wood-apple or a banyan tree. If such suitable place is not available, a tulasi or a young plantain tree is planted in the courtyard of a household to perform the ceremony. A small pedestal surrounding the tree or the plant is raised with earth. On the pedestal a naivedya of rice, mangu-dāl and varieties of fruits, earthen lamp, incense and a pair of areca-nuts and betel-leaves are offered to the deity. The prayers continue for about an hour. The form of Jagannātha described in the songs, represents Lord Kṛṣṇa. After the prayers are over the naivedya is distributed among the devotees.

The mock-marriage of Jagannātha:

Another form of ceremony performed in honour of Jagannātha is the mock-marriage of Jagannātha held in a few villages of Kamrup. As an example we may mention the name of the village Chamārkuchi where the ceremony is held regularly. There are two nām-ghars in the village. On the Caitra-saṁkrānti

\textsuperscript{73} In some villages (e.g., Bejera, Bhomolahati, etc.), however, Jagannāthar nām is held in the month of Jyaiṣṭha or Aṣāḍha.
four plantain trees are erected in four corners of each nam-ghar and from that day prayers are held regularly with the offering of naivedya to Jagannātha for the whole month of Vaisākha. The mock-marriage takes place on the Vaisākha-saṁkrānti, i.e., the last day of the ceremony. On the day preceding the marriage, two young banana plants are fixed vertically on a raft made of banana trunks in one of the nam-ghars. Of the two plants one is regarded as the 'bridegroom', i.e., Jagannātha and the other as 'bestman' of the marriage. Likewise, three young banana plants are also kept in the other nam-ghar. These are regarded as the 'bride' Ghunucā, her mother and friend. All the five plants are bedecked with vermilion, flowers and garlands.

On the next day is held the mock-marriage which closely resembles the Hindu marriage in respect of some śāstric rites and local customs. For instance, functions like fetching of water, ārāddha ceremony, bridal procession, and tying of nuptial knot etc., are performed. Light refreshment for the visitors is an essential feature of the mock-marriage.

At the end of the ceremony the banana plants representing the 'pair' and their 'attendants' are immersed.

Duni-bhaṇā-nām:

According to the śāstric custom homage is paid to ancestors of the groom and the bride on the marriage day in a ritual

74. Infra, ch. VI.
called nāndi-śrāddha. This ritual which is also appended to the mock-marriage of Jagannātha described above, is followed by a simple ceremony known as duni-bhaṅga-nām. Duni (Skt. droni) is a bamboo basket in which rice, potatoes, betel-nuts, coins, etc., are ceremonially kept on the occasion of the nāndi-śrāddha. The articles contained in the duni are preserved till the fifth, seventh or ninth day after marriage when certain devotional folk-songs are sung by the women-folk in a simple ceremony. At the end of the function the articles contained in the duni and a naivedya offered to Jagannatha are distributed among the women present.

Jagannāthar sabhā:

Jagannāthar sabhā is a kind of religious fair held in honour of Jagannātha in some villages like Sandheli of Nalbari sub-division and Sundaridīya of Barpeta sub-division. On this occasion the women-folk collect money and rice from the neighbouring villages. The prayers are performed on an auspicious day. On the occasion a special offering called lādu, is made to the deity along with naivedya. So the ceremony is also known as laurā-nām.

Daily worship of Jagannātha:

Besides prayer-songs and mock-marriage of Jagannātha, there are instances of the worship of Jagannātha in some places of Kamrup. In Miṭanī, a village about 13 km distant from Sonāpur
towards North-East, there is an old temple of Jagannatha where three wooden icons of Jagannātha, Subhadra and Balabhadra are daily worshipped. These icons bear some resemblances to those of the Jagannātha temple at Puri. As in Puri the incomplete wooden icons at Mitanī are placed facing towards east. There is also a banyan tree called aksāva-vāṭa near the temple. Moreover, the snāna-vāṭa, the dola-vāṭa and the ratha-vāṭa are also regularly held there.

There is another temple of Jagannātha situated in the village of Katālkuchi. In Belbāri, a village under Pānbarī Mauza, there is a thān of Jagannātha where Viṣṇu as Jagannātha is worshipped daily. From this it appears that Jagannātha is a popular deity in the district of Kamrup.

Satya-nārayaṇa

Satya-nārayaṇa is worshipped as a form of Viṣṇu in Assam as well as in some other parts of India. The Skanda-purāṇa prescribes that this deity may be worshipped on any auspicious day of the year, but the worship must be held in the evening (niśāmukhe). This is also stated in a prayer-song sung in honour of Satya-nārayaṇa. Generally a saṃkrānti or a full-moon day is considered auspicious for worshipping the deity.

75. Skanda-purāṇa, Revākhaṇḍa, 233.17.
76. satya nārayaṇ hari satya nārayaṇ sandhyā kāle pūjā kare tomāra caraṇ.
Skanda-purāṇa (Revākhaṇḍa. 235.99) narrates that a merchant was able to go to 'Satyapura' (a place of salvation) by worshipping Satya-nārāyaṇa in a sāṅkrānti-day. It (Revākhaṇḍa.233.16) further holds that by worshipping the deity one can get rid of the worldly miseries, secure divine blessings and earthly happiness and become victorious everywhere. According to the Satya-nārāyaṇa Pācāli, an Assamese narrative in verse, the worshipper can be blessed with anything he desires.

The performer of the Satya-nārāyaṇa vṛata observes fast at the day time and worships the deity in the evening under the instruction of a Brāhmaṇ priest. The offerings consist of rice, pulse, earthen lamp, resin, incense, tulasī leaves and varieties of fruits. Besides, one special offering consisting of twelve pairs of ripe banana and wheat or rice powder, ghee, milk, curd, sugar and molasses of equal quantity, usually one and a quarter seer of each article, is considered delectable to Satyanārāyaṇa (Revākhaṇḍa, 233.19-20). These articles are mixed in a big tumbler and stirred into a paste which is known as jokhār-bhog (jokh = measure). Moreover, kēcā-bhog consisting of banana, curd and molasses, is also prepared for distribution among the votaries.

