CHAPTER V

RELIGIOUS LIFE

Religion has been the primal driving force of human societies since early times. From the dawn of human civilization, people have always been awed by the mysterious and unknown things surrounding them and this has led them to believe in the handiwork of some supernatural unseen force of the universe at work which they perceive as a higher force or energy and which they regarded as divine. With time, certain rites and rituals developed, centering upon the worship of these higher forces and later they became permanently incorporated in the values and belief system of the society. This chapter explores the religious life of the people of the Tezpur region through the centuries as revealed by its archaeological remains.

The earliest archaeological finds of this region are the Da-Parbatiya ruins which dates back to the 5th-6th century C.E. There it is noticed an almost free standing, ornate dvāra with the bottom of the dvārāsākhā having beautifully carved graceful images of the river goddesses Ganga and Yamuna with attendants [see plates 1,2]. The topmost horizontal pattā contains the sculpted figures of Lakulisa Siva, Surya, and Krishna along with other mythical beings like nāgas and nāgis. The pattā also houses a two-winged figure in flying posture which is identified with Garuda.¹ Aryanisation which began in the Brahmaputra Valley with the coming of Naraka, a legendary figure who came from Videha and established his control over the kingdom of Pragjyotishpura after killing its ruler Ghataka, saw full flowering during the 5th -6th century C.E when a large numbers of Brahmanas from Northern India were invited to settle down amongst

¹ R.D Choudhury, *Archaeology Of The Brahmaputra Valley Of Assam*, p135
the aboriginal people of the Brahmaputra Valley. In the *Kalika Purana*, Naraka is associated with the establishment of a large number of families of the twice born classes having proficiency in the Vedas and other *shastras* in his kingdom:

\[\text{tasmat kiratan utsarya vedasastratigan bahun dvijatin vasayamastra tatra varnan sanatanan.}\]

This process was continued and we find historical evidence of it from the time of Bhutivarman in first half of the sixth century C.E. if not earlier, when he issued copper plate charters granting revenue-free lands to Brahmanas. These brahmanas were most influential in popularizing the Aryan deities amongst the non-Aryan local inhabitants of this land. This is why from the 5th -6th century itself we find the worship of goddesses Ganga, Yamuna, (who are typically river goddesses of North India ) Surya and Garuda, along with the non-Aryan god Lakilusa Siva being worshipped in the region of Tezpur. This indicates that Aryanisation was by then deeply rooted in the Brahmaputra valley and the non-Aryan god Siva was brought into the Vedic fold and accorded a prominent place amongst the Vedic deities. The depiction of Krishna and Garuda, the *vāhana* of Vishnu, on the stone pillar indicates that Vaishnavism was also emerging as a popular religion, along with the worship of Siva in this region. Just in front of the *dvāra* which is facing the west, there exists a *śivalinga* on a block of stone facing the east. Although local people now worship this as the original *śivalinga*, this appears to be a wrong concept for as put forward by R.D Choudhury, the present *linga* is a broken piece of some stone pillar as it does not have its *yonipitha*, nor does the size of the so called *linga* fit with the size of the hole into which it is inserted. The original image of the deity must have been placed in this

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2 Chowdhury, edited, *Kalika Purana*. 38.128
3 R.D Choudhury, *ABVA*, p135
hole which unfortunately is now lost. Nevertheless this temple with its planned lay out which consists of a garbhagriha, mandapa and an ardha mandapa must have been an important religious centre during the period under study. The finding of terracotta plaques consisting of human figures close to the site which are now preserved in the State museum further proves that this area around the temple site must have witnessed artistic activities from the people during the period prior to the Ahom period. One of the terracotta plaques depicts a headless figure in Yogāsana with a broad chest, proportionately thin waist and well formed hands and legs and show a close similarity with the art of Bengal. It resembles those from Birhat, Raypur and Paharpur in Rajshahi district. Another two reveal the existence of a modified form of acanthus motif, similar to those noticed in the Gupta temples at Bhumara, Nachnakuthara and Deogarh.

Close to the Da-Parbatiya site are found structural remains of an old stone temple at Balimara Satra. The nāṃghar of the present satra stands on the remains of the old stone temple. A couple of stone sculptures are also found in this area. One is an image of Surya holding a lotus in each hand and flanked by attendants on either side. On stylistic ground, it can be assigned to the 7th-8th century C.E. A stone image of Siva is also noticed near the temple ruins. Here the figure is found in the sthānaka attitude with four arms [see plate 22]. This sculpted image of Siva is dated a little later and must have belonged to the 8th-9th century C.E.

