CHAPTER VI

GENERAL LIFE AT BARPETĀ AND ITS SURROUNDINGS

Distinctiveness of Barpetā's Life: Introduction

The importance of Barpetā as a centre of socio-religious culture as well as a centre of trade and commerce owes its origin to its locational and topographical advantages. Barpetā was once situated at the border of two medieval kingdoms of diversified culture, namely the Āhom kingdom and the Koch kingdom. Moreover, the following of rivers on all sides made for the formation of alluvial soil for agriculture, good climate for habitation and facilities for trade and commerce etc. At a time when modern means of transport were unknown, the rivers were the easiest routes through which men and materials could move. Barpetā had easy communications to different places within and outside Assam through the river routes as land routes were not safe because the dense forests were infested with predatory animals. As a result of this boat-making enterprises thrived at Barpetā and many people used to have big and small trading boats and boats for race (khel-nāo). Facilitated by the above circumstances the Assam Vaishnava movement flourished and played a significant role on
the general life of the people of Barpeta and its surroundings. Although life in Barpeta is by and large conforms to the pattern of Assamese life in general and that of Lower Assam in particular it has its own distinctive features, a picture of which is attempted to be given below.

1. **The Life Cycle: The Rites of Passage:**

Rites of passage are the different social rites and ceremonies relating to the crucial points in one's life, such as birth, marriage and death which constitute the fundamental stages in the life of an individual in particular and of the society in general.

(A) **The Rites and Ceremonies relating to Birth:**

According to the prevalent custom in Assam in the fifth month of her first pregnancy, a woman is to undergo a ceremony known as pañcāmrit khōwā, but in the Barpeta area the same function is known as jeurādiyā. In this ceremony the mother of the pregnant woman is to play the main role. In absence of the mother, the mother-in-law plays the same role in feeding the pregnant woman pañcamrit which consists of ghee, honey,

1. N.P. Bardoloi: *A samar Lok Sańskriti*, p. 3
milk, curd and sugar (mixture-five items of sweets). For this purpose rice is boiled with milk and sugar to prepare paramānna (sweetened rice-milk). In order to celebrate the ceremony five neighbouring women/to make the auspicious 'ulu-ulu' sound (jakardiyā) in time and to feed the woman pañcāmrit so prepared in a separate room. Such act of feeding is repeated for five times. This custom is locally known here as pāṅgo-meihā kāpor diyā or pāc-meihā jeurā.

A similar ceremony is conducted for a woman either in the seventh or in the ninth month of her first pregnancy which is known as sādh-bhakṣan in standard Assamese colloquial and sāt-meihā-jeurā or kapor diyā in local dialect or in the parlance. The ceremony is also celebrated in the same manner as that held in the fifth month along with pañcāmrit, paramānna and other delicacies. However, according to the custom prevalent among the non-Brahmin castes the pregnant woman is taken to her father's house on the eighth month so that she may pass the whole month in rest. This custom is popularly called āth-meihā khaṭā.

2. Devananda Barua (ed.): Hema Kosha, p. 586
3. N.P. Bardoloi: Asamar Loka Samskriti, p. 3
Another function is conducted on the eighth month of the first pregnancy exclusively by the Brahmins here which is known as pohan-biyā. It is conducted like the regular marriage observing all rites and rituals.

(i) Child-birth and associated ceremonies:

When the time comes for the delivery of the baby, the woman is provided with a separate room and thorny branches are hung on the four walls of the room. In doing so, it is believed traditionally that the evil spirits cannot enter into that room and harm the woman and her new born baby. Though this custom has been done away with in the urban areas, it is still in vogue in the rural areas where modern medical science has not established itself. Moreover, poverty also deprives many such women from availing of medical assistance as a result of which they are to follow the old custom of taking the help of the rural nurse (dhāi) as yet.

According to the prevailing custom a woman during the first five days after delivery is supposed to be in danger period of death. Therefore, she is kept confined in her room and generally no solid food is allowed her to be taken during this period of danger. A fire of shaff is kept lighting near
her bed and a big knife (dāo) is kept under her sleeping mat (pāti). It is a popular belief that the fire (jui) and dāo keep the fiends away from doing any harm to both the mother and the baby.4

(a) Ceremonial removal of pollution:

In the morning of the fifth day after delivery, the female relations come to wash off the impurities of both the mother and the baby ceremoniously. The activities of cleansing being over, the mother comes out with the baby and prays to the sun-god offering milk and ripe banana (manohar kal)5 so that her baby's fame becomes well spread like the rays of the sun-god. This purificatory ceremony on the fifth day is, perhaps, done following the pācati-utsav of Lord Kṛṣṇa's birth which has been discussed in the previous chapter.

(b) Astrological calculations (ganani):

After finishing the purificatory activities, the ganani is conducted regarding the baby's fate in the fore-noon which is considered as part and parcel of the ceremony of child-birth.


5. 'Manohar kal' is a kind of banana which is considered most sacred and only this banana is offered in all sorts of worship as oblation.
In some cases, the ceremony of qanani is conducted on the thirtieth day of delivery which is locally known as māhekīyā āhuj. On the day of qanani ceremony, fish, salt, green vegetables, termeric flour (hāladhi gurā) etc. are distributed among the people present in the function and the neighbouring families for the welfare of the baby as tradition goes. In absence of the above articles cash coins are distributed among the people which is considered as an indispensible part of qanani utsav. Of course financial ability of the family depends upon its pomp and grandeur. At the night of the fifth day there is another function which is exclusively of the woman folk. At that night neighbouring woman keep watch over the mother and the baby and spent the whole night singing janmāṣṭamīr gīts with joy. Along with such amusement they pray to the creator (vidhātā) for the bright lot of the newborn baby through the medium of their hymns and songs. This function is a recently developed one and is popularly known as pāc-dinā rakhā which was unknown to the people of this area upto few years back.

6. N.P. Bardoloi: Asamar Loka Saṁskrīti, p. 6
7. It is believed that Vidhātā comes on that very night in order to write the lot of the baby.
On the sixth day of the child-birth one stage of impurity has been over though the mother (puwēti) is not considered completely pure till a month. When the mother passes full thirty days after delivery she is to undergo the last ceremonial bath which is known as ḍhujkhedā. On that day after washing off impurities of the mother and the baby, all the house-hold clothes and cooking utensils are also to be cleansed. Finally cow-dung solution is sprinkled inside and outside of the houses in order to remove impurity. This act of sprinkling cow-dung solution is called gobar-cān diya in the parlance while it is called gobar-māṭi diya in the standard colloquial. Perhaps, this is so done to destroy the various germs also. Now-a-days, antiseptic germicides serve the aforesaid purposes specially in the urban areas. However, the sprinkling of cow-dung solution is an indispen-sible purificatory act specially in Vedic worship. In that particular evening nām-prasaṅga or generally bir-nām is held as an act of purification and free mixing with the society. The invited guests are hosted with sweet dishes and māh-prasād accordingly.