At the end of the worship the vṛata-kathā or the stories relating to the glorious deeds of Satyanārāyaṇa are

77. kāmanā kariyā yadi karaya sevana yei bara māge tāke del nārāyaṇa.
(Quoted from Satya-narāyaṇa Pacāli)

78. The Skanda-purāṇa narrates four stories relating to the glory of Satya-nārāyaṇa. These are : (1) Satyanārāyaṇa-
recited by the priest before the devotee and his invitees. After that, the devotional songs are sung to the accompaniment of musical instruments like nagara and cymbals. The function ends with the distribution of prasāda and the paying of daksīṇā to the priest. A few friends and relatives of the devotee are usually treated to a dinner that night.

It is difficult to ascertain the date when the worship of Satyanārāyaṇa was introduced in the land. The deity is worshipped according to the rites prescribed in the Skanda-purāṇa. It is noteworthy that Satyanārāyaṇa is not referred to in the Bombay edition of the Skanda-purāṇa. It may be an interpolation occurring in the Bengali edition only. The editor of the Bengali edition has clearly stated in a foot-note (Revā-khaṇḍa, p.3660) that the chapters (four in number) relating to Satyanārāyaṇa have been incorporated in the purāṇa only because these are found in some Bengali books, and because the worship of Satyanārāyaṇa is widely prevalent in Bengal. So, the origin of Satyanārāyaṇa cannot be traced to the original Skanda-purāṇa. The Bhavisya-purāṇa also prescribes the rite of the worship of Satyanarayana, but the different parts of this purāṇa were composed in different periods coming down to the seventeenth century.79 Hence it is difficult to fix the date from the Bhavisya-purāṇa.

vipra-sañvāda, (2) Vipra-kāśṭhaketu, (3) Bapīk-sādhu mokṣavarpaṇa and (4) Vāmśadhyajopākhyāna. Among these four stories the third one is most popular.

The Muslims began to settle with the Hindus of Bengal from about the early part of the thirteenth century. As a result of co-existence for a long time, exchange of thoughts and ideas contributed to mutual understanding between these two communities. Some of them revered each other's minor gods and goddesses with awe and reverence. Many illiterate and credulous Hindus revered Pîr, a village deity of the Muslims. Some of them offered śinnî (Persian-širînî, širnî, śinnî) to Pîr and donated earthen horses in places considered to be the abode of Pîr. 80 Even now in Bengal there are some minor deities who are worshipped both by the Hindus and the Muslims. One such deity is Bâda Khân Gâzî or Gâzî Sâheb in whose name śinnî is offered with a view to be blessed with children. 81 Thus we may refer to some common deities like Pîr-gorâchând, 82 Mânik-pîr 83 and Satya-pîr who are worshipped mainly with the offering of śinnî. The ijkhar-bhog or the kēcâ-bhog, as mentioned above, is nothing but a kind of śinnî. While describing the rituals of worshipping Satyanârâyana śinnî is mentioned in the Pûrâkita-dânapa (p.914). From this offering we may assume that on juxtaposition of some of the religious rites and offerings of both the religions a new form of worship, as that of Satya-nârâyana emerged with the passage of time. Khan Choudhury Amanatulla Ahmed considers Satya-pîr as a title of a saint who

81. G. K. Basu: Bâmlar Laukik Devatâ, p.43-44.
82. Ibid., p.99.
83. Ibid., pp.173-176.
is said to have been born of a Hindu family, although later on he was converted to Islam. Satyapir himself preached Islam among the people of North Bengal and introduced śinni which was respectfully accepted both by the Hindus and the Muslims. There are some other well-known saints with the surname pīr, viz., Gāzipir, Kālpīr, Pācārī, Māṇikpīr, etc. It can, therefore, be understood that in our case, Satya is the name of a saint, and pīr is his title. However, like Kabīr, the noted saint, Satyapir is revered both by the Hindus and the Muslims. In course of time, due to the Brāhmāncical influence Satyapir might have been transformed into Satyanārayana. Satyanārayana was regarded as a form of Viṣṇu, but his śinni, the principal offering of Satyapir remained unchanged. This deity, whether Satyapir or Satyanārayana became so popular in Bengal that long poems in Bengali had been composed in regard to the glory of the deity. The poems are popularly known as vṛata-kathā or pācāli, viz., Satyanārayana-kathā, Satyapirer-kathā, Nārāyānadever-pācāli, Rāmeśvari Satya-nārayana pācāli, etc. In this connection reference may be made to the Lālmoner-kecchā composed by one Muslim poet, called Arif. It is noteworthy that most of these books have accepted Satyapir or Satyanārayana as the same deity. In the Sabda-kalpa-druma Satyanārayana is recognised as Satyapira (Satyapira Itibhāṣā).

85. (a) yei satyanārayana sei satyapir dui kule laiche gevā kariyā jāhīr. (Satyanārayner Pācāli as cited in the Kochbihārer Itiḥās, p.69).
(b) rām rahim dui nām dhare eksāth mākāy rahim āmi ayodhyāy rām. kalite sampratr satyapir nārayana. (Rāmeśvari Satyanārayana Pācāli)
It is stated in one verse of the Skanda-purāṇa that one can attain satyapura (satvapuram vayau, 235.99) by worshipping Satyanārāyaṇa. It is to be noted that there is no mention of Vaikuṇṭha even though Satyanārāyaṇa has been regarded as Viṣṇu possessing incomparable valour (Viṣṇoratulateiasah - Rev.255.7). Moreover, the āsana (the holy seat) on which the articles are offered to Satyanārāyaṇa, is called mokām in Bengal. Mokām is a Persian word, meaning abode, i.e., the abode of the Lord. From this the Islamic influence on the worship of Satyanārāyaṇa may be inferred. Under the leadership of Bakhtiyar Khilji, the first Muslim invasion in Bengal took place in 1205 A.D. and after that the Muslims began to settle in Bengal. So it appears that the worship of Satyanārāyaṇa might have originated in Bengal in the thirteenth century. Tradition has it that one ruler of Gaṇḍa, called Gaṇeśa or Hussain Shah, introduced āśira of Satyapīr amongst the Hindus and the Muslims, in order to establish a harmonious relation between the people of these two communities. If this is correct, we may infer that the worship of Satyanārāyaṇa might first originate in Bengal and gradually it spread to the neighbouring states like Assam, Bihar, Orissa and Uttar Pradesh. In this connection we may refer to the Satyanārāyaṇer Pālā, a book composed in Oriya relating to the glory of Satyanārāyaṇa. There is also a temple of Satyanārāyaṇa near the

86. Viśvakosa, Vol. XXI, p.27.
87. Kocbiharer Itihās, p.70.
famous Viśvesvara temple of Vārānasī.

The episode relating to the glory of Satyanārāyaṇa as narrated in the Skanda-purāṇa was rendered into Assamese. In this connection we may refer to the Śrīśrisatyanārāyaṇa-devar Pācāli, a poetical work of the eighteenth A.D. by Dvija Viśvesvara. Even today, this pācāli is usually recited in the worship of Satyanārāyaṇa by the priest.