Similar excavations at another site of Balimara Satra of Da-Parbatiya have revealed ruins of a brick temple belonging to the 7th-8th century C.E. To the same period also belongs a stone image of Ananta (Vishnu) with two arms and a nine hooded serpent canopy [see plate 21]. This standing figure of Vishnu has the right hand in abhayāmudra while the left hand holds a kimbo.

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5 Ibid.,p.115-116
This sculpted image is preserved inside the manikuta at Balimara Satra. At a little distance from the satra, on an elevated mound is noticed a huge yonipitha but the śivalinga which must have adorned the yonipitha is not found [see plates 33,34].

The Da-Parbariya region must have once been a hub of cultural and religious activity, thronging with people and devotees who must have come with offerings to the deities at the temple sites. The prevalence of many architectural and sculptural ruins in this region alone, indicates that this Da-Parbariya region must have emerged as an important religious centre.

The rulers of the Sālastambha dynasty had their headquarters at Hadappesvara or Hatappesvara which has been identified with the modern Tezpur region. In this context, it was but natural for the rulers of the dynasty to shower royal patronage for the development of religion for the obtaining of punya or religious merit for themselves and their families. This they generally did by laying out the construction of huge temples and religious edifices within the vicinity of their capital city. The Tezpur grant of Vanamala in verse twenty four records the reconstruction of the dilapidated temple of Hetukasulin which was also provided with elephants, vesyas and a number of villages for its maintenance. Both the Tezpur grant (lines 11-13) and the Parbariya copper-plate inscription of the same ruler (lines 33-47) refer to the installation of god Kamesvarā (Siva) and goddess Mahagauri (Kamakhya) on the top of the Kamakuta hill. The Nagaon plates of Balavarman further represents Vanamala as the builder of many palatial buildings. Under royal patrons given to religious pursuits, the region witnessed a phase of architectural and artistic development.

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6 M.M Sarma, IAA, p103
7 D.Sarma ed, K.S.p.183
The modern Henguleswar Devalaya at Tezpur is built on the ruins of an old temple. The garbhagriha of the temple reveals the brick structure of an old temple which must have belonged to the 8th-9th century C.E. Although no linga or any iconographic representation of any gods can be found inside the temple belonging to that period, the presence of a door lintel of stone embossed with nine kalpavrksas on its upper register and its lower sunken register having the miniature figure of Ganesha in latābimba posture within the two plain sakhas suggests the dedication of the temple to a Saivite deity. The Sālastambha rulers were great patrons of lord Siva. The towering temple of Hetukasulin was built as adoration to god Siva. Again, in the Hayunthal grant, king Harjaravarman is described as paramamahesvara or a great devotee of Siva. King Balavarman III was also a devotee of lord Siva as all his copper plate grants begin with the same mangala verse addressed to Siva: bhavatu bhavatimirvidurah tejo rudra prasantye jagata… In such case, Haduppesvara or Hatappesvara, the capital city of the Sālastambhas (the modern Tezpur region) naturally was made the abode of religious shrines dedicated to the Saivite deities. This contention is clearly borne out by the presence of many Saivite shrines in the vicinity of Tezpur.

Amongst the structural ruins belonging to the 9th-10th century are the remains of some old stone temples dedicated to Siva which have been noticed at Majgaon, a few kilometers from the Tezpur town. There in two huge dvārasirapattis are noticed some few miniature śikharas wherein in the middle of each of the śikha is a sculpted image of the Saivite god Ganesha. There are also three dvārasakhas which bears the figurines of a dvārapala, Nandi (the bull associated with god Siva) and the images of the river goddesses Ganga and Yamuna.

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8 Ibid., p169
9 Uttarbarbil grant verse.1, Nowgong grant,verse1
Other such structural remains of this period are seen at Singri which is thirty kilometers downstream from Tezpur town. These ruins are noticed mainly in places like Bangla Basti, Bhanga Mandir Gaon and Visvakarma Mandir. The ruins at Bangla Basti indicate that it had either a brick temple with stone panels or two temples of brick and stone respectively.

