Chapter VII

Conclusion

In the foregoing chapters an attempt has been made to project how the Assamese culture was reflected in mediaeval Assamese literature. It can be easily understood that within this period of four hundred years, i.e., from the 14th century A.D. to the 17th mediaeval Assamese literature was richly descriptive. Assam was highly advanced in fine art and culture relating to materials used in personal or social life.

Like Assamese literature, Assamese culture also had two sources of patronage. One was the royal patronage and the other was prevalent religious institutions. It is stated in Chapter II that the Assamese literature became rich at that time because of the patronage received from Assam Kings of different tribes and ethnic groups like Cutia, Kachari, Bārabhuyān, Āhom, Kamatā, Koc, etc. These kings also made special contributions towards Assamese culture. On the other hand, the preachers of Vaiśnavism, besides enriching Assamese literature, also cast tremendous influence on Assamese religious, social and cultural life. In other words, the Sāṅkaradeva culture (Sāṅkari Saṅskṛti) threw luminosity on Assamese culture. At that time there were lot of infightings between various political factions as well as between the
followers of Saivism, Saktism, Buddhism, etc. Sankaradeva united these warring forces and bound them with a single religion and inspired them to develop a sense of national unity. He gave birth in Assam to the great Vaisnava culture by which he let flow the great Indian national feeling through the hearts of Assamese society. To propagate Vaisnava religion Sankaradeva made use of Ankiā-nāṭ, which was his ingenious creation. This was an admixture of Sanskrit drama, puppet-play (putalā nrītya), choral songs (Ojāpāli), etc. This Ankiā-nāṭ opened up a new horizon to Assamese cultural life and gave birth to actors, new singers, performers, etc.

Special rāga-based songs were sung in Assam much before the Sankaradeva era and this is amply proved by Kālikā-purāṇa and the literature of the pre-Sankaradeva era. Even though the influence of Indian classical rāgas was noticed in the songs composed by mediaeval Assamese composers, there were some special rāga-based songs popular in Assam. For example we can point to the rāgas like Māhura, Tuḍa, Kau in Bārgītas, Ākāśmaṇḍalī, Bāyumaṇḍalī, Cālani in Durgavara's songs: Goragiri, Pāhādi, Guñjari, Bhāṭhiyāli, etc., in Pitambara's songs. These were either creations of Assamese poets or were old Kāmarūpī melody modes. From these it can be surmised that even though the Indian rāgas were popular in mediaeval Assam, some indigenous rāgas were there which were peculiar to Assamese society. Like rāgas, Sattrīyā music has speciality in tālas too. In the field of dance it is noticed
that dances like devadāsi, deodhani, ojāpāli, etc., and also puppet dancing were there in Assam from ancient times. In the foregoing chapters there are references to the prevalence of various other types of dances in mediaeval Assam.

It is noteworthy that with classical dance Saṅkaradeva mixed local productions and thus created a new form of dance which is called 'Sattriya nṛtya'. We have spoken about Sattriya nṛtya in the earlier chapters. "This is a most interesting phase of the Indian drama, which developed locally in Assam."¹ This sattriya dance probably has influenced Manipuri dance also.² Similarly in the field of instruments we can gather from the writings of Mādhava Kandali, Saṅkaradeva, Mādhavadeva, etc., that various kinds of instruments were in use. From this we can easily infer that besides songs musical instruments had special place in mediaeval Assam.

Culture of a community implies its social system, customs and manners, marriage system, education, political and economic situation, religion, philosophy, fine arts, etc., and these have all been referred to on the earlier pages. We can clearly notice the reflections of these in mediaeval