The śālagrāma

The śālagrāma, a kind of small, oval or round stone, considered to be a form of Viśnu, is held in high esteem throughout India. Dubois describes the śālagrāma thus:

"It is a sort of fossilized shell, ammonite or nautil-lus, oval, striated, umbilicated, and ornamented with 'arborizations' or tree-like markings on the outside. The more there are of these tree-like markings the more highly they are revered."  

The origin of the śālagrāma is described in various texts. According to the size, colour and markings, different kinds of śālagrāma have been given different names, viz., Madhusūdana, Padmanābha Lakṣmī-nārāyaṇa, Vāsudeva, Lakṣmī-hari, Matsya, Kūrma, etc. Madhusūdana, the great god, possessing bright colour

as gold and a marking of one wheel, is said to have beneficial influence upon the fortune of the worshipper. Even a poor man may obtain a kingdom, if he daily worships the śālagrama, called Padmanābha with tulasi leaves. Padmanābha contains the marking of one wheel, one lotus, the crescent moon, a garland of wild flowers and curly hair, namely śrīvatsa, on its surface. Thus we have one hundred and seventy one varieties of śālagramas which are believed to possess different kinds of magical virtues.

The origin of the worship of śālagrama may be traced back to the practice of stone worship, i.e., fetishism of the primitive people. It is aptly remarked that "during the stone-age religion developed among all the peoples of the world. In attempting to establish and perpetuate friendly relations with the gods and spirits, definite rituals were evolved, and the instruments employed in these rituals were naturally made of stone. The ritual use of stone is connected with the fact that in many parts of the world certain stones have been considered sacred. We have evidences to believe that the stone-worship was prevalent in different parts of the world in different periods of time. In the pre-historic age of Greece a stone was worshipped as a

89. madhusudano-mahādeva ekacakro mahādyutīḥ sa suvarṇasamāyukto mahātejajpradād śubhāḥ.
(As quoted in the Viśvakosa, Vol.XX under the title Śalagrama from the Brahmāṇḍa-purāṇa).

90. Translation from the quotation in the Viśvakosa, Vol.XX, p.316, from the Brahmāṇḍa-purāṇa.

91. Ibid., pp.313-324.

fetish. In Arab a sacred rock was regarded as a god. Likewise, the aborigins of India used to worship stone. In course of time possibly due to the Brāhmanical influence the different sizes of stones came to be worshipped under new names, viz., śālagrama, līnga, and voni, the symbolic representations of Viṣṇu, Śiva and Śakti respectively.

Viṣṇu is said to have been pleased with the worship of śālagrama, and thereby, the devotees are believed to have attained salvation, all their sins having been atoned. Most of the Brāhmīns, particularly the priestly class, have at least a śālagrama in their devagṛha for daily worship. They preserve it as an heirloom. It is stated in the Atharva-veda that a Brāhmin's house without a śālagrama is as impure as a cemetery, and the food prepared therein, is as unclean as a dog's vomit. Besides the Atharva-veda, we have reference to the virtues and the mode of worship of the śālagrama in different texts like Brahma-vai-varta-purāṇa, Varāha-purāṇa, Padma-purāṇa and Cakrayiveka. As regards the origin of the śālagrama a few interesting episodes are also narrated in some of these texts. One episode, as narrated in the Brahma-vai-varta-purāṇa (ch.21) runs briefly thus:

One demon-king, called Śaṅkhacūḍa, had a chaste wife, namely Tulasī. Once Hari, through the power of his illusion took the form of Śaṅkhacūḍa. He approaching Tulasī and violated her chastity. But when the

93. Ibid., p.870.
94. Ibid., p.876.
95. Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies, p.649.
chaste lady knew the fraudulence of Hari she cursed him to become a piece of stone. Tulasī's curse soon materialised and Hari was obliged to transform himself into a sālagrama-stone in the Gāndakī river. Henceforward, Hari was worshipped in the world in the form of a stone.

The Padma-purāṇa (Pātāla-khaṇḍa, ch.10) prescribes the worship of two sālagramas together (sālagrama yugāḥ pūjyā). But the Varāha-purāṇa forbids the worship of two sālagramas at the same place.96 The priests, however, follow the injunctions of the Varāha-purāṇa.

As Hari, the Almighty, is believed to have remained in a sālagrama, there is no need of consecration of a sālagrama. The worship of a sālagrama is preceded by certain preliminaries, viz., ṛcamaṇa (rinsing the mouth), sāmānvārghva (general oblation), jalaśuddhi (purification of water), āsana-śuddhi (purification of seat), etc., and salutation to deities like Ananta, Pṛthivī, Lakṣmī, Sarasvatī, Ganesā, Sūrya, etc. The sālagrama is besmeared with ghee and is washed in a copper dish with the ringing of a bell and the reciting of a mantra. While pouring water on the sālagrama the mantra etad snānivodakam om nārāyaṇaṁ nāmaḥ (Salute to Thee, oh Nārāyaṇa, receive Thou the water for bathing) is to be recited.97 After washing the sālagrama is sponged with a towel and placed on the permanent pedestal after pasting two tulasī leaves besmeared with sandal on its sides. The mantras

96. grhe liṅgadvayam nārcya sālagramadvayantathā. 
   (Viśvakesa, p.327)

97. According to the Cakraviveka a sālagrama can be worshipped even by reciting the words "namo nārāyaṇaṁ" along with
for dhvāna (meditation), pranāma (obeisance) and stuti (prayer) are to be recited. The worship of śālagrāma is usually performed with the offerings of oblation, flowers, resin, incense, earthen lamp, sandal paste, etc.

The śālagrāma is to be worshipped daily. If it is not possible, it should at least be washed daily. However, during the time of ambuyāci (the supposed menstrual period of the Mother Earth) or in the period of ceremonial defilement caused by the birth of a child or the death of a near relative, one should neither wash nor touch a śālagrāma. People drink water with which the śālagrāma is washed. Because such sanctified water, as believed, not only ensures happiness in this world but also eternal bliss in heaven after death.

