Chapter I

Introduction

Significance of Mediaeval Assamese Literature and Culture

I

The term 'culture' is of wider connotation than what is usually implied by its popular, loose application to refer to only the domain of certain arts. It refers to a state or a phase in the gradual, evolutionary process of man's advancements in refined understanding and ways of life. In fact, when we speak of the culture of a people, we think of every aspect of their life and activities - the way they eke out their livelihood or their economic life, their manners and customs or social life, their faiths and rituals or religious life, their dresses and tastes or aesthetic sense as reflected in the fine arts, and their understanding and intellectual attainments as expressed through education and literature. It is the culture of a nation or a sub-nationality that marks it out as a distinct entity. In this wider sense, even the literary heritage of a nation is a part of its cultural heritage.

However, accepting literature as a distinct and major form of man's cultural pursuits, we can study the
relations between a nation's or sub-nationality's literary heritage and certain other aspects of its cultural life, the latter being closely connected with and mirrored in the former.

Beginning with this assumption, we propose to undertake here a study of the mediaeval Assamese literature as it reflected certain aspects of Assamese culture of the mediaeval period of Assamese literary history.

The period of mediaeval Assamese literature, as distinct from the early period of Assamese literature, roughly marks the beginning of written literature in Assamese and also constitutes a most varied and fruitful period of literary creativity in Assamese. This was the period which also saw the flourishing of neo-Vaiṣṇava literature with saints Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva as the central creative force, giving birth to the Golden Age of Assamese literature. Hence, the importance of this period in the literary history of Assamese can hardly be overemphasized.

Historically, however, there is a clear distinction between the mediaeval period of European or English literature and that of Assamese literature. In the case of the former, "the period known as the Middle Age covers the thousand years from the death of Constantine I to the birth of the modern nation-state, A.D. 337 to A.D. 1500, and is the
intermediate period between the culture of classical antiquity and the Renaissance. Thus, the mediaeval literature in English refers to the literary creations belonging to the period from the fourth century to the end of the fifteenth century A.D. On the other hand, the mediaeval period in Assamese literature refers to a different period of history. According to scholars, the beginning of Assamese language and literature can be traced back to the 10th or 11th century A.D. The Caryapadas or dohas composed during the 10th-11th centuries A.D. are accepted as the first specimens of Assamese literature. According to the scholar Hemchandra Goswami, mantras (incantations) and vachanas or bhanitās (aphorism) were also composed during the 12th and the 13th centuries A.D., but in language and syntactical order, these appear to have been composed during a later period. Besides, these were orally transmitted literature.

In reality, after the Caryapadas, we do not come across any extant evidence of written literature during the 12th-13th centuries A.D. It was only from the 14th century A.D. down to the present times that we find plenty of literary works on varied subjects in Assamese. Hence, we may consider the

period extending from the 14th to the 17th century A.D. as the Mediaeval age of Assamese literature.

The period from the 14th century to the mid 15th century A.D. can be regarded as the Early Mediaeval Age which covers the writings of poets of the pre-Śaṅkaradeva era. These writings carry the reflections of the contemporary Assamese cultural life including social customs, religious beliefs and rituals, economic life, arts and crafts, etc. Then follows the Later Mediaeval Age when the writings of Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva mirrored the Assamese society in all its various aspects. The period also saw the literary creations of other contemporary Vaiṣṇava poets of the age of Śaṅkaradeva as well as those of the pāñcālī poets - all these writings having added to the variety and vitality of the mediaeval Assamese literature. As can be expected, the literary products of this fertile period invariably carried the impact of the cultural life of the Assamese society of those days.

In the next chapter an attempt will be made to survey the Assamese literature of the period under purview.
As an equivalent to the English word 'culture' the word saṃskṛti has been used in the Assamese language. In Sanskrit language the word saṃskṛti does not have any application in the sense in which it is used as a substitute for 'culture'. In ancient Indian literatures like Pāli and Prākrit or in other regional languages also, we do not come across any such usage. The word saṃskṛti, therefore, is a new coinage. It connotes refinement or, in philosophic terminology, implies the prior knowledge of some subjects.

In its current usage culture refers to the best of a nation's thought, imagination and action. Even though man acts or behaves according to innate instincts, he is to avoid that which is regarded as improper or harmful. Thus by deciding to add the physical beauty and refining the mind man accepted for himself the bondage of some artificial rules and regulations, and thereby created culture. Even though all the different groups of people all over the world found out the means of subsistence by developing agriculture, there came about certain distinctive features in the artificial means which they adopted. Further, because of the differences in natural environments in which they carried on their living, their manners and customs also acquired distinct traits. The differences in mental refinements were
reflected in the distinctive manners of eating and drinking, in the varying methods of construction of houses, in manufacturing dresses and in the way such dresses were worn. Thus was developed the different brands of culture among the different groups of people or communities. "Culture is the result of the struggle and victory of the human mind over impulses." \(^1\) Hence the nation or ethnic group which could hold a greater sway over these impulses, would attain to a higher state of culture to that extent. Civilisation and culture act and re-act upon each other, or one depends on the other. Without civilisation, there cannot be culture, though, it is culture that glorifies and enlivens civilisation.

Culture does not manifest itself in food and dresses, architecture and sculpture alone; it shows itself also in religious beliefs, high philosophic thoughts, morality, etc. To sum up, next to human civilisation, consequent on the need for mental upliftment, culture has found its development.