1. S.K. Chatterji, Foreword to Sattriya Nrtya āru Sattriya Nrtyar Tāl, p. xii
Assamese literature. For example, there are references in the Gītā to the four castes among Aryans, viz., Brāhmaṇa, Kṣatriya, Vaiśya and Śūdra. However, in Assam different tribes appeared because of the assimilations of Aryans and non-Aryans. We have referred to earlier of thirty four ethnic groups (cautriṣa jāti) in Śaṅkaradeva’s writing. Prior to Śaṅkaradeva, Mādhava Kandali also referred to castes like Brāhmaṇa, Kṣatriya, Vaiśya, Kāyastha and various castes of professions like Teli, Tīti, Sonāri, Kamār, Dhobā, Nāpit, etc. As is the case today, the differentiation on caste basis was there in Assam at that time also. The Brāhmaṇas were treated as the highest caste. It is noteworthy that the Assamese people, as also the broaden Indian community, is the result of assimilation of various races of men like Niṣāda (Austric), Kirāta (Mongolian), Dravidian, Aryan, etc., in various times. It is gathered from the Kālikā-purāṇa and the Yogini-tantra that the aborigines of Kāmarūpa were Kirātas. The social beliefs and customs of these Kirātas gave rise to the religion of Kāmarūpa as stated in the Yogini-tantra. The Kirātas which were Śiva worshippers are believed to be descendants of the Mongolians. In the Vedas there is no reference to a God named Śiva. The scholars believe that the worship of Śiva

1. Gītā, 4.13
2. 'siddhesi yogini pître dharmaḥ kairatajaḥ mataḥ'
   - Yogini-tantra, 2.9.13
came from the Dravidians. The appearance of the system of worshipping Śiva with flower within the ritualistic procedure like pranāma (salutation), homa (sacred fire), yajñā of the Aryans can be assumed as a concoction with Dravidian customs. The marriage systems like forcefully kidnapping a girl, or the Rākṣasa, Āsura or Paiśācī system of marriage are believed to bear some relation to the tribal culture of Assam. References to such marriages are found in books like Rukmini-harana, Subhadrā-harana, etc. Among the Aryans vermillion, turmeric, etc., were not in use, and according to Dr. Birinci Kumar Barua these were Niśāda (Austric) customs. However, the Aryans later started using vermillion, turmeric, etc. Examples of these are found in ancient literature, e.g., sandal wood paste was used by the Aryans and vermillion by the Austrics. But in Assamese culture both the items were merged. Madhava Kandali describes in his Rāmāyana how womenfolk used vermillion, sandal wood paste as marks of auspiciousness. It is easily understood that the intermixing of Aryan and non-Aryan culture took place much prior to pre-Saṅkaradeva era. Betel-nut and betel-leaf have an unique place in Assamese culture. In Assamese marriages, and religious and social functions betel-nut and leaf are still

1. B.K. Barua, Assamīyā Bhāsā āru Saṅskṛti, p. 79
2. B.K. Barua, Assamīyā Bhāsā āru Saṅskṛti, pp. 77, 83
3. Rāmā, v. 2646
The use of betel-nut and leaf even during the mediaeval period is described in almost all the books mentioned in the earlier chapters. However, it is noteworthy that at the early period there were no use of betel-nut and leaf among the Aryans. This system had its descendence from the Austrics. From the reference obtained from the mediaeval literature it is understood that the use of betel-nut and leaf in Assam were there in mediaeval period or even prior to that. This indicates an interaction between Aryan and non-Aryan culture. Similarly the habit of eating fish which is a popular Assamese food item (even to the Vaiṣṇavas) is basically of Tibeto-Burman or non-Aryan origin. Mentions of fish eating as well as accessories for fishing like worm, fishing rod, etc., are there in mediaeval literature. The same are still popular in Assamese society. Fish was not a food for the Aryans. However, Dr. Barua thinks that through the Tibeto-Burmans it gained its entry into Aryan culture.

It is seen in Mādhava Kandali’s Rāmāyana that the Aryan saint Bharadvāja, while entertaining his guest Bharata, latter being an Aryan, served dishes of fish along with meat. From the facts like the use of eatables of various types of potherbs,

1. B.K. Barua, Asamiyā Bhāsā āru Saṃskṛti, p. 83
2. B.K. Barua, Asamiyā Bhāsā āru Saṃskṛti, p. 81
3. Rāmā, v. 2474
vegetables, fish, meat, tortoise, etc., fried, barbecued and roasted on spit, it is understood that the non-Aryan culture brought a newness to Aryan culture.