8. Cow-dung is considered as the most sacred thing by the Hindus. Moreover, it kills some germs and hence it is used both from hygenic and religious points of view.
(c) Rice-feeding ceremony (bḥāṭ-mukhat diya or bḥāṭ-cuweni):

The new born baby lives on mother's milk and liquid food till a few teeth have come out. When some teeth start growing, the baby wants to chew hard eatable articles and at that time the baby is ceremoniously fed solid food (anna, bḥāṭ) on an auspicious day in a month with an odd number in case of boy-baby and in case of girl-baby it is celebrated in a month with an even number, generally starting from seventh or eighth month onwards as the case may be. This traditional custom is known as bḥāṭ-mukhat diya or bḥāṭ-cuweni in the parlance while it is called anna-prastaṇṇa in standard colloquial. This custom is a compulsory one whether it is celebrated on a small or on large scale.

(d) The ceremony of tonsure (Culākaran or Cuḍākaran):

It is an important ceremony observed by the three upper castes of the Hindus. The ceremony is exclusively conducted for the male child only. Here in the Assamese Hindu community, this ceremony of tonsure is popularly known as culākaran. The ceremony is generally conducted either at the age of one or three years. Till that age of the child, the birth hair is kept unshaved and when the boy attains above mentioned age,
his hair is tonsured observing all ceremonial rites. Only a
tuft of hair on the crown of the head is left unshaved in order
to distinguish the child as that of Hindu. But in practice the
Brahmins are seen observe the ceremony compulsorily. The other
two classes of the Hindus namely Kāvastha and Baisya are not
seen observe the ceremony of tonsure compulsorily and uniformly
in this particular zone of our study.

(e) Sacred-thread ceremony (loqup dieni):

This ceremony is a Vedic rite exclusively observed by the
Brahmins. When a Brahmin boy attains the school going age i.e.,
from 9 years to 14 years 4 months, he is to undergo the ceremony
of investiture in which the sacred thread is conferred on him
and from that day he is not only supposed to be a Brahmin by
caste but also a genuine Brahmin by virtue. The ceremony of
investiture is called upanayana in Sanskrit which is locally
known as lagundieni or lagun-diyani. The real significance is
that in the Vedic age upanayana ceremony was conducted, before
a Brahmin boy was going to Guru-grha (preceptor's house) for
the study of the Vedas and then after receiving all possible

9. Now-a-days, school going age starts from 4/5 years, yet
the old custom is celebrated following Vedic process.
instructions, he started for Guru-grha. This period was one of the four āśramas (stages) known as brahmacārya-āśrama.

The sacred thread contains nine-folds (gunas) in one thread where gāyatri mantra is prescribed and is purified according to a set formula.

Such an investiture of conferring sacred thread on a Kayastha gosāin is called uttariya or uttarī. In Sundaridiyā and Bāmunā Satras the custom of conferring uttarī on a Kayastha boy up to the age of 16 years is being conducted even now although not uniformly. The nine folded uttarī represents the nine forms of bhakti (devotion) such as śravaṇa, kīrtana, arcanā, vandana, dāsya, sakhitva, ātmanivedana, śaraṇa and bhajana. It is noticed in the GCK that when a Kāyastha by caste undergoes the ceremonies of birth (janma), astrological calculation (ganani), annaprāśan (bhat-mukhat-diyā), cudākaran (tensure), kāṅvindhani (boring of ears) and biyā (marriage), he is then known as sarakarmani (performer of six ceremonies) Kāyastha. But there is no mention of uttarī

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12. Hema Kosha, p. 125
13. GCK, p. 20
14. 'Sadarakarmani' as mentioned in the GCK, it is understood that boring of ears was conducted ceremoniously in the past which is discontinued now-a-days.
among the six ceremonies which may have evolved in the later period.

There are other two important ceremonies for a girl before her marriage. These are kān-vindhani and dhuweni.

(1) The boring of ears (kān-vindhani (Sans. karnavedha):

In order to make provisions for wearing ornaments the boring of ears (kāna) and nose (nāka) are conducted ceremoniously at the tender age of a girl. Generally these function are conducted within the age limit of three to five years. The functions are popularly known as kān-vindhani and nāk-vindheni respectively. But now-a-days, the acts of kān-vindheni and nāk-vindheni are also seen conducted in the medical hospital instead of being observed traditionally. This may perhaps be due to deplorable financial condition or due to easily available medical assistance.

(2) Ceremony on attaining puberty by a girl (dhuweni):

It is one of the most important and amusing ceremonies of the woman-folk. The function is known as dhuweni in Barpe-tīyā dialect. In the morning of the third day of attaining puberty, (puṣpītā howā < Sans. puṣpītā dāṅgar hawā, the astrologer (ganak) reads the astrological calculation
regarding the good or bad combination (yog) of stars in the midst of the people gathered on the occasion. Then in the afternoon of that very day an imaginary child\textsuperscript{15} keeping in a covered basket (jāpā) is carried ceremoniously to be kept in the house of a near relative. The jāpā so kept is brought back to the girl's house next-day i.e., on the fourth day of dāngar howā (puberty). The two incidents are known as jāpā-diya and jāpā-ānā respectively. After bringing the jāpā back the purificatory bath of the girl is conducted under a plaintain tree\textsuperscript{16} as in the case of a bride sitting on a wooden square frame known as bei\textsuperscript{17} in standard colloquial while/same is called gher in the local dialect. This ceremonial bath is called dhuweni (bathing). According to popular belief the girl is prohibited to see the sun, the moon, the cow and the male people from the day of attaining puberty till the ceremonial bath and in view of that she is kept confined in a separate room. During this period of menstrual the girl is not allowed to take any kind of food.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{15} The imaginative child kept in the jāpā is an indication that the girl is fully matured to give birth to a child since then.

\textsuperscript{16} The plaintain tree is considered as the symbol of a bridegroom.

\textsuperscript{17} N.B. Bardoloi : Asamar Loka Samskriti, p. 12

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid, pp. 10-11
In course of jāpā-diya, jāpā-ānā and dhuweni separate gits are sung which are the integral parts of the ceremony on attaining puberty by a girl. From jāpā-diya to dhuweni the āyatīs (assembly of women) sing those songs (gīts) most of which are of spontaneous character and do not have much of symbolic significance. Specially the rituals of bath (dhuweni) for the girl are attended by dhuwenir gīts of haunting melody as that of biyā-nāms and they are orally preserved.

(B) Ceremonies associated with Marriage:

Marriage is the vital institution of social life through which man and woman can live in wed-lock till death. Marriage should have social recognition and religious sanction behind it. The various rites associated with 'marriage proper' may be studied under the heads of (a) pre-nuptial rites and (b) post-nuptial rites.

(a) Pre-nuptial Rites:

The initial stage of marriage is the rāhi-jorā cowā. The parents of both the boy and girl consult the horoscopes of

19. A portion of jāpā-diya gīt runs as follows:
Barpetār bhakatare O mere mere ghar nālo /
Jāpāt kari gāji āiche O nām Dhāneswar nālo /
the pair according to **Vedic** procedures and if their respective signs of zodiac are found to agree with each other, then it is known as **rāhi-jorā khowā** or **mila**. In that case they may proceed for other agreement.

