According to the 1961 census, out of a total population of 15,43,392, the religion-wise distribution of the people of the district was as follows:

- Hindus: 786,597
- Muslims: 668,748
- Christians: 51,594
- Buddhists: 1,135
- Jains: 2,077
- Sikhs: 310
- Tribal Religions: 26,932
- Other Religions: 6,449

Thus Hindus and Muslims constituted the bulk of the population accounting for 50.95 per cent and 43.32 per cent of the total respectively. The third largest group formed by the Christians, had a strength of only 3.34 per cent of the population. People following tribal religions made up a mere 1.75 per cent.  

As against this, 'forty four percent of the population in 1901 were Hindus, 28 per cent Muhammadans and 27 percent were still faithful to their tribal forms of religion.'

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1. The figures have been taken from the Statistical Handbook of Assam, 1970 (Table 2.7) published by the Dept. of Economics and Statistics, Govt. of Assam.

The appreciable increase in the proportions of the Hindus and Muslims and the drop in that of those professing tribal religions seem to be the result of the following factors:

1. The present figures for both Hindus and Muslims include huge numbers of people of both communities who have migrated to the district from outside, chiefly from East Bengal, in comparatively recent years and have thus helped to inflate their respective proportions.

2. The present figure for Hindus obviously includes a large number of people of tribal origin, mainly of Bodo and Rabha stock, who were earlier included in the category of those faithful to the 'tribal forms of religion.' Much of this addition has come through conversion of tribals into Hinduism. But there is also room to believe that changes in attitudes have resulted in many tribals following an unorthodox kind of Hinduism being returned as Hindus, and not as followers of tribal religions, as was the earlier practice.

3. There has also been in the intervening years the conversion of some tribals of the district, mostly Garos and Bodos into Christianity. This has also contributed, however slightly, to the reduction of the percentage of the followers of tribal religions.

It may be pointed out that though the percentage of Christians has shown a slight increase, Christianity has not assumed any distinctly local character in the district and as such has yet to make any appreciable contribution to its cultural pattern. A good
A distinctive feature of the population of Goalpara — or of Assam and North Bengal for that matter — is that a sizeable portion of it belongs to various tribal groups who, though not formally belonging to the orthodox Hindu fold, reside on the periphery of Hinduism at various stages of assimilation. Now, the process of gradual assimilation of non-Aryan elements has been associated with Hinduism since a very distant past. But what is remarkable about the process in these parts is that it is still fairly active. Practically, the bulk of the Hindu population in Assam and North Bengal is drawn from various non-Aryan stocks that have been integrated into the Hindu society at different times of history.

The integration generally takes place through the process of conversion. 'Such conversion is naturally most common on the outskirts of the territory long occupied by Hindus. Thus in Assam, the Koch Rajas, who are without doubt of non-Aryan descent have been recognised by the Brahmans as springing from Siva.' In recent centuries at least the formalities of conversion have been performed in this region by Vaishnava preachers (gosains) through whose ministration tribal families have gained recognition as pure Hindus after going through more than one stage of 'purification'. The first stage in the process is that which, in Goalpara, is known as madāshi.

3. In the rest of Assam Valley, these two stages are known as madāshi and saraniā respectively.
At this stage the aspiring converts are permitted the consumption of pork and liquor. Gārāmi is the second stage at which these practices have been given up by the family. The final admittance into the pure Hindu fold comes after years and may sometimes take more than one generation.

It is worth noting in this context that the Vaishnava preachers and also the Brahman priests of Assam have shown much greater liberalism than those from other parts of India. Not only have the Assam Vaishnava guides, both Brahmans and non-Brahmans, have eagerly officiated in the process of conversion and shown remarkable tolerance in the matter of their unorthodox habits and practices, it is the Kamrupi Brahman priests again who have traditionally catered to the needs of the so called degraded Hindus, including the Rajbansis, not only in Goalpara but throughout North Bengal. Brahmins from other parts of India have generally kept themselves at a distance from these 'impure' Hindus for fear of being degraded through contact with them and have always looked down upon the Kamrupi Brahmans for stooping so low as to have such lowly people as their clients.

As already pointed out, the Rajbansis, who account for the majority of the local Hindu population of the district and who have

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1. See fn. 3 of page 68.
2. "The process is often gradual. When the Kachāri first puts himself under the guidance of a gosāin, or teacher of the Vaishnava sect, he is a Hindu in little more than name, eating pigs and fowls, and continuing to drink strong liquor. After a time, he somewhat modifies these abominable practices, and then, after several generations, when the family has given up or concealed its taste for forbidden food and drink, and has become, in appearance at least, ceremonially pure, its members are finally promoted to the rank of orthodox Hindus." — See Crooke, op. cit., pp. 699-701.
3. The class of Brahmans who perform priestly duties in Goalpara and North Bengal, mainly from the Kamrup district, are known as bili-tiyā bāmun.
contributed in a large measure in forging some kind of homogeneity into the social and cultural pattern of the district, are known to have been originally of non-Aryan extraction, and quite an appreciable portion of them are believed to have been admitted to their rank from the local Bodo or Rabha stocks through the process described above. The Hinduism as practised by the Rajbansis is in general characterised by beliefs and practices that betray the legacy of such past associations and it is remarkably free from much of the rigidity normally accompanying orthodox Hinduism.¹

II Hinduism : the Different Sects

Drawing upon the census figures of 1901, B. C. Allen reported in 1905.

'83 per cent of the Hindus returned the sect to which they attorned. Of these 6 per cent declared themselves as Saktists, or worshippers of the generative power as manifested in the female; 4 per cent as followers of Siva; and 90 per cent as Vaishnavites.'

¹. Both ethnically and culturally, the Rajbansis of Goalpara are very close to the Rajbansis of the neighbouring districts of North Bengal, and the following account of the religion as practised by the Rajbansis of Jalpaiguri could be said to apply in case of Goalpara also:

'From the nature of the races who call themselves Hindus it is not surprising that the Hinduism professed in the district is not of a very rigid character. The Rajbansis ... ... retain much of their ancient beliefs and superstitions. The popular religion is expressed in the worship of a number of a spirits or deities whose chief attribute is their power to cause evil if they are not appeased by offerings and sacrifices.'— See Grunnin: Jalpaiguri District Gazetteer, 1911, p.42.
No such figures are available for the present times. However, so far as the local Hindu population is concerned, the majority still claim to be Vaishnavas and only a small percentage to be Sakta and Saivas. But since, as already observed, popular Hinduism of the district is something different from orthodox Hinduism, such sectarian divisions carry little significance for the rank of the Hindu populace except in case of the highest castes.