The ever changing new ideas acquire new forms in synthesis with the old and give birth to a new culture which brings joy to life. Waves and treaties have combined in history to transform culture and have given a new look to

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Culture. Culture has its life in the process of give and take. Just as a number of streams unite to form a river which flows down to commingle with a sea or ocean, similarly various races or sub-racial groups with their varying religious beliefs and thoughts join the sea of humanity. By such commingling culture acquires its new character. That is why culture is progressive by nature.

III

Assamese culture, too, refers to the ways of life of a community of people comprising their religious beliefs, manners and customs, thoughts and ideas, the modes and principles underlying their social structure, their music and dances, sculpture and architecture which took shape through the synthesis of various races and tribes that found their homes in the land belonging to the North Eastern part of India variously known as Prāgjyotisapura, Kāmarūpa and Assam during different periods of its history.

The abode of various ethnic groups, Assam has been the cradle of different religious beliefs and customs and manners. The literary works composed by the mediaeval Assamese poets at different times beautifully mirror the Assamese national life. For instance, poet-saint Saṅkaradeva
in his Assamese rendering of a sloka belonging to the second book of the Bhāgavata-purāṇa has supplanted the racial names like Hūna, Āndhra, Pulinda, Pukkasa, Abhira, Śuhma, Khāsi by Assamese racial names:

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\begin{align*}
\text{kirāta-kachāri} & \quad \text{khāsi-gāro-miri} \\
\text{yavana kāṅka gowāla} & \\
\text{asama-maluka} & \quad \text{rajaka turuka} \\
\text{kuvāca mleccha caṇḍala}. & \\
\end{align*}
\]

The verse mentions tribes such as Kirāta, Kachāri, Khāsi, Gāro, Miri and castes based on professions such as Gowāla and Rajaka. Even the names of Kuvaca or Koc and Turuk or Musalmān\(^2\) have not been left out. Hence we come to know that communities were formed in Assam not only on the basis of religion, but also on that of profession or trade. A reference to this is found in Saṅkaradeva's Uresā-vaṁpana in Kirtana-qhosa\(^3\) we come across mentions of Sonārī or Baniyā (gold-smith), Sūtār (carpenter), Chamār (cobbler), Kamār (blacksmith), Kumār (potter), Caṇḍāl (an outcast), Naṭa (dancer). In Darāṇg Rājvamsāvalī\(^4\) too, we have similar

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1. v. 474
2. M. Neog, Purāṇi Asamīyā Samāj Āru Saṁskṛti, p. 1
3. vv. 2033-35
4. vv. 537, 550
references. These castes or communities are described in *Katha-Qurucarita* as well. Besides, in the *Katha-Qurucarita* we come across descriptions of various trade-based castes like the snake-charming yogis, the kātanīs or mugu cocoon-rearing yogis, tāntī, hirā, sālai, dhobā, nāpit, teliyā, kharīyā, darjī, māchuai, etc.

The hilly areas of Assam are mostly inhabited by the tribals of Mongoloid origin. In the North Eastern part reside the Mising, the Misimis, the Chingphous, the Ābars (Ādi), the Daphalās, the Akās, and the Bhutiyās. The southern areas are inhabited by the Āngāmis, the Āos, the Samās, the Kanyāks, the Tāngkhuls - all representing various groups of the Nāgās. The same areas also form the abodes of the Kukis, the Manipuris or Malteis and the Mizo. In the Brahmaputra valley and its nearby hills the Bodos or tribes of Tibetobarman origin have had their settlements since very ancient times. These people comprise various sub-sections like Morān, Cutiyā, Hojāi, Dimāchā, Tiwā, Mech, Kachārī, Rābhā, Gāro and Hājong. The eastern part of Assam is inhabited by racial groups of the Shān family like the Khamtīs, the Narūs, the Turungs and the Phākiyāls. The people of Austric origin are also found among them. They are the Khasi speaking Mon-khmers. The Khasis have been called Kharāmi in *Katha-*

1. pp. 118, 123, 168, 203
Assamese culture has grown out of the synthesis of diverse customs and manners, modes and morals prevalent among the various communities living in this 'land of one score and fourteen races' and it has found beautiful expressions in Assamese literature. Even though mediaeval Assamese literature is primarily religious and its subject matters have been drawn from the Rāmāyana and the Mahābhārata as well as other Purānic literature, the Assamese poets of those days while narrating the original subject matters also tried to incorporate descriptions of Assamese national, religious and cultural life as also of contemporary social customs and manners, popular beliefs and also natural phenomena.

Notwithstanding the fact that no one could offer any definite opinions about the exact period when people of Hindu faith began settling in Assam, some scholars express the view that the people of Aryan origin lived here by the time the Christian era began. The benevolence of some Hindu kings encouraged the Hindus of Brāhmaṇa and other higher castes to settle in this land. In the Kathā-guru-carita we are told how

1. p. 454
2. p. 432
3. M. Neog, Purani Asamiya Samaj āru Sanskriti, p. 3
Brāhmaṇas and Kāyasthas were brought in from outside. ¹
Since the thirteenth century A.D. when Muslim invasions began, the followers of Islam began to settle in Assam. Thus in Assam which is the meeting grounds of many races and diverse cultures, the heritage of Indian religions and meditations acquired a new form to represent the Indian culture and thus developed a liberal and tolerant humanistic religion that taught people to pay due respect to this assimilated culture. As a result of this assimilation, the system of castes and creed lost its rigidity, the orthodoxy of untouchability also lost its edge. The tribal people also without any social opposition came to be part of the Hindu community under the caste names of Bar-Kalitā, Saru-Kalitā, Bar-Koc, Saru-Koc, Pāni-Koc, Keōt, etc.² Other castes like Baishya, Mukhi, Nāpit, Nāth, Hārī, Candāl, Dom, etc., are also worth mentioning.³ Again like men, women, too, became 'Medhis' and participated in social activities.⁴ People belonging to different communities had also the right to initiation into Vaisnava faith.⁵