(1) **Agreements about detailed arrangement (khāṭār-bhār)**:

After finishing the initial stage of **rāhi-jorā cowā** the final negotiation is made confirming date and related matters of solemnisation of marriage. In view of that a party from the bride-groom's side comes to the house of bride on an auspicious day with a **bhār** (load carried on the shoulders suspended from either end of a **pole**) containing articles like curd, sweets, banana, mustard oil, fish, areca nut and betel leaves etc. and then both the parties sitting together discuss the probable conveniences and inconveniences of both the families in order to arrive at an agreement about detailed arrangement of celebrating the wedding ceremony safely and smoothly. The process of this final negotiation is popularly known as **khāṭār bhār diyā** which is conducted few days ahead of the marriage-proper.

(2) **Telar-bhār (gifts marriage)**:

The next phase of the pre-nuptial rites is locally known as **telar-bhār**. On the stipulated day, a party of the

20. **In some places of Assam specially in Upper Assam, the telar-bhār is known as joran or tekeli diyā.**
bridegroom's house starts for the bride's house with a bhar containing clothes, ornaments, food-stuff with a jar of mustard oil and sacramental jar of water. Perhaps, the jar of mustard oil is considered here in this region to be the central item of the bhar and hence, this bhar is known as telar-bhar. According to custom the bride-grooms party is to give all the required ornaments and dresses of the bride for the marriage day in presence of some leading members of that society either of village or of town.

(3) Adhivās or sūin:

The day before wedding is known as adibāh (Sans. adhivāsa) in which only a few solemn rites are to be performed before marriage proper. The day of adibāh is also known as sūin here in our cultural zone as there is no notable function for the day. Sūin means zero-hour as no social function of importance is left to perform. The day falls in between the telar bhar and the wedding. From the evening of the adibāh, the bridegroom, the bride and the persons who are to solemn-nise religious ritās have to keep a vow (vrat) of fast till the end of the marriage ceremony.
(4) *Marriage proper (biyā)*:

This central ceremony is such a holy and amusing function in which people of all ages become extremely joyous. Proper functioning of the marriage starts from the dawn of that day. At the dawn of the marriage day water is carried by the women in a procession from the nearby river, pond, well etc. which is easy of access. This process is called *pānītolā* and the water so carried is considered as holy as the water of the Gangā and the ceremonial bath of the bride and the groom is conducted before solemnisation of marriage rites and rituals at night. Before the departure of the bridegroom's party to the bride's house another rites is conducted by the *āyatis*. The female relations proceed to a bathing *ghāṭ* or a well accompanied by a band of musicians and perform certain rites there which is known *suwāg jārā* in the parlance and the songs as *suwāg jārār gīts*.

In the late morning another rite is conducted in order to offer *pinda* (a lump of rice mixed with milk, sugar, banana, ghee etc.) to the deceased ancestors of seven generations, four from the paternal side and three from maternal side. This rite is called *sāt puruṣīyā sevā* or *sāt-puirā sevā*. The *sātpuirā*
sevā being over, the female relations conduct one rite known as telseira. In this rite a pair of betel leaves and an areca-nut keep on the head of the bride and oil is sprinkled with the help of a betel leave. Of course, the process varies from place to place.

The vital part of the ceremony starts at night when the bride-groom (bar) and his party come to the bride's house at an auspicious hour in the evening. On the arrival of the bride-groom, the kanyā dātā (who puts the bride in marriage) greets the groom near to the sacrificial alter ceremoniously observing all prevailing rites and rituals. This rite is known as bar-barinīyā. After finishing Vedic rites of homa or otherwise, the clasping hands of the man and the woman in wed-lock is made infront of the elders and superiors of the marriage parties in the place of worship by the priest with the nuptial knot (lagān-gāthi) and after that the bride accompanied by the bride-groom takes seven steps towards the north-east known as the rite of saptapadi.21 The marriage ceremony proper comes to an end after this ritual.22

21. B.K. Barua: A Cultural History of Assam, p. 130
22. For detailed description see H.C. Barua: Notes on the marriage system of the people of Assam, 1909
The most entertaining items of the wedding ceremony are the band and the biyā-nāms of the āyatīs, specially the biyā-nāms accompanied by khicā-gīts (teasing songs). The āyatīs of both parties sing those narrative songs one after another where they compare the bride and the bride-groom with Sītā and Rāma, Rukmīni and Kṛṣṇa. Sometimes the āyatīs of the bride's party sing those songs through which they try to disqualify the groom. In the same manner the groom's party sings similar songs to disqualify the bride and her near relatives. Two such specimens of khicā-gīts of local variety run as follows:

Groom's party - "kainār māyek udhul dhuli murat nede tel,
    bārir para hāpā āhi murat muti gel .../

Bride's party - "Ali, alī pakā dali,
    dali bāgar khāi;
    biyār bare biḍi khawa,
    koto dekhā nāi .../ (portions of teasing songs)

Post-nuptial Rites:

The post nuptial ceremony is short and simple. In the following morning i.e., the morning after the marriage night, the mother of the groom or some related woman in absence of the mother, welcomes the married couple to the house of the
bridegroom observing ceremonial rites according to custom. In the local dialect this process is called bar-kainā (groom-bride) bariniyā (welcome). The concluding function of the wedding ceremony is to break the fast of the bride-groom and the bride as they have been holding fast from the day of adibāh i.e., from the day before marriage proper. Accordingly a feast is arranged and the groom and the bride along with the invited guest take their meal breaking the brat ( < Sans. vrata = vow). Here in this region the feast popularly known as 'bar-kainār pātat bhāt diyā' and with this feast the entire course of marriage ceremony is finally concluded.

(C) Some abnormalities relating to marriage:

(1) Early marriage or child-marriage (bālya biyā):

We have come across in the GCK. 23 that there was the custom of child marriage formerly among the Assamese Hindu community particularly among the so-called high castes and it was compulsory for the Brahmin even up to few years back. In this system of the marriage ceremony was held twice. Firstly, the wedding was solemnised before the attaining of puberty by a girl. This was called āq-biyā (early marriage). Secondly, the

23. GCK, p. 25
wedding was solemnised again when the girl attained puberty and it was known as pāc-biyā or sānti-biyā (marriage proper).

Now-a-days, child-marriage system has been dropped totally. Even a Brahmin girl is no longer put in early marriage. It so happened due to the influence of modern education and social liberty to woman.

(2) Widow marriage (bidhavā-biyā):

The re-marriage of a widow was rather a common feature in the society formerly. In the words of K.R. Medhi, "in Assam widow marriage is going on from time immemorial although now-a-days, the educated people think it to be undignified." The young widows except those of Brahmin were expected not to remain single for the rest of their lives. As a woman could be married for once only before sacred fire (hom), hence the subsequent unions were conducted by social negotiation and not by śāstric rites. Such unions are hardly seen encouraged in this region to-day.

(3) Informal Marriages:

The co-habitation as husband and wife may be accorded in our society through different ways and means which are generally

considered as informal and non-sastric unions. Some such unions current in our society as well as in our area of study are discussed here briefly:

(i) Dhakā : In this system of co-habitation a man lives at the house of a woman who keeps him as her husband. This sort of informal union is known as dhakā thākā and the man of this union is called dhakā.

