The society in Assam is often compared to a "Federal Hall," where the people of all races, Aryans and non-Aryans, Hindus and non-Hindus, "assimilated with their divergent ethnics and cultural heritages." The Arvan people mainly inhabited in the valley of the two rivers - the Brahmaputra and the Surma (Barak). The Brahmins, Kayasthas,

and Kalitas are generally identified as of the Aryan origin. When these people entered and settled permanently in this region is not known for certain. Reference to Kamarupa are found in the epics and some of the Puranas. The inscriptions issued by the rulers of Kamarupa as early as the fifth century A.D., the existence of archaeological evidences discovered in this region and the growth of the Assamese language based on Sanskrit are the testimonies sufficient to prove the entry of the Aryan culture in this land long ago. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee opines that "the Aryanization of the ruling classes in the western part of this Assamese–Bengali language area was completed at least as early as c. 400 A.D." According to him, the Brahmaputra Valley became a part of the Aryan-speaking India by 1200 A.D. This view can be accepted

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2 Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, *The Place of Assam in the History and Civilization of India*, Gauhati University, 1955, p. 35.

3 Ibid.
with some reservation because of the fact that the Brahmaputra valley was also the home of some non-Aryan people like the Kacharis, Chutiyas, the Morans, who retained their own language and culture for a very long time.

The non-Aryan people of Assam are comprised of various tribes with their several groups. The Bodo-Kachari tribe included the Bodo, Kachari, Mech, Rabha, Dimasa, Hojai, Hajong, Lalung and also the Garo, Chutiya, Koch, Miri, Mikir. The Naga tribe comprised of the Aos, Angamis, Semas, Lohtas, Rengmas and Kanyaks and Change. The recent influx of the non-Aryan people was the Ahoms, an off-shoot of the Tai people who entered and settled in the Brahmaputra valley in the beginning of the thirteenth century and in course of time became the masters of the whole valley. All these groups belonged to same human racial element i.e. the Mongoloid, and linguistically they are placed under the Tibeto-Burman stock. The Khasis were the only people in this region who represented the Austro-Asiatic Mon Khmer linguistic people of the world's human
race and in India their racial brethren are found in Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

Gunabhiram Barua estimated the population of Assam at 24,00,000 in about 1750. In subsequent decade the Mowarias uprisings, civil wars, and the Burmese invasions had caused depopulation to such an extent that the number came down to less than one million in the thirties of the nineteenth century. In 1837, John M'Cosh estimated the population of Assam at 799519 souls including the population of about 10,000 in Goalpara, which was at that time a part of Bengal. He gave the distribution of

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population as follows:\n
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Districts</th>
<th>No. of population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assam Rajah (Upper Assam)</td>
<td>2,20,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darrang</td>
<td>89,519</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nagaon</td>
<td>90,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kamrup</td>
<td>3,00,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goalpara (not ascertained but probable)</td>
<td>1,00,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Due to the lack of contemporary reliable statistics, it is difficult to reach any definite conclusion regarding the ethnic and caste composition of the population of Assam before 1826. We are, however, in a comfortable position about the population figure towards the closing years of the nineteenth century when census

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of population was introduced in Assam. In 1881 the total population of Assam was 48,81,426 of which 22,62,747 in the Surma valley, 22,25,771 in the Brahmaputra Valley, and 3,92,908 in the Hill tracts. Of these, Hindu population was 30,62,148 constituting 62.5% of the total population. The Muslims numbered 13,17,027 persons constituting 27% of the total population, 11,0424 were in the Surma Valley, 208431 in the Brahmaputra Valley and only 667 in the Hills. Of the remaining population the different groups of the aboriginal tribes huling the animistic beliefs numbered 13,278 in the Surma Valley and 1,18,778 in the Brahmaputra Valley. There were 6,563 Buddhists, majority of whom were the inhabitants of the Brahmaputra Valley and 158 Jains.

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7 Ibid., p. 35.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
who came from Rajputana mainly for trading. Of the total Christian people of 7,693, the number of the European and Eurasian was 1,631 and natives 5,462. Jainism and Christianity entered Assam only after the coming of the English.

The society of pre-British Assam was comprised of the population majority of whom belonged to the Hindu fold. They included the Brahmins, Kavasthas, Vaidyas, Ganakas, Kalitas, Kaibartas, Koote, Doms (Nadial), Maris, Kamars, Kumars, Malis, Phul-Malis, Talis and some others. Besides, there were also some tribes and sub-tribes, who were either Hinduised or in the process of Hinduisation. They included the Chutiyas, the Ahoms, the pre-British ruling people of Assam, the plains Miris, Deoris, Kacharis, Rabhas and the plains Mikirs.

10 Ibid., p. 39.
11 Ibid., p. 39.
The Brahmins, being the highest caste in the Hindu society, had enjoyed considerable influence and respect among the Hindus. They acted as the priests in temples and conducted other religious functions. But being more orthodox in their outlook, they observed caste distinctions more rigidly than other people. They laid great emphasis on obedience, devotion, duty and unquestioned respect to the traditional institutions and customs and manners. Marriage with other castes was strictly prohibited among them. So rigid was their position that even among themselves they made some distinctions on the basis of locality or region in which they lived. For instance the matrimonial relations between the Soumariya Brahmins or the Brahmins settled in Upper Assam and those of the Kamrupi Brahmins, or the Brahmins of Lower Assam were forbidden by customs. In the same way, the Brahmins in southern bank of the

13 G.B., p.176.
Brahmaputra considered themselves separate in their status from those in the north bank. The Brahmins known as Kadi Brahmins, a section of Brahmins who paid tax to the state, were considered by others of the same caste as degenerated and hence made no social relations with them. All of them, however, strictly observed restrictions in eating and drinking and did not take food cooked by persons belonging to other castes. Even a Brahmin girl of very orthodox family, after her marriage, was not allowed to eat cooked food in her parent's house on the ground of losing the purity which she acquired through the marriage ceremony. To protect the purity of their caste, they often carried all the requirements, from food to utensils, when they made any tour.

15 Ibid., p.89.
16 This is recorded by Lakshminath Bezbaruah in Amar Jiban Smriti, p.57, an event which occurred in the case of his own sister.
17 A.D.P.J.C., p.35.
caste restrictions is also indicated in some inscriptions of the later Ahom rulers. For instance, in an inscription issued by the king Siva Singha (1714–44), it is recorded that the king appointed two Kulin Brahmin paiks to replace akulin Brahmin paik. This indicate the existence of caste rigidity among the Brahmins of Assam.

Not only this, earlier during the reign of king Rudra Singha (1696–1714), the Brahmins challenged the authority of the Sudra Mahantas of the Vaishnava sects to initiate the people of the Brahmin caste. Seven Mahantas took up the challenge but as they failed to produce any scriptures and shastras in support of their claim, they were punished and the king proclaimed that in future no Sudra Mahanta should initiate the Brahmins. Those who had already been initiated were asked to be re-initiated by the Brahmin Gossains. The Brahmins alone had the right to read the

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Hindu *shastras* and other religious books. The sons of the Brahmin families were not allowed to learn any foreign languages like Persian, and Arabic as the learning of other languages was considered by them as loosing one's caste who would forfeit the right to perform the funeral ceremony of his parents and to offer *pinda* to their ancestors.  

Next to the Brahmins were the Ganakas and the Kayasthas. Ganakas were the astrologers and they observed all the rites and customs of the Brahmanical faith. The Kayasthas of Assam also occupied an important position in the society. Sri Sri Sankar Deva, the preacher of Neo-Vaisnavism in Assam, was a Sudra. After him many other *Vaisnava Mahantas* also came from this caste. According to Haliram Dhekial Phukan the number of the Kayastha in Upper Assam was very few and in Lower Assam only three to four hundred families of this caste existed and unlike the

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Brahmins, the Kayasthas of Soumer and Kamrupa had social relations. The Kayasthas in Assam observed all the customs of the Hindu society.

Kalitas were regarded as high caste next to the Brahmins, Ganakas and Kayasthas. They were perhaps the first people of Aryan origin to colonise in Assam. Before the introduction of the Brahmanical faith in this land, the Kalitas served as the religious priests. After the coming of the Brahmins, they, being deposed of their position, gradually turned into an agricultural community and sub-divided into two divisions, the Bar-Kalita and the Saru-Kalita. The Saru-Kalita had some divisions according to their works such as Mali (gardener), Kamar (blacksmith), Kumar (potter), Sonari (gold-smith), aosolia (boat-makers) etc. Though generally the Bar-Kalitas considered them-

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21 Haliram Dhekial Phukan, *op. cit.*, p. 87.
selves to be higher in status than the Saru-Kalitas and so did not wed-locked with later, but among those functional sub-division no such rigidity was prevalent. The Kaibartas and Keota were again sub-divided as Haloes i.e. cultivator and Jalore i.e. fisher-man. The fisher-man were considered as low in position than that of the cultivators.