¹ KG, pp. 9-10
² B.K. Barma, Asamiyā Bhāṣā āru Samskṛti. p. 179
⁴ KG, p. 523
⁵ KG, p. 576
IV

Saivism:

Viewed against the wider background of all-India religious practices, Kamarūpa or Assam had been the seat of the worship of Śiva or Saivism since very ancient times. It is learnt from what has been written in the Kālikā-purāṇa that even though the eighteen primary scriptures of Saivism had been composed in Northern India, this faith rapidly spread in the eastern part of India as well.¹ The Puranic texts make it clear that Saivism had a strong hold over Assam. In the Sabhā-parva of the Mahābhārata the Kāmarūpa King Bhagadatta had been called 'Śiva's friend' at one place.

Again, in the Kālikā-purāṇa we are told that the Kirātas under Śambhu's core at first worshipped Śiva in Assam. Even before Naraka began worshipping goddess Kāmākhyā at the behest of Viṣnū, this kingdom had been under Śambhu's control. Its inhabitants, the Kirātas, had been Śiva-worshippers even before that. Even after Naraka had introduced the worship of Śakti in Assam Śiva-worship continued unabated here secretly.² In this context, mention may be made of King Vāna, the great devotee of Śiva. In another chapter of Kālikā-

1. M. Neog, Purāṇi Asamīyā Samāj āru Samāskṛti, p. 5
2. sa ca desāh svarājyārthe pūrvaṃ guptaśca śambhunā - Kp 38, p. 96
purāṇa there is a fine description of how Śiva became the favourite of the Mlecchas. In Gunābhīrām Barua’s Āsām Buraṇjī we are told how King Jalpēśwara, the founder of the Jalpēśwara temple in the present Jalpaiguri district, West Bengal, worshipped Śiva and propagated this religion. In the Āvantya episode of the Skanda-purāṇa we find mentions of the worship of Śiva-linga by King Jalpa and his disappearance in that linga.¹

The copper plate inscriptions also provide evidence of the supremacy of the Śiva-cult during the reigns of the Hindu kings of Asam or Kāmarūpa. It is from such copper plate inscriptions that we learn that the Kāmarūpa kings Bhagadatta and Vajradatta worshipped Śiva.² In the Nidhā�pur copper plate inscription Bhāskara Barīm offers obeissance to Śiva and sings in his praise.³ Bānabhattā’s Harsa-carita has a beautiful description of Bhāskara Varmā’s devotion to Śiva. In the copper-plate Grant of Vanamāla⁴ (9th century A.D.) and also in the copper plate inscription of his grandson Bala Varmā there is evidence of their sincere

¹. M. Neog, Purāṇi Asamiyā Samāj āru Sanskriti, p. 6
². Tezpur Grant of Vanamāla, vv. 5-6 and Nowgong Grant of Bala Varmā, v. 8
³. Nidhānpur Grant of Bhāskara Varmā, v. 1
⁴. v. 2
devotion to Śiva. Again, in the Gauhati Grant of King Indrapāla, the story of Śiva and Gaurī has been narrated.\(^1\)

In the Śubhaṅkara-pāṭaka Grant of King Dharmapāla of the 12th century A.D., another form of Śiva, viz., ardhanārīśvara (i.e. half female and half divine form) has been depicted.\(^2\)

Even though this royal dynasty is claimed to have descended from the Varāha incarnation of Nārāyaṇa, it is felt that they were the devotees of Śiva.\(^3\) Thus the texts of the inscriptions lead us to conclude that the Hindu kings referred to in the Copper Plate inscriptions were the followers of Śiva.

In the historical accounts, too, we find references to Saivism. When the Chinese traveller Hiuen-Tsang visited Kāmarūpa during the reign of King Bhāskara Varmā in 7th century A.D., he saw hundreds of temples in this land and most of these were Śiva-temples. Though in those days there were various sects like the Śāktas and the Vaiṣṇavas, the majority of the people were followers of Saivism.

The ruins of the temples also indicate the variety of religious faiths in Assam. The remains of two Śiva

\[\text{1. v. 1}\]

\[\text{2. v. 1 (Ardhanārīśvara : An image which is believed to be a hybrid form of Adīrāsa and Rudrārāsa)}\]

\[\text{3. Puspaḥhadrā Grant of Dharmapāla, v. 1}\]
temples found in the Dhanukhanā hill of the north bank of the Brahmaputra have been tentatively identified by scholars as belonging to the period of Harjara Varmā of the eighth century A.D. A lakulīśa image of Śiva has also been discovered in the remains of a temple of post-sixth century period in the Dañparvatiyā village of Tezpur. Another ruins of the 10th century A.D. has been excavated at Tezpur. Besides these, the Tingyeswara temple founded by the Kāmarūpa King Tingyadeva, the Śiva temple of Viśvanāthghāṭ of Tezpur, the ruined Śiva temple of Negheriting of Golaghat, the Deo Parvat of Numaligarh of Golaghat, the Śiva temple of Umānanda at Guwahati have been taken to belong to the pre-Āhom period. Hence, the wide prevalence of Śaivism in Assam can be easily guessed. Further, images depicting various forms of Śiva such as Īṣāna, Maheśa, Bhairava, Lakulīśa, Naṭarāja, Śadabhūja, Deśabhūja, Umā-Maheśa have been found in various places in Assam.