(ii) Ghajyā : In standard colloquial ghajyā is known as ghar-jowāi in which a son-in-law lives permanently in the house of his father-in-law. In this system of co-habitation, marriage may be solemnised before the sacred fire or as the case may be. Ghar-jowāi is also known as capaniyā.25

(iii) Dhemni (concubine) : A woman specially one who co-habit with a man without being married, is called dhemni.26 In this union the woman goes and lives of her own accord with the man as his wife without being married to him formally. She may be an unmarried girl or a previously married woman or a widow.

(iv) Pāusā : This system of informal marriage may be applicable both in monogamy and polygamy systems of marriage. When

25. Audrey Cantlie : The Assamese, p. 110
26. In Upper Assam cāpāni is equivalent to dhemni (feminine gender of capaniyā and demnā respectively)
a widow comes to lead a conjugal life with a married man or
with a widower after negotiation, it is known as pāusā ānā and
the woman's act is called pāusā ( < Sans. pascāt) i.e., coming
subsequently.

So far, the above mentioned forms of informal marriages
are concerned it may undoubtedlly be said that now-a-days, such
unions are decreasing in number. Perhaps educated people consider
it undignified specially in the urban areas. These systems are
in vogue in the rural areas though the number of such unions
are certainly on the decline in comparison with the past.

(D) Ceremonial rites on death (mritakarma) :

Death is the inevitable effect of the cause birth. They
are the two sides of a coin. Hindu theology believes that death
is the messenger of future birth and the soul is immortal.
Therefore, some rites and ceremonies are observed for the puri-
fication and salvation of the departed soul. Here we shall
attempt to discuss only those major functions related to death
which are performed by the Assamese Hindus with special refer-
ence to Barpeta and its surrounding areas.
(i) Cremation (kāth-sāṃskār): The terms 'kāth-sāṃskār' are derived from Sanskrit 'kāstha-sāṃskāra' meaning cremation. The act of cremation is called kharidiya in the parlance. The consecration of the dead body is solemnised by two different processes. (a) The dead body of the people below the age group of 12 years and of those committing suicide are generally buried (puta). (b) All other dead bodies are cremated on fire ceremoniously on a pyre of seven stairs. The rites of cremation are observed uniformly by the Assamese Hindus.

(ii) After the cremation the members of the deceased family including the person who put fire on the face of the dead body known as (mukhāgni) are to observe a brat of complete three days fast; but in case of the Brahmin the same brat continues for four days. They are known as tinidinīyā-āsuc and cāridinīyā-āsuc respectively. On those days the neighbouring householders and relatives of maternal side offer them rice-flour which is known as jācā-pīthāguri and by the articles of food the members of the deceased family are to conclude their brat of tinidinīyā

27. The processes (a) and (b) above are not seen to follow strictly as it was in the past i.e., the dead body of category (a) are also seen cremated ceremoniously like (b) and subsequent rites are also followed.

28. Tinidinīyā and cāridinīyā are known as tilani and caturthi respectively in Upper Assam. For detailed reference see N.P. Bardoloi: Assam Loka Sāṃskriti, p. 116
or cāridiniyā as the case may be. During the course of these days the members of the family are prohibited even to drink course water in regular/according to prevailing custom. Since then they are allowed to take only one meal a day before dask with āla-cāul (rice made without boiling the paddy), gāvā-ghee (ghee prepared from cow’s milk), sijā ālu (boiled potato), bēngēnā (boiled bringal), but mustard oil is prohibited till māchcuweni.

(iii) Dah-dāhā (the ceremony performed on the tenth day after death); As the ceremony is conducted on the 10th day after death, hence it is known as dāh-dāhā. The members of the family need to take their bath in the river or tank to remove all cuwās (impurities) from that day. The sons are to shave their hair on that day which is known as mūr-khurani ( Sans. mūndan). The party accompanied with the members of the deceased family to the place where dāhā is conducted ceremoniously are offered rice powder with banana, milk, molasses etc. according to custom.

(iv) Ādyaśrāddha: As tradition goes, the Brahmins observe the ten days of rituals impurity on death. They perform the ādya-śrāddha locally known as 'kāma' on the eleventh day
while non-Brahmins observe thirty days' of ritual impurities on death performing the 'kāma' on the thirty first day after death. During the entire period from dāhā to kāma the family of the deceased is allowed to take only vegetarian food. On the day of kāma pinda (a lump of ala-rice mixed with banana, milk, sugar, honey etc.) is offered to names of the deceased persons. Nām-kīrtan is held at the end of the śrāddha for the welfare of the family. On third day of śrāddha a feast is arranged to which relatives and friends are invited. Special food is offered to the deceased person with the articles of food that he liked in his life time. The other members of the deceased family also take fish, meat etc. after offering food to the departed soul. This feast (bhōj) is known as 'marār bhāt' or māch-cuwenti in local dialect and maitṣya sparsā in standard colloquial. From that day the family is freed from the restrictions on taking non-vegetarian food with the sanction of the society.

(v) Śaṅkaradeva Saṅgha, a new trend : The inception of Śrī Śaṅkaradeva Saṅgha brings a new trend to Assam Vaiṣṇavism. The Saṅgha claims a reformation driving away the anomalies associated with the Assam Vaiṣṇavism.
Now, in the light of Vaiṣṇava culture and schism of the faith it would perhaps be necessary to mention here about the new trend initiated by Śrī Śaṅkaradeva Saṅgha in the 3rd decade of the twentieth century. The Saṅgha has taken certain measures in order to reform some social rites and rituals relating to marriage, death etc. Since the inception of the Saṅgha the ceremonial rites and rituals relating to marriage and death of the so-called Śūdra population are seen observed diversely. From that point of view the entire Śūdra population may be divided into four groups in cases of ceremony observed at death. They are - (1) the monthly group who continues the old custom of māhekīyā (monthly) śrāddha, (2) the eleventh day group or eghāradinīyā who performs ten days' ritual impurity on the model of the Brahmans, (3) the teradinīyā (thirteen days') group who observes twelve days' ritual impurity, (4) the extreme group is the Haridhanīyā group. This group of the Śaṅkara-Saṅgha has ceased to employ Brahmin priest in order to conduct marriage ceremony, ceremonies on death etc. through Brahmanical rites and rituals. The people

29. Audrey Cantlie: *The Assamese*, p. 273
of this group conduct the rites of passage themselves, following almost all the traditional rites except fire worship. They perform these ceremonies by singing and reciting yugala-patāla from the Vaiṣṇava religious scriptures. So, this group of Assam Vaiṣṇavism has earned the nickname 'jugal-party'. The jugal-party of Barpeta group of satras has been playing, as it claims, a major role in liberalising the faith of Śaṅkara-deva.