Again at Visvakarma Mandir ruins of probably two or more temples exist. According to S. Kakoti, it was a temple dedicated to Durga as an image of Durga was discovered amidst the ruins. But R.M. Nath is of the opinion that it is a Siva temple as many Saivite symbols are noticed in the ruins. R.D. Choudhury opines that since one or two dvarasirapattis among the ruins show images of Surya and some other Navagrahas, it is possible that there may be one or more temples dedicated to Surya. Even after a close study of the ruins no conclusive remark could be made. Because of the unfavorable climatic condition of Assam with recurrent floods, earthquakes and excessive rain during the rainy season, the once glorious structures and buildings of the pre-Ahom period were bound to be naturally laid waste with time. Coupled with this factor, was the nature of the materials used for building purposes which more or less were of perishable nature. Even when stone was used, the mortar used was of inferior quality and failed to withstand the vagaries of nature and time. As such, most of the architectural remains of the period are found in a dilapidated condition.

Architectural remains of the 9th-10th century are also noticed at the Bhairavi temple at Tezpur [see plate 14]. This is a shrine dedicated to mother goddess Bhairavi, the consort of Siva and speaks of the prevalence of the Sakti cult in this region. Although a modern temple has been

10 'Ancient Remains at Singri in Darrang' JARS, IV, 1937, pp. 93-95
12 R.D. Choudhury, ABVA, p141
constructed on the ruins some of the structural remains of the old temple including some stone panels having sculptural designs have been preserved in the District Museum at Tezpur. The shrine is located on a small hillock with its slope touching the waters of the mighty Brahmaputra. As such there is enough scope to identify this hill with the Kamakuta Hill mentioned in the Parbatiyia copper plate inscription: “on the top of which was installed the temple of Kamesvara and Mahagauri and the current of the waters of which became purer on account of constantly flowing over the slopes of the Kamakuta mountain”. However K.L. Barua identifies the temple referred to in the inscription with the Kamakhya temple near Silghat. Dharmeswar Chutia locates the Kamakuta hill at a little distance to the east from the present town of Tezpur. It has been further suggested that the Bamuni hill which lies to the east of present Tezpur may be the Kamakuta hill as it is covered with extensive ruins of stone temples. However, P.C. Sarma after examining the topography of the hill clarifies that there were five temples at the site. Moreover the temples of this site were attributed to different deities like Siva, Surya, Visnu, Goddess Durga etc. So, the Kamakuta hill wherein was installed the temple of Kamesvar and Mahagauri may be the identified with the hill where the shrine of Bhairavi is located. Moreover, according to local traditions this Bhairavi temple is said to belong to the time of the legendary king Bana who ruled over Sonitpur. His daughter Usha is said to have offered regular prayers to the mother goddess at this very temple to bless her with a happy conjugal life. This shrine, thus, must have been very popular as a centre of Sakti worship.

13 M.M. Sarma, IAA, pp.103-04
14 K.L Barua, EHK, 98-9
15 M.M. Sarma, IAA, p.112
The architectural remains which are preserved in the Chitralekha Udyan (Cole Park) at Tezpur also belong to the 9th-10th century C.E. On entering the park, one can notice two pillars and one huge lintel. The first is sixteen sided with a kirtimukha on top while the upper part of the shaft of the second pillar is decagonal and the top is divided into three horizontal parts [see plate 32]. The upper part of the lintel has five miniature temple designs with Siva lingas in each one of them. On the central part of the lintel, there is a small niche containing the image of Ganesha. There can also be noticed in one side of the park, a huge lintel having three raised panels containing the figure of Brahma on the left, Surya at centre and the figure of Siva on the right side. There is also a figure of Goddess Saraswati holding a vīna to the right of the figure of God Brahma. To the left, another female figure is noticed which has been identified as Savitri by R.D. Choudhury. A small figure of Gajalaxmi is also noticed sculpted on a slab of granite in the park seated on a padma in the lalitāsana attitude. On the central part of the park a huge slab of stone is noticed which is particularly interesting. It contains some avatārs or incarnations of Visnu namely, Matsya, Kurma, Parasurama and Rama [see plate 13]. Besides, there are also images of Varaha and Narasimha noticed in different stone panels. One can also notice many beautifully sculpted pillars, lintels, door jambs inside the Cole Park complex [see plates 23,24,25,28,29,30,31]. These undoubtedly point to the existence of some big temples in the Tezpur area. The worship of Visnu and Siva must have been very popular; the latter being worshipped in both the aniconic linga and anthropomorphic forms. The presence of the figurines of the avatārs of Visnu shows that not only Visnu but the deity’s avatārs were well known in the region and equally revered by the people.