We have no early records as to when the śālagrāma was first worshipped in Assam. It is narrated in one Ahom chronicle that long before the rule in Assam the great sage Vāsiṣṭha wanted to build a city as holy as Vārāṇasi by putting one thousand śālagrāmas on the bank of the river Dikhau. But the plans of the rṣi were frustrated. Sadarāmīn records that the Lakṣmi-nārāyana śālagrāma was given a place of honour along with the Ahoms' presiding deity Somdeo during the reign of Sudāngpha (1397-1407 A.D.). The Ahom queen Phuleśwarī asked the heads of the Āunīṭī

the offering of flowers and tulasī leaves besmeared with sandal. (Vide Viśvakosa, XX, p.327).

and Gaḍmūr monasteries to offer worship to the śālagrāma-stone under the priesthood of the Bhāgavatīs and Deurīs. Daityārī states that Kanṭhabhūṣaṇa, a Vaiṣṇava devotee, worshipped one hundred and twenty images including a śālagrāma at Hājo. Dāmodara-deva's father Satānanda also worshipped a śālagrāma daily. Even today a śālagrāma is worshipped not only in the sattras of Brahma-sāmhati but also in all the Viṣṇu temples and in the individual deva-grha.

It may be noted in this connection that some people offer one hundred and eight tulasī leaves to a śālagrāma on any auspicious day in the month of Kārtika (October-November) every year. On this occasion a Brāhmaṇ priest is invited to perform the rituals along with the worship of Paṇca-devatā. The mantra for offering a tulasī leaf is: om paramabrahma svarūpāya viṣṇave namah. At the end of the ceremony the Brāhmaṇ priest is fed and is paid dākṣiṇā.

IV

Viṣṇu-yajña

Viṣṇu-yajña or the sacrificial ceremony in honour of Viṣṇu is performed throughout India. The term yajña is derived

100. S.K. Bhuyan, tr. & ed.: Tūṅghkhunī Buraṇī, p.41; Sātsari Asām Buraṇī, p.127.
103. N.M.S.T., pp.123-124.
from the Skt. root vaj. It consists of pūjā (worship), samgati-karana (communion) and dāna (gift). Hence, a religious ceremony consisting of these three functions may be called vajña. The main purpose of celebrating a vajña is to establish the closest communion between the worshipper and the worshipped for the benefit of the former. An elaborate procedure is followed in performing a vajña. Usually the performer offers oblation including homa (sacrificial fire) to the deity, fee to the priest and other gifts to the needy and the poor in the vajña ceremony.

Great importance is attached to the performing a vajña in India from the Vedic age. The performance of a vajña was considered superior to any other kind of religious activity. Sacrifices were meant for the welfare of the country. It was believed that cloud was produced from the smoke arising out of the sacrifice. Cloud causes rain which makes the earth fertile for cultivation. Moreover, the sacrifice is said to have the power of propitiating the gods, who fulfilled the desires of the sacrificers and save the earth from natural calamities like earth-quake, flood, draught, famine, epidemics and warfare. The following lines from the Yajur-veda make specific reference to this point of view:


105. yajñō vai śrēthātara karma (Kapi, Śā, 46.3, as quoted in the Śrīśrīmahāviṣṇu-vajña).

106. yajñāḥ kalyāṇa-hetavah (Viṣṇu-purāṇa).
"May this sacrificer be blessed with sons, conquering equipped with conveyances, civilised, young and heroic. May cloud send rain according to our desire, may our fruit bearing trees ripen, may acquisition and preservation of property be secured to us." 107

In early times different kinds sacrifices to different gods like Indra, Agni, Adityas, etc., were performed. The *Viṣṇu-purāṇa* refers to a sacrifice to the mountain of Govardhana performed by the inhabitants of Braja with the offerings of curd, paramāṇa and meat. 108 But when Viṣṇu emerged as a mighty god, sacrifice to Viṣṇu also became popular. The *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* states that Viṣṇu, the Almighty should be worshipped with utmost devotion. 109

According to the Vaiṣṇava reformers sacrifice is not necessary in the Kaliyuga. Madhavadeva states in his *Nāmagḥosā* (v.399) that to the devotees meditation was necessary in the Satya-yuga, sacrifice (*vaiṣṇa*) in the Treta-yuga and worship in the Dvāpara-yuga; but in the Kali-yuga the one thing which is of supreme importance is the constant recitation of the name of Hari. The *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* (XI,5.29) widens the scope by including sacrifice amongst the activities of a devotee in the Kaliyuga too. However, the sacrifice should be performed along with

108. *Viṣṇu-purāṇa*, 5.10.44.
109. op.cit., II,3.10.
the recitation of the name of Hari (sāmkīrtana-pravaih). Thus, the sacrifice to and recitation of the name of Viṣṇu are still in vogue in the land.

In ancient times different kinds of sacrifices like the aśvamedha and rājasūya were performed by the kings for attaining glory or for procuring victory over their enemies. These were the costliest of the ceremonies. Only the kings were in a position to celebrate these ceremonies. But in course of time along with the passing away of the palmy days of monarchs, such sort of big sacrifices disappeared from the land. The sacrifice of today is usually performed on a community basis through public donations.

Viṣṇu-yajña is performed in the district of Kamrup usually in the winter and spring seasons. The ceremony begins on an auspicious moment and continues for several days. A sacrificial fire-pit (kunda) is dug and sacred wood like that of mango, banyan, ficus, etc., are piled on the pit for the lighting of fire with ghee and other offerings to Viṣṇu. It may be mentioned here that no animal sacrifice is made in the name of Viṣṇu.

Besides burning a sacred fire and offering of worship, recitations from the holy scriptures like the Bhāgavata and the Gītā, and devotional prayers and discourses on the religious topics form part of performances on the occasion of Viṣṇu-yajña. At the end of sacrifice the votaries put on holy marks (tilaka) of ashes taken out of the sacrificial fire pit on their foreheads and receive flowers and other offerings as nirmāli.
Visṇu-yajña is performed in Kamrup in connection with village fairs also. In a few villages of eastern Kamrup Viṣṇu-yajña is performed in a festival called daul held in the month of Vaiśākha (April-May).

People from different walks of life assemble in the place of Viṣṇu-yajña not only for paying their respectful homage to the deity, but also witnessing and enjoying different functions held there. From this it appears that though the present day worship of Viṣṇu is performed mainly with a view to securing peace and prosperity of the self and society, it has also served as a source of delight to the people at large.