2. Economic Life:

In respect of economic life of the people, there is a general remark given by Dr. B.K. Barua, "from early times, the villages in India has been the backbone of the economic life of the people, that is to say, the people live a rustic life with agriculture as their main occupation." The people of Barpeta region have also been depending on rural agriculture as the primary occupation of their livelihood from the remote past. Here agricultural products are procured mainly through (a) food crops and (b) forest resources.

30. A specimen of frugala-patāla runs thus:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{karā kripā Kṛṣṇa manata miloka} \\
\text{Hari Hari Hari Hari e,}
\text{Taju pada sevā parama amiyā rasa ... etc. (Nama-Ghoṣā)}
\end{align*}
\]

31. B.K. Barua: A Cultural History of Assam, p. 75
(a) Food crops: Rice is the staple food of Assamese people as well as the people of our study zone. Major portions of cultivated land of this area are occupied by rice cultivation. Moreover, alluvial land, seasonal rainfall etc. have been encouraging the people to pay more attention to growing and procuring different varieties of food crops along with paddy. The crops may be divided into two seasonal groups - (a) āhu (summer crops), (b) sāli (winter crops).

(a) Āhu-saha (summer crops): The crops are sowed in the winter season and generally harvested in the summer while sāli-sahas (crops) are sowed in the spring and rainy seasons.

Paddy (dhān < Sans. dhānya) is the mamor crop of both āhu and sāli sowed and harvested in different seasons of the year. From the methods of cultivation, paddy may be classified into three- āhu, bāo and sāli which have been carrying on since very early period. For instance, we have come across in the GCK that gutidhān (thrashed paddy) and cinādhān32(a kind of millet) had been cultivated in this region in those days of the past. Perhaps the process of keeping paddy in forms of

32. GCK, pp. 199, 353
gutidhān and gāchidhān (without thrashed) were in vogue in those days though it is discontinued now-a-days.

The āhudhān is sowed and broadcast in the spring season and harvested in mid-summer. The long stemmed bāodhān is a paddy sowed and broadcast usually in low land at the same time with āhudhān. But bāodhān is harvested in the winter which covers nearly nine to ten months from the date of sowing. śālidhān is the most popular crop and is considered to be sacred among other varieties of paddy. It is transplanted in the quasi-low land area during the summer and harvested in the winter along with bāodhān. According to custom in vogue, śālidhān is indispensible in birth, marriage and death ceremonies without which ceremonial rites can not be conducted by the Assamese Hindus. Dr. B.K. Barua33 has quoted a verse from the Yogini Tantra - "Vasante rupitāṁ dhānyāṁ yaten ca vivaryet" which forbids its offering (offering of āhu, bāodhān etc.) to gods.

Now-a-days, more than hundred varieties of paddy cultivation are here in circulation which are cultivated in different parts of this region.

33. B.K. Barua: A Cultural History of Assam, p. 94
Except *bokā, borā dhān* all other varieties of paddy are used for the purpose of food as common article. A sticky variety of rice made from *barā dhān* is used for the purpose of preparing different types of cake. Moreover, the tribal people of some areas who are outside the Vaiṣṇava faith use *borā dhān* to prepare country liquor (*hārimad*). On the other hand, rice made from *bokā dhān* is extensively used as an article of heavy refreshment. The rice (*cāul*) is soaked in water until it becomes soft to be consumed uncooked. The Assamese people are very fond of this most delicious food taken with curd and molasses. Formerly this item of food was invariably served in all ceremonial functions, though the present Assamese society has ceased to use it for want of sufficient supply of articles of the combination. Moreover, the high prices of curd and its non-availability compels people to drop this traditional item of *bokā cāul.*

In the same way *jahā cāul* (a fragrant variety of rice) is generally used to prepare *māh prasād* and *paramānna* locally known as *pāyas.* Over and above these traditional varieties of paddy, some seeds of high yielding varieties of paddy have been imported from the foreign countries during the last few years.

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34. *Bokā cāul* of Barpetā region is known as *kompāl cāul* in Upper Assam.
years. In this area except baro and āijung dhan, a new variety of paddy called iri-dhan has been imported from neighbouring Bangladesh now, and cultivated here which yields rice from 35 to 40 mds. (1 qu. = 2½ mds.) per bigha of land.

The fibrous plant jute is extensively cultivated in this area which is sowed and broadcast generally in the month of January and February. This cultivation may be carried both in upland and lowland. Potatoes, Oil seeds, pulses etc. are the main rabi crops of this area which have been traditionally cultivated throughout the area. Sugarcane is another food crop of Assam known for its good quality. It evoked the following remark from Cazim - "it excels in softness and sweetness, and is of three colours red, black and white." Now, the white type of sugarcane is being cultivated in this area predominantly by the new Assamese (na-Asamiyā) community.

Over and above the food crops mentioned, the cultivation of fruit trees and creepers of various kinds are being carried on, special examples of which can be made here under. Of these fruit trees and creepers mention may be made of areca-nut and

35. S.K. Barua : A Cultural History of Assam, p. 94
betel leaves, mangoes, cocoa-nuts, jack fruits, barries (jām), cucumbers, guava (saphriām), lemon, muskmelon (bāṅgi), papaya, pineapple, plum (baqri), pomegranate, wood-apple (bel < Sans. vilva) and plaintain tree.

Importance of plaintain: The leaves and sheaths of plain­tain tree along with fruit-banana are still very commonly used to serve the purpose of dishes almost in all ceremonies of the Assamese both in villages and towns. Moreover, an alkaline solu­tion called khar has been distilled from the sheaths, peels and roots of the plaintain tree that has been used by the villagers specially as an item of curry and to wash clothes even today. The role of plaintain tree in socio-religious aspects of the Assamese society is beyond explanation. As ment­ioned earlier that Madhavadeva presented his Guru Saṅkara a mat made of dried stems of plaintain tree while the former was at Ganak-kuchi.

(b) Forest Products:

Along with food crops, the forest products also have been playing an important role in the economical life of the people

36. There is an aphorism of Dākpurūṣa regarding the appreci­ation of banana which runs thus—Suphal kadali, Su-nārī khedalī ... etc. (banana is a good fruit, while a dirty woman is good wife).
of this area since the earliest times. It is noticed that there
are mentions in the Guru Caritas about Baraljär (jär = forest),
Kaljär consisting of two famous forests namely Saru-mar and
Bar-mar as mentioned in chapter II which met the demands of
the day to day life of the people of this region. Except agricul­
tural fields almost all of the areas were covered with
jungles containing reeds and trees. Tradition claims, people
not in the past but even today have been living in the that­
ched houses made of easily available required materials from
the jungles and specially in the past that was the order of
the day. Even now, people specially in the villages have been
dwelling in the traditional house made of thatches, bamboos and
timber posts, cross-beams, wooden doors and windows. Reeds,
split rods and whole rods of bamboo were used to set-up the
walls of the houses which were collected from the nearby
jungles mostly. The religious heads use the simple things made
of bamboo and wood, put on simple cotton clothes locally woven
and perform prayers sitting on mats made of reeds, bamboo and
stems of plaintain tree.