The Koc royal family of Coochbehār-Kāmarūpa has been called the descendants of Śiva. The founder of the Koc kingdom and Koc dynasty Bisū or Viśvasimha was born out of the union of Śiva assuming the form of a Mecha male called

1. M. Neog, Purani Assamīyā Samāj āru Samāskṛti, pp. 8-9
2. Parang Rājvāhāśvalī, pp. 50-53
Hāriā Mandal and his wife Hirā. The Koc kings have
designated themselves as 'Śiva-carana-madhukara' in their
royal seals. It is gathered from the Rājvamśāvalī that they
were the worshippers of Śiva. They offered ducks, pigeons,
rice-beer, buffaloes, hens, goats, etc. and performed deodhai
dance to the accompaniment of mādal (a drum-like instrument)
while worshipping Śiva. Similarly Śiva has been and is
still worshipped by the Bādo tribals in the name of Bātho,
Bāthou, Bāthou-Brāi or Bāthou-Śiva-Rāi. They also offer
buffaloes, goats, pigs, hens, pigeons, etc. to Śiva.

In various manuscripts we come across references to
the performance of dances by natī or temple-girls in Śiva
temples and sacrificing goats or other animals snapping
their necks on the occasion of Śiva caturdāsi. In certain
Śiva-temples like those of Umānanda, Kāmeśvara, Siddhesvara,
Āmratakeśvara, etc., the latter practice is still in vogue.

In mediaeval literature, also we have enough
informations and references about Śaivism. These will be
discussed in due course.

1. M. Neog, Saṅkaradeva and His Times, p. 80
2. Darang Rājvamśāvalī, pp. 324-28; M. Neog, Purāṇa Asamiyā
   Samāj āru Samāskṛti, p. 10
3. M. Neog, Saṅkaradeva And His Times, p. 81
Saṅkaradeva's father, Kusumvara Barbhuyān sought the blessing of a son from Śiva, worshipped as a living god, by offering pūjā with performance of rituals of exorcise and with curd, milk, ghee, honey, fried rice or ākhai, rice and milk-made preparations, sugar, etc., and it was believed that Śiva appeared in his dream and implanted himself in the womb of his wife and subsequently the offspring born of divine power was named Saṅkaravara. In Bhūṣanādvija's Gurucarita, too, there is a reference suggesting that Kusumvara Bhūyān used to worship the Śiva-linga. When the three sons of Vyāsakalāi, one of Saṅkaradeva's disciples who was deeply devoted to Saivism, had died of small pox, and his fourth son Hridayananda, too, was on his death bed, Vyāsakalāi's wife offered two pigeons in the name of Mahādeva through another person. Because of this fault, Vyāsakalāi had to be ousted from the fold of Saṅkarite faith. Again, the Kathā-guru carita mentions how the king had deputed the Saivist scholar Asurāli to the temples of Hājo, Nilācchal, Asvaklānta, Umānanda, etc., to offer Pūjās and had accompanied Mādhavadeva to Nilācchal. Mādhavadeva's elder

1. KGC, pp. 16-21
2. As quoted in Purāṇī Asamūyā Saṃāj Āru Samāskṛti, p. 12
3. KGC, p. 143
4. KGC, p. 340
brother was also a follower of Saivism. Hence we can assert with certainty that Saivism was prevalent in Assam even during the period of Śaṅkaradeva.

Śaktism:

Besides Śaivism, there is also a stronghold of Śaktism or Śākta faith in Assam. According to scholars, Tantra and Śākta faith had their origin in Assam and Bengal. Tantraic literature appeared during the fourth-fifth centuries A.D. and gathered more sway during the seventh century A.D. Of course, several sources suggest that in Assam Śaivism had more ancient roots than Śākta religion. Even though Kāmarūpa was well-known as the major centre of Śakti-worship since early times, still there are no available references to Śākta faith in the copper-plate inscriptions as the Hindu kings of the age of Copper Plates were mostly the followers of Śaivism. Nevertheless, the few references to the Śakti cult that we come across are enough to indicate that Assam had been the home of the followers of the Śakti cult prior to several ages. According to the Kālikā-purāṇa it was Narakāśura who first introduced the Śakti cult in Kāmarūpa. Even though the older copper plate Inscriptions

1. M. Neog, Purani Asamiyā Samaj Āru Sanskriti, p. 13
2. M. Neog, Purani Asamiyā Samaj Āru Sanskriti, p. 15
do not have any reference to Sakti worship, in the two inscriptions of Vanamala\(^1\) and Indrapala,\(^2\) there is a reference to the temple of Śrīkāmeswar-Mahā-Gaurī.

In the Kālikā-purāṇa, Kāmākhya-tantra, Kālivilāsa and such other tantric scriptures we find the accounts of how the Sakti cult spread in the North-East India. We cannot say that this faith spread in Assam much later than Saivism. This is clearly understood from the account of Sakti worship given in the Kālikā-purāṇa. In ancient Kāmarūpa, the Devi had been established as the presiding deity. In the account dealing with the Devī, it has been said that Mahāmāyā came to Nīlācala hill for enjoying union with Mahādeva, and so this holy place had been named Kāmākhya. There are references to the five different forms of the Devī, Kāmākhya, Kāmesvarī, Kāmarūpā, Tripurā and Yonimandalā. Mother Kāmākhya is also conceived as Ādyāsaktī, Jagajjananī and Sṛṣṭikārini. The temple of Kāmākhya is still famous as the greatest seat of Sakti worship in the whole of India. It is goddess Kāmākhya who is worshipped in her virgin form as Tripurā-sundari and as the presiding deity of beauty.\(^3\) Scholars believe that because of