In the society of Assam, besides the Brahmins, the Kayasthas and Ganakas were also observing the Hindu rites and customs to some extent rigidly. So pre-puberty marriage within the caste, bar on widow re-marriage were also prevalent. But the other inferior castes like Dom, Hari, Chandals and those tribes, who entered into the Hindu fold through conversion, did not observe the customs and manners rigidly. There was no child marriage, no bar on widow re-marriage, and their females were enjoying more liberty than of the higher castes. But they accepted the superiority of the higher castes as customs and did not hesitate to show due respect to them. Restrictions of castes, drinking and eating were taken by the people as a
Inspite of this traditional division of the Assamese Hindu society, according to birth and heredity, it had some characteristics of its own which were not found in other parts of India. In Assam neither the one caste nor the other are very rigidly observant of the high caste principles and a greater latitude and toleration amongst them is observed than in other parts of India. The professional castes and sub-castes like Kamar, Kumar, Mali, Haloa, Jaloa, Tal, Tati, etc. were not strictly dependent on their own profession for their livelihood. In Assam every man possessed some amount of land which was the main source of his subsistence. The paik system of the Ahoms actually turned the mass people, including the professional classes, into agriculturists as each paik was assigned two puras of tax-free land for the maintenance of his family. In other parts

24 John M. Cosh, Topography of Assam, p. 21.
of India weaving was a profession but in Assam it was universal to all sections. The separate weaving caste known as Tati catered the needs of the royal house only. Each family, high or low, rich or poor, had at least one loom and the female members of the family wove cloth for the members of the family. 26 The people of Assam built their own houses and produced almost all their requirements locally. By and large people were non-vegetarian. Even the Brahmins and the people of the Vaishava persuasion took fish and meat. 27 Caste restrictions obtained in those days only in the matter of eating and drinking, but these never interfered with the exchange of the neighbourly good or with loving services of the lower or untouchable castes by the higher castes during disease, death or difficulties. 28

Other rigidities of the Hindu society which prevailed in some parts of India like polygamy, Kulinism, paranda system and restrictions on the free movement of women were not prevalent amongst other castes of the Hindu society except those of the high castes. Even among the high caste people such practices could not reach its extreme form. Polygamy was rarely found and the sati was quite unknown in Assam.

Such liberalism in the Hindu society of Assam was mainly due to two factors. Firstly its geographical isolation that acted as an obstruction in maintaining a close touch with the same society in other parts of India; and secondly, the majority of the people of Assam belonged to non-Aryan and non-Hindu origin, and Assam was ruled, for a long period, by the Ahoms, a non-Aryan people of Tai origin. Apart from these two factors, the Vaisnava movement of Sri Sri Sankar Deva also helped much in constituting a liberal society in Assam.

The non-Hindu population constituted of the Muslims and different groups of animistic tribes, The
Muslims, as estimated by William Robinson as early as fourties of the nineteenth century, constituted of about a sixth part of the total population 8,00,000, majority of whom found in Lower Assam. Being cut-off from other Muslims in India, and surrounded by the Hindus and tribal peoples, the Muslims in Assam are Assamese in their habits and Mahammadans but in name. In some areas, they, instead of erecting any mosque, performed their prayer in a house like the Assamese Namghar. As their villages were rarely visited by any saint of their faith, there was non to explain to them about the key-note of the Koran. As a result, they gradually deviated from their original faith. As such, they follow no rule, but that of their

29 William Robinson, op. cit., p. 252.
32 Ibid., p. 5.
own inclination," that grew up due to the influence of their Hindu neighbours. Some of them became experts in playing musical instruments and group song like Olhapali, and were often invited by the Hindus during marriage ceremony to perform their music. Some of the Muslims even worshipped Mother Goddess Manasa, Chandi, and others, and in Mongoldoi area they left the habit of eating beef. A Muslim tailor named Chand Khan became a disciple of Sri Sri Sankar Deva, the founder of the Neo-Vaisnavism in Assam, who composed a number of religious songs.

The aboriginal tribes like the Garos, Nagas, Mikirs, Mishmis, Kacharis, Khasis, and Jayantias, who were not Hinduised, had their separate culture. The division

of the society—on birth and heredity was absent in their society. They were divided into separate clans, based on common ancestor, and marriage within the same clan was not allowed. A clan consisted of either the families of mother's side or that of father's side. In Assam both matrilineal and patrilineal clans were found among the tribes. In case of matrilineal clans, all the off-springs of one woman were held to be members of one clan. Even the sisters and brothers of the same woman are also members of this clan, but it did not include the children.

of the brothers. The Khasis belong to this group. In the case of patrilineal clans the man, his children, brothers, sisters and the children of his brothers, but not those of the sisters, were included.

The non-Hindu society was totally free from the caste system of the Hindus. No restrictions on eating and drinking existed in their society. Only some extra benefits and privileges were enjoyed by the priests, the chiefs and the warriors of the village. In functions and feasts the priest first took their share of meat and rice-bear and the persons who performed the social *ganna* acquired the right to increase the share of the meat at feast and function. 39 The priest, chief and warriors wore a distinct dress and this distinction was only to maintain their

dignity. A Naga warrior dressed with a "collar round the neck reaching to the waist, made of goat's hair, dyed red, inter-mixed with long flowing locks of hair of the persons he had killed and ornamented with cowrie shells." The kilt embroidered with three lines of cowries were put on by the warrior and the dress with four lines were used by old and distinguished persons. No other persons were allowed to put on this dress of honour unless he had killed many of his enemies and brought home their heads. Unlike the Hindus, priest-hood was not hereditary among the tribes and also not for the individual family but for the community as a whole and villages. They performed the sacrifices for the welfare of the state and community at large. Consequently, the priest could not be powerful

40 J. Butler, op. cit., p. 82.
42 Gurdon, op. cit., p. 120; Sidney Endle, op. cit., p. 39; Playfair, Th- Garos, Gauhati, 1975 (1909), p. 98.
in the society nor could occupy and exalted position as
they achieved in the Hindu social life.

The Ahoms, the ruling people in Assam, though were
partially incorporated into the Hindu society, was not given
a superior place in the Hindu social life, but being the
ruling power, could achieve the supreme place in the social
division of the people according to status, power and dignity
of the post. A form of class system existed. There was the
nobility who formed the upper class, and the distinction
between the common people and the higher class was also
maintained by imposing some restrictions on ornaments, dress,
transport, sitting accommodation and type of building. A man
of the lower status was not permitted to sit in front of a
person of a higher class. 43 On dress also distinctions were

43 Haliram Dhekial Phukan, op.cit., p.57; K.C. Bordoloi,
Sadar Aminar Atmajiveni, by Harakanta Sarma Baruah,
North Gauhati 1960, pp.73, 143, 145.
made from the upper strata to the common people. Ordinary people could not wear certain types of dresses and ornaments. An upper garment called uttariva or chadar could be used by the upper class people folding it on the right shoulder and a person of low birth could put on it on special occasion by folding it on the left shoulder and not on the right. The silk dress and garment embroidered with golden thread were used by the people according to their status and dignity in their society. Head-gear, turban or paguri was tied by the people of the rank. Like-wise, the right to wear shoes and to use umbrellas were enjoyed by the royal family and the aristocracy only.

44 Haliram Dhekiai Phukan, op.cit., pp.57-58.
In the use of transport restrictions were also imposed on the people. In the absence of wheeled carriage in Assam before 1826, elephant, horse, boat, and palanquin were the means of transport and communication. But not all could use these conveyances. The common people were not allowed to travel on elephant and the right to travel in a palanquin was also granted to the nobility only, and for honourable permission that was granted to them, they had to pay Rs. 1000 to the king. Similar restrictions were also imposed in the construction of houses. The gable-roofed house and houses with two round ends were the monopoly of the royal families and the nobilities could build their houses with only one round end.

48 J. Butler, *op. cit.*, p. 223. This practice was to be seen towards the closing days of the Ahom rule.

Apart from this, the priestly classes occupied a high place in the society. They "hold the first place in point of dignity and clothed with terror of religion are regarded by other classes with deep veneration". 50

Thus in the society of Assam both class and caste system existed. In the Hindu society the Brahmins, being the superior castes, occupied a high status and the nobility and the royal families, being the high class, not only occupied a high dignity but also enjoyed certain privileges in the society.

Family: In Assam, as in other Hindu society of India, the joint family was the normal pattern of among the Hindus. It was composed of father, mother, their sons, daughter-in-law, grandsons, grand-daughters. Sometimes, widow daughter

50 William Robinson, A Descriptive Account of Assam, p. 260.
who came back to her parent's house with her children, if any, after the death of her husband, became a member of the family. The father was the head of the family. All the members of the family lived under one roof and ate food cooked at one hearth and shared the pleasure and grief of the family jointly.

The father was the owner of the property. After the death of the father the sons inherited the property.

Among some tribes, the sons and daughters after attaining certain age (seven in case of Naga boy), left their parents house and slept in a bachelor's house called morung and only after their marriage they left this morung and went to live with his bride in the house.

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51 Pratap Chandra Choudhury "Prak Ahom Jugar Asamiya Samaj", Asamiya Sanskriti, compiled by Hariprasad Neog and Lila Gogoi, Gauhati, 1975, p. 56.