The Sevā Observances

Besides sattras, there is a kind of religious institution, called sacāṁ, satsaṅgī māṭh or satsaṅgī-sattra in the district of Kamrup. It is called sacāṁ (Skt. sat (= holy)+ saṅga (= association) because the holy persons or people having a religious bent of mind meet there for offering prayer-services and performing religious ceremonies. Sarma holds that "heads of at least five such institutions form a sort of association having an ācārya who presides over their religious meetings."110 Such institution is managed and supervised by its head called Medhi or

110. N.M.S.T., p.117.
Mahanta. These institutions seem to have come into existence in the early part of the eighteenth century. The Ahom kings, viz. Śivasiṃha (1714-1744), Pramattasiṃha (1745-1750) and Rājeswarasimha (1751-1769) donated land and pāks (a kind of labours) to some of the satsāṅgi-maths.

In the satsāṅgi-math as well as in some individual households special types of prayer-services are occasionally held. These are called meru-karāṇi or pūrna-sevā, phul-karāṇi, bhūmi-karāṇi and bhakat-sevā. These services can be performed by an individual on any auspicious day. Generally the winter is considered the most suitable time for holding these functions. The first three functions are performed at night, while the last one at noontide.

It is believed that god is pleased only when His devotees are pleased, and by propitiating devotees one can also fulfill one's desire. So, people perform the sevā ceremonies where bhakats (male-clerics) and bhakataniś (female-clerics) of different categories are invited. Of all these services the meru-karāṇi is the greatest.

113. In order of rank there are three classes of bhakats (Skt. bhakta) (1) Mahanta (superior) bhakat, (2) Dah-nāmar bhakat and (3) Pāc-nāmar bhakat. The Mahanta bhakat who initiates other categories of bhakats occupies the highest rank. Dah-nāmar bhakat can prepare rice and other eatables for all classes of bhakats. The Pac-namar bhakat helps in arranging a function and in distributing prasāda. Any one willing to be a bhakat is to perform first certain rituals as laid-down by the Mahanta bhakat.
To this ceremony at least five Mahanta-bhakats, several other Dah-namar and Pāc-nāmar bhakats and bhakatanīs and a host of friends and relatives are invited. On the occasion a plantain tree is felled by slowly pressing a big knife through it to the accompaniment of instrumental music. One portion of the plantain trunk of the same size with that of the devotee, is first tied with pieces of cloth and erected in the centre of the pedestal. The plantain trunk is called meru. Similarly four pieces of plantain trunk are trimmed lengthwise to the height of the navel of the devotee and are placed in the four corners of the pedestal. A big earthen lamp with ghee on the top of the meru and 108 other earthen lamps near the meru are lighted. Articles like areca-nuts, betel-leaves, tiny pieces of gold and silver, nine pieces of cloth, offerings of rice, pulses, fruits, cakes, lāddu, paramāñana and white flowers are required in the ceremony.

As soon as the arrangements are completed the feet of the Mahanta-bhakats are washed by the devotee. Bare mustard-oil is considered impure. So the devotee mixes a little amount of water with it and offers it to the Mahanta-bhakats. All other clerics, male and female, wash their feet and take their respective seats on the ceremonial ground. The Mahanta-bhakats worship the meru by offering flowers and singing a kind of devotional song, called Cīvā.\footnote{Cīvā: This is a kind of mystic and devotional song mainly prevalent amongst the devotees belonging to the sect of the esoteric practices.} The songs continue till day break.
At the end of the function all the offerings are distributed among the persons present. The devotees are fed with soft-rice (koma-caul), fried rice (cira), or boiled rice (bhāt). They are also paid coins as daksina.

The meru-karaṇi is called purna-sevā in some places.

Phul-karaṇi and bhūmi-karaṇi:

These ceremonies are less gorgeous than meru-karaṇi. In these ceremonies no meru is required. Phul-karaṇi, as the name indicates, requires varieties of flowers. Here, five earthen lamps are kept on five stands and a few other lamps are kept on the plantain leaves placed on the ground. For the bhumi-karaṇi ceremony fewer flowers are used and no lamp stand is necessary. Only five earthen lamps are lit on the ground. Five pieces of cloth are essential for each ceremony. Other offerings as well as the rituals of the ceremony are almost the same as in meru-karaṇi.

Bhakat-sevā:

This ceremony is also known as jalpanīva bhakat-sevā, as the bhakats are served with jalpan i.e., a light repast. On this occasion, a few clerics are invited for performing prayers and singing devotional songs.
It may be mentioned that the service to the clerics is considered to be a meritorious deed. A bhakat was given an honoured place in neo-Vaiṣṇavism. In his Bhakti-ratnākara (chs. 16, 17, 18) Sankaradeva not only describes the qualities of three types of bhaktā: highest (uttama), mediocre (madhyama) and primary or low (prākṛta), but also lays emphasis on the fellowship with devotees, because bhakti is believed to be born in such an association. In his Nāma-ghosā (vv.275-278) Mādhava-deva also clearly narrates the qualities of a bhakat. The bhakats are given such a place of honour in neo-Vaiṣṇavism that any sin committed against a bhakat is considered to be more heinous than any type of sin committed against nāma (name of Almighty) deva (the deity) and guru (the preceptor).115

In fact the Mahanta and other types of devotees are regarded as a sine qua non of all the religious functions. The devotees thus form the pivot of the neo-Vaisnavite festivals and they occupy a unique position in ceremonies like pūrṇa-sevā, phul-karaṇi, bhūmi-karaṇi and bhakat-sevā.

Some esoteric practices

Besides different types of prayer-services mentioned above, there are some esoteric practices in some sattras and sacams in Kamrup. One such unorthodox practice is aritiva mat

115. N.M.S.T., p.59.
or rātikhovā prathā. "It is called arītiyā because it is not sanctioned by traditional laws and custom (rītī = custom) and rātikhovā because it is associated with nocturnal enjoyment. The followers of this practice indulge in nocturnal feast, music, dance and wine drinking in the name of some religious rites."  