\(^1\) Tezpur Grant of Vanamala, v. 30
\(^2\) Guwakuci Grant of Indrapala, vv. 49, 52
\(^3\) Kalicharan Das, 'Asamar Dharma āru Darśan', Asam Gaurav, p. 137
the predominance of matriarchal civilisation among some tribal people of ancient Assam many gods and goddesses belonging to the Śakti cult had their origin in ancient Kāmarūpa.\textsuperscript{1} In those days the matriarchal Khāsi and Gāro communities also worshipped the maternal power. In most Purānic narrations we find references to the worship of the various forms of the Mahāmāyā, Mahā-Śakti, Parā-Śakti, etc.\textsuperscript{2} Eliot has described Śaktism or the form of the Devī in this manner - "a goddess of many names and forms, who is adored with sexual rites and the sacrifice of animals, or, when the law permits, of men."\textsuperscript{3} Again, Eliot has further written of Śaktism and Tāntrism in this way - "The essence of Śaktism is the worship of a goddess with certain rites. Tāntrism means rather the use of spells, gestures, diagrams and various magical or sacramental rites, which accompanies Śaktism but may exist without it."\textsuperscript{4} It is also conceivable that these tantras and mantras originated from the impact of primitive tribal religion on Vedic religion. Various aspects of Śaktism have led scholars to opine that there had been a blending of Hindu and non-Indian elements. The various forms

\textsuperscript{1} B.K. Barua, \textit{Asamiyā Bhāsā āru Sāmśkriti}, p. 180
\textsuperscript{2} \textit{Asam Gaurav}, pp. 137-38
\textsuperscript{4} \textit{Hinduism and Buddhism}, II, p. 275
of the Devī such as Kālī, Tārā, Ugratārā, Chinnamastā are said to be of Buddhist origin.¹ The present Kāmakhyā is the major centre of Sakti worship and on the Nīlācal hill the Devī is offered pūjā in her ten different forms and names such as - Kālī, Tārā (Ugratārā), Sodasi (Kāmakhyā), Bhubanēswari, Bhairavi, Chinnamastā, Dhūmāvati, Bagalā, Kamalā and Mātangī.

During the 10th-11th centuries A.D. since the time of the composition of the Kālikā-purāṇa, Saktism became the most potent form of faith in Kāmarūpa and because of the vigorous prevalence of Vāmācāra, such popular rites as human sacrifices, Sabarotsava were carried on.² Later on, in the Yoginī-tantra, composed during the 16th century A.D., one does not come across any reference to human sacrifices, Sabarotsava, etc., but in both the works we have references to Pānca-tattva, or Pānca-makāra i.e. wine, meat, fish, mudra, and sexual union. Besides, there are references to the six cruel rites (Ṣaṭ-Karma) such as Śānti, Vaśya, Stambhana, Vidvesa, Ucchātana and māraṇa.³ Even though in Saktism, the Devī is imagined in her various forms, it is the Mother form or incarnation of the Devī which comes first and in Yoginī-tantra,

¹ M. Neog, Purani Asamiya Samaj aru Sanskriti, p. 15
² Kālikā-purāṇa, 78,140
³ Yoginī-tantra, 1.4.28-31
too, goddess Kāmākhyā appears as the Mother or as Bhagavati. This Mother goddess as the symbol of the Creative Power has taken her seat at the Kāmākhyā temple. The temples of different goddesses as found on the Nilācalā hill do not possess any images but some split stones at the places of worship. In one or two temples water is found to flow out of such cleavages of stones as in the case of the principal shrine of Kāmākhyā. This represents the yoni of the deity and is accepted as the symbol of Creative Power, and offerings of Aparājita and Karavi flowers - symbolizing creations - are made there. Of course, during the times of King Naranārayana, the practice of worshipping the clay images of Devi Durgā in Kāmarūpa was said to have been introduced.¹ It is said that by providing the offerings of cow, buffalo, copper, bell metal, servants and maids Govinda Garmani became a pauper and finally when he offered his own blood in a conch shell, it was drunk by the Devi in the form of a snake coiling it.² Besides, making the offerings of buffalo, goat, duck, fish, pigeon, deer, tortoise, pig, rhinoceros, crocodile, etc., there was also the system of making human sacrifices and offering one's own blood to the Devi. It is learnt that at one time there was

1. Hem Chandra Goswami, ed., Purani Assam Buranji, p. 53
2. KGC, p. 93
the practice of making human sacrifices at the temple of Bhairavi, which is situated on a lower slope towards the south of the main Kāmākhya temple. On the practice of sacrificial rites, it is gathered that Mādhavadeva pledged to sacrifice a pair of he-goats on the occasion of the autummal worship of the Devi for the welfare of his mother and set out for Bharalidubi.¹ The subsequent encounter between Śakti-worshipper Mādhavadeva and Śaṅkaradeva and the former’s arguments in favour of the practice of sacrificial rites only confirm the strong prevalence of the worship of goddess Caṇḍi in Assam. Besides these in the pre-Śaṅkaradeva era we come across the reference to "Aṣṭamira chāga" (a goat to be sacrificed on the eighth day of Devi Pakṣa) in Mādhava Kandali's writings or the references to Caṇḍi, Raṇacandli, Durgā, Yogamāyā in other books. We have the story of Visvasimha born of the supreme energy of Śiva and made invincible and ever youthful who, in his childhood, built the clay image of Durgā and worshipped her at home. He planted his stick reversed and made a sacrificial dāo out of the sharp slits of bamboo with which he sacrificed a dragonfly. As leader of the cowherds he engaged them in catching dragonflies. He caught hold of two or three boys, who failed to get the catch, and put their necks under his stick and