52 G.B., p. 201.

This morung was not only the sleeping place for the youth, but also served as a training centre to train the young boys and girls to lead a good family and social life. Among the Nagas after the marriage of each son, the parents along with other members of the family shifted to a new house, which was built with the help of other people of the clan, and the newly married couple lived in the old one. After the marriage of all sons the parents according to their own accord, might live alone or with the eldest son or with any other sons. After the marriage of a girl the Khasi family, she and her husband lived with her mother but after the birth of one or two children the husband


could come out of his mother-in-law's family by building a new house of his own. 55

In Assam, with the exception of few tribes, the family system was based on patriarchy, where father was the head of the family and owner of all the properties, which could be inherited by the males. The ancestry in such family belonged to the male.

The Garos and the Khasis were the best examples of matriarchal family system. In a Khasi or a Garo family mother was the source and bond of union of the family. She was owner of the property and through her alone inheritance transmitted. The children of a matriarchal family belonged to their mother's clan. 57 In the Khasi society earnings of the father went to his own matriarchal stock and at his death his bones were deposited in the cromtech of his mother's clan kin. The flat memorial

56 Gurdon, op.cit., p.17.
57 Ibid., p.76; Playfair, op.cit., p.71.
stone that was set up to preserve the memory of the
dead was called after the name of the women who represented
the clan and the stones kept vertically behind it was
offered to the male kinsmen on the mother's side.\textsuperscript{58}

The Rabha and the Mikir families indicated a
transmission from matriarchy to patriarchy. Among them
the father was the owner of the property and the
inheritance went to the male members of the family
but they took the mother's clan and not that of father's.\textsuperscript{59}

Position of the women:,

Women in Assam were held in very high
esteem in the society and suffered from no social
disability, and enjoyed considerable freedom in their
social life." Many women in more civilised parts of

\textsuperscript{58} Gurdon, \textit{op.cit.}, p.17.

\textsuperscript{59} E.Stack, \textit{The Mikirs}, p.10.
India may well envy the women of the Naga Hills, their high status and their free and happy life; and if you measure the cultural level of a people by the social position and personal freedom of its women, you will think twice before looking down on the Nagas as savages." Though Christoph Von- Furer-Haimendorf wrote these words about the women of the Naga Hills, this can well be applied for the women of Assam in general of both the hills and the plains.

The society, excepting few orthodox castes, did not erect any high wall of seclusion around their women. "They both in early life and as matrons enjoyed a large measure of freedom, a freedom which as rarely abused for evil purposes". Except in a few high castes and classes

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61 Endla, op.cit.,p.22.
no *parda* system existed in the society in Assam. As in the words of John McCosh, "The Women go about in public quite divested of that artificial modesty practised by native ladies in other parts of India". 62 Endle also wrote in the same vein "On being spoken to on the way-side, the Kachari women will generally reply at once with absolute frankness looking the questioner straight in the face and yet with the most perfect modesty". The liberty to select their mates of life was also granted to the women of Assam, excluding those of the higher class and caste. 64 Amongst the general people divorce was accepted

63 Endle, *op.cit.* p.22.
as social law and after divorce men and women both were free to marry again. Except those of the high caste of the Hindu society widow remarriage was prevalent in the society. Similarly child-marriage and polygamy were rare among the low caste and quite unknown among the tribes. This freedom that was enjoyed by the women of Assam and the absence of rigidity and abuses, that were not found in the Aryan Society of other parts of India, lessened the sufferings and distress of the women of Assam.

Females of Assam had always an important role in the economy of the family. Women of Assam, irrespective of their caste, creed, and social position were expert in weaving. They span the thread, dyed the

66 Soppitt, op.cit.,p.35; Endle, op.cit.,p.29; Playfair, op.cit.,p.69; Gurdon, op.cit.,p.76.

67 P.C.,Choudhury, Prak-Ahom Jugar Asamiya Samaj, p.59; Padmadhar Saikia, op.cit.,p.5; E. Stack, op.cit.,p.10; Gurdon, op.cit.,p.76; Soppitt, op.cit.,p.34.
thread and wove for all the members of the family. Weaving constituted the most essential part of a girl's education and the ignorance in this art was considered as a great discredit and disqualification at the time of her selection as bride.

In Assam labour was divided unequally between men and women. Skillful in rearing of crops, transplanting the paddy, seeding and reaping the harvest when ripe, the women of Assam helped the men in cultivation.

Among the low caste Hindus and some of the tribes of Assam, women caught fish with net and other implements. George M. Barker, while travelling by boat in Assam, observed, "The most curious representatives of the fishing class are the old women, who were to be seen near every station,

70 Endle, *op. cit.*, p. 70; Playfair, *op. cit.*, pp. 34-35.
standing up to their waists in water armed with a weapon very much like an ordinary small sized shrimping net. This they put down into the water in front of them retaining hold of the pole with both hands. When they feel actively disposed the net is brought up to the surface with varying success. Among some people women also made the row pots and also helped the men in placing those pots on the shelf over the fire.

The women of Assam fetched water from river or spring, looked after their children, cooked food, trained her children for their future life, wove cloth for the entire family, nursed her husband and other members of her family, helped her husband in the field and participated in all the functions of the family and the village. In this

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72 G.M. Barker, op. cit., p.63.

73 J.P. Mills, *The Re Naga Tribes*, p.94; *The Range Naga Tribes*, p.68; *The Lehta Naga Tribes*, p.41.
way the women of Assam held the helm of the family. They were dispenser of the whole welfare of the family.

Singing and dancing was the part and parcel of the cultural and social life of Assam. They, at the time of festival, participated in dancing and singing along with the males of the village. Among the Hindus, a class of women, well-known as Natia, acted as dancers in the temples. 74

The women of Assam were not lacking behind in politics. Among the women who played important role in the socio-political life of the people, were Phuleswari Kowri, Mulagabhore and Joymati. Mulagabhore sacrificed her life fighting against the enemy in the battle field and Joymati embraced martyrdom for the establishment of political stability of her mother land by protecting the

the life of her husband, Gadapani.

Thus the women of Assam had enjoyed a distinct place in the political, cultural, religious and economic life of the country. However, the door of education, except for a few women of high class, was closed for them. General people considered the knowledge of reading and writing of the girls as a disqualification, at the time of marriage. The female education was regarded in the society not only as unbecoming but also unsuspicious that "makes a girl *dusia* (bad)." Skill in weaving, cooking, and husking of paddy was considered as greater accomplishments in a girl, which qualified the girl of Assam to be a good house-wife.

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75 G.B., p.199.


77 Papers and Resolutions of the American Baptist Mission Union Jubily Conference, 1886, pp.73, 186.
Food:

Rice was the staple food of the people of both plains and hills. Vegetables included different varieties of beans, climbers, pumpkin, gourd, spinach, bamboo shoot, the esculent creeper and roots, yams, sorrel and different kinds of ferns and fungoids. The favourite curry of the people, specially of Lower Assam, was the alkaline preparation called khar obtained from the plaintain tree and some water herbs used as a substitute for salt. Sour curry with fish was also a favourite dish for the people of Assam.

The people of Assam was non-vegetarian in their food habits. Even the Brahmins and the Vaisnavs also

78 Haliram Dhakial Phukan, _op. cit._, p.104; G.B., p.2; Playfair, _op. cit._, p.50; Gurdon, _op. cit._, p.51; Endle, _op. cit._, pp.15-16; Soppitt, _op. cit._, p.17; E.Stack, _op. cit._, p.13.


80 _Ibid._, p.104; _Ibid._
took fish and meat.\textsuperscript{81} Some restrictions regarding the
eating of meat was, however, observed by the people. Meat
of foul and cow was considered by the Hindus as impure
and not to speak of eating even the touching of their
meat was considered to be out-casted.\textsuperscript{82} Generally, the
Hinduised people of tribal origin did not take the flesh
of these animals which were forbidden to the Hindus.\textsuperscript{83}

Food restrictions were observed during the
period of penance, uncleanliness due to death of a relative
or on the occasions like \textit{sankranti}, \textit{sk	exttilde{d}asi} and other
religious functions. On such occasions Hindus used to
take vegetarian food, fruits, milk, etc.\textsuperscript{84}

Sugar was not used by the common people. The \textit{padi}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{81} \textit{Ibid.}; \textit{Ibid.}

\textsuperscript{82} Lakshminath Bezbarash, \textit{Amar Jiban Smriti}, New Delhi, 1975,
p. 19.

\textsuperscript{83} Soppitt, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 17.

\textsuperscript{84} \textit{GGB.}, p. 202.
\end{flushright}
of the chanisaliya khel prepared sugar for the use of the royal kitchen. The mass people prepared qwd (molasses) from sugar-cane. They also prepared various cakes with pounded powdered rice. The milk and the milk made food was taken by the people of the plains but not by the tribes.