An account of the arītiyā-mat is given by Haliram Dhekiyal Phukan in his Āsām Buraṇji published in 1829. It makes specific mention of a group of devotees, who assembled at night at an appointed place and indulged in drinking and feasting for the whole night. A woman who served eatables was called thalānahārī. Another nude, young and menstruous woman took seat among the devotees. The woman was called the bhakti-mātr or the devout mother. Milk was poured on her breasts. The milk which ran down to the genital organ of the woman was collected by the devotees for the purpose of drinking (āṅgodaka). However, such rituals were performed very secretly and no outsider was allowed to witness it. We have no evidence as to whether such practices are prevalent today or not.

It is interesting to note that in his Bhaviṣya Saṅgraha Kṛṣṇācārya Dvīja (eighteenth century) describes three types of bhakti viz., āhkīlā, sambalā and lampaṭā. According to the first one anything including pork and wine can freely be taken. Sambalā

117. Āsām Buraṇji, ed. by J. M. Bhattaecherys, p.97.
bhakti lays stress on sexual enjoyment. Lampāṭā bhakti prescribes the above two together.¹¹⁸ The followers of these types of bhakti are called amivā-bhakat.

In a few sattras and sacams of Kamrup are performed the esoteric practices which correspond roughly to the aṅkilā type of bhakti as described by Kṛṣṇācārya Dvija. There are of course local variations. This sort of esoteric practices confined to the very intimate circle of devotees, is also called pūrṇa-sevā. Because the devotees assert that they worship pūrṇa Kṛṣṇa and that their Order has come from pūrṇa Śaṅkara, pūrṇa Mādhava and pūrṇa Gopāla. Moreover, the adherents of this sect point out that their cult is pūrṇa, because in practice there are no obsessions regarding food and drink. Actually articles like wine, pork, fowl, crab, fish like eel, (kucīvā) sāl, sīṅgi, etc., varieties of local cakes (til-pithā, kholācāpāni-pithā, cakari-pithā, etc.) paramānā, milk, molasses and oblations consisting of rice, pulses, fruits, etc., are first collected and prepared. After the preparation is over, the devotees make salutation to the Almighty and the chief Mahanta-bhakat showers his blessings. Then all the devotees sing civās in order to purify all the articles, because they believe that the civā has the power of purification. Civā is also chanted at the time of killing a pig or fowls and of arranging the offerings near the pedestal of the prayer-hall.

¹¹⁸ op.cit., vv.25-37.
The place of offerings is called *meru* by the devotees. On the pedestal there is a seat (āsana) where a holy scripture is kept.

After making all arrangements the devotees start prayers by chanting *cīvās* which continue till morning. At the end of the function the offerings are distributed amongst the devotees. It may be mentioned that *cīvā* must be chanted while distributing each kind of offerings. Besides *prasāda* the devotees take hemp in the function.

According to the people of this sect the reason of offering all kinds of articles lies in the fact that man cannot create anything. Everything is the creation of God and is, therefore, pure. So the followers of the sect do not distinguish one thing from another. That is to say, they do not hold that milk is pure and pork impure. So, they offer all sorts of articles to God as sacred. In one *cīvā* it is stated, "Oh Lord, what do we possess? Everything is Yours. So all Your possessions have been offered to You as presents." The followers of the

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119. *Meru*: The term *meru* originally means a fabulous mountain in the centre of the earth round which all the planets are said to revolve. But according to the esoteric sect *meru* is a centre place between the pedestal and the seats of devotees. This place is first purified by chanting a *cīvā* and then used for keeping all the offerings. The *guru* or the chief priest takes seat near the *meru*. But in the *meru-karani* ceremony described before, the *meru* is made of a measured plantain trunk on the top of which a lamp is lighted.

120. *ki āche āmār prabhu sakalo tomar,*
*tomār bastu tomākehe dicho upahār.*
(Collected from Amritchandra Mahanta, Sarpāra *sattrā.*)
esoteric practices further assert that God makes no discrimina-
tion between a male and a female. So, there cannot be a bar
with respect to sex in offering prayers to the Almighty.

The esoteric practices in the purga-sevā may be due to
certain tantric influences which include "a mass of heterogeneous
elements like the chanting and muttering of mantras describing
various mystic diagrams, meditations and salutations of various
types, yogic practices, sometimes involving sex-relation."\textsuperscript{121} It
may be added that there is no food restriction in tantrism.

Tantrism in Buddhism was prevalent in Assam long before
the time of Śaṅkaradeva. The Kathā-guru carita (p.45) refers to
two Buddhist magicians (baudhamatīvā tātakīvā) with whom Śaṅka-
deva had encounters. Such people were called pāsaṅḍa (heretic)
by Śaṅkaradeva.\textsuperscript{122} Vaṃśīgopāladevara Carita refers to the Bud-
dhists who harassed Vaṃśīgopāla while he was preaching Vaiśn-
vism in the Ahom kingdom.\textsuperscript{123} Thus during and after the time of
Śaṅkaradeva the tantric Buddhism had a hold in Assam, but under
the levelling influence of neo-Vaiśnavism the followers of tan-
tric Buddhism were probably converted to neo-Vaiśnavism. They
referred to Śaṅkaradeva, Mādhavadeva or Gopāla Ātā as their
first gurus and to cīvās as the composition of their gurus.

\textsuperscript{121} S. B. Dasgupta: An Introduction to the Tantric Buddhism,
Calcutta, 1958, p.2.
\textsuperscript{122} Kirtana-ghosā (Pāsaṅḍa-mardana).
\textsuperscript{123} op.cit., pp.161-162.
However, most of them and their adherents could not leave their old rites which they followed secretly. Secondly, most of the adherents are tribal people among whom their old food-habits, such as pork and wine persists. Choudhury remarks that "many Tantrik-Buddhist rites have crept also into the different phases of neo-Vaisnavism of later times through a process of absorption."

In pūrṇa-sevā, the devotees take gāṅja (the Indian hemp), the most favourite offering to the Lord Śiva. Some of the devotees put on rosaries of rudrākṣa (elaeocarpus janiarus) beads generally used by the votaries of Śiva.

Thus we may come to the conclusion that pūrṇa-sevā is an institution where there is composite influence of Vaiṣṇavism, Buddhist tantrism and Śaivism.

Different types of prayer-services

Besides festivals celebrated for commemorating the life-episodes and glories of Lord Kṛṣṇa, there are a few types of prayer-services (nāma-prasaṅga) held in the sattras, village-nāmghars or individual households at different times of the year.