In different mediaeval Assamese literary works mention is made of references the womenfolk using eri (cloth made with species of silk-worm which feeds on the leaves of the castor), pāt (silk) and muga (another type of silk). Eri, muga, pāt industries were popular among the Mongolians who lived in Assam. Among the Ahoms also pāt silk and muga silk were widely used. According to popular belief the Kachārīs through Śiva's boon learnt to rear muga. In Śaṅkara deva's version of the Bhāgavata it is described how Yaśodā, while she was churning curdled milk, decorated herself with various ornaments and silk (pāt) dress and with mālati flowers on her coiffure. In the original Sanskrit Bhāgavata also there are references to kṣauma or pāt dresses. There are some items in the translated version of the book which were not there in original version. These items were either in use in the past or still are in vogue in Assam. From these it can be well imagined that from ancient times pāt silk as a prime symbol of Indian culture relating to materials was in popular use in Assam. There was an Ahom custom in which the soldiers before going to war used to wear kavac kāpor, a piece of cloth woven

1. L. Gogoi, Asamar Samskriti, p. 60
within a single night. From the reference to 'kavac' cloth and 'Sandiqai' (an Ahom clan) as obtained in Mādhava Kandali's Rāmāyaṇa, it became apparent that Ahom culture had cast its influence on Aryan culture way back in 14th century A.D. The description of dresses, weapons and musical instruments show certain amount of non-Aryan influence. In the old Assamese books references are found to various types of musical instruments played during the war or on auspicious occasions. Even though some of those instruments were Aryan there were some non-Aryan instruments too like ḍābā, bhūrṭāl, etc.

From ancient times different types of musical instruments were used on auspicious occasions like worship, marriage, etc. The scriptures classify these instruments into four groups. "These musical instruments are usually classified under tata-yantra, comprising all stringed instruments, ghana-yantra, comprising cymbals, gongs, bells, etc., anaddha-yantra, comprising all instruments covered with skins, such as drums, tabors, etc. and suṣira-yantra, comprising wind instruments of all kinds." From these it can be understood that the instruments used in different parts of India were played in Assam too. This conclusively proves

1. Asam Burañji, p. 21
2. B.K. Barua, A Cultural History of Assam, p. 84
that the Assamese culture was an integral part of Indian culture. On the other hand, like other regions of India, the Assamese culture too was religion-based. Based on religion, literature, music, sculpture, etc., evolved. Similarly the various tantras and mantras, referred to in mediaeval literature, are believed to be the result of concoction of Vedic literature, tantra-sāstra of the Buddhists and Hindus and the popular beliefs of the non-Aryans. A lot of cultural similarities are observed between the traditions of non-Aryan tribes like Austric, Dravidian, Tibeto-Burman, etc., and those described in mediaeval Assamese literature. Even though Assamese culture is an offshoot of Aryan culture, there is a lot of elements of non-Aryan culture too. Though the subject-matter of mediaeval Assamese literature were taken from Sanskrit, yet according to need the poets occasionally put in local touch in the translated versions of classics, dramas, etc. That is why these also depict the cultural life of Assam of those times. In the literature of the times the houses described in course of descriptions of the cities, were normally thatched. There is no mention of building or stone-house in the descriptions. The prime reason for this is that in ancient Assam people did not commonly build houses of stones or bricks. Assamese people mainly lived in villages and their houses were mostly built of bamboo, kher (thatching grass), ikarā (a kind of reed), wood, clay, etc. In the mediaeval times there were only few stone-temples. That is
why in mediaeval Assamese literature the houses described were mostly thatched. Clay was also used for house-building. It was used for making pottery, playing-tools, images and musical instruments. So in the books under reference, Kumār, Hirā, Khanikar, etc., are found mentioned on many occasions. Metals like gold, silver, lead, copper, iron were also used though in lesser quantity. With these metals various utensils, ornaments and weapons were made. As tools for writing, clay, stone, metal and bark of trees were used. Most of the writings in mediaeval Assamese literature were done on sacipāt, tulāpāt, etc.¹

The livelihood of most of the Assamese people was agriculture. Various crops, vegetables and fruits grew here in abundance. Assamese civilization was basically village oriented. Descriptions of cities are generally not found in ancient Assamese books. To increase agricultural production the system of bonded labour or slaves trading was there. It is already mentioned earlier that besides agriculture trading was an important activity in the society. Rivers were main trading routes and business were mostly conducted with boats and rafts. At one time sandal wood, scented resin, incense stick, pāt, mugā, etc., along with other goods were sold at