Amongst the aboriginal tribes there was nothing which was not in the list of food of the people of Assam, only some restrictions were observed according to some taboo. The Mikirs and the Kacharis did not eat the flesh of the cow. In same way dog was forbidden as food to the Khasis and cat to the Nagas. Among the latter the flesh of a forktail with white head was not eaten by the

85 Haliram Dhekial Phukan, Assam Buranjí, p.104.
87 E. Gait, A History of Assam, p.294.
young men as they believed that they would become
pre-maturely old if they ate it. Meat of the he-goat
was prohibited to the women on the ground that they
would acquire the treacherous propensity of the he-goat.
They were also not allowed to eat the meat of the monkey
as they believed that women who got the paddy for house-
hold consumption of paddy would be excessive.

The Khasis used to eat the inner portion of
the bark of the *saga* palm tree. Its bark was dried in
the sun, and then pounded to obtain a reddish flour of
sweet taste which was boiled with rice or prepared cakes
and puddings. Among the Kacharis, the curry of white-ants
were considered as a great luxury.

91 J. P. Mills, *The Rangma Nagas*, p. 110; *The Ao Nagas*, p. 44.
93 Soppitt, *op. cit.*, p. 17.
Fish was the common dish to the people of both the hills and the plains. Dried fish was very favourite dish to almost all the tribes of Assam. ⁹⁴

During the later part of the Ahom rule delicious dishes of the Mughal India were introduced in Assam but these remained confined to the upper section of the royal family and high official of the society only.

The chewing of betel-nut and pepper vine was the most favourite and common to the people of Assam. "The people of Assam," as commented by Haliram Dhekial Phukan and Gunabhiram Barua," could spend a day without meal but not without tali which was the unavoidable part of their food." ⁹⁵ Tobacco was smoked by the people of both hills and plains. Pipe made of bamboo and wood were used to


The Kacharis rolled up the tobacco into a leaf and smoked like cheroot. In the plains huka made of bamboo or wood and coconut shell was used to smoke tobacco. The coconut shell was used as water chamber.

Opium is said to have been first brought to Assam during Captain Walsh's mission to Assam in 1792 at the request of the Ahom king Cowrinath Singha to suppress the Bengal Burkandazes and Krishnanarayan, the rebel prince of Darrang, and the Moamarias. Gradually the inhabitants of Assam became habituated in this drug and began to cultivate it.

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97 Soppitt, loc. cit., p. 17.


99 A. D. P. J. C., p. 5; J. Butler, op. cit., p. 246.
The drinking of milk among the tribes was not prevalent, but drinking of liquor was the part and parcel of their social, cultural and daily life. Every family prepared rice bear for their daily use. To show respect and hospitality to the guests they offered rice bear.

Dress:

The ordinary dress of the male of the plain's people normally consisted of a piece of cloth known as dhuti which was worn round the waist with folds in the front and was put on above the knee. But at the time of festival, people generally wore this attire just below the knee. An upper garment called chador was used.

100 Gurdon, op. cit., p. 15; Playfair, op. cit., p. 52; E. Stack, op. cit., p. 12; Endle, op. cit., p. 15.
during the winter. A person who put on a cloth called as *uttariya* folded on the right shoulder indicated his high rank and status in the society. Such person also wore a head dress known as *maauri*.

The dress of the women of the plains was consisted of three pieces of cloths—a lower garment called *makhela*, usually of cotton or muslin, was worn round the waist. Another piece called *riha* was fastened above the breast reaching to the waist and the third one was a *chadar*, one end of which was put on round the waist over the *makhela* and the other end was placed across the breast and left shoulder behind. The *chadar* was generally used by


104 Ibid.

105 Ibid.
the women on ceremonial occasion and after the marriage used as vail. Wearing of the vail and the tilaka of sindur (a mark of vermilion) on the fore-head between the eye-brows indicated that the woman was married. 106

Garments put on by the Bodo-Kacharis and Rabhas, who were influenced by the people of the plains were like that of their attire. Over and above this dress they also wore a sleeveless jacket. 107

Dress of the different tribes varied from tribe to tribe. The Khasi male dressed themselves with a cloth round the waist. One end of this cloth passing between the legs knotted in the back side of the waist and the other end folded and hanged down in front like the people of the plains. 108 They wore a sleeveless coat called jymphone.

106 Ibid., p.354.

107 Rajen Rabha, Rabha Janajati, Asam Sahitya Sabha, Jorhat, 1974, p.28; Soppitt, op.cit., p.16.

which was decorated with a fringe in the button and with a row of tassel across the chest and fastened in front. They put on a cap with flaps on the ears. The caps used by them were generally black in colour, sometimes with a thick coating of grease. The elderly men wore white turban. The attire of the Mikir males was like that of the Khasis. The garment of the Garo males was stripes of blue cloth interwoven with red lines called gando which was six inches wide and about two to three metres long. This piece of cloth wore round the waist. One edge measuring about 46 cms. often decorated with several rows of beads made of conch shell, was hanged in front, while the other side of the gando passing between the two

109 Gurdon, op. cit., p. 18.
110 Ibid.
111 Ibid.
112 Ibid.
113 Playfair, op. cit., p. 22.
lags wore round the waist and tucked at the behind.  \(^{114}\)
The Caras also used turban made of dark blue or white cotton cloth. They did not, however, cover the top of their head with the turban and wore round the line with the brow. \(^{115}\)
Turban made of red Assam silk with an ornamental fringe was put on by a person who was a nokma or laskar. \(^{116}\)
In the winter they wore a cotton cloth or a wraper over their shoulder. \(^{117}\)

The dress of Naga men differed from clan to clan. Some of the interior Nagas went naked. The only dress they wore was a narrow ribbon bound tightly on their waist. \(^{118}\) The Sema, the Angami, the Lohta, the Ao all used a piece of cloth which was decorated with cowries, conch

\(^{114}\) Playfair, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 24.
\(^{115}\) Ibid., p. 25.
\(^{116}\) Ibid.
\(^{117}\) Ibid.
\(^{118}\) Von Furer-Haimendorf, \textit{The Naked Nagas}, p. 77.
shall and dog's hair of scarlet colour, having stripes of different colours, like red, blue, white, yellow and black, differed from clan to clan, tribe to tribe.\textsuperscript{119}

They also wore another cloth rounding his left shoulder. The dress of the Angami males consisted of blue or black kilt embellished with cowrie-shells.

The number of the cowries line embroidered in that kilt indicated the status and position of the person who wore it.\textsuperscript{120} They also tied a belt round the waist and a brown cloth made of the bark of the nettle plant was put on over the shoulders. An Angami warrior wore a special collar round the neck reaching to the waist which was made of goat's hair, dyed red, intermixed with long bunch of hairs.

\textsuperscript{119} J. P. Mills, \textit{The Rangma Nagas}, p. 20; \textit{The Lohta Nagas}, p. 8; W. C. Smith, London, 1925, \textit{The Lohta Naga Tribes}, pp. 16-17

\textsuperscript{120} Major J. Butler, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 145
of the persons he had killed and decorated with couriashells. A person who had killed many of his enemies and successfully abled to bring their heads only acquired the right to wear this insignia of honour.\textsuperscript{121}

The dress of the women of the tribes was also varied. The Khasi female garment was a cloth called \textit{K-Jympian} put on round the body and fastened at the loins with a belt and reached to the knee. Over this they wore a long two pieces of attires called \textit{Ka-Jainsen} which were knotted on two shoulders letting it be hanged loosely from the shoulders down to the ankles. Over all these cloths they used another dress known as \textit{Ka-Jaismen} which was thrown over the shoulders like a clock, the two edges being knotted in front. I hanged loosely down the back stretched

\textsuperscript{121} \textit{Ibid}.
upto ankle. In the winter season they used a shawl.\(^{122}\)
The Mikir women wore a petticoat which was tied round the waist by an ornamental girdle and the upper portion of the body was covered with a wrapper which was worn under the arms and fastened tightly over the breasts.\(^{123}\)
The dress of the Garo women consisted of a piece of cloth with about eighteen inches broad and just long enough to gird her waist like a petticoat. They often used a shawl to wrap the upper portion of their body. The Naga women also used a cloth round their waist with varieties of designs and colours.\(^{125}\)

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122 Gurdon, *The Khasis*, p. 19
The people of the Hills used generally cloth made of cotton. In the plains the muga cloth was used by all sections of the people in all seasons. Edi cloths were used as garments during the winter season. Attire made of pat silk was put on by the women of the higher section and by the men at the time festivals.

On ceremonial occasions, the people of the plains generally used new garments made of muga and pat silk and often embroidered with various designs. The Garo women wore marang-lasku made of dyed Assam silk round the body passing under right arm and tied in a knot on the left shoulder reaching down the knee. The Garo males dressed themselves in a black cloth which was worn round the body under the arms and lacked across with

126 Haliram Dhekial Phukan, Assam Buranji, p. 106.
127 Ibid.
bands of white cotton. This cloth reached up to the waist.
At the time of dancing the Garo male and female wore on their head circlets of bamboo or stiffened cloth ornamented with rows of white beads and cock's and hornbill's feathers.