(a) Vaishnavism

In the western parts of the district Bengal Vaishnavism has a greater influence today than Assam Vaishnavism. The spiritual guides of the majority of those professing Vaishnavism are Brahman gosâins and their non-Brahman assistants called adhikâris, belonging to the Bengal Vaishnava order. Bengali Kirtans are sung in most religion congregations. There is also large number of folksongs either containing direct references to Chaitanya deva or showing clear marks of having been inspired by Chaitanya Vaishnavism. Besides, there is a whole body of folksongs of love and desire which, having very little to do with religions sentiments, take on as their theme the parakîvâ love between Krishna and Radha, obviously borrowed from Bengal Vaishnavism.

1. 'In orthodox Hinduism the religions instructor (guru) bestows consecration (dikṣā) on his disciple by informing him of the name of the deity to be worshipped. The name of the deity is given to the disciple in the root-formula (mūla-mantra)'. - See R. W. Frazer: 'Saivism' in Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics, Vol.XI, p.91.

If the mūla-mantra contains the name of Vāsudeva or Nārāyana, he is a Vaishnava, if it contains the name of Śiva, he is a Saiva, if the name of the mūla-mantra is Durgā, Kālī, Tārā or Tripura-Sundarī he is a Sākta. The initiated Hindu may be personally free from sectarian narrowness, still he must be classed as a sectary' (Ram Prasad Chanda : Indo-Aryan Races, quoted in Ibid.)
But in most of the eastern parts of the district Assam Vaishnavism and its organizational pattern still hold sway. There is a large number of satras and gahe-ghars (prayer-halls) belonging to different schisms of the Assamese Vaishnava order still active here. The heads of these satras are called adhikārs (when they are Sudras, generally Kayasthas) or gosāins (when they are Brahmanas). Below them there are Sudra officers called medhis who officiate for the gurus in all minor spiritual matters. A lower grade of officers of this order are called kāmsena, also drawn from the Sudra laity. There are today practically no celebate monks, a distinguishing feature of the satra institution, and in general the influence of the satras is steadily on the wane.

1. The satras are like medieval monasteries or maths. They were originally established at places away from the humdrum of life, and the first satras was established by Sankaradeva near his ancestral village at Bardowa. Later on satras grew up at all places where Sankaradeva stayed during his movements from Bardowa to Barpeta. But more satras came into existence when differences of opinion arose among the followers after Sankaradeva's death, particularly between Brahmana and Sudras followers. The first Brahmana seceders were Damodaradeva and Harideva. Later on the Brahmana preachers founded four important satras in Upper Assam, namely, Garamur, Kuruabahi, Auniati and Dakhinpat. After the death of Madhavadeva, who became the chief apostle after Sankaradeva, the schism in the Sankarite sect widened and consequently several sub-sects or samhatis grew up. Some of the major sub-sects are Brahma-Samhati, Kala-Samhati, Nika-Samhati and Purusha-Samhati. As the disciples of these sub-sects spread their activities, their missionary outposts became branch satras, and the original centres became the headquarters. The branch satras founded by Brahmana preachers usually follow the pattern of the Bamuniya satras like the Auniati or Dakhinpat, the others follow the set-up of Bardowa or Barpeta and derive inspiration from them. Whether original or branch, the satras have huge establishments, departments and a great number of structures. See B. K. Barua and K. V. S. Murthi, Temples and Legends of Assam, pp.112-113.

2. Medhis are 'officers who periodically supervise the religious life of the people.' See Ibid., p.130.
The history of Assam Vaishnavism and the satra institution reveals that the area of influence of the Assamese Vaishnava gurus and the satras founded by them covered not only the whole of Goalpara but also extended further west to include a large tract of North Bengal. Assamese Vaishnavism had flourished in this region under the active patronage of the Koch King Naramarayana, his illustrious brother Chilarai and their descendants. Cooch Behar was one of the main centres of activity of the great Vaishnava apostles of Assam — Sankaradeva, Madhavadeva and Damodaradeva. Devout Vaishnavas of Assam still regard Madhupur satra, situated in Cooch Behar, as one of the holiest places, the other two being Barpeta in Kamrup and Kamalabari in Upper Assam.

The chronicles of the satras list a big number of them that once flourished in the Goalpara district. Very few exist today in the western parts or are even heard of. The only institution that still maintains its past glory is the satra known as Ramraikuthi situated at Chhatrasal on the Goalpara-Rangpur border. It seems that Assam Vaishnavism had been steadily losing its influence in these parts (as also in North Bengal), and started yielding place to Bengal Vaishnavism quite a long time ago. Martin had noticed this development as early as in the second quarter of the last century. From his accounts we get an idea not only about the areas of influence of the two Vaishnava orders but also some relevant details about their systems of working.

1. Bihare Madhupur Kamrupe Barpetā Ujanit Kamalābāri: 'Madhupur in (Cooch) Behar, Barpeta in Kamrup and Kamalabari in Upper Assam' — as the popular saying goes.

Speaking about 'the chief Gurus, who preside over the worshippers of Vishnu, that form by far the most numerous class of Hindus in this district', Martin says, 'In the parts west from the Chonno Kosh [the San Kosh] the Goswamis of Bengal have secured a large proportion of these ... (They) frequently travel through their respective districts and give Upodes to very high and pure personages. For lower persons of pure birth they employ Odhikari Brahmans ... ... The Goswamis for the lower castes, and even for the Rajbongsis, employ sudra instructors ... ...' Continuing, Martin says: 'In the parts of the district, which are subject to Porikhyit Raja, and in Assam, the plan differs a good deal, except where some encroachments have been made in Bahirbondo and Bhitorbondo; but there the Eastern Gurus retain some of their power, as also in a small degree, the case in Vihar proper, and in the parts of the district west from the old Tista. In these Eastern regions the Bhokot, or worshippers of Vishnu, are much more subjected to their Gurus, who are called Mahajons or persons of great wealth, a title usually given to merchants. They are also called Mohapurush or great men. Many of them are Kamrupi Brahmans, but the greater part, and those who have the greatest number of followers, are Kolitas. These instructors have large thatched halls, where they reside, and instruct their pupils (Sishyo), and many of these always attend the Guru, and work for their mutual support, while others remain in general at home, take care of their families, and only attend occasionally for instruction. In order to assist them in