¹. KGC, p. 65
sacrificed them with the help of the pieces of bamboo.\(^1\) This has been mentioned in *Darang Rājvamsāvalli* as well.\(^2\)

Thereafter the cowherd's stick became the Devi's holy seat and the sliced piece of bamboo was transformed into a dāo. Even now this temple of Tāmrēswari or Kēcāikhāti Gosānī at Chikana carries on the tradition of sacrificial rites.\(^3\)

During the childhood of Śaṅkaradeva, a stone image of Cāndi was the object of worship in his household.\(^4\) In *Kathā-guru-carita* it is narrated how Mahendra Kandali wanted to teach his student Śaṅkara the mantra for Durgā worship. Further, the great-grandfather of Śaṅkaradeva, Cāndīvara being an ardent devotee of the Devi, King Durlabhānārāyaṇa renamed him as 'Devidāsa'.\(^5\) The fact that Mādhavadeva's elder brother residing at Bāndukā sacrificed ten goats also indicates the strong prevalence of Śaktism in ancient Assam.\(^6\)

From the detailed description of Śaktism and the worship of Śakti as found in *Kālikā-purāṇa*, which was

\begin{enumerate}
\item *KGC*, p. 47
\item *Darang Rājvamsāvalli*, p. 79
\item *KGC*, p. 48
\item M. Neog, *Purani Asamīyā Samaj āru Saṅskṛti*, p. 22
\item Rāma-carana Thākura, *Gurucarita*, p. 11, v. 55
\item Rāmānanda, *Gurucarita*, 126-f
\end{enumerate}
composed during the 10th-11th centuries A.D., it can be presumed that Śaktism was widely followed in Kāmarūpa during the 10th-11th centuries A.D. In the language of Kālikā-purāṇa, "anyatra viralā devi kāmarūpe gṛhe gṛhe."¹ ('Rare elsewhere, the Devi is in every household of Kāmarūpa').

During the days of Śaṅkaradeva, even though the intensity of Devi worship witnessed much decline, we come across the descriptions of Mahāmāyā temple in one or two books written by Śaṅkaradeva. Of course, in Yoqinītranta, too, which was composed during the 16th century A.D. the expression "anyatra viralā devi kāmarūpe gṛhe gṛhe", made in Kālikā-purāṇa has been repeated.² A few other books, too, testify that during the 16th century A.D. Śaktism was strongly prevalent in Assam. It is recorded in history that in 1615 A.D. the son of a general to a Muslim invader, Karmachānd by name, was picked up from a boat and later sacrificed to the goddess Kāmākhyā.³ Even when, under the influence of the liberal Vaisnava religion propagated by Śaṅkaradeva the people recited the name of Hari, they would install a "ghatā" as symbol of the Devi in every household in

1. Kālikā-purāṇa, 58.42
2. Yoqini-tantra, I.6.152
Assam during autumn, that is the period of Durgā-Pujā. 1
Hence, it is evident from the dominance of Saktism in the
age under reference that this form of faith had a prolonged
hold over the mind of the people for ages together.

Vaiṣṇavism:

Though it is difficult to state with certainty when
exactly Vaiṣṇavism was introduced in Assam, there are,
however, references which suggest that the worship of Viṣṇu
was in vogue during the period of copper-plate inscriptions.

From the copper-plate inscriptions, it is gathered
that even though the ancient kings of Kāmarūpa claimed their
origin from Viṣṇu in his incarnation as boar and goddess
Dharitri, they were Śaivites. Only on the basis of the
Bargangā inscription (554 A.D.) of the sixth century A.D.
one learns that the Kāmarūpa King Mahābhūtivarman had been
called "Śrī parama daivata parama bhāgavata." 2 Of course, in
the self-composed Puṣpabhadra Lipi by Dharmapala, a Kāmarūpa
king of the 12th-13th century A.D., instead of mentioning the
name of Śiva, the boar incarnation of Lord Viṣṇu has been
eulogized. 3 Besides, this inscription mentions that Śrīmān

1. M. Neog, Śaṅkaradeva And His Times, p. 86
3. Puṣpabhadrā Grant of Dharmapāla, v. 18
Madhusudana, the son of a Brāhmaṇa, who had been bestowed the grant of land, was a worshipper of Viṣṇu since his early days. From this, Padmanath Bhattacharya has rightly concluded that King Brahmapāla, while making the grant, had accepted Vaisnavism. As these copper-plates carry references to the various incarnations of Viṣṇu such as Varāha, Nara-simha, Jāmadagnya, Rāma, etc., hints about Lord Kṛṣna’s sportive activities with Nanda, Yasodā, the milkmen and milk-maids, and the names such as Keśava, Janārdana, Nādhava given to the Brāhmaṇa who were entitled to land grants by these copper-plates, it can be presumed that during the period of the copper-plate inscriptions, Vaisnavism was in vogue in a mild form in Assam.

Evidence based on architectural and sculptural remains also proves the existence of the Vaisnava faith during the age of copper-plate inscriptions. Among the contemporary sculptural remains, a ninth century A.D. image of Viṣṇu found near Deopāni of Golaghat, an eleventh-twelfth century A.D. bell-metal image of Viṣṇu collected from an old temple from a place adjacent to Dibrugarh, the twelfth century image of Viṣṇu in His eternal sleep found in the Āsvakrānta temple, the eight-ninth century image of Śukreśvar at Śukleswar, the seventh-eighth century image of Venu-Gopāla carved in stone in the western entrance to the Kāmākhyā temple, etc., lead one to conclude that during these
centuries too the practice of worshipping Visnu existed in Assam, though in a mild form.