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17 R.D. Choudhury, ABVA, p.93
Surya was another very popular god. The worship of Brahma, Lakshmi, Saraswati, Ganesha was also not uncommon. All these sculptural evidences clearly indicate the absence of rigid sectarianism in the region. The Saivite God Ganesha seems to be a very popular deity in the region. The deity is seen sculpted both in miniature forms in the pillars, lintels and also along with other deities in stone panels. In some cases, Ganesha alone is seen sculpted on huge pieces of rock. At Ganeshghat, a sculpted four armed image of Ganesha is seen holding clockwise from upper left, a *ladduka*, *dhutarapuspa*, *pasa* and the remaining hand is in *varada- mudra*. His *vāhana* Muska is also carved [see plate 5]. Another image of Ganesha is also noticed sculpted on a rock at Dhenukhana Parvat, close to the place of the find spot of the Tezpur Copper Plate Inscription of Vanamalavarman, near Tezpur town [see plate 6].

An image of Mahisamardini is noticed at Dhekiajuli which belongs to the same period. The Goddess is seen standing upon her *vāhana*, in *atibhanga* posture with her ten hands carrying the usual weapons. This suggests the popularity of Sakti worship. An image of Brahma was also discovered in the region of Dhekiajuli which belongs to the same period.

Although primarily religious in nature, some sculptures also depict lively scenes of dance and music. A long slab of stone preserved at Chitralekha Udyan, depicts a beautiful dancing scene. The whole scene is divided into panels by *laghusambhas*. From the right, one can notice a male fighting with a lion; another male playing on a flute with a female dancing by his side; one male playing on a flute and another on a *dundhubi*; a male playing on cymbals and a female dancing; still another male playing on a *vīna* with a female dancing. Stylistically, the piece of sculpture could be placed in the 9th-10th century C.E. This slab apparently formed part of a series of similar panels that adorned the lower portion of the walls of the sanctum. Such decorative sculptures are common in the contemporary temples of Orissa as well as in Madan
Kamdev and Pingalesvar. These figures, besides showcasing the interest of the people of the region in dance and music, also suggest the prevalence of dance and music in the temples as a way to appease the Gods. The reference to *vesyas* which obviously means the temple girls in the Tezpur grant of Vanamala lends credence to this fact. However, the earliest dancing scene in Assam is noticed in the *dvarasākhā* of the ruined temple at Da-Parbatiya referred to earlier. Here a miniature female figure holding a *vīna* is noticed on the left *sākhā* and above it is found a miniature male figure dancing. Dancing figures also formed part of the temple structures at Bamuni hill and also at Singri as evidenced from the remains. An erotic sculpture displayed at the Tezpur District Museum which has been recovered from the Singri ruins may also have religious significance. Such erotic sculptures generally formed part of the walls of the temples, as seen in the temples of Madan-Kamdev and Pingalesvara in modern Kamrup District. This element suggests the influence of Sakta-Tantricism which lays stress on physical gratification for the soul to achieve higher religious merit.

The Bamuni hill, close to Tezpur town is another site of immense architectural and religious significance containing the ruins of a group of temples belonging to the pre-Ahom period. The hillock reveals heaps of stone consisting of door jambs, lintels, pillars, icons etc. and it is now virtually impossible to make out the original form of the architectural structure[see plates 19]. Nevertheless, R.D. Bannerji concluded that the ruins contained a total of seven temples and six of these shrines were situated in a large rectangular enclosure. But P.C Sarma after making a on the spot enquiry revealed that there were six buildings within the area that belonged to five temples. The shrines at the four corners are independent, while the ruins of the buildings at the centre seem to belong to one big temple, with its *vimāna*, *antarala* and *mandapa*,

19 ARASI,1925-26,pp.115-16
arranged along an east-west axis.\textsuperscript{20} His view seems to be more tenable as the temples stand on a *panchayatna* platform with the central shrine located at the centre and the four subsidiary shrines along the four corners. These remains may be assigned to the 10th-11th century C.E. According to Dharmeswar Chutia the Bamuni Hill can be identified with the Kamakuta hill mentioned in the Tezpur Copper Plate Inscription.\textsuperscript{21} But P.C. Sarma suggests that the central shrine of the Bamuni Pahar group of temples was dedicated to Visnu. It “could be easily conceived from the existence of a Visnu image in *sthānaka* posture at the *lalātabimba* of the massive lintel, now lying near the ruins of the *vimāna*. Probably, the large image of the Narasimha, lying in the ruins, also points to a Visnu temple.”\textsuperscript{22}