2. A prince of the eastern branch of the Koch Kings.
the care of the numerous flock, which many of these great men possess, they employ deputies to reside in places, that are chiefly convenient for the instruction of such, as family concerns prevent from a due attendance on the chief. These are Medis, and are attended in the same manner as their masters, but by smaller numbers; and they also contribute to his support and power.¹

Although the hold of the spiritual order on the social life has been lost for all practical purposes, only some vestiges of the old order still remain. The following excerpt from Martin gives an idea about the nature of the role played by the Vaishnava spiritual order in settling disputes and trying moral offences - something that has added distinction to the social life of the Assamese Hindus till the recent past:

'In the eastern parts ... everything is settled by Medis, appointed by the spiritual guides. The plan which is followed in Haworaghat,² may serve as an example for the whole. The priest (pu-rohit) of the Vijni Raja, to which chief the territory belongs, has drawn up a proper code of rules called Brayoschitto Totto ... which is generally observed. Each Medi has under his care a company (Mel or Kel), which contains about a hundred families of the worshippers of Vishnu (Bhokot) of all castes. ... When a person has been discovered in the transgression of any rule of his caste, as described in the Code of laws, he is in danger of excommunication, and must humbly entreat the Medi to remove the scandal, which is done by a fine.'³

¹ Martin: pp.559-560.
² Haworaghat or Habraghat is a pargana in the southern part of Goalpara district.
³ Martin: p.565.
(b) Saktism

The majority of the Vaishnavas are so in little more than name and they freely indulge in practices that are normally forbidden to a strict Vaishnava. Even the non-Vaishnava practice of offering sacrifices to the various gods and goddesses, usually associated with the Sakta cult, is so common among them that the distinction between the Vaishnava and the Sakta gets blurred. The following observations made by Martin largely holds good for Goalpara today.

'The sect of Saktism prevails most commonly among the Brahmans and Kayosthos, and most of the Sudras are worshippers of Visnu; ... All persons, moreover, except the very Goswamis, offer sacrifices to the Saktis when in distress.' Thus, although Saktism is formally professed by only a small population, Sakta beliefs and practices are by no means restricted to these few.

As Martin observed, 'Kali is a Gramdevata, and Kali is the grand object of worship. Indeed all female Gramdevatas are considered as different forms of the same deity ...' The biggest number of shrines (than or pât) temples and other holy places are dedicated to Kali and her various manifestations. In some regions the goddess is popularly believed to have an almost bewildering variety of forms, some of which are Krishna Kali, Bhadra Kali, Smashan Kali, Dakshinâ Kali, Châmunda Kali, Rakshâ Kali, Shvâmâ Kali, Nishâ Kali, Bhut Kali, and so on. Some people speak of eighteen forms, a few of which suggest Tantric associations.

2. Ibid., p.557.
Apart from the independent worship of Kali, the worship of the goddess is also associated with the Charak Puja and, in some parts, with the Bag Puja ceremony. The Kali-Chandi dance is one of the most important dances of the district. Chandi, as Siva's consort, is a popular figure in folk-literature. Durga as such does not seem to be one of the popular folk-goddesses though Durga Puja is widely observed. It is as Mahamaya that the goddess has greater popularity.

Assam and the north-east of Bengal have been traditionally associated with the Sakti cult. Some scholars believe this region to be the source from which the Tantric and Sakta corruptions of the religion of the Vedas and the Puranas proceeded. "Saktism, in the sense of a definite sect with scriptures of its own, if not confined to the north-east corner, at least had its headquarters here." The temple of Kamakhya, 'the goddess of desire', is the most famous shrine of this sect and with the worship of Kamakhya are incorporated various Sakta rites of mantras, mudras and sacrifices. The cult is believed to have developed out of old primitive beliefs and practices.

There are more than one shrine in the district of Goalpara known by the name of Kamakhya. Kamakhya also figures prominently in the magical lore of the ojas (medicine-men expert in spells) of the area and most of the mantras used by them contain invocations to the goddess. But Kamakhya does not seem to be one of the popular deities receiving regular worship from the village folk, except among the

1. See B. K. Barua: Cultural History of Assam, p. 147.
Bodos who identify their chief goddess Khāriā Brui with Kamakhya. Nor are 'the most abominable rites', 'licentious scenes' and 'even human sacrifices', described as important characteristics of Saktism in this region,\(^1\) are in evidence anywhere in the district today as features of the popular religion. It is doubtful whether Saktism of the above kind had ever been popular here.\(^2\)

(c) Saivism

Similarly Saivism of the orthodox canonical order is professed by only a very small section of the community. And yet Siva is a most popular deity throughout the district and his popularity cuts across racial and sectarian divisions.\(^3\) The extent of this popularity can be judged from the fact that next to Kāli shrines and holy places, it is the Mahadeb shrines and temples that are most numerous in the district.\(^4\) He is worshipped directly in different forms under different names in the various shrines dedicated to him. Besides, he is also intimately associated with a number of other local gods and goddesses. For example, he is the consort of Kāli or Chandi and the begetter of Kāti; Manasā is his daughter born from his seed. Lakshmi

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2. On the subject of the prevalence of Sakti worship in Assam in the past Dr B. K. Barua points to the fact that 'in the inscriptions there is no trace of Sakti worship except the veiled references' in a few of them. According to him, 'The silence may, however, be explained by the fact that Saktism represents a particular phase of religion which was in the main personal and esoteric. Consequently it had no connection with any public religious order or establishment.' — See Cultural History of Assam, p. 148.
3. 'Saivism, or at least the worship of Siva, prevailed in Assam from a remote period and it was the popular form of religion both amongst the aboriginal and the Aryanized people.' — See B. K. Barua: A Cultural History of Assam, p. 143.
5. A popular god.
and Saraswati, in the manner in which they are associated with the folk-mind in these parts, are also daughters of Siva. Thus there is, as it were, a Siva family of gods and goddesses.