On the other hand, Hayagrīva is an incarnation of Viṣṇu and it is in the name that Viṣṇu is worshipped in the temple of Hayagrīva-Mādhava at Hājo.¹ According to scholars, this temple belongs to the pre-Āhom period. In Kālikā-purāṇa we find a description of Hayagrīva. Besides, Yogini-tantra offers a detailed description of the worship of Hayagrīva. Besides Hayagrīva, the worship of Viśuṣdeva is also mentioned in Kālikā-purāṇa.² In Kathā-guru-carita also we find references to the image of Madana Gopāla³ and that of Viśuṣdeva of Yudhiṣṭhira’s Jajñā ceremony.⁴ In performing the pūjā of Viśuṣdeva, tāntric rituals such mantra, vīja, yantra, nyāsa, mudrā, etc., were included. Even today pūjā is offered to the image of Viśuṣdeva in the holy place of Viśuṣdeva situated 29 k.m. away to the east of North Lakhimpur. The pujā is performed according to tāntric system, otherwise known as Pañcarātra system. Śambhu, Gaurī, Brahmā, Rāma and Kṛṣṇa are worshipped by performing the tāntric rituals of mantra, vīja, yantra, nyāsa, etc.

1. Ch. 76 ff
2. Ch. 83, 88, 194
3. pp. 34, 212, 264
4. KGC, p. 213
Buddhism:

Kathā-guru-carita narrates how Śaṅkaradeva drove away by the recital of the Lord's name in his poem, Pāsandamardana, two Buddhist magicians (baudhamatiya ṭaṭakīyā). In the Kirtana-ghosā Śaṅkaradeva has written that the Lord assumed the incarnation of Buddha and led people away from the Vedic path and He enchanted all people with the scriptures relating to the left hand practice (vāmānaya śāstra). Śaṅkaradeva has further written that towards the close of Kali yuga (the iron age or the age of vice) the Lord assuming the form of Kalki will slaughter the Mlecchas and the Buddhists, and will establish the reign of truth. In this context, pointing towards the rituals and customs of the Vajrayāna form of Buddhism or Tantric Buddhism, Dr. Neog has noted that the excesses committed by the Vajrayāna sect of Buddhists are mixed with tantric rituals, and this was witnessed by Śaṅkaradeva himself. The Vajrayāna Buddhism is a blending of monistic philosophy, magic and erotic actions. To this has been added Buddhist concepts. The five sensual experiences (pañca-makāra) are essential to the worshippers and the seekers of salvation should enjoy the perfect truth and this perfect truth (prajñā-pāramitā) co-exists in every

1. KGC, p. 45
2. v. 14
female body. In *Sādhanamālā*, which deals with the Vajrayāna faith, there is a mention of four holy places as the centres of this religion. These holy places are Kāmākhyā or Kāmarūpa, Śrı̄hāṭṭa, Pūrṇagiri and Uddiyāna. Of these, the first two may be taken to be included with Kāmarūpa. Mādhavadeva in his *Nāma-ghosā* mentions certain mysterious rituals known as *Pāṇḍamāya*. Those who follow these rituals commit outrage against the set norms of caste and lineage without any discrimination on the basis of sex or food habit, and they secretly mislead people.\(^1\) In his *Vyāsāśrama*, Rāma Sarawati describes how in the Kali-yuga the Brāhmaṇa would accept the Vāmānaya ritualistic ceremonies and become Buddhists. They will give up the normal activities of a Brāhmaṇa and will propagate the Buddhist doctrine. They will earn their livelihood by displaying tantric rituals and mudrās with images made of copper, bell-metal, wood and clay.\(^2\) Vamsīgopāladeva had to face the hostility and opposition of the *Buddhists* while he tried to propagate Vaiṣṇavism in the Ṛhom kingdom.\(^3\)

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1. vv. 294-95
2. M. Neog, *Śaṅkaradeva And His Times*, p. 89
3. Śri Śri *Vamsīgopāldevara Carita*, pp. 23-25
Other Minor Religious Sects:

It seems that the Nātha religious faith was in vogue in Assam even before Śaṅkaradeva. The Nāthas are also known as the Yogīs. They practised various forms of yoga. They are also known as katāni as they traded in thread made of Ėrī and Muga silk. Even though the Nātha community forms a branch of the Saivas, some scholars opine that they drew inspiration from Vajrayāna Buddhism, or, their forefathers gave a Hindu form to Buddhism. Of the eighty-four saints of Buddhism, nine were original Nāthas.

Dr. Neog suggests¹ that the picture which Mādhava Kandali has drawn of the yogīs in his narration of Rāma's exile in the forests in the Ayoddhyākāṇḍa of his Rāmāyana may correspond to the actual state of the Nāthas of contemporary period. According to Mādhava Kandali's description, the yogīs carried bags and "twelve sticks" in the hands and chanted the name of Śiva. It is learnt from Kathā-guru-carita that once while Mādhavadeva was wandering about with his parents following a famine, he had been to the house of a yogī rearing Ėrī cocoons and residing on a river bank at Kāncikātā.² At present, even though the Nātha

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1. M. Neog, Purani Asamlyā Samaj āru Samskṛti, p. 61
2. KJC, p. 57
community is rarely extinct in Assam, the Assamese folk-songs still carry the story of the Nātha religion.