Many sculptured images of deities can also be noticed among the ruins. A miniature image of Varaha is found on a stone panel along with Balarama, Parashurama and Narasimha. The image of Varaha is seen with his four hands; the upper right hand lifting the Devi, the upper left hand holding a *gadā*, the right front hand resting on the chest in *abhayāmudra* while the front hand is in the *katyābalambita* pose. The image of Parashurama is noticed in the *tribhanga sthanaka* attitude holding an axe in his right hand [see plate 18]. Placing Hiranyakashipu on his thighs, the image of Narasimha is seen standing upon the right leg, with the front hands tearing at the belly of the *asura*. His back hands are seen holding the *jatacudās* which hang from his head [see plate 16]. The image of Nataraja has six hands with the usual *ayudhas*. An image of Surya in the *samapada- sthānaka* attitude is also found carrying two *padmas*. The image of Bhairava in the *sthānaka* attitude is almost similar to that at Kamakhya. Figures of Navagrahas can also be seen in a lintel among the ruins of the Bamuni hill.

\textsuperscript{20} Architecture of Assam, p.52
\textsuperscript{21} M.M Sarma, IAA, p.112
\textsuperscript{22} P.C. Sarma, Architecture of Assam, p.53
As in the previous century, religious activity continued unabated in the 10th-11th century as well. This can be gauged from the presence of several structural remains and sculptural figurines in the region of Tezpur. The massive remains at Bamuni Hill indicate the huge lay out of a temple plan which undoubtedly speaks of the skilled workmanship and the royal patronage required for its execution. At the Tezpur Museum, ghatas which are generally placed on the top of the temples are preserved. One of these ghata was found in the Singri Tea Estate while the others had been discovered in the Da-Parbatiya region.

Stone ruins from a huge temple belonging to the same period can also be noticed at Sirajuli, about five kilometers east of Singri. The ruins consist of a pair of door jambs with three sākhas, a beautifully carved ceiling slab, a sirapatti, a door sill carved with a kirtimukha, sixteen sided columns, besides a multi- sectional image pedestal. A four- handed image of Vishnu is also found among the ruins. The image is seen in samapada- sṭhānaka posture accompanied by vidyādhara, attendants, gajā-vyāla and Garuda.

A unique Sivalinga can be noticed at Ketekibari which can be assigned to the 10th-11th century C.E. It is a massive pancha-mukha linga which is more than 305 cms in height; its square lower portion been cut into four faces facing the four directions. Two of the faces have now become totally unrecognizable while the other two are mutilated. At a little distance from the linga, the yonipitha of the linga can be seen [see plate 7]. However, the yonipitha is seen to be broken into two parts. The length of the pitha including water outlet is 505 cms, and breadth is 380 cms.

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23 N.P Choudhury, HACA, p.217
24 N.P Choudhury, HACA, p.217
At Phulbari Devalaya an image of the serpent Goddess Manasa has been found. The deity is seen along with the two figures of Jarat Karu and Astika on a pointed *silāpatta* with the figure of *kirttimukha* flanked by two figures of *vidyadhara*. This points to the prevalence of the Manasa cult in the region from the 10th-11th century if not earlier.

The period also seems to have witnessed the limited rise and popularity of Tantrik Buddhism in the region along with the worship the Brahmanical Gods and Goddesses. At Dhekiajuli, images of the Buddhist goddess Tara Devi, Bali and Angada carved in black basalt rock were discovered which are now preserved in the Tezpur District museum [see plate 8]. Although Buddhism in its pure form is marked by its absence in Assam during the pre-Ahom period, (except for the *stūpas* of Sri Surya Pahar at Goalpara) nevertheless Vajrayana or Tantrik form of Buddhism prevailed in the region. But, it intermingled with the Brahmanical Sakti-Tantricism in such a way that there ceased to be any sharp distinction between Brahmanical and Buddhist deities and practices. As stated by R.P Chandra, “The modern cult of Tārā seems to be a Brāhmanic śākta adaptation of the Mahāyāna Buddhist cult of Tārā”, and she “was evidently admitted to the Mahāyāna pantheon from the older śākta pantheon.”

The reference to the death of Vanamala by religious suicide and the abdication of the throne by Jayamala in favor of his son, considering the world to be vain and human life as meaningless as a water drop (Nagaon Copper Plate Inscription of Balavarman, verse17 and verses 22-23) may suggest that they had come under Buddhist influence. But at the same time such practices were also not uncommon amongst the followers of the Brahmanical pantheon.