Siva is also a very powerful figure in a big volume of folk-literature and is represented in many songs and dances.

However, this Siva of the popular religion is not the Siva of the Brahman philosopher, 'the All-god from whom the universe is evolved', but it is the Siva of the peasant, 'who associates him with the mysteries of the reproduction of life.' This Siva himself is depicted as 'the successful peasant, the improvident householder and the sensuous husband; he lives in the cremation ground in the company of goblins and is addicted to narcotics. By some curious rule of folk mythology, he is always seen assisted by Narada and Bhima in some of his highly mundane activities.

This concept is clearly something far removed from the original conception of Rudra-Siva of the Vedic times: it has not only assimilated much of polytheism and Animism of the non-Aryan races but has also been largely modified by the fertility cults of this region.

There can be little doubt that the Mongoloid Bodos, the biggest and the most important tribe of this region, have made the greatest contribution towards the shaping of this peculiar concept of Siva. Significantly, both Siva and Sivani are described as Kirata and Kirati respectively.

2. Ibid.
3. 'The popularization of the cult of Siva involved a process of syncretism, the adoption of various local deities as his manifestations.' — See Ibid., p. 701.
The most important god of the Bodos is Bathou Brai (Old Bathou). He is also known by such names as Khāriā Brai, Sibrāi etc. His consort is Khāriā Brui. Creation takes place through the union of Khāriā Brai with Khāriā Brui.

This concept of the great god and his consort fitted nicely with that of Siva and Sivani and the identification of the two was most easy. The assimilation has been so complete that not only has Siva of the Hindu pantheon assumed a new form but even the primitive Bodo religion has been reoriented by this new Siva concept. Thus the Bodos now seriously believe themselves to be Siva-worshippers. Even the name of the god, Sibrāi, seems to be the result of such reorientation. It is not difficult to see that the large number of holy places called Burā-Buri thān (shrines of the Old Man and the Old Woman) which are strewn over the district were originally associated with Bodo Brai and Brui.

III Community Shrines and Popular Gods and Godlings

A typical village in the western parts of the district has at least one community shrine or place of public worship where most of the popular gods and godlings are installed. It is known as a dasjaniya dhām and a single village often has several such dhāms in different localities.

The dhām is usually an open space surrounded on all sides by a jungle of bamboo clumps and other trees except for the approach
The space is kept clean and tidy by those who are charged with its maintenance, is known as chatal. At the centre of the chatal stands a small hut without walls, known as chotāl ghar or nāchan ghar. The deities are supposed to reside in the hut but no images are kept there. But each deity has an appointed place along the boundary of the open chotāl. When a ceremonial puja is to take place, the whole place is given a thorough cleaning.

A freshly made pith image of each of the deities represented in the dhām (except for one or two who are traditionally not represented by such images) is installed at the place allotted to it and a temporary shade of banana barks is built for each. Ceremonial worship of all the gods and godlings are held twice in the year — once after the salī harvest and the other after the ḍhēhu harvest before the Nayā Khawā ceremony has taken place. These pujas are known as baro puja (literally, big worship) and they are performed by the deuri, the priest in charge of the shrine. He is normally a Rajbansi.

A piece of red cloth is kept suspended from the roof of the nāchan ghar with the help of strings tied to its four corners and it is called chāndani. On the cloth is placed an earthen pot called bhārāl where the deuri puts water, milk, uncooked unboiled rice, dubulā grass and basil leaves. It is believed that at the puja time the deuri can see in the bhārāl which of the gods have come to receive the offerings.

1. In some places, particularly in the eastern parts, a similar holy spot is known as a than.
2. See Chap V. Sec III.
The number of gods and godlings worshipped in a dasaniya dhām is not fixed and it depends on the size of the dhām. However, it is only in case of minor godlings that that the number may vary; the principal gods and godlings are invariably represented. Kali is always the central figure in such a dhām. Around her are placed the other gods according to their importance and standing in the folk-mind of the particular village community. A small dhām has at least the following deities apart from Kali— Jakhā, Mahāmāyā, Subachani, Mahādev, Purā Madan-Kām, Mā-thakurāṇī and Madār. A bigger shrine will have apart from these: Mangalchandi, Hari, Balaram, Sītī, Pāglā, Dhumesīva, Abholā, Sanyāsi, Achin, Gaganā, Pateswari, Sashān, Mahān, Dāini and Jogini.

Kali, as we have seen, is the grand object of worship. As for the other gods and godlings some information about each is given below:

Bhogoboti is Manasa or Bishohori, and is represented by a Bishohori image. Mahamāyā is none other than Durga, normally represented by a four-handed image and rarely by a ten-handed one. Dharmā has a place reserved for him, but there is no image of the god. Mangalchandi and Subachani are goddesses who are especially worshipped by women at home. In the dhām they have their respective places but generally there are no images.

Hari is Vishnu or Krishna; and Balaram is Krishna's brother, the Haladhara incarnation of Vishnu. Hari is worshipped by many in family shrines.

1. Details about the natures and the methods of worship of the more important of these gods and godlings have been given in the next chapter.
Shitli is Shitalā, the small-pox goddess. She is believed to have seven sisters. Māthākurani is another goddess associated with diseases Pāgā, Dhumsiyā and Sanyāsi are believed to be various forms of Siva himself. While Pagā is offered tobacco in a hubble-bubble, Dhumsiyā accepts flattened rice and āthiyā banana. But Sanyā-sī must be offered ānja (hemp). In some dhāms in place of the three, only Mahādeb or Burā Sib is installed. Burā is another name for Madan-Kām. He is represented by a bamboo (and not by an image). A jākha and a khilāi (fishing implements) are generally tied to the bamboo representing the god.

Another deity represented by a Bamboo is Mādār.

Jākha or Jākha is actually a spirit, but he has such hold over the folk-mind in some areas that he has been given the status of god. He even claims a place next to Kali in the community shrine. Jākha puja is the family tradition with many households who have separate Jakha shrines. Regular puja is offered, special pujas are also given before a Nava Khāwā ceremony or before an auspicious occasion like marriage. The puja itself is simple: offerings of bananas, unboiled rice, flattened rice, etc. are placed before the Jākha image and incense is burnt. Small shrines with pith images of Jākha (Jakhā pāt) are to be seen all over the area, sometimes near a Kali shrine and sometimes independently. A female Jākha, called Jakhi, is also sometimes heard of.