The Khasis wore maximum ornaments made of gold and beads at the time of gala. At the time of dancing, they adorned themselves with a cap made of gold or silver, which was peculiar to them only. About six inches up above the cap a peak or spike stood at the back of it and from where long silver tassels hanged down the back. The men ornamented themselves with large gold pendants of a circular or oval shape and a silver collar hanged down over the neck in front and also a white turban. 129

128 Playfair, op. cit., p. 27.
129 Gurdon, op. cit., p. 22.
The Nagas on ceremonial occasions in addition to their ordinary dress ornamented themselves with hairs from a bear's neck, cane, cotton wool, hornbill's feathers, scarlet wool, dog's hair, goat's hair, human hair, cowries.

Hair dressing:

The women of Assam kept long hair and knotted on the back. The Naga Girls shaved their hair till they attained the age of twelve or fourteen, the age that considered to be marriagable and from that age they were allowed to let their hair be long.

Among the Hindus some people of the high caste used to keep long hair, knotted at back while others cut their hair. But the Brahmins kept a long tail which

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was also tied on a knot at back. The Kachari both male and female kept long hair and knotted it at back. The Sema, the Ao, the chans and Rangma Naga men cut their hair in a cleat line round the head about an inch or two above the ear and shaving below this line allowed the hair to grow long up to this line. The hair style of the Tungkhul Nagas was to cut their hair back at sides leaving a point in front which looked like a cock's comb. The Konyak Nagas kept long tail at the back sometimes reaching to the ground which was tied round with a cloth and knotted it at the back.

132 A.D.P.J.C., p.42
133 Scoppitt, op.cit., p.15.
135 Ibid.
Ornaments: Like the womenfolk of elsewhere, the women of Assam too were very fond of ornaments. The women of Assam generally used the ornaments made of gold and silver. Some even wore the ornaments made of brass and other metals. According to some writer the Kachari women did not wear the ornaments made of gold. The tribal women also used feathers, cane, conch-shell, beads, cowries, elephant's tusk, flowers and various stone as ornaments.

Of the ornaments used by the females of Assam mention may be made of kara (necklace), galpata (a flat necklace), kharu (bracelet), Karu and angoda.

136 Ibid., p. 115.
137 Soppitt, op.cit., p. 16.
(wore on the upper arms), Kankan (bracelet), Kundala (ear rings), chandra-har, bakar-pata Kharu, Gejra Kharu, makam kundal, baju, ring etc. The women of the plains did not use any ornament in their legs and nose.

Education:

The division of the Hindu society on the basis of caste produced gradations and differences in the social life of the people and this had its reflections on education. The educational institutions like tol and pathsala that existed was under the control of the superior caste and low castes had no entrance to it, as a teacher or a student. The Hindu society in the plains of Assam was not an exception to that. So in

140 Ibid.
the pre-British Assam, as usual the door of education was not open to all. The mass people had no access to the benefits of education in tol and pathsala run by gurus. The medium of instruction was Sanskrit language and the curriculum was the religious scriptures and Sanskrit literature.

Though formal education was restricted to a few high castes, the common had to remain beyond the pale of literary education, the Vaisnava satras and namgharas served as centres of the spread of social, if not literary, education. In those days, Vaisnava satras also served the purpose of library in Assam. Not simply the Vaisnava literature, but also of other literature were also collected and preserved in those satras.

The Gosains and the Mahantas of the satras recited and illustrated portions from those books in simple language to the people assembled there every evening. Besides, bhaona, a sort of theatrical performance was performed in those satras through which also the people got the light of education. In this way, the namohars and satras became centres of vocational training of the mass people. It contributed greatly to diffuse the basic education of the general people. Singing, playing on musical instruments, arts, crafts, all kinds of vocational training were given in those satras and namohars. The satras and namohars thus imparted true education to the mass people to lead a good and happy life.

Amongst the tribes the morung, or the dormitory of the youths served the function of a school for training in folklore, song, dance, sports and games, discipline, hard work, spirit of community service and a resilience in all

144 Birinchi Kumar Barua, Assamiya Bhasa Aty Sanskriti, Gauhati, 1957, p.135.
In Assam although there was no technical school in pre-British period in the modern sense of term, the youth got practical training in many arts and crafts. The traditional kanar (blacksmith), kumar (potter), sonari (goldsmith), teli (oil pressurer), kehar (bell-metal worker) manufactured the different articles of requirement of the people and the young got training in these crafts, in their own family. In Assam all the family had their own loom and the women of Assam wove their own cloth. The girls acquired this art from their mother. Moma Tamuli Barbaruah during the reign of Swargodeo Pratap Singha (1603-1641) reorganised the villages on professional line.  

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Apart from this, the division of the *paiks* into *khal*, with distinct profession to perform, provided them the scope to learn the technic of manufacture. 147

Likewise there was no school for medical studies and it was also confined within the families of the *Bez* who made treatment of the diseases by applying various herbal medicine. The house of the *Bez* or *ojha* was the centre of training. The disciple had to stay in the house of a *Bez* and to help him in collecting the plants and in preparing the medicine and in this way got the practical training of the method of treatment. Some *Bez* resorted to *mantras* and magic and taught the learners in the theoretical study of *mantras* and magic. 148

147 Lila Baisai, *Tai Sanskritir Rup Rakha*, p. 138
148 Ibid., p. 139.
Veterinary science was also not unknown in Assam. The books like Hastividvamavata, Ghora Nidhan, Shvanar Puthi proved that the people of Assam had good knowledge of the treatment of their animals.

Professions:

Though a number of castes and sub-castes based on their occupation like Ganaka (astrologer), Kamer (blacksmith), Kumar (potter), Kahar (bell-metal worker), Sonari (gold-smith), Teli (oil-pressuer), Mali (gardener), Haloo (cultivator), Jalee (fisher-man), existed in the society, but extreme rigidity in the division of profession according to castes was not followed in the Brahmaputra Valley. This liberality in profession was due to the very composite nature of the society. Under

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149 Ibid., p. 140.
the Ahom administration, all the male individual known as paik, were brought under a khel with distinct work like arrow making, boat making, supplying of necessary articles for the royal kitchen etc. For the maintenance of their family, each individual male got two puras of tax free land. So they had to accept some profession under a khel only to serve the state and the king but not for the support of their family. Hence agriculture was the main profession of the people.

Among the tribal people, though the paik and khel systems was not prevalent, but they were also self-sufficient in their economy and mainly depended on agriculture. Thus in Assam the people "cultivated rice, pulses, fruits, vegetables to supply in their dishes, mustard to light their house, silk, cotton to provide their garments". 150

In Assam separate weaver caste was not prevalent in the society. In the later part of the Ahom rule, some weavers were imported and settled them permanently in the kingdom but they wove for the royal family only. In Assam every woman, irrespective of caste and creed, high and low classes, rich and poor, knew the art of weaving, dying and embroidery. Each family had their own loom and they wove cloth for all the members of the family. \(^{151}\)

The people of Assam built their own houses. If any person expressed his inability to erect his own house or cultivate his land alone, sought the help of his neighbours, they gladly extended their services, and in return of which they were entertained with meal. \(^{152}\) Those

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\(^{151}\) Haliram Dhekial Phukan, *op.cit.*, p.98.

who did not know the art of manufacturing the necessary articles like pottery, they collected those things from others in exchange of other commodities of their productions. 153

Economically, the region was predominantly self-sufficient. Local production was almost locally consumed. The people, who were satisfied with the humblest of food, plainest of clothes and smallest of habitations had little interest in trade. 154 Whatever little trade existed it was through barter of commodities. Hence what they produced and manufactured it was for local consumption. under the Ahom regim whatever trade existed with the neighbouring country, particularly with Bengal, it was conducted through an official known as Duaria Barua


154 A.J. Maffatt Mills, op.cit., Appendix J.
resided at the Assam Choky. The Ahom rulers were very careful of the foreign traders and did not allow them into the interior of the country or to settle in Assam least they would create troubles in the country. Goalpara, Jorighopa and Rangamati were the three important centres from where the trade and commerce with Bengal and Assam was conducted through the Duria Barua.

The articles exported from Assam to Bengal included muga silk, stick lac, munting or madder, elephant tusks, cotton, pepper and mustard seed. Agar or alas wood was also produced and exported to Bengal during the Mughal period.

155 S.K. Bhuyan, Anglo-Assamese Relations, p. 50.
156 A.B.S.M., pp. IXXV, 67.
158 Buchanan Hamilton, op. cit., p. 46.
159 K.B., p. 20.
Though there were brine springs in Sadiya and Rarhat in Upper Assam and salt produced was not bad but costed more. A production of salt from those brine springs became more expensive, salt was imported regularly from Bengal specially for the royal aristocracy and officials.

The price of the Bengal salt was varied from Rs.70 to 120 per 100 maunds about the year 1780 and after twelve years it costed 400 rupees per 100 maunds. In 1780 the price of Bengal salt sold in Assam ranged from Rs.2 to 4 per maund and after twelve years it was sold Rs.5 to 10 per maund. It became the most profitable trade which soon attracted the notice of the Bengal merchants to the Assam trade.