The region of Tezpur showed a trend of continuous religious activity in the 12th century C.E. as well. Both architectural and sculptural remains abound in the region during this time. The

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25 *Indo-Aryan Races*, pp. 138
Guptesvara Devalaya located at Singri is another example of Pre-Ahom architecture although it has been extensively renovated during the Ahom period. In plan, it consists of a vimāna, an antārala and a mandapa of do-cālā shape and the entire complex is enclosed within a brick boundary wall.

“The cella of the Guptesvara temple is a gahbar, the floor of which lies much below the outside ground level, and is permanently submerged under water, concealing the deity, if any.”

It is apparently from this fact that the term Guptesvara or hidden God has been derived.

The antarāla of the temple contains a door frame with five sākhās. The dvārapālas at the bottom of the jambs carry Saivite ayudhas (objects held in the hand of deities) while the lalātabimba contains a seated Ganesha. The narasākhā contains twenty-two figures, all in padmāsana with hands in anjali namaskara mudrā, and contains inter alia, Surya, Ganesha and erotic figures.

The temple in all probability must have been a Saivite shrine.

Heaps of ruins belonging to an old temple also exist at Haleswar, about five kilometres to the north of Tezpur. The presence of a śivalinga along with the yonipitha in the sanctum indicates that the temple was dedicated to Siva. Now a modern temple has been erected at its premises. Two beautifully sculpted pieces of Brahma and a dancing Ganesha of the same period is seen at Barpukhuripar, close to the Haleswar Devalaya [see plate 12]. However it cannot be known if the deities were a part of the temple remains of Haleswar Devalaya or they were installed at some temples at Barpukhuripar area. No temple ruins as such have been discovered at Barpukhuripar till date. Nevertheless, the sculptures at Barpukhuripar carved on black basalt show great skill of craftsmanship. The image of a four armed Brahma, the creator of the universe according to the Brahmanical pantheon, is noticed seated on a visvapadma in lalitasana posture. Two female figures are seen on the either side of the deity which may be identified with Savitri

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27 *Ibid*, p.82
and Saraswati, the consorts of Brahma. On the pedestal can be seen a swan at the centre flanked by lotus, devotees and scrolls. The image of a dancing Ganesha is depicted with eight arms and is shown dancing on a full blown lotus. The pedestal consists of figures of musicians, playing on cymbal and a drum. The execution of the figure show good specimens of Nrtyaganapati figures.

The Tingeswar Devalaya which is said to be build by Tingyadeva can also be assigned to the 12th century. It is situated to the west of Tezpur on a hillock near the river Brahmaputra. The temple is in ruins. But the śivalinga still exists which suggests that the temple must have been built for offering obeisance to God Siva. Sculptural remains are also noticed at Chariduar. The remains consists of stone figures of avatārs of Visnu, goddess Durga, Lakshmi, Saraswati, a seated Ganesha and an image of Krisna as Bansigopala. Images of Siva and Parvati on a single stone panel were also discovered at Dipotahat, near Tezpur. These figures can also be assigned to the 12th century. It is for the first time that an image of Goddess Parvati appears along with Siva has been discovered in the Tezpur region [see plate 9]. The stone panel is preserved in the Tezpur museum.

Tezpur continued to be a political centre during the time of the Pala rule as well although during the reign of Ratnapala the capital was shifted to Durjjaya. This indicates that till the time of Brahmapala the region of Tezpur continued to be a centre of political importance. Later, the Gachtal inscription of Gopala, who was the great-grandson of Ratnapala was issued from the political centre of Hadapyaka, identifiable with the Tezpur region. As such, Tezpur being a political centre for a long time, from the rule of the Sālastambhas to the Pala rule; it was quite

28 N. P Choudhury, HACA, p.239
29 Ibid., p.220
natural that the rulers engaged themselves in works of religious pursuit by extending royal patronage to the building of religious edifices and sculptures found in the region. The royal affinity shown by the rulers to the worship of Siva is also in a way related to the prevalence of so many Saivite shrines in the region of Tezpur. Right from the legendary king Bana, the ruler of Sonitpura (Tezpur), who was a contemporary and friend of Naraka, the cult of Siva worship prevailed in the land. Bana was regarded as wise, mighty and friend of Sambhu and was counted on even by Naraka for his prudent advice. The Kalika Purana states:

Atasminnartare bano mitra sambhusakho bali
Anukulyita mantrapradanen mahabudha

Tradition holds that the present imposing Mahabhairaba temple standing on the northern side of Tezpur town was originally built by King Bana, the great devotee of Lord Siva from whom he had the blessings of procuring the strength of a thousand arms. The Siva linga of this great temple, which is of sthavara class, is bigger than that of the Somnath temple in Gujarat, measuring 3.30 metres in length and 2.30 metres in circumference at the rudra-bhāga. The original temple collapsed and it was later re-built during the Ahom period. The famous Bhairavi temple of Sakti worship lying on the Bhairavi Hill is also attributed to the age of Bana. Remnants of an ancient stone temple also exist at Bhalukpung, at a distance of 64 kilometres north of Tezpur. It is believed to be the capital of Bana and later of his grandson, Bhaluka from whom the name of the place, Bhalukpung is derived.