A few other godlings not represented in the dhām are Gorakh-Nāth, Lukā (Nukā) Thākur, Buri (Kal Mātri) and so on.
There are some other gods and godlings popular in other parts of the district, of whom the following are well-known:

Burāthākur, Rākhāl Thākur, Rādhikā Thākur, Kālā Kaltu Thākur, Khudikhāi, Kāchā-Khai, Gāo-rājā, Bāra-Gopāli, Bāra-Khetra, Bāra-Maya, etc.

IV Spirits and Ghosts

Only a very thin line divides the gods from the spirits and the worship and propitiation of the latter constitute as much part of the popular religion as those of the gods and goddesses. In fact the term deo (Skt. deva or devatā) is used indiscriminately to designate any supernatural being, benevolent or malevolent, belonging either to the celestial or to the terrestrial world; and in the folk-pantheon of the district they take their places side by side.

The number of spirits and ghosts is quite big. Most of them are malevolent and are capable of doing harm; and the purpose of offering them puja or sacrifices is to keep them from taking offence and doing harm. Of course this is by no means peculiar to Hinduism in this region. 'A belief in every kind of demoniacal influence has always been from the earliest times an essential ingredient in Hindu religious thought. ... Certainly no one who has ever been brought into close contact with the Hindus in their own country can doubt the fact that the worship of at least ninety per cent of the people of India in the present day is a worship of fear.'

Bhut (or deo) is generally believed to be the spirit of a dead man, which lives in a bamboo grove or a sheorè tree or any other ancient tree, particularly in a lonely place. The female counterparts of the bhuts are pettânis. In the westernmost regions, the most important of the spirits are Jakha, Mashan (or Mashang), Sashen, Abholè, Achin, Gaganè, Dhumeiyè among the male and Käl Matri, Sundarmalè, Akash-Kamni, Koltāni among the female. Many of these, we have seen, are assigned places in the community shrines.

Jakha or Jakā : In the popular religion of this area, Jakha is a spirit enjoying the status of a godling. He is considered to be so important that he is often given a place near Kāli in a community shrine and many families worship him as a family god. The fishermen particularly endeavour to keep him pleased with pujas.

There are three kinds of Jakha — Kāl Jakha, Boishnab Jakha and Dakni Jakha, of which the first is the most powerful. Boishnab Jakha accepts only vegetarian offerings whereas Kāl Jakha is fond of pigeons. A Jakha is believed to accompany a newly married bride (whose family has a Jakha shrine) to her in-law's house and to extract puja from the family.¹

Next in importance comes Mashan (or Mashāng), an evil spirits most universally dreaded. He is conceived as a male spirit, normally riding a horse and is attributed with the greatest of malignancy. In some areas he is associated particularly with cremation

1. In Assamese demonology Jakh is 'a terrible spirit. He kills his victim by gnawing into his vital parts. He assumes the form of a large buffalo and splashes the water with his horns.' — See B. Rajkhowa: Assamese Demonology, p.4.
grounds; but generally he is supposed to live everywhere except in human habitations.

The attack of the Mashān can cause all sorts of diseases and abnormalities like fever, dysentery, bed-wetting, night pollution, aches and pains and they are attributed to different forms of the spirit, which according some, are as many as eighteen. The following are the names of some of the forms— Bārikā, Jalā, Porā, Chuchivā, Nāriyā, Nātiyā, Amātā, Bhengrā, Purā Roug and so on. When a person is believed to have been possessed by a Mashan, the services of an exorcist are enlisted. He finds out which particular Mashān is at work and then uses the prescribed occult formulae to drive him away.²

Towards the eastern side, the list of spirits dreaded and propitiated is different. In Salkocha, Bongaingaon and Abhayapuri areas we have the following: Birādeu, Kubir, Mashāng, Jakh, Jakhāti, Ghorāpāk, Bhoirabdeo, etc. Of these Mashāng is the same malignant spirit we have met above. Jakh is related to Jakhā described above but his status is not as high. Jakhāti is a female spirit, probably related to Jakh, and particularly associated with fishing.

Kubir seems to have its origin in Kuber, the god of treasure. However, this Kubir is an evil spirit who has several forms only one of which is associated with buried treasures (Dhan Kubir). The other two are Jal Kubir (residing in water) and Thal Kubir (residing on land).

1. Mashān is a dreadful ghost active in large parts of North India. See Crooke: Popular Religion and Folklore of Northern India, pp.161-163. He is also the most powerful evil spirit among the Rajbansis of North Bengal. See C. C. Sanyal : The Rajbansis of North Bengal, pp.162-163.
Fishermen offer special pujas to Mashāng, Jakh, Jakhāti and Kubir before starting the fishing operations for the year.

Birā or Birādevu is a most mischievous spirit who takes special delight in harassing its victims. It makes its presence felt by throwing stones and other missiles on houses, stealing or misplacing things of the household and generally making a nuisance of himself in other obnoxious ways. Some mysterious diseases are also sometimes attributed to the Birā. It is believed that there are persons who tame Birā and who can set them upon anybody if they so desire. Such persons are looked upon with great awe and suspicion by village people.

Ghorāpāk is an evil spirit which can assume enormous proportions whenever it so desires. The mortal fear that the sight of a Ghorapak generally causes is sufficient to cause all sorts of sufferings to the unfortunate beholder. People like fishermen who have to move alone or in small groups, specially at night, take every care to avoid an encounter with him.1 Bāra-Khetra and Bāra-Mayā are also spirits believed in by some. The will-o'-the wisp is also believed to be a ghostly phenomenon by the villagers. In eastern parts it is called ukā-bhut (ghost) and in the western parts, bhuter-Agun (the ghost fire).2

Another kind of ghostly phenomenon is believed to take place when a man loses his way and inspite of his best efforts arrives again

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1. Kubir, Birā and Ghorāpāk are spirits widely believed in all over lower Assam.