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In the year 1808 to 1809 some of the commodities that imported to Assam from Bengal were - salt, ghee, fine pulse, sugar, stone beads, coral, jewels and pearls, European cutlery and glass ware, spices, paints, copper, red lead, English woollens, tafetas, benaras khinkobs, satin, gold, and silver cloth, shells, muslin. The total value of these imported goods were Rs.2,28,300.  

The commodities that were exported from Assam in the year 1808-1809, costed Rs.130,900. Some of the important commodities that were exported from Assam were - stick lac, muga silk, muga cloth, manjit, black pepper, cotton with seeds, ivory, bell-metal vessels, mustard seeds, iron hoes, slaves, theikol fruit.

Assam had also commercial relations with the neighbouring hill tribes and also with China and Tibet. The value of the trade with Tibet amounted to about

163 Francis Buchanan Hamilton, op.cit., pp.45-46; Martin, Eastern India, pp.660-661; Pemberton, op.cit., pp.80-81;
164 Ibid.; Ibid.; Ibid.
165 Ibid.; Ibid.; Ibid.
Rs.200,000 a year towards the close of the eighteenth century. The articles exported from Assam were lac, muga silk andi cloth, and dry fish and the imports from Bhutan consisted of woollen cloths, gold dust, rock salt, cow-tails, musk and Chinese silks. They also brought from Tibet smoking pipes of Chinese made, woollens and rock salt.

At a place near Chouna, at a distance of two months journey from Lhassa was the centre of this business, where the two parties received their commodities. The Assamese merchants also received from the Lhassa or Bhutia merchants a bullion of silver to nearly a lakh of rupees and gold to the value of rupees 70,000 and above. The Assamese traders also went to southern China through Sadiya, across the Patkai hills and through Hon-kong valley to the town of Rung Kang in Burma. The Mishmis inhabiting in the hills to the north of Sadiya came down to plains with Lama swords and spears and the vegetable poison known as *Mishmi tita* and bartered these with glass beads, cloths,
salt and money. The Abors and Miris brought pepper, ginger, 

mujit and wax for exchange with other commodities.
The Nagas brought cotton, ginger, and salt that produced
in their springs. From ancient times the Khasis were
famous for their works on iron and they supplied this
materials made of iron in the Brahmaputra Valley.

Slavery:

Slavery existed to a considerable extent both
in hills and plains of Assam. The slaves were kept not only
by the nobles but also by all persons of a respectable
position. The discovery of a document of the purchase of a
slave by the Mahanta of the Salanuri Satta (Nougang) in
1721 Saka (1799 A.D.) during the reign of Kamaleswar Singha
is an important source to prove not only of the existence


167 Gurdon, op. cit., p. 57.
of the slavery but also of the system of selling and buying of the slaves in Assam during the Ahom age. In this document it was stated that the Salaquri Satradhikar purchased a man named Mohan at six rupees from twenty villagers including Lerelu Saikia and Sudhi Bara at the witness of a number of people. Another document recovered from Balindra Bhattacharya of Silsako, North Gauhati, recorded the purchase of a woman as slave from her husband at the cost of rupees eight and an embroidered sari by a priest of Kamakhya temple during the reign of Gadadhar Singha in 1607 Saka (1685 A.D.).

Some of the English writers of that period pointed out that "slaves were bought and sold openly in the market and the prices varied according to the general health, age, and capacity to work. High caste adult male sold for about rupees twenty to fifteen and girls for


169 Ibid., pp. introduction, 179.
ruppes eight to twelve. The slaves of the lower caste did not bring more than one third of the high castes. 170 C.A. Soppitt in his Account of the Kachari tribes in North Cachar Hills wrote, "It was customary in the old days for the Kacharis to buy slaves from the neighbouring tribes. These tribes constantly captured people innumerable raids they undertook, and found a ready market for any not redeemed, or any whom they themselves did not care to keep, among the Kacharis." 171 The sail of the slave in open market in Assam as mentioned by some Europeans perhaps existed amongst those tribes who carried off the inhabitants of the neighbouring territories at the time of their raids. Besides, many of them, due to poverty or failure to repay the loan they borrowed, had been enslaved by mortgaging

170 John Mc Cosh, op. cit., pp. 26-27; Gait, op. cit., p. 242;


171 Soppitt, loc. cit., p. 47.
their bodies and "for want of the means of accumulating the original sum increased by exorbitant usury, continued bondage for life, themselves and their descendants, from generation to generation." 172

In Assam the system of keeping of slaves by paying a salary was not prevalent. 173 Slaves were the private property of the owner and so had to perform all the drudgery of the household and labour in the field according to the direction of their master. 174 The master had the right to punish a slave for his unsatisfactory activities. 175

All the officials and persons of respected

175 Soppitt, *op. cit.*, p. 47.
position had their slaves. In Assam slaves were generally kindly treated by their masters and they also, in many cases, won their master’s love and affection by their loyalty and sincere service rendered and in such cases payment of money did not express or indicate the true relation between the slave and his master. They gradually became a member of the family.

In such cases the marriage of a slave was arranged by the master of the family in his own house and even at his own expenses. Very often a slave when married was allotted cultivated land for the maintenance of his family as a mark of affection by the master.


178 Ibid.
Among the Nagas, he was not allotted land for cultivation but was received into the community. Among the Kacharis after the marriage of a slave with the consent of his master he got the liberty to live separately by erecting a new house and he was no longer dependent on his master though he had to perform slight services for his master and also remained belonging to him.

Among the Kacharis if a slave girl gave birth to a male child by a man, other than his master, the man concerned had to take responsibility of the child. But if the child was a female one, she remained with the mother and was brought up and treated a slave. The father concerned was find doubled the amount originally paid

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180 Soppitt, *op. cit.*, p. 47.
by the master for the slave mother. 181

The dead body of a slave was generally buried by the Kacharis but where a slave remained for a long time with in the family and became a member of the family, the body was cremated in accordance with the Kachari customs. 182

In this way, unlike the slaves of Africa and serfs of Europe, the slaves of Assam were well treated, well-fed and well looked after and every care was taken so that they did not suffer.

Marriage custom:

According one authority, "The marriage rites of the Hindus of Assam are a curious admixture of rules and formulas laid down in the shastras and those of local customs ... for while in Kamarupa

181 Ibid., p. 48.
182 Ibid., p. 48.
marriage ceremonies as a rule never exceed beyond one day; in Upper Assam they were, for the most part, continued for a longer period. The Hindu marriage ceremony had a socio-religious sanction. Among the Brahmins and the Kayasthas, the pre-puberty marriage was prevalent; but it was not a custom among the low castes; and not at all amongst the tribes. According to the Hindu custom marriage outside the caste was prohibited, and this was strictly observed by the people belonging to the superior castes and if there was any such inter-caste marriage the couple along with the members of his family was excommunicated. Among other people, however,

183 Hem Chandra Baruah, Notes on the Marriage Systems of the peoples of Assam, 1908, pp. 9-10.

Among other people, however caste-tie was not so strictly observed. Persons socially out casted were allowed to remain within the caste and society by performing purificatory rites. But the inter-caste marriage amongst the low castes, though was not appreciated in the society, was not treated so strictly as like that of the orthodox castes.

Among the superior castes and classes marriage was normally arranged by the parents and the horoscopes of the boys and girls were examined before finalising the dates. But the boys and girls of the low caste people and also of the tribes enjoyed the liberty to select their mates and then the parents came forward to finalise the marriage. The system of offering of

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188 G.B., p. 200.
dowry was unknown in Assam. Amongst some tribes the system of giving bride's price was prevalent. Certain months such as Agraahayana, Maaha, Phaloune, and Vaiisakha were considered auspicious for performing marriage. The month of Jaiistha was considered as inauspicious for the marriage of the eldest son and Pauua and Chaitra were most inauspicious for the marriage of the Hindu boys and girls. Among the Hindus the date of wedding was also fixed with the consultation of the priest or astrologers. Hindu marriage functions were generally started two or three days before the day of marriage. These functions were performed by the women without any religious rites and so were differed from place to place. Some of the functions, observed by them


were _tekali diya_ or _telar-vhar_ (as in Kamrup) _Adhivasa_ or _gathian khunda_ (powdering of a kind of aromatic root), _suwaouri_ or _suwao-tola_. 193 In the morning of the day of marriage some religious functions was performed in the houses of both the bride and bride-groom called the _nandimukh shraddha_. After this the grooms proceeded to bride's house so as to reach her house before the _lagna_ or auspicious moment usually at night. 194 The marriage ceremony among the Hindus, was then performed according to the Vedic rites.

In the case of Brahmins, the bride, after few days of the marriage, was sent back to her parent's house and stayed till her attainment of puberty. On this occasion the bride-groom came to his father-in-law's house and after performing a function, called _shantikaran_.

193 P. Goswami, _op. cit._, pp. 136-40.
194 _Ibid._, p. 140.
the bride was taken by the groom to his house to live permanently. Among the lower caste people this function is known as the nowai-tola which was purely a female function.