Daily prayer-services:

The daily prayer-services held in the sattras, mainly consist of the features like the singing of hymns and songs to

124. H.C.P.A., p.413.
the accompaniment of musical instruments, and reading, and expounding the holy books like the Gitā and the Bhāgavata. The total number of items for prayer-services is twelve in the Brahma-saṃhāti and fourteen in three other saṃhātis.125 The items are grouped into three divisions to be observed in morning, afternoon and evening. The number of items (prasāṅgas) of service to be observed is five in the morning (puwār prasāṅga or matins), three in the afternoon (bivalir prasāṅga) and six in the evening (rātir prasāṅga). The items of services are: (1) singing of two bargītas, (2) chanting of a bhaṭīmā, (3) chanting of nāmachanda (prayer consisting solely of names of Viṣṇu) and āraṇa-chanda (prayers expressing self-surrender and supplication), (4) reading of reciting of a few chapters from the Gitā or the Bhāgavata, (5) recitation from Assamese versions of the Bhāgavata or the Gitā, (6) recitation of a few chapters from any of the following scriptures: Nāmāghoṣā, Bhaktiratnāvalī, Bhakti-ratnakara and Bhakti-pradīpa, (7) chanting of nāmachanda, (8) reading or reciting of a few chapters from the Gitā or the Bhāgavata, (9) recitation of one or more chapters from the Ṣuṇamālā, (10) reading of a portion of Līlāmālā, (11) recitation or chanting of guru-bhaṭīmā, (12) Sevā-kīrtana which consists of singing of two bargītas, (13) chanting of nāma-chanda and āraṇa-chanda and (14) recitation of some portions from Daśama composed by Śaṅkara-deva126 and

125. N.M.S.T., p.127.
reading from some scriptures like the Kirtana-ghosa, Rājasūya (Madhavadeva) and Rāmāvana (Ananta Kandali). The songs composed by the members of the own samhati are usually sung in the prayer-services. The devotional services for the day are closed by invoking the glory to nāma, deva, guru and bhakta.\footnote{127}

Besides prayer-services held in the sattras,\footnote{128} there are four types of special prayer-services observed in some sattras and village nāmghars of Kamrup. These are pāl-nām, Jeuṭhā-nām, Kātimahiya nām and mahānām.

Pāl-nām:

The word pāl originates from Skt. word parvāya meaning one after another and nām from Skt. nāma meaning names and epithets of Kṛṣṇa and descriptions of his forms and activities. Pāl-nām is a kind of congregational prayer service which continues without any break for a number of days (e.g. three days in Bezera, five days in Pipalibārī, seven days in Belsor and fifteen days in Cāmatā, etc.) or even for a month as in the village of Gandhiya. Batches of devotional singers participate in the pāl-nām by rotation. This function is held not only in the month of Bhādra and Kārtika,\footnote{129} but also from the closing day of the ambulacī.

\footnote{127} N.M.S.T., p.129.\footnote{128} It may be noted that image-worship is also regularly performed in some sattras. The worship of gālagrama and Viṣṇu-image is an essential part of daily services held particularly in the sattras affiliated to the Brahma-saṁhati.\footnote{129} N.M.S.T., p.137.
period in the month of Āṣāḍha.

On this occasion prayer-services (prasaṅga) for three times a day (i.e., morning, noon and evening) are regularly held and the chanting of congregational songs along with the accompaniment of musical instruments (viz., cymbals, nāgāra, etc.) is performed throughout every night of the ceremony. Moreover, the recitation from the holy scriptures (e.g., the Bhāgavata, the Kirtana, etc.) also continues for the whole period of the institution. The reciter or the reader of the holy scriptures is called Pāṭhaka or Bhāgavatī. The seat of the reciter is called vyāsāsana. It is believed that the celebrated sage Vyāsadeva produced his voluminous writings and recited from the holy scriptures daily sitting on a similar seat called vyāsāsana. Possibly with that belief in mind people call the seat of the Bhagavati a vyāsāsana. It is a common belief that the vyāsāsana should not be left vacant. So, the seat is occupied for the whole period of the ceremony either by a reciter or a devotee without break.

In some villages the pradakṣīna (going round the prayer-hall) function takes place in the evening as a part of the ceremony. While going round the prayer-hall in procession, devotees sing the following song by clapping their hands and playing with their khols:

hare kṛṣṇa hare kṛṣṇa kṛṣṇa hare hare
hare rāma hare rāma rāma hare hare.
This song indicates the influence of the Caitanya sect of Bengal on pāl-nām, as it is a very popular song of that sect.

The aim of performing the pāl-nām is to attract attention of the common people to the path of bhakti (devotion). It is believed that one can fulfil one's desire by offering any kind of articles to the deity (Viṣṇu) on the occasion of the pāl-nām. So, people, male and female, offer rice, pulses, fruits, sugar, mustard oil, etc., in the name to the deity. The offerings are made to the deity thrice a day, i.e., in the morning, afternoon and in the evening just at the beginning of each prasaṅga. The offerings are distributed among the participants at the end of the prasaṅga.

Tradition has it that Śaṅkaradeva first introduced pāl-nām at Dhuwāhāt with the hope of getting back his disciple Mādhavadeva and his son-in-law Hari Bhuyān from the custody of the Ahom monarch Cuhuṅmung Dihiṅgyā Rajā (1497-1539). Mādhavadeva was, however, set free, but Hari Bhuyān was put to death. We learn from the biography of Sri Harideva that once Śaṅkaradeva came from Patbūsi to Māneri and along with his disciples he performed the prayer-services continuously for seven days and nights to enhance the prestige (māna) of Harideva. Thereafter the place came to be known as Māneri. The continuous prayer-services at Māneri appear to be no other than pāl-nām. Śaṅkaradeva

130. Information received from Girikanta Mahanta Adhikara, Sundaridīyā sattra.
stayed at Pāṭbāusi from about 1546 to 1564 A.D. So it leads us to assume that the above mentioned prayer-service at Maneri took place sometimes during this period.

There is another tradition which indicates that the performance of pāl-nām was held at Sundarīdiyā by Mādhavađeva just to drive away the yakṣas (a class of demi-gods) living in a rivulet, called Yakṣajān. This tradition lends support to the description as found in the Assamese biographical literature. Mādhavađeva stayed at Sundarīdiyā for a couple of years from about 1569. It can be inferred that the incidents of driving away the Yaksas and observing the pāl-nām might have taken place in the early part of Mādhavađeva's stay at Sundarīdiyā. Thus from the above instances we may conclude that the observance of pāl-nām was in vogue in the land at least from the sixteenth century A.D.