2. It is called ukā in Kamrup and dhanguoi in upper Assam.
and again in the same spot from where he had started. This is called pāure dhāra in the eastern regions and bhulā khāwā in the west.¹

V Magic

(a) Extent of the Beliefs and Practices

Belief in and practice of magic² is most wide-spread among all sections of people in the district, Hindu and Muslim, tribal and non-tribal. Much of it is, however, connected with various supernatural beings and agencies like gods, spirits and ghosts, about whom we have already given some idea. Many of these are believed to be capable of causing diseases and other afflictions, and the biggest number of practitioners of magic are ojās (also pronounced as ojhā) or gunins who are experts at detecting and exercising these malignant agencies. Not a few of these men specialise in dispelling serpent-venom.³

1. According to Assamese demonology Parooā 'is sprightly female spirit. She amuses herself at the meeting of three roads and leads way-fairē sastray.' — See B. Rajkhowa : Assamese Demonology, p.9.

2. '... As a belief, it [magic] is the recognition of the existence of occult power, impersonal or only vaguely personal, mystically dangerous and not lightly to be approaced, but capable of being channelled, controlled and directed by man. As a practice magic is the utilization of this power for public or private ends, which are good or bad, orthodox or heterodox, licit or illicit, according to the stimuli placed upon them by a particular society at a particular time.' — See Hutton Webster : Magic, 1906.

3. 'Although magic is not very flourishing in the hands of the sacred order of Kamrup, it has a numerous class of practitioners among the plebeians both Hindus and Muhammedans, who by means of certain incantations pretend to cure diseases and the bites of serpents, and to cast out devils. These incantations, are powerful forms of commanding the disorder in the name of certain deities to quit the
Since long Kamrup has been looked upon by outsiders as a land of magic and sorcery. References to the dreadful effects of Assamese magic and sorcery are to be found in a number of accounts on Assam written by outsiders. There are also a few in which Goalpara, or some particular place in the district, comes in for specific mention. For example, the Baharistan-i-Ghaybi, written around 1640, mentions Khuntaghat as 'notorious for magic and sorcery' and gives a vivid account of the extraordinary doings of the magicians of this area. Martin had found that 'Goyalpara' was 'considered to be the chief place for this science'.

Belief in and practice of magic has considerable influence on the behaviour pattern of the people, both public and private. They are reflected, for example, in the various rites meant to control nature, to increase the fertility of the soil and to ensure a good harvest. Much of the religious beliefs and practices also recall ancient fertility rites that are magical in conception.

'From the rites of the field to those of the peasant's homestead is not a far cry. His illness and those of his family and his cattle are cured by remedies designated as such not by medical science but by the logic of homeopathic magic.'

afflicted person, and here usually are called Kamrupi-montros, ... and are composed in a mixture of the vulgar and polished languages. Both Muhammadans and Hindus acknowledge, that these incantations were first divulged by order of Kamakhya. Almost every person knows more or less of them and the number of those who profess to repeat them for hire are considerable ...' — See Martin: Eastern India, Vol.III, p.508.

1. Khuntaghat or Khutaghat is a pargana in Goalpara district on the northern bank of the Brahmaputra.
Apart from the diseases which are believed to be caused by the visitations of malignant gods and spirits, there are many others which are vaguely 'diagnosed' as being the result of some evil spell and the 'victim' in such cases submits himself to the ministrations of a witch-doctor.

Fevers and stomach troubles, aches and pains, sprains and fractures, even sticking fish bones—there is a remedy for each of these with the witch-doctor. The latter even claims to be able to cure such conditions as night-blindness and debility. The science of the witch-doctor is said to be specially efficacious in preventing miscarriage, ensuring easy delivery and protecting the baby from harm. The mode of treatment he uses is to administer charmed water (jal porā, pāni jhārā) or dust (dhulā jhārā), etc. Again, talismans and amulets of various kinds (tābij, madli), including such objects as tiger's nails and boar's teeth, charmed cords (jāp, kāsini) are used freely to protect infants and children from the evil eye and other undesirable influences. Even grown-ups frequently have a generous collection of them hanging on the arms or the waist. Cattle, and sometimes even plants, are given a similar kind of magical treatment both for curing them of diseases and for protecting them from the evil eye.

There is also the widespread belief that various harms can be wrought upon an intended victim by using certain spells with his nail-pairings, hair-clippings and even with fragments from his garments or the water which he has used for his bath. Again, it is believed that an intended victim can be made to face trouble by burying charmed objects in the compound of his house or that he may come harm's way by unwittingly walking across charmed objects buried there.
(b) **Bāns or Charmed Arrows**

A bān literally means an arrow and in the vocabulary of the world of magic and sorcery, a bān is an invisible arrow of charms or spells having the kind of effect on persons or objects or phenomena as desired by the one who casts it. Most of the bāns are of course directed against a person or persons with the object of causing some positive harm. There are bāns with different names such as ar bān, brahma bān, lengrā bān, bishāli bān, khasula bān, māyā dhāp, chāyā dhāp, which are supposed to cause different kinds of diseases and afflictions like severe headache and burning sensation, distention of the stomach, cramps, consumption, delirium and madness. The victim may even meet his death. Expert ojās are supposed to know not only the bāns but also their antidotes.

Marriage parties are supposed to be particularly open to the danger of evil spells and charms and are seen to go all out to guard against it. Services of some expert are requisitioned by many to immunise the house of the bride or the bride-groom against bāns. Members of the bride-groom's party are often made to carry charmed objects meant for protecting them against bāns. Care is taken to give magical protection to the bride and the bride-groom who are believed to be the special targets of bān attacks. The most notorious bāns used in such cases are māyā dhāp and chāyā dhāp that cause discomfort and dizziness, swooning feats, involuntary passing of stool and urine, delirium and, in some cases, even death.  

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1. Customarily the Hindu bridegroom carries a knife and the Muslim bridegroom has a needle stuck to his turban or cap. Both are for warding off evil charms since iron is said to have protective property. Mustard seeds are believed to be especially effective against charms and spirits.
Sometimes ojhās are even believed to have the power to control nature and are employed for such purposes as to ensure good weather on the marriage day.

The practice of using bāns is also widely current among the professional folk music and dance parties. It is said that the effects of a bān cause temporary incapacity to the performers or some other abnormality to the party leading to discomfiture and even humiliation at the time of a performance.

Even thieves and dacoits have their own world of bāns and their antidotes. Houses and their inmates and articles are as frequently fortified by bāns against the evil designs of thieves and dacoits as they are made vulnerable also by bāns. Notorious thieves themselves are said to learn the lore or otherwise utilise the services of expert practitioners.