39. GCK, p. 91
40. GCK, p. 286
The most common trees of this region are bata (ficus indica), āśvastha (ficus religiosa), bakul, ām-gach (mango tree) etc. that serve many religious purposes of the satra and people in general. Madhava himself had started the movement of vriksaropan (afforestation) in the last part of the 16th century by planting mango tree, ketekī flower, rangiyāl flower in this satras of Barpeta area and his place of afforestation at Barpeta is known as Ketekībāri\(^4^2\) (garden) bears the sacred memory of the past, for which Barpeta area can boast of as the area of first afforestation movement. Even now, Ketekībāri is considered a holy place by the devotees and the visitors.

The timber of urīām (bischofia javanice), pama (udrelatoona) have been used mainly for building boats. Other valuable trees of these forests were śalakh (terminelia), khakun, bel, pārāli, som etc. Bamboo and cane were largely grown in the forests. Moreover, special attention had been paid for growing plaintain tree, bamboo and cane. Bamboo and plaintain tree have hundred and one requirements in the daily life of an Assamese villager.\(^4^3\) Bamboo provides him with materials not

42. GCK, p. 325
43. B.K. Barua: A Cultural History of Assam, p. 97
only for building houses but also fences, fuels, bridges, busket making, equipments of plough, fishing and hunting equipments. Some musical instruments are also made of bamboo. The young sprouts of bamboo are used to prepare a delicious item of food locally known bāh-gājartengā. Therefore, bamboo is treated with special reverence and is forbidden even to cut it on inauspicious day like Tuesday and Saturday as tradition is in vogue in this locality. In respect of establishing residence, there is a saying of Dāk-puruṣa:

'Rube hān, paścime bāh,
uttare guwā, dakṣine dhuā'

i.e., the importance of bamboo in the household is indispensable.

Formerly the forests were infested with various kinds of birds and wild beasts of prey. Now, except the Bāghbar hill the entire forest areas have practically disappeared with the growth of population and in its place new villages and towns have developed with a green signal of changing pattern of society.

44. In Upper Assam it is known as kharicā (a sour preparation)

45. Bamboo is an object of Kāmropi Lokagī which runs as follows: 'pārire pīcara jāti bāh ecupi sio mor sodarar bāh' ... etc.

46. which means that there should be duck in the east, bamboo in the west, tree of arecanut in the north and is to be kept open the south of the residency.
(b) **Industries**:

As has been mentioned earlier that Barpeta is a temple-town. Naturally such type of town can not thrive for a large scale heavy industry as the religious zeal of the people has been occupying the primary position since the days of its inception. There is information in the *Guru-Caritas* specially in the *GCK* and Daityari's *carita* that during the reign of Koch King Naranarayan some small scale handloom industrial centres were established under his initiative at Kenduguri (Barpeta) near Pāṭbāusī and at Bhaṭṭinnagar (Bhaṭṭāpur of Gopāl Āṭā).

Barpeta gradually developed as a centre of trade and commerce since medieval period. Various small scale industries grew to fulfil the demand of the day to day life of the people of the entire surrounding areas specially at the time of Mathurādās Budhā Āṭā and those were the means of livelihood too.

The skill in the art of preparing cotton cloth of exquisite quality of Tāṭikuchi had reached the high perfection as evidenced by the *Vṛindāvani vastra*. Weaving of cloth was the means of

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47. *GCK*, p. 175; *Daityārī Thākur's Carit*, p. 184
48. *Dvija Paramānanda*, v-131
49. *Daityārī*, p. 185
livelhood of a class of people who were known as Tāti (weaver). In the later period people of this area happened to take initiative in some cottage industries not for the sake of industry itself but for the sake of livelihood and to meet the urgent demands of the neighbouring people. As for instance, some had carried on iron-works and they were known as Kamār (blacksmith), some were engaged in pottery and were known as Kumār (those who used to wheel) and Hīrā (without wheel). Some were engaged in fire works (bākhār, āfic-bājī) and were known as Gandhiyā, some carried on gold and silver works they were known as goldsmith and silversmith (bāniyā or kārikā). There were also classes of people who carried on wood work like making of boat, guru-āsana, floral design, mask etc. and were known as sūtār, khanikār etc. Some people were engaged in burning snail-shells for procuring lime and called them mukhi. They supplied lime throughout the whole region along with the satras. Another most important and well-known cottage industry of Barpatā is ivory work. Now, this unique industry of Barpatā has been facing crisis for want of sufficient supply of raw materials on the one hand and soaring price of raw materials on the other. These cottage industries went on a great deal to ameliorate the evils of caste distinction.
At present the brick industry of Barpeta has developed extensively which has provided self-employment for the sons of the soil. The proposed jute mill at Guwāghā (Kāmcarana's satra) has not yet been completed and this would be the only public sector large scale industry throughout the area after accomplishment.

The major difficulties faced by the cottage industries of Barpeta will be discussed in chapter VIII of this work.

(c) Trade and Commerce:

We have come across two notable names in the GCK of which one is Cakiya Maṭi or Bāradi Satra30 who had the business of renting boats as well as was a boatswain. The other person is Bhavānand Sādgr51 (merchant), later better known as Nārāyandās Thākur whose merchant boats plied from place to place through all the navigable water ways of Koch Kingdom before the advent of Sahkaradeva. They were a class of rich trades men of this region, the heritage of which has been maintained through the ages. As mention in the chapter II

\[50. \text{GCK, p. 66; Rāmānanda, v. 537}\]
\[51. \text{GCK, p. 92; Ibid, v. 578}\]
that the tributaries of the Brahmaputra have been flowing through entire area of this zone of study. So, when means of modern transport were unknown the rivers were the easiest routes through which men and materials could move throughout the year round. This privilege attracted the people more and more to carry on trade and commerce to far and near. It is noticed in the remark of E.T. Dalton that most of the inhabitants of Barpeṭā region lived on trades and commerce and agriculture. Their trading boats full of agricultural goods and utensils of various kinds were seen in all rivers of Assam. Even such boats sailed to Shrirājganj (now in Bangladesh) through the Brahmaputra.

But now, the tributaries have become small and shallow in the Autumn and particularly in winter. Secondly, modern means of transport have developed gradually through which people can move within a short time and hence, riverine trade has been discontinued. Even then, there is not a single town in Assam where a Barpeṭīan has not established his business. These tradesmen have been expanding their trades and commerce to the nook and corner of the territory maintaining the old

tradition with reputation even now. Side by side, a new business of motor-bus has been developed at Barpeta as a result of which a good number of motor-bus body building enterprises have been established here.