During the historical period, Siva continued to be the dominant deity in the region. This is affirmed by the references made in the inscriptions as well. King Balavarman III was a

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30 Chapter 39, verse 31
devotee of Siva, as depicted in his inscriptions. The grants of Ratnapala also begin with the mangala verse meant for paying homage to Lord Siva (Sambhu). Likewise, in the Tezpur grant of Vanamalavarman, the king is credited to have rebuilt the dilapidated temple of Hetukasulin. The Gachtal Copper Plate of Gopala describes that King Indrapala constructed a series of whitewashed temples dedicated to Sambhu. The archaeological remains found in the region of Tezpur relating to the Saivite shrines and sculptures of the period justly verify the claim of the cult of Siva worship made in the inscriptions. Along with Siva, Sakti worship was also prevalent in the region. Reverential reference is made in the Tezpur (Lines 10-11) and Parbatiya plates (Lines 39-40) of Vanamala to the presence of God Kamesvara and Goddess Mahagauri on the top of a hill called Kamakutagiri. The presence of a Sakti shrine at Bhairavi and the discovery of many images of Durga and Mahisamardini in the region also point to the prevalence of the Sakti cult.

Saivism, however, could not undermine the growing influence of Vaishnavism. In the Hayungthal plates of Harjjra, there is reference to Devi Kamalanivasini (Lakshmi) (Lines 23); the prince is named Vanamala (a synonym for Visnu); the chief door-keeper is named Janardhana; the chief-minister is named Govinda, and yet another royal officer is called Madhusudāna all of which are again synonyms of Visnu. This proves the unmistakable popularity of Vaishnavism. Similarly, in the Tezpur and Parbatiya plates of Vanamala (verses 13-5) reference has been made to Lakshmi and Vishnu, who is also described as the holder of the wheel (rathangapani) and to Vishnu’s association with the gopis (cowherdresses). In the Gachtal plates of Gopala, there are references to the boar incarnation (verses 4-5), to Lakshmi (Kamalakara) and Vishnu (Purusottama) together (verse 22) and to Rama. Moreover, the name Gopala is itself significant in this respect. All the copper plate grants up to the Subhankarapataka plates begin invariably
with adoration to Siva. But in the Pushpabhadra grant of Dharmapala, references to the worship of Siva or any deity of the Sakta cult is conspicuous by its absence. The plate begins with a salutation to Vishnu in his boar incarnation. Reference is also made in the inscription to a temple dedicated to Sri Madhusudāna (Lines18). This reverence showed to Vaishnavism and the absence of any trace of the Saivite cult cannot be taken as a mere accidental occurrence. It shows a deliberate tendency towards Vaishnavism. The Kamauli grant of Vaidyadeva (1138 C.E.) which comes next in the chronological order also begins with a salutation to Vasudeva. The numerous iconographical representations of Vishnu and his incarnations and the other deities associated with the Vaishnava cult found in and around the vicinity of the Tezpur region indicate the emergence of the Vaishnava cult and its growing popularity in the region.

An important aspect of religion in this ancient town of Tezpur, and also probably elsewhere in Assam, is the active patronage shown by the rulers of the land to the popular religion. This fact is noticed throughout our period of study. Besides Saivism, which appears to be the dominant and abiding religious force in the region, Vaishnavism was another very popular cult. The worship of Ganesha, a Saivite deity was also very popular; the elephant god being sculpted in most of the temple structures and sculptures of the period. Although there is no clear evidence in early epigraphical records regarding the prevalence of the solar cult, the archaeological finds of images of Surya in the region, however, go a long way to prove the prevalence of the worship of the Sun-god Surya. Again the cult of worshipping Surya and the grahas (planetary worship) is also intricately connected with astrological studies. The discovery of navagrahas in the area of Bamuni hill, Singri, Tezpur town and in other parts of the region

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31 D. Sircar edited Epigraphica Indika, ii.347ff.
may be an indicator of the distinct system of astrology and astronomy that might have developed in the region. Apart from these deities, a number of minor deities were also worshipped in the region.