Mohini bāns are a special class of bāns that are used for the purpose of achieving success in such fields as love, public performance, royal patronage, etc. They are of various kinds like, bāti mohini, mayur mohini, koirā mohini, rāj mohini and shobhā mohini. The first three of these are love-charms supposed to bring under one's control the object of one's love or passion. The last two are meant for success in the royal court and in dramatic and musical performances respectively. The love charms are especially popular with young men and women. Even husbands and wives are known to take recourse to them to restore lost conjugal accord. Often the dispensers of the charms are women.

1. Martin had found that jādu or witchcraft was supposed to be pretty commonly understood by the old women of Goalpara, who were chiefly employed by the young to secure the affections of their lovers. See Eastern India, Vol.III, p.510.
The bāns are cast by a combination of herbs and other charmed objects, homeopathic and sympathetic magical rites and spells. An expert in the lore is believed to be adept not only at the casting of the spell (bān mārā) but also in warding it off (bān kātā). He can extract the bān from the body of the victim and send it back to the thrower (bān phirāni). Often there are tussles between the magic-men on this score.

The magical formulae and incantations are kept a closely guarded secret. However in the few mantras that are available there are frequent references not only to Kamakhya, but also to Gorakhnath. The frequent use of the term dhanni, obviously a corruption of dhārrani, points to Mahayana Buddhistic associations.

Stories of the most unusual phenomena taking place as a result of magic and sorcery are widely current; and while they are relied upon by the credulous and superstitious village folk, they are found to impress even the more informed members of the society. A very good idea of the kind of unnatural phenomena occurring as the result of magical spells can be had from the account given in Baharistan-i-Ghayabi which relates to Khuntaghat.

Muhammad Zaman Tabrizi, who went to the pargana of Khuntaghat, was a hot-tempered man and he began to oppress the ryots and seize their beautiful girls and boys. This place [Khuntaghat] is notorious for magic and sorcery. Thus if a man takes by force a fowl from a ryot and the ryot comes to the judge for redress, and if

1. A sampling of such spells have been presented in
that person is refused justice then the complaintant by means of his magic and sorcery could make the accused produce the voice of a fowl from inside his stomach and thus prove the falsity of the protestations of the accused. If a bailiff of the judge stayed at a village in connection with the work of the Dihidar or the Pattadar (the tenure holder or the revenue-farmer) and if in a state of drunkenness, he demanded fish with violence in the evening or at midnight when no fish was available, and persisted in his demand by torturing the ryots, then they would bring some leaves of mango tree or another tree whose name reads like lahsura and breathe on the leaves some words of magic and sorcery. These leaves would forthwith turn into a kind of small fish. When these fish were cooked by him in a state of drunkenness, they turned into blood. As soon as they were eaten by the bailiff he died.

The tribal communities believe extensively in all the spells and bens described above. There are a considerable number of ojhës or gunins among them. The Garos, for example, believe that the Muslim invaders at first failed to enter Assam because Garo gunins threw the intruders off their horses by means of their magical spells. The invaders succeeded only when they could tackle the Garo magicians by offering them their friendship.

(c) Divination

Divination is another kind of activity based on the faith on magic-power resorted to by men in their 'desire to be guided as to

the best course to take when in doubt, difficulty, or danger or to be forewarned about the future.\footnote{1}

Publicly organised divination is very common in this district, especially in the tribal societies. The Bodos and Rabhas have their female deodhanis, female dancers who perform shamanistic dances and make pronouncements in a state of trance on the occasion of Kherai and Marai Pujas. Often the priests themselves perform the function of foretelling the future with the help of omens and auguries. The non-tribal population also have the male counterpart of the deodhani— the deodhā (also called dendhā, bhoriyā), who makes similar pronouncements on such occasions as Bās Puja and Charak Puja. The deodhās and deodhanis are usually professional people who are believed to be supernaturally 'chosen'.

'The practice of divination is by no means confined to professional magicians, or even sooth-sayers, but any one may employ the accessory means.' Thus divination (mangulā chawā, thiknā chawā) is privately attempted by any individual by different methods—with the help of sticks (kāthi) or lines drawn on the ground, or by offering eatables to the crow. The last mentioned method is most common among the Bodos and the Goalpara Bodos call it khāuri nāy nāy. The tribal people resort to divination for a variety of purposes, e.g. choosing the site for a house, arranging a match, and so on.

Closely connected with the practice of divination is the belief in omens and auguries, of which there is a surprisingly big number, determining the actions of the people at almost every step.

\footnote{1. A. C. "Haddon: Magic and Fetishism, p.40.}
(d) Witches

Some people, especially tribals, believe in the existence of witches (dāini) and credit them with the possession of the most unwholesome powers. A dāini is not a spirit or a ghost but a human being, usually a woman, who has acquired extraordinary powers by mastering the prescribed secret lore. The most dreaded witch of the Rabhas and Bodos of Goalpara is the Thān-Thin Dāini, whose head gets separated from her body at night and goes out in search of food. She devours everything from cooked food to living creatures including human beings. Her human victims either die immediately or fall dangerously ill. She is either propitiated with pujas or is punished by being ensnared with a net spread over the victim’s body. Many Rabhas and Bodos of Goalpara eat their food only after offering a portion of it in the name of Thān-Thin Dāini.¹

Another very common belief is that of a man turning into a tiger by a magical process. The process which includes also the re-assuming of human form needs the assistance of an accomplice. There are many stories current about how the man, once he turned into a tiger, was unable to return to human form because the accomplice failed to fulfil his part of the prescribed magical process.

VI Islam

It is generally believed that Islam came to Assam with the invading Mughal forces and since the area now comprising the district of Goalpara was one of the first in this region to experience the

onslaught of Muslim invasion, it is quite natural that Goalpara came in contact with Islam earlier than the rest of Assam. The fact that the district was for a considerable period of time under the Muslims also points to the possibility that Islam had established itself more securely in the area than elsewhere in Assam. The large percentage of Muslims and the large number of old mosques and other Muslim holy places found in the district confirm this.