Besides, during the pre-Śaṅkaradeva era, Dharma worship was performed. This is gathered from Kathā-guru-carita. While offering pūjā to Devī Manasā, an altar is constructed a little away for Dharma-pūjā. A sacred pot (ghaṭa) is placed with offerings of mango foliage and a freshly grown banana leaf is placed on the mandala. The pot is accepted as the symbol of the god of Dharma. At certain places, it has also been mentioned that people being possessed by the spirit of deities dance on the pot.¹

In addition, it can also be deduced from the various remains, images, etc., that these were practices of offering pūjā to Manasā or the goddess of snakes, the Sun-god, Navagraha and goddess Sītalā during the pre-Śaṅkaradeva era. It is also learnt that other rituals like sacrificial rites were also performed while worshipping the goddess of snakes. We find reflections of this in mediaeval literature. The Manasā kāvyas bear testimony to this.

As in religion, in the sphere of fine arts too Assam has a glorious tradition. The term 'fine arts' brings to our mind not only the art of poetry, but also the other

¹. M. Neog, Purani Asamiyā Samaj āru Saṃskṛti, p. 50
arts of music, painting, sculpture and architecture. The
tradition of Indian music has two streams: classical music
and folk music. Both these streams of music have been
prevalent in Assam since time immemorial.\(^1\) We have evidence
of musical culture in Kāmarūpa in the Sanskrit literary works,
Caryāpadas, the copper-plate inscriptions of ancient Kāmarūpa
kings, stone images, and the accounts left by foreign
travellers.\(^2\) Evidence of the prevalence of musical culture
in Assam during the medieval period of Assamese literature,
that is, from the 14th century to the 17th century A.D., can
be found in the lyrics of the Manasā Kāvyas composed by the
Pāñcālī poets Mankar\(^3\) and Durgāvara, those of the Usū
Parinaya composed by Pitāmbara Kavi, and also the songs
composed by the Vaiṣṇava poets Śaṅkaradeva, Mādhavadeva,
Gopāl Ātā and others. The songs composed by Mankar\(^4\) and
Durgāvara were sung in accompaniment to the Ojāpālī dances
and these are still popular even today and the songs composed
by Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva came to be called Bargīt (the
'Noble Numbers') because of the conservative quality of their
themes, the use of Brajamālī as the medium, the classical
quality of their notes, and also their appropriateness for
vocal rendering on the occasions of the Vaiṣṇava religious

1. Fradip Chaliha, 'Asamat Kantha Sangit', *Asam Gaurav*, p. 389
2. *Asam Gaurav*, p. 390
ceremonies called nām-prasanga, and their appeal continues to be as fresh as ever to the popular mind. With this reference to the songs, one cannot but take note of the ancient tradition of dances in Assam. In ancient times, a dance form called Devadāsī-nṛtya was in vogue in a good number of Śiva temples. Two distinguished dance forms that enriched the mediaeval tradition of dances in Assam were Ojāpāli-nṛtya which had its origin during the pre-Śaṅkaradeva period and Sattriyā-nṛtya which originated with poet-saint Śaṅkaradeva. Besides, several forms of folk-dances such as Putalā-nṛtya or puppet dance and Deodhani-nṛtya – have been in vogue in Assam since long prior to the times of Śaṅkaradeva. We come across references to various dance forms and dances in the books under study.

Assam also had the traditional practice of painting. Poet-saint Śaṅkaradeva is known to have painted pictures of Vaikuṇṭha on tulāpāt (cotton made paper) to be used as backdrop for staging the play Cīhṇayātṛā and also an image of elephant painted in indigenous colours for presentation as a gift to Mahārāja Naranārāyaṇa. Besides these, during the Śaṅkaradeva and post-Śaṅkaradeva ages, a number of illuminated manuscripts were composed such as Citra-Bhāgavata, Lava-Kuśar Yuddha, Darang Rājvamsāvalī, Hastividyārṇava under

1. M. Neog, Asamiyā Sāhityar Rūprekhā, pp. 94-96
royal or Sattriya patronage. Even though Assam was not so rich in the fields of ancient sculpture and architecture, we have examples of a tradition of Assamese sculpture and architecture in the scattered remains of stone images and the different temples and monasteries together with images or gods and goddesses in Assam. Of the temples built during the mediaeval period, the most noteworthy are the temples of Kamakhya, the Hayagriva-Madhava temple of Hajo and the Siva temple of Dubi. Because of various natural calamities like earthquakes, floods and rains, a substantial number of Assam's architectural and sculptural remains had been devastated. It is also to be noted in Assam that people generally used to live in houses built of thatches and bamboos, and they continue to do so even today. In olden days, even the kings of Assam would usually live in thatched wood-and-bamboo houses. Under these circumstances, it is rare to find ample evidence of architectural or sculptural remains of ancient days in Assam. Thatched houses were so dear to the Assamese heart that even in ancient manuscripts, poets, while describing the royal palaces of kings, indirectly painted the Assamese thatched houses. This fact has been supported with evidence at the appropriate place.

1. M. Neog, 'Asamar Citrakalā', Asam Gaurav, p. 365
It is to be admitted that Assamese culture was enriched by contributions from the Aryan culture of all-India level as well as those from tribal sources. Its most prominent characteristic is the synthesis and assimilation of various ethnic groups. This is the culture that lives on through Assamese folk-literature as well as mediaeval Assamese literature primarily religious by nature. The reflections of Assamese society have found beautiful expressions in mediaeval Assamese literature. In the following chapters, this will be discussed in details.