Buddhism however could not make much impact in the religious life of the people of the region and its practice must have been limited. Along with the cult of Siva and Sakti, the Buddha was also incorporated into the Brahmanical pantheon. He was regarded as an avatar of Visnu. Although images of the Buddhist deity Tara Devi has been discovered in the region, the deity was probably worshipped within the fold of Brahmanical Sakti Tantricism.

Another noteworthy feature noticed from the sculptures and structural ruins of the Tezpur region was that the people of the region were very familiar with demigods or aerial beings like vidyadharas and apsarās, as well as chimerical and mythical creatures like kirttimukhas, gajavylas, Garuda, the vāhana of Visnu and also Nandi, the bull of Siva. Among the Bamuni Hill ruins, two large slabs of stone bear the gajasardula motif. Stone slabs bearing lions standing on couchant and vanquished elephants are also noticed in the Tezpur region. Kinnaras, figures of nagas and nagis are also noticed in the region of Tezpur. The latter are vividly depicted in the gateway found at Da-Parvatiya discussed earlier. Other animals depicted in the sculptures are the elephant, rat, the bull, crocodile, tortoise and swan.

A very important aspect of the Brahmanical religion which is gleaned from the archaeological remains, especially the inscriptions is the aspect of dāna or charity. Copper plate grants of the period stands as an unquestionable testimony to this aspect of religion. The Tezpur grant of Vanamala records the offering of gifts made by the king of gold, silver, elephants,

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32 R.D. Choudhury, *ABVA*, p.181
houses and women. The offering of gifts or donations was treated as religious deeds and hence such dāna were made on auspicious days.\textsuperscript{33} The Uttar Barbil grant of Balavarman records the grant of gifts made on the auspicious occasion of the annual worship in connection with Sakrotthana (v.30). This ceremony is probably associated with the “Vedic custom of worship of Indra by setting up Indradhvaja”.\textsuperscript{34} In the Ulubari grant of Balavarman III (Lines51), the time of making gifts is given as udaksamkramana which corresponds to the Assamese festival of Māgh Bihu. In the Caratbari grant of Ratnapala (Lines67), the time of making the gifts is mentioned as dhanuhsamkramana; this also coincides with the Māgh Bihu festival. The kings usually made the gifts for earning religious merit not only for themselves but also for their parents. In the Parbatiya (Lines57) and Uttar Barbil plates (v.32) the grants are said to have been made for gaining religious merit as well as fame for the parents and for the donor himself. The Tezpur grant of Vanamala (v.32) records the making of gifts for earning punya (religious merit) for his parents. Another salient feature of Brahmanical religion was vrata or fasting. Reference has been made in the Nagaon grant of Balavarman III (v.17), whereby king Vanamala got absorbed in the spirit of Mahesvara when he committed religious suicide by fasting unto death. We also find references to religious snāna in the inscriptions which were undertaken by the kings on special occasions apart from the regular religious snāna.\textsuperscript{35} Thus the custom of taking a bath before performing any religious deed was regarded as essential and was followed since ancient times. Perhaps the Harjjara Pukhuri, said to be excavated by Harjjara had the same relevance. The tank covers an area of about seventy acres of land.\textsuperscript{36} A little away from this tank is a newly constructed temple called Kailashpati Mandir built on the remains of earlier ruins. One

\textsuperscript{33} Uttarbarbil grant of Balavarman, verse29; Nagaon grant of Balavarman, verse26
\textsuperscript{34} Cited in B.K. Barua, A Cultural History of Assam, p.9; S.C Goswami, J.A.R.S., Vol. X, pp.26-33
\textsuperscript{35} Hayungthal grant, verses13-4; Nagaon grant of Balavarman, verse32
\textsuperscript{36} R.D Chaudhury, ABVA, p.161
visvapadma, the ceiling stone of the temple, broken pieces of stambhas, other slabs of stone used in the adhisthana and bricks used in the bhitti were seen lying uncared for. The Bali Pukhuri, which is towards the north-west of Harjpara Pukhuri is also a pre-Ahom tank. However its last traces have also disappeared due to the construction activities of the defence department.

The archaeological evidence thus provides interesting insights into the religious life of the people of the region besides indicating the popularity of the worship of different deities like Siva, Visnu and other Brahmannical gods and goddesses.

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37Ibid., p. 141