The elopement at the time of Bihur was common among the villagers in Upper Assam. In such cases the couple was excepted by the society after words on payment of something to the girls parents. Among the Hinduised sections a man and woman could live together as husband and wife even without performing any nuptial ceremony. They, however, performed the ceremony after the birth of two or three children or at the time of the marriage of their children only to purify their body. This ceremony was sometime called har-suci-biya or burhi-biya.

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195 A.D.P.J.C., pp. 57-58.; P. Goswami, op.cit., p. 143.
196 Ibid., p. 143.
198 G.B., p. 200; Haliram Dhekial Phukan, op.cit., p. 100
The Ahoms had their own marriage system known as chaklang and this marriage was performed with the help of their own priest and shastras. The Ahoms also performed the ceremony of Joron and novami like the Hindus but adhivasa and the nandimukh shraddha of the Hindus were not performed by them. Before the day of the marriage the Ahoms performed the worship of some of their traditional gods, Langkuri, Janchai-hong, La-rang, Langdon.

Child marriage was not prevalent amongst the tribes of Assam. Marriage within the clan was also strictly forbidden by the law of exogamy, and the marriage within the clan was considered to be the greatest sin that a person committed. Hence such person was excommunicated.

200 Ibid., p. 144; Lila Gogoi, op. cit., p. 116.
201 E. Stack, op. cit., p. 17; Playfair, op. cit., p. 66; Soppiit, op. cit., p. 29; Gurdon, op. cit., p. 76; Horam, op. cit., p. 81.
A person belonging to the Garo or Mikir families could marry the daughter of his maternal uncle. But a Khasi could not marry his maternal uncle's daughter during lifetime of the maternal uncle. Marrying the daughters of father's sister was also not allowed during the lifetime of the father. After the death of his wife a Khasi also could marry the sister of his deceased wife.

The custom of the marrying one's mother-in-law, after the death of his father-in-law was also prevalent among the Garos, perhaps for the purpose of inheritance. A Kachari could marry the younger brother of her deceased husband but not the elder.

The system of paying of bride's price was existed amongst the Dimacha - Kacharis, Nagas, Garos, if the failed to pay bride's price he had to spend a period of


204 Gurdon, op.cit., p.76.

205 Playfair, loc.cit., pp.68-69.

206 Endle, op.cit., p.29.
time in his father-in-law's house and have to help him in the jhum work.

Amongst the tribes both the boys and girls had the liberty to select their mates. After such a selection the guardians of the boy were sent to the parents of the girl with some amount of liquor for seeking their consent. Amongst the Kacharis of Goalpara District the parents of the groom kept a pair of silver bangle on the roof of the house of the girl. If the ornament was not returned within a week it was considered as affirmative and then the family of the boy proceeded further to fix the date. But if the girl did not present to the boy, who usually visited her house, with a decorated handkerchief and towel, it meant that the girl did not accept the boy.

207 Soppitt, op. cit., p. 33.

208 Playfair, op. cit., p. 67; Gurdon, op. cit., p. 76; Endle, op. cit., p. 29; Soppitt, loc. cit., pp. 32-33; E. Stack, op. cit., p. 17; Horam, op. cit., p. 81.
In such cases no marriage was settled.

The most remarkable feature of the Garo marriage was that the proposal of marriage came from the girls and not from the boy side. Among the groups of Garos the custom was that a man should have to refuse the proposal at first and hide himself. The friends of the girl would search him and forcefully bring him to the village. But if he escaped for the third time it was taken that the boy really had no interest to marry the girl. In such cases no marriage was fixed.

Among certain instruction of the Garo society, before fixing the date of the marriage after both the parties agreed on the marriage, the girl had to live in the house of the bride groom's parents and had to work for them and thus became mutually acquainted.


211 Ibid.
Among the machi Garos a girl sent a dish of cooked rice to the man she liked in the hands of her sister or some other female relatives. At the same time she also followed and if the boy accepted the dish, the girl came forward and began to eat with him. But if he refused to eat, the girl went to him late at night and laid down by his side, if the boy is still obdurated he left the village for the time being. But if the boy relented he became the husband of the girl from that night and in such cases no further ceremony was required to perform.

Among the Mikir the boy his parents to the girl's parents and if the latter agreed they left a betrothal ring or bracelet with the girl and after this engagement if the girl married another person, the village council

212 Ibid., p. 68.
imposed a fine on her family. Sometimes the engagement ring was returned.

The most notable characteristics of the matriarchal Khasi marriage was that the husband had to live with his in his mother-in-law's house. He could shift his family to a separate apartment of his own only after the birth of two or three children.

In a Syntana's family the husband did not go to live in his mother-in-law's family nor he was allowed to bring his wife into his parents house. So the girl after the marriage stayed in her parent's house. The husband could meet his wife only at night in his mother-in-law's house and, like the Khasis after the birth of one or two children he could shift his family in a new house of his own.

213 E. Stack, The Mikirs, p. 17.

214 Gurdon, The Khasis, p. 76.

215 Ibid.
Among the Nagas the man with his friends first went to his selected girl's house for courting and after this the guardians came to negotiate and fix the date.\textsuperscript{216}

The marriage ceremony among the tribes was purely a social function having no religious sanction. After the selection of the mate, the parents fixed the date of marriage together with the bride's price. On the occasion of the parents of the groom made presents of articles and rice-bear to the parents of the bride.

On the day of the marriage, the groom and his party went to the bride's house where a great feast was arranged and after the entertainment the boy and the girl were declared as the husband and wife in the presence of village elders and others.\textsuperscript{217} If the groom fail to give the bride's price before the marriage he had to live a certain period in the house of the bride and to

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{216} Horam, \textit{Social and Cultural Life of Nagas}, p. 81.
\item \textsuperscript{217} E. Stack, \textit{op.cit.}, pp. 17-18; Soppitt, \textit{op.cit.}, pp. 32-33; Playfair, \textit{op.cit.}, pp. 66-68; J. Butler, \textit{op.cit.}, pp. 125, 130.
\end{itemize}
help the father-in-law in jhum cultivation. The system of the payment of bride's price was not prevalent amongst the Garos.

With the exception of the Khasis, the marriage function among other tribes had no religious significans, it was simply marry making affair with dance, song and great feast. The Khasis performed some religious functions during the marriage ceremony. Before fixing the date of the marriage, eggs were broken and fowl's entails were examined to see for favourable signs. If the sign was positive, the date was fixed for marriage. The first function was the exchange of rings between the bride and bride groom which was called Ka-syniat. On the day of marriage a man known as U Ksiano in clean dress wearing a red or white turban accompanied the bride groom's party whose duty was to manage all the business of the ceremony and also to hand over the bride groom to the maternal

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218 E. Stack, The Mikirs, p. 18; Spppitt, op. cit., p. 33.
219 Playfair, The Garos, p. 69.
uncle or father of the bride. The bride and bride groom then exchanged the betelnut. The Ksaiang then recited the marriage contact and gave a gourd containing fermented liquor provided by the contracting parties to an old man of learning who solemnly mixed the contents together. The dried fish were placed on the floor of the house. The priest then solemnly adjured the gods and sought blessing from all the ancestors by pouring liquor for three times on the ground. To satisfy the Sian the elders and all the people who did not belong to any of the clan, he repeated act for another three times. They then sacrificed fowl or pig for the spirit of the deceased and ancestors of the family. After two or three days the bride accompanied with the female members of the family and other relatives paid a visit to the bride groom at his house and this ended the ceremony.220

Except among the caste Hindus, widow remarriage was
accepted as social custom of both Hindus and non-Hindus of Assam. Divorce was also accepted among all the people except the superior castes of the Hindu society. After the divorce both parties could marry again. On the ground of adultery, barrenness, and incompatibility of temperament one could divorce his wife. Among the Khasis the consent of both the parties was required otherwise he or she had to pay compensation which was called Kamynrain or Ka thnam. The parties who had been divorced could not remarry one another again though both had the liberty to marry into other family. A woman could not be divorced at pregnancy. The two parties should have

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221 Haliram Dhakial Phukan, *op. cit.* p. 100; G.B., p. 199

to appear before the friends and other relatives of both man and women with at least five cowries. The wife gave her five cowries to her husband who along with his own put before others and then returned along his five cowries total ten cowries to her who again returned the ten to her husband. Then the husband threw those ten cowries on the ground A crier then would declare the divorce and spread the news throughout the village. After this the divorce the mother was allowed the custody of the children.

Among the Kacharis man and wife appeared before the village elders and stated their case and then tore a betel leaf into two pieces in front of the village elders indicating that they separated from each other. If a husband appealed to the village elders for divorce of his wife and the ground on which separation was

223 Gurdon, *op. cit.*, p. 79.
sought was appeared to be inadequate or capricious, he was not entitled to receive back the marriage money paid by him to the bride’s parents and on the other hand he had to pay a fine of rupees 5 to 10 for his freedom. The amount was divided among the village elders and the divorced women. If the divorce was sought on sufficient and just reasons all the money was to be returned by the wife. Both the man and women divorced had the liberty to marry another person. 224 A similar custom also prevailed among the Rabhas to get the separation.