(d) Food Habit:

As already seen, the Barpeta group of satra is located in the lowland area and there were many tributaries and bils. As a result of which fish and fowl, milk, deer etc. were more than sufficient. Therefore, the chief articles of food were constituted with rice, vegetables, milk, curd, fish, fruits and meat of various wild beasts. Of these, two articles of food were more favourite, namely fish and curd along with meat which comprised common articles of diet. There was a popular saying that none had purchased a fish the price of which might be rupees five. They never did it because, the price of the fish was considered equal to the price of bullock. So, they considered the eating of such a fish as eating of beef (goma-nqsa) which is a prohibition for the Hindus. From this point of view it can be inferred that the price of fish was too cheap and binding of religion on the people was stringent.
If one party of a hāti went on fishing by boat at night, which is known as Vantipora in the parlance, was sufficient for the entire hāti or village. Moreover, it was hobby for some people to collect eggs of tortoise from the bank of a river or a bil in the month of Caitra (March-April). Upto few years fish was so cheap that one could purchase seven to eight middle size solomons (kūdhi) by one paisā (64 paisās = Re. 1).53 Fishes like, sal, šingi, haq, mirikā, bāya etc. were prohibited for the Assamese high castes Hindus. Different devices of catching fish are lāngī (net), cepā, sahrā, dihgor, jākhoi or jākhā, poulā, koch and few modern nets of different name.

Besides these articles, young banana and bamboo plants are made relishing popular preparation known as pācła or pacalā bāh-gājar lengā or kharicā. Various fruits locally known as thāikārā, tetli, āmra, kadde, ou, jalpe etc. are used for sour-curry preparation.54 An alkali preparation was obtained from some water creepers known as kalam or kalamou, gāngdal etc. Saltpetre (jakhār) was prepared from urine of goat and cow.

In the words of Dr. B.K. Barua, "it is noteworthy that in Assam, unlike the other provinces of India, both the Brahmins

54. B.K. Barua: A Cultural History of Assam, p. 137
and Vaishnavas/meat and fish without any bar or comment."\(^{55}\)

Sāndah, cīrā and qurā (parched rice pounded flat and flour):

The Sāndah is used for food both in towns and villages, particularly in the rural area Gurā sānda is more popular and used as break­fast generally. Jakrā-bhāt, rice soaked in water over night is known as jakrā-bhāt which is a very popular item of food particularly in rural area. It is also taken as break­fast specially in summer season with salt, chillies and mustard oil. The words jakrā-bhāt are used locally as jakrā-pāntā also.

Due to unbroken influx of immigrants to Assam, owing to various political and economic reasons from the neighbouring states caused much increase in population specially in Barpeta area. The grazing, fishing and hunting fields have been occupied by these immigrants as a result of which the articles of food have been becoming rare, specially fish, meat and curd day by day. Now, Assamese people are about to forget the habits of vantipora, preparation of alkali, saltapatre etc. which have caused changes in food habits of the people to a great extent.

55. Ibid, p. 138
Man and woman devotees with traditional dresses

Man and woman with ceremonial dresses
(2) **Dresses and Ornament:**

Our endeavour here is to give a brief account of dresses and ornaments used by male and female of this group of satras separately.

(a) **The dresses and ornaments of males:** The dresses of male in general is short and simple. Formerly as stated in the GCK male dress consisted of the long and broad clothes known as bhuni or dhoti and pācarā or celehg woven out of cotton which were popular among the monks of satras. There is mention about parhis (warm and thick winter cloth) and dagalā (a long shirt) which was presented to Śāṅkaradeva by King Naranārāyaṇa though such costly shirt was not used by the saints at their own initiative. One gāmoca was added to their dress along with bhuni and pācarā. Of course a householder used a shirt and a baniyan occasionally. The celibate monks are generally having long hair with lock like woman. Regarding ornaments of various types Henikar may be cited where he gave a list of gold and silver ornaments both for male and female which will be mentioned in chapter VIII of this work.

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56. GCK, p. 121
57. GCK, p. 121
58. GCK, p. 368
59. GCK, p. 168
60. F.C. Heniker: **Gold and Silver work of Assam**, 1905
(b) Female dress: Formerly the dresses comprised of mainly three garments known as mekhelā (skirt), ākurān (breast cloth) and unnā or urani (a cloth used for both veil and to cover upper portion of the body). The mekhelā is worn adjusting it either above the breast or round the waist that reaches to the ankles. The lower portion of the mekhelā contains a gāchā-bachā (a piece of embroidered border like big earthen lamp stand called gāchā), woven figures of creeper with floral designs for which unique skill Barpētā has a reputation throughout Assam. Ākurān or riha is an ornamented long and broad cloth which is wrapped around the waist to breast over the mekhelā making knot thereon called methani. Over the ākurān a kind shawl known as unnā is worn to cover the upper portion of the body upto head and according to necessity it is also used to wear the veil (orani), generally by a married woman. Perhaps unnā or urani is a corrupt word of orani. The traditional cooking dress of woman and monks were separate and dyed yellow. Now, such customary dress is hardly seen.

Over and above the customary dress, some associated ordinary ceremonial pieces of cloth are like telas, ārāheita or ārehāti, mukcā and bihān or bihuwān, in some places of this
region bihān is also called Caiteli kāpor. According to custom a woman had to wear a veil before the elders of her husband's relation. A widow is to wear white dress. But the above custom seems to discontinue. Rather the dress and short-cut hair in the western style seem to attract the Assamese lady more and more instead of Assamese traditional dress rihi mekhālā or mekhelā cādar, specially the educated section of the urban area which may be termed as pseudo western style.

(e) Beliefs, Superstition, Customs etc.:  

(1) Beliefs: In the words of H.M. Johnson, "from knowledge and cognitive errors we may distinguish belief which in empirical terms are neither true nor false."61 Such belief may be "about the world of nature - animate and inanimate; about human behaviour and things made by man; about a spirit world and man's reaction with it; about magic and witchcraft; about spirits and fairies; about spell, charms, amulets, luck, omens; about disease and death."62

61. Herry M. Johnson: Sociology: A Systematic Introduction, p. 66
62. P. Goswami: Ballad and Tales of Assam, p. 2
Assam is a multi-ethnic land where particular beliefs of different ethnic groups differ from one another. Many of the beliefs are nothing but superstitions. In this context it is needed to mention here that in this cultural zone of our study the dominant influence of Vaiṣṇavism on popular beliefs is quite evident. Particularly in socio-religious aspect, the life and thought of the people has been intimately connected with the Vaiṣṇavite tradition. It is noticed in the Rukminiharan nāta of Saṅkaradeva that the left thigh, arm and the left eye of Rukminidevi had moved frequently before meeting with Kṛṣṇa which was believed to have a favourable indication to her.63

In the satras some beliefs had grown pertaining to religious behaviour, such as default of Guru-sevā is a crime; disloyalty to preceptor is a sin. Cooked meal is prohibited for a Vaiṣṇava devotee on the eleventh day of every month which is known as ekādaśi. Once Mādhava was rebuked by Saṅkaradeva for taking rice and water on the day of ekādaśi.64 The biographies of the saints register different folk-beliefs in order to impose religious control over the devotees which are

64. *GCK*, p. 91
regarded as codes of conduct even now. Hence, it may be assumed that popular beliefs are means of social control. These are few auguries. These prevail even now.