¹ M. Neog, Guru-Carita-Kathā, Guwahati, 1987, Intro., p. 118
high prices in the outside markets. Even though famine, scarcity, etc., occasionally occurred due to some natural calamity yet the economic situation of the Assamese society as depicted in mediaeval Assamese literature was quite healthy. From references to astrologers (daivajña), nature-curists (vaidya), it is understood that astrology was seriously studied in Assam in those days. According to Kandali Rāmāyana and Kathā-Guru-Carita, Ayurvedic treatment was widely practised by the nature-curists - the maker of Nārāyaṇa oil. Almost all the industries mentioned in Assamese literature were cottage industries. Various professionals like kahār, kumār, sonāri, tāntī, tell engaged themselves in their respective professions. Besides constructing houses with bamboo and cane, other household items like handloom, accessories for pounding rice and fishing, mat (dharā), bamboo-mat (pāṭi), grass-mat (kaṭh), mat made of kuśa-grass (Kuśāsana), etc., were made in house itself.

Descriptions in mediaeval literature about various vegetables, crops, fruits, ginger, spicy seed (yani), cumin (jirā), asafoetida (hing), long pepper (pipali), salt, etc., portray the food-taste of Assamese people. These spicy food items are still popular in Assam. The applicability of ancient home-science has not yet vanished. A glance of old-time dresses show the popularity of kṣauma-vāstra or pāṭ, mugā cloth even today which also reflected the economic
standard of the society. A modern Assamese lady dressed in
clothes of pát or mugā, wearing ornaments with a small round
mark of vermillion on the fore-head and having braided hair
(sarpaneja keśaka bāndhile tuli khopa) still depict the
picture of a mediaeval Assamese lady. Also the description
of Rāma and Kṛṣṇa as obtained in mediaeval Assamese literature
virtually gives the picture of an Assamese gentleman. Besides
domestic life, descriptions given about marriage ceremonies
also reflected the colour of Assamese society and culture.
How much the present Assamese culture has deviated from the
culture of those times and how much western influence has now
been cast can be realized by studying these mediaeval
literature.

Thoughts can be recorded when these are concrete
enough for expression. The Assamese literature of pre-
Śaṅkaradeva era was very mature and its language was highly
developed. From these books composed in Assamese language it
is easily understood that much of the growth of Assamese
language took place even before pre-Śaṅkaradeva era. But
sadly enough these books are no longer available now-a-days.
A tribe or a race could be identified through its culture.
Literature also somewhat helps to compile the history of that
culture. Mediaeval Assamese literature contributed a lot in
portraying the cultural picture of that period. Though
literature of that period had descriptions of stories or
events only, yet along with it the poets were successful in
depicting the local picture and thus made them some kind of authenticated documents or mirror.

It was primarily Śāṅkaradeva, Mādhavadeva and their disciples who consolidated the cultural base of Assam by creating what is today known as Sattriya culture for the purpose of propagating Vaiṣṇava religion. That tradition of Sattriya culture is still very much present in Assam. Leaving Śāṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva we cannot even imagine of Assamese culture today. Besides propagating religion they revitalized literature by composing songs, dramas, etc., thereby enriching various facets of theatrical activity as well as fine arts and raised the level of culture of Assamese society to a great height. The sattras and nāmghars established by Śāṅkaradeva became the nerve centres of Nāmdeva and Assamese national life. His nāmghars are the precursors of today's pañcāyati-rāj. These nāmghars and sattras became the focal point of village administration. Through these all the social, moral, cultural and religious activities were conducted. The democratic pañcāyat system which has now been employed for running national administration was successfully applied five hundred years ago in Assam. In this modern world the media of mass-communication has a tremendous influence. Like the present-day world in those days also methods of mass-communication like songs, dramas, dances, painting and various types of
The present study covers the two most important periods of Assamese literature and culture, viz., the pre-Śāṅkara Deva and Śāṅkara Deva's times which were immensely fruitful in the matters of literature and culture of the country. This literature and culture not only reclaimed India's great national heritage but also were vibrant with echo's of the life of the people in those times. These pages are a humble attempt to paint a picture of Assam as preserved in the literary heritage of the times.