The Nagas performed no such ceremony except the consent of the village elders. If a woman was divorced for adultery she or her parents had to pay a cow and repay the bride’s price but if she divorced having no justified ground the bride’s price would not require to pay. 225

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224 Soppitt, op.cit., p.35; Endle, op.cit., p.30.

Among the Mikirs divorce was possible at the consent of the village elders on sufficient and just grounds for which the husband took a gourd of bear to her parents declared himself free. 226

Inheritance:
In Assam, except the Khasis and the Garos, the family system was based on the patriarchy and so father being the head of the family, possessed the sole authority over his property. Only the sons inherited the property. According to the Davabhaga system sons had no interest in ancestral property by birth and they could claim the share only after the death of their father. The division of the property during the lifetime of their father could be possible only at the desire of the father. Though the law of premogeniture was not recognised in the society.

the eldest son very often inherited the lion's share of the property as generally the parents preferred to live with the eldest son in their old age.227 Though the patriarchal tribal people also followed the custom of the male inheritance, among the Nagas when the head of the family divided his properties among his sons, he made provisions for his wife in the event of his death.228 In a Mikir family, the wife and daughters got nothing but if the deceased had no sons or brothers, the widow could retain


the property by marrying into her deceased husband's kur. Among the tribes the wife also retained her personal property like ornaments and cloths after the death of her husband. After her death these were inherited by her daughters. If a person had no son, the property was inherited by the brother or brother's sons and if no such male was available it passed to any male member of the clan.

In matriarchal Khasi family the females were the heir apparent of the property, and not the males. The youngest daughter got the largest share of the property because she had to perform the family ceremonies and to propitiate the family ancestors. The property was divided among the daughters after the death of their mother. The youngest daughter could not sell the house without the unanimous consent of other sisters. Committing of an act of

229 E.Stack, op.cit., p.21.
231 Soppitt, loc.cit., p.37.
sin or taboo caused the degradation of the younger daughter in the family and her place was given to her elder sister. If the parents had no daughters the ownership of their property passed to mother’s sisters and their female descendants. If a man acquired any property at his own labour, it could not be inherited by his wife or children but by his mother, if she was not alive would be succeeded by his youngest daughter. If the wife decided not to remarry she would get half of her husband’s property. 232

Among the Garos, the descent in a clan was through mother and not to the father and this also led the law of inheritance, i.e. heirship was restricted to the female line. If a woman died without leaving a daughter, the husband could not inherit the property but if he married another lady of the deceased wife’s machong (clan) provided by the wife’s relatives, they would assume the possession of the property of his first wife by the daughter of his second wife. If a wife was divorced on

232 Gurdon, op.cit., p.82.
the charge of adultery she would lose the right of retaining the family property and in such case also the husband could enjoy the property of his first wife by marrying another lady of his first wife's machong as selected by the machong. Although a man could not inherit the property, his machong had the right to control over the belongings of his own labour or of those what his wife had brought for him. A Nokrom, generally the son of the man's sister, was appointed by him to represent him after his death, who was not an heir but had the right to control the property and to look after the family.233

Ceremony attending birth:

As soon as a child was born the Hindus well-comed it, if it was a male, by ringing bell, blowing conch-shell and sounding ulu by the women. If the child was a female, they rung winnowing platter and worked on husking paddy.234 Some people also


234 Lakshminath Bezbaruah, Amar Jiban Smriti, p. 5.
distributed fish among the neighbours after the birth of a male child.\textsuperscript{235} The birth of a child was considered by the Hindus as uncleanness of the family so the members of that family abstained themselves from performing any social or religious functions. This period of uncleanness was observed by some people for a month and others for two or three weeks.\textsuperscript{236} After the end of this period, some functions were performed in which the child was named and a feast was given to the neighbours.\textsuperscript{237} The second function relating to the birth of a child was observed after six or eight months in case of a male child and five or seven months for a female child which known as \textit{annaprasan\(\bar{n}\)a} on this occasion by performing some religious rites, the food was given in the mouth of the child.\textsuperscript{238}

\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{235}] Benudhar Sarma, \textit{Maniram Deuan}, Gauhati, 1950, p. 32.
\item[\textsuperscript{236}] \textit{Ibid.}
\item[\textsuperscript{237}] \textit{Ibid.}
\item[\textsuperscript{238}] \textit{Ibid.}
\end{itemize}
In a Brahmin family, when a boy attained the age of eight, a ceremony called *chudakaran* or *upanayana* i.e. acceptance of the sacred thread. After *upanayana* a Brahmin boy acquired the right to worship and from then he had to observe some restrictions in eating and drinking and also had to perform the prayer in the morning and evening regularly.

Among the Bodo-Kacharis the birth of a child was observed by the sacrifice of a fowl to propitiate the family deity. When a son was born to the parents who had no male issue, a function was performed at the age of five years in which the maternal uncle of the boy had to cut the hair of the boy giving him a long happy life. They

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observed a period of uncleanliness, in case of a boy, for seven days, and in case of a female, for five days. At the end of this period they gave a feast and the ceremony of christening also performed. 241

The Khasis performed the naming ceremony next day after the birth of a child. Although no fixed period was observed as seng or taboo after the birth of a child, the parents of the child were forbidden by custom to cross a stream or wash their cloth until the naval code string of the child fell off as they believed that the child would be attacked by the demon of hills or the vale. 242

Among the Angami Nagas, just before the delivery, all the strings of beads the women wearin were broken to spread on the floor of the room here and there.

241 Bhaben Narji, op.cit., p.146; Soppitt, op.cit., p.43.

242 Gurdon, op.cit., p.124.
Immediately after the delivery and before the cutting of the naval code, the mother was fed rice-bear, rice, and the meat of a hen touched by the newly born child. This food continued for five days and in case of the first issue for ten days. After this period the mother came out of the delivery room by back door opened by her husband, and threw away all the utensils she used during the period of her confinement. Next day she collected water from the village watering place bathed her child. This was followed by certain other ceremonies. When a Naga boy attained the age of four to six years he strangling a fowl left his mother's side and went to his father's side and thus he entered the male community.

The husband of a Garo family sacrificed a bull, a goat or a fowl according to his capacity after the


244 Ibid., p. 219.
child was born safely. Incantations were recited to drive away the evil spirits. The midwife and other women who attended the mother also performed some rites to keep the evil spirits away.

When the navel string of the child fell off, a bamboo was pushed through the roof of the main room close to the wall of the sleeping room to the ground beneath. At the foot of this bamboo a sacrificial alter was erected. The mother with the baby after having a bath, the hair of the child was shaved keeping a little hair on the top of the head. The priest then prayed at the alter for the happiness of the child and then the father climbed up the roof of the house and cut off the head of a fowl. Blood of the sacrificial fowl were dropped down the bamboo on the floor beneath. The priest and father then cut through the bamboo and pulling it out threw it and the sacrificial alter away. The father then threw the sacrificed fowl on the ground which was to be cooked and eaten by the
priest and the father only, by offering this meat along with some rice-beer to the spirit on a plantain leaf.  

Ceremony connected with death:

The Hindus cremated their dead and generally observed a month's impurity by the whole family. At the end of this period they performed a ceremony called shrāddha. This ceremony was purely a religious function performed for the peace of the soul of the dead in the heavenly abode. The Brahmins observed thirteen days as uncleanness and performed shrāddha ceremony at the end of the period.  

All the Hindus observed some restrictions in matters of eating and sleeping on the period of impurity. Before the day of shrāddha, the sons of the dead person shaved their hair, and beard, which they could not do during the period of

246 A.D.P.J.C., p. 154.
uncleanliness.

Among the Garos, the Kacharis and the Khasis the cremation was the custom, while the system of burial prevailed among other tribes. The Bodo-Kacharis generally buried their dead body but in some cases they kept the dead body on the ground on the belief that if it was eaten by the crow, vulture and fox the deceased would be free from all his or her sins, committed during the life-time. They performed a ceremony after twelve or thirteen days.

The tribes also observed a period of nanng or taboo during which they abstained from doing any works in the field. At the end of this period, they performed

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249 Ibid.

some religious rites according to their customs and made sacrifices of foul, mithun, or other animals, according to their capacity, to propitiate the spirit. It was accompanied by a big feast to which all the people of the clan were invited. Some of the tribes, who believed in life after the death, sacrificed the animals, with the idea that it would accompany the soul of the deceased to the next world, and gave some articles along with food with the dead body so to make the after life easy and comfortable.

If a Garo man died away from his village and could not be cremated at his home, they put some cowries into the pot which represented the bones of the deceased and performed the function as usual according to their


252 Playfair, op. cit., p. 106; Smith, The Ao Nagas, 103.
customs. Among the Angami Nagas also if a dead body of a person not received, a wooden image was made of a particular tree called hatho and cremated.

Death by accident or killed by the wild animal, were treated separately not like that of the natural death. The dead body in such cases were not buried or cremated within the boundary of the village.


254 Hutton, *The Angami Nagas*, p. 229