The people have beliefs on Monday and Saturday that there is an interruption on journey if one starts towards the east which is nothing but an ill omen. In the same way losing of teeth in dream at night is believed to cause death of some near relatives of the person concerned. Hair cutting and shaving are prohibited on Tuesday. The 'neu-neu' sounds made by an owl in the last part of the night is an ill forecasting somebody's death. Laughing in a dream is a bad sign. The followings are some other popular beliefs: If the crow remains crowing on the roof of a house, then it is believed to announce the coming of guests to the family concerned. Marriage is considered approaching to a youth if a fly falls on his body. Fallen teeth of lower jaw should be thrown to the roof of a house in order to have new teeth like that of a mouse. In this way numerous popular beliefs are in vogue which have been handed down traditionally from one generation to another.

(ii) **Superstition**: The present society is more advanced both educationally and scientifically than the society of the
of the past. So, the tendency of examining the real significance of every phenomenon through reasoning has become more and more evident than what was in the past.

As in the case of folk-songs or folk-tales, similarly the case of folk-beliefs or superstitions, it is difficult to trace their origin. In course of time popular beliefs undergo many changes that no particular belief can be said to be deliberate planning or design. Many of the popular beliefs are considered now-a-days, to be superstitions. Although superstitions are considered to be unscientific and irrational beliefs connected with the supernatural agencies, omens, divinations etc. rooted in the past, many of them continue even today.

We may cite here few old instances from the GCK regarding superstition associated with religion. Byāskalāi, a staunch devotee of Vaiṣṇava faith was excommunicated by Saṅkaradeva as he worshipped Śitāladevī or Ai (goddess of small-pox) from Vaiṣṇavism for his animist superstition. Cholera was believed to be caused by a demi-god known as

65. GCK, p. 120
Māur. It is now, proved to be a mere superstition. In another place of the GCK it is noticed that there were Yakṣas (demi-gods) in the Bar-bil\(^66\) located in the north-east of Sundarīdiyā Satra which is considered to be a superstition now.

There are some beliefs in the society that Birā, Dāulā (evil spirits) etc. are believed to be harmful spirits specially for the woman folk even today. In the rural areas there is a belief that the new born babies are killed by an evil spirit known as Markuisā. In order to get rid of the spirit, a dāo (knife) is kept under the sleeping mat, so that the evil spirit can not come near the baby.\(^67\) Even now, the people particularly in the villages, are not free from those superstitions. The function of the village oja or bej (native physician) has been still continuing his campaign against such spirits.

It is noticed that some superstitious ideas are current among the present student community. According Dr. S. Barman the student examinees do not take egg and potato with their meal before going to examination hall considering bad result

\(^{66}\) GCK, p. 268

\(^{67}\) N.P. Bardoloi: Asamar Loka Gaṃskriti, p. 45. In this respect here is a current Assamese idiom which runs thus: 'nairār pātir dāo' (worth for nothing) is a superstition.
in the examination. But the superstitious idea here is not associated with potato; it is associated with egg. Even an educated lady puts a black-spot on the forehead or any portion of the forehead of her baby in order to avoid evil eye etc.

Thus superstition changes its form and shifts its ground but may exists everywhere. It may be concluded that the differences between beliefs and superstition are largely matters of degree rather than kinds. But premitive society could hardly make the distinctions between belief and superstition. Notwithstanding these beliefs and superstitions are adherent to the culture of every society whether primitive or modern and it is not that our present society is free from the influences of certain beliefs and superstition.

(iii) Customs: Customs are nothing but long established habits and usages of a certain society. They usually grow out of frequent and habitual repetition of the same act. Whenever, there is a widespread habit there is corresponding custom as well. "It is a peculiar characteristics of custom that exists only as a social relationship and has for the individual

68. Sibnath Barman: Loka Krātir Utsah, p, 17
an external sanction.”\(^{69}\) In the words of MacIver, "... it is a part of a complex of determinate sustained and guarded by the group ... . Custom is a group of procedures that have gradually emerged, without expressed enactment, with any constituted authority to declare it, to apply it, to safeguard it."\(^{70}\) In brief it is the common acceptance of frequent habitual repetition of the same act that sustains customs and they have been playing a major role in our social behaviour since the inception of society.

Now, we may cite few examples of custom as a cultural trait which have been occupying a conspicuous place in our society traditionally. Besides, custom as a constituent element of culture some changes have to undergo that are being occupied from time to time. Because new custom drives away the old one from the society.

The following examples will be helpful to illustrate customs that have been refreshing the entire Assamese society with certain variation. As such, all social marriages are celebrated at night is a custom. Such contracts are initiated by

\(^{69}\) Sachdeva and Gupta: \textit{A Simple Study of Sociology}, 223

\(^{70}\) \textit{Ibid} = op.cit.
the guardians of both man and woman. *Telarbhār* (gift marriage) is handed over before a day or two of the wedding ceremony. The woman takes food after her husband. A married woman is loyal to her husband first. The *Bihu* festivals are celebrated every year both in *Satra Kirtanagar* and in the individual household. The younger members of Assamese Hindu family touch the feet of the elders in *Māgh-domāhi* and *Bahāg-domāhi* specially. An initiated Vaiṣṇava devotee performs *Guru-sevā* (prayer to *Guru*) at least once a day; he is to take bath before *Guru-sevā*. Virtually a *celebrate* devotee lives on alms, but now that is seen discontinued.

The customs emerges with different forms of worship, rituals and with ceremonies relating to marriage, birth and death. It has also emerged depending upon the occupation of the individual with which he becomes familiar, as the cultivator does not plough on certain dates of the month; he touches the feet of the bullocks before he starts ploughing. Fasting on *āusi* (the day of conjunction of the sun and the moon), *purnimā* (day of full-moon) and *ekādaśī* specially the Vaiṣṇava devotees are to observe *brat* customarily. In the same way wearing a white dress by a widow, *conducting* of a
function on entering a newly constructed house, benediction is conferred on the family after conclusion of nampraseanga are parts of custom. The lightening of caki or vanti under the basil-plant (tulasi) in Kati-domahi, erecting bhelaghbar and fasting on the eve of Magh-domahi by the children and young men, ceremonial bath of the cattle and providing new rope (pasha), merry-making and taking of bihan in Bahag-domahi etc. are prevalent customs of the Assamese people of this area along with other parts of Assam which are considered indispen sible. To pay Guru-kar (tax) yearly to the satra is a custom among the devotees. Once there was a custom for a Satradhikar to compose at least one drama. But that custom is not seen followed now-a-days. Child marriage was a custom among the Brahmins which is not continued now. The inheritors of Kamar, Kumar, Sonari, Khanikar, Sutar, Mukhi etc. have dis continued to follow the traditional customs of their ancestors. Even most of the Assamese cultivators of this region are not interested to carry on their customary occupation.

71. M. Neog : Sri Sri Sankaradeva, p. 139
72. Information received from Spot-verification and interviews.
New trends: On the other hand some new trends of customs have emerged in this region due to coexistence in the individual functions, such as birth-day celebration, luthuri mukhat diyā (feeding of cooked rice powder), pāc-dinā rakhā (watch over the newborn baby on the fifth day after birth). In the same way some new public functions have emerged in the form of Bahāqī-bidāy (farewell to Bahāq), Jannotsava of Gurus etc. Perhaps, modern education, economic condition together with the mixed modern cultural waves are the causes of this new trends of customs. However, these customs bring something new to our culture as a whole.