Jeuthā nām:

The Jeuthā-nām is a kind of devotional function in which the prayer-service includes the singing of holy songs in the month of Jyaiśṭha (May-June). This function is usually performed in the village nām-gahars with a view to propitiating God, and thereby,

133. Information received from Girikanta Adhikari, Sundarīdiyā sattrā.
obtaining blessings from Him for the improvement of cultivation and for the protection of the villagers from epidemics. Articles including rice, pulses, fruits, earthen lamp, incense and a pair of areca-nuts and betel-leaves are offered to the deity. The votaries offer prayer-service by chanting devotional songs to the accompaniment of musical instruments.

In Jeuthā-nām sometimes a shaman is seen dancing to the tune of the prayer songs. The shaman is called pānda.\textsuperscript{135} During the period of trance he can tell a person all about his past, present and future life.

Kātimahīyā nām:

This sort of prayer-service is performed in the month of Kārtika (October-November). Its arrangement and mode of performance are the same as those of Jeuthā-nām.

Ek paicār nām:

This is a kind of prayer-service held in the village of Sarthebārī. The special feature of this function is that its expenditure is met by collecting only one paisā from each member of the village. This process helps the survey of the population.

\textsuperscript{135} The pilgrim-guide is usually called a pānda. But the term pānda in the ceremonial prayers is ascribed to a person who is believed to be possessed of spiritual power only for the time being when he dances in the prayer-services like the Jeuthā-nām and Kātimahīyā-nām.
of the village as well. The mode of performing the function is the same as that of the Jeuthā-nām.

In some village of eastern Kamrup (Kamalpur area) there are devotional functions like the Gītā-pāṭha (recitation from the Gītā and the Bhāgavata) and the Kīrtana-pāṭha (recitation from the Kīrtana). The former is held in the months of Kārtika and Agrahāyāṇa and the latter in the months of Āṣāḍha and Śrāvaṇa. The Vaiṣṇava devotees are entertained in such functions.

We have no reference to Jeuthā-nām and such other devotional functions in the Assamese biographical literature as well as in other old texts. Had these functions been observed in the life time of Śaṅkaradeva and his contemporary Vaiṣṇava saints, there would have been some direct or indirect references in such texts. It may, therefore, be inferred that these functions were possibly introduced long after the demise of Śaṅkaradeva and his principal disciples. Thus we can mention the devotional function mahanām held in the village Mitani on the third of Māgha (January-February). This function was introduced about thirty years back. Śaṅkaradeva introduced prayer-service which might set a noble example of different types of devotional functions in sattras and village nām-ghars. In other words, Śaṅkaradeva planted the seedling, as it were, of prayer-service which later on grew into a big tree with its different branches of devotional functions and religious practices spreading over the whole of our national life.
From the above it becomes clear that though the neo-Vaisnāvite cult laid utmost emphasis on the prayer-services (nāma-prasaṅga) through śravaṇa and kirtana (listening to and recitation of the name and glory of Hari) as a simpler mode of winning the blessings of God, along with the establishment of sattras and nām-ghars, different kinds of Vaiṣṇava festivals connected with the life episodes of Lord Kṛṣṇa also sprang up.

Vaiṣṇavism widespread in Kamrup has a distinct course which is very deep, wide and variegated. It percolated down to the strata of Śaivism and Śaktism in more than one way. The village folk, irrespective of their professed faith, continue to join the nāma-prasaṅga which is basically a Vaiṣṇava form of worship. Some of the devotional folk-songs which relate to the glory of the non-Vaiṣṇavite deities like Śiva, Durgā and Manasā, and which are sung to the accompaniment of clapping of hands (chāpāri), were possibly patterned after nāma-prasaṅga of the Vaiṣṇava sect. The corollary to this is that the composition of these folk-songs is a later innovation.

Barua aptly remarks that in ancient Kāmarūpa there was "complete harmony among the followers of the different religions" and the kings "often patronised all sects (Śaivism, Śaktism, Vaiṣṇavism, etc.) in equal measure."136 This spirit of religious

tolerance is the salient feature of the religious life of Kamrup even today. The people of our time, irrespective of their sects, join the fairs and festivals associated with Śaiva, Śākta or Vaiṣṇava cult. Instead of being mutually exclusive many of the festivals of different sects underscore the uniformity of patterns and beliefs.

It is interesting to note that the festivals connected with Vaiṣṇavism professed by the Vaiṣṇavas dispense with the ritualistic aspect of worship. Yet many of these festivals indicate a veritable cultural cord that links the Vaiṣṇavas of Kamrup with those of the other parts of India. Thus dola-vātra, rāsa-vātra and janmāṣṭami are widely observed by the Vaiṣṇavas in different parts of India including Kamrup.

Along with the spread of Vaiṣṇavism, Assamese literature which was used as one of the main vehicles of preaching the Vaiṣṇava faith among the people also prospered and secured a place among the rich literatures of India of that time. The literature usually termed as 'Vaiṣṇava literature' comprises several typical forms like lyrics (pargit), longer narratives (pada-puthis), epic-poetry (kavva), drama (āūka or nāta), prose (kathā) and biography (carita-puthis). This has marked a distinctive period of the history of Assamese literature. The great epics, namely, the Rāmāvāna and the Mahābhārata as well as some purāṇas including the Bhāgavata, were rendered into Assamese. The different episodes of the tenth Book of the Bhāgavata were depicted
through some coloured paintings. In the performance of the one-act play (ahkīyā-nāṭa) effigies (chō), masks (mukhā) and some kinds of costumes were used. The stage and prayer-halls were painted with the materials like vermilion (heṅgul), Yellow arsenic (hāitāl), indigo, etc. The walls of some of the nām-ghars (like that of Barpeṭā) were decorated with the wood-cut images of deities. In connection with the dramatic performances the art of dancing was introduced, and as a result we have different types of dances such as sūtra-bhaṅgi or sūtrādhār-nāc, Kṛṣṇa-bhaṅgi or gōsāi-pravesār nāc, Gāli-nāc, etc. Thus it seems that the neo-Vaiṣṇavite movement has amply contributed to the healthy growth and development of literature and fine arts in Assam besides adding a new dimension to the religious life of the district.

139. Ibid., p.273.
140. Ibid., pp.294-298.