There is no record of any Islamic movement or of large-scale conversion into Islam in these parts. The prevailing opinion is that

1. 'The effect of Muhammadan occupation of Goalpara is to be seen in the fact that in 1901 nearly 28 percent of the total population professed the faith of Islam, as compared to 9 percent in the neighbouring Kamrup district.' - See B.C. Allen: Goal.Dist.Gaz., 1905, p.57.

2. The more important of these are:

(a) The Panch Pir dargah of Dhubri which houses the major sharif of five pirs, Shah Akbar, Shah Bagmar, Shah Sharan, Shah Sufi and Shah Kamal. They were brought to Assam by Mirjumlah, the Commander of the Mughal army to ward off the 'magic' of Kamrup. - See S. K. Bhuyan: Annals of the Delhi Sultanate, p.101. According to another account it was Ram Singh, another Mughal commander, who had brought the pirs, and of the five only Shah Akbar died here. - See M. Neog (Ed): Pavitra Assam, p.338.

(b) The dargah at Degdhowa near Goalpara town which is said to have been established by a dervesh, also brought by one of the invading Muslim armies (Ibid., p.336).

(c) The Panjatan dargah of Dakaidal village, ten miles to the south-east of Goalpara town. Another dervesh is said to have died here (Ibid., p.355).


(e) The major of the Khorasani Pir at Goalpara town. This is associated with Abul Kasem Khorasan, a holy man, who came to India in the middle of the 18th century and finally settled at Goalpara where he had won the veneration of all. He died here in 1896 (Ibid., p.338).

(f) The mosque built by Mirjumlah near Manikachar while he had his headquarters there during his Assam expedition (Ibid., p.339).
a good many of the Muslim soldiers belonging to the invading Mughal armies did not return home and married local women. The opinion gains strength from the physical features of the local Muslims which differ very little from those of their non-Muslim neighbours. Some also might have voluntarily embraced Islam. The result was that the local Muslims subscribed to various beliefs and practices of their non-Muslim neighbours, many of which they still retain.

Although B. C. Allen says about the Muslims of Goalpara that 'they are said to be fairly well-grounded in the principles of their faith and to have been little affected by the Hindu superstitions,' the information does not seem to be supported by facts. We have found that local Muslims of this district associate themselves directly or indirectly with various beliefs, practices, rites and ceremonies which are clearly drawn from their Hindu neighbours. Muslims are known to have taken active part in such religious functions as Marâi Puja and Bas Puja; in a Muslim Madârer Bas ceremony there are bamboos representing Hindu gods and goddesses; seasonal and agricultural rites with Hindu religious overtones are performed as enthusiastically by Muslim farmers as by their Hindu counterparts; a typical local Muslim marriage has almost the same rites as a Hindu marriage, with banana plants, vermillion marks, conch-shell bangles, turmeric, bands and marriage songs; and Muslim singers and composers have freely drawn from characters and episodes from Hindu epics and legends.

On the other hand, Muslim holy men and holy places have drawn the reverent attention of the Hindus. A Muslim pir has been transformed into a Hindu godling, namely, Mādār. And Muslim marriage laws permitting divorce and widow marriage seem to have given some indirect kind of sanction to the local practices of divorce and widow marriage. The influence of Islam is also reflected in oral literature.

VII Tribal Religions

As already noted, a very large number of people of tribal stock stand at various stages of assimilation into the Hindu society and live on its periphery and even those who live outside the recognised territory of Hinduism, contact with it has been close and significant.

On the basis of religious beliefs and practices the Bodos of Goalpara may be divided into four groups — those who follow the aboriginal methods of worship, those who practice some form of Hinduism influenced by Saktism and Saivism, those who have been assimilated into Hinduism through conversion into the Vaishnava faith and those who are followers of the 'Brahma' faith preached by the famous Bodo religious reformer, the late Kalicharan Brahma.

The majority of the Bodos of Goalpara belong to the first group and Goalpara is also the home of the biggest number of people belonging to the last group. So far as the other two groups are concerned, they are Hindus for all practical purposes.

The modern tendency among many enlightened Bodos is to interpret the aboriginal religion in terms of Saivism, and to show the people
following this faith as basically Siva-worshippers. We have already noted the process by which the concept of Siva in this region is believed to have been moulded by that of the Bodo god Bāthou and also how the new concept of Siva itself later influenced the original concept of Bāthou.

S. Endle gives the following description of the aboriginal religion of the Kacharis (or Bodos, as they are more commonly known now-a-days):

"The religion of the Kachari race is distinctly of the type commonly known as "animistic", and its underlying principle is characteristically one of fear or dread. ... In the typical Kachari village as a rule neither idol nor place of worship is to be found; but to the Kachari mind and imagination earth, air, and sky are alike peopled with a vast number of invisible spiritual beings, known usually as "Modal", all possessing powers and faculties far greater than those of man, and almost invariably inclined to use these powers for malignant and malevolent, rather than benevolent purposes."¹ These invisible beings, the Kacharis believe, interfere in the affairs of men causing sickness, famines, earthquakes etc. and they must be propitiated by various offerings to ensure the welfare of the individual and of the community.

The Bodo pantheon is a very extensive one, though it seems probable that only a comparatively small number are strictly of tribal origin, many having obviously been borrowed from their Hindu neighbours. The popular Bodo deities fall naturally into two classes, i.e., (1) house-

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hold gods (na-ni madai); (2) village gods (gāmi-ni madai). The for­
mer are worshipped inside the house, or at least in the homestead; 
the latter by the whole village collectively, outside the house, and 
usually near the sacred grove of trees or bamboos, often to be seen 
some fifteen or twenty yards from the village.\(^1\) There are also some 
gods known as hāgānī madai (gods of the forest).

The most important Bodo god is Bathou who is represented by 
a siju (Euphorbia splendens) tree and is identified with Siva. In 
Goalpara almost every household has its Bathou in the courtyard. Next 
in importance is Maināo or Maothānshri, who is identified with Lakshmi 
and looked upon as Bathou's wife. These two are also called Khāria 
Brāj and Khāria Brui respectively. Maināo has her place inside the 
main house.

Besides Bathou and Maināo and the very big number of Bodo 
gods and spirits of the household, the village and the forest (like 
Ākhāishri, Sang Rājā, Sang Rāni, Burli Brui, Māusa Rājā, Ranchandi) 
the Bodos also worship quite a few gods of Aryan-Hindu origin, called 
hārā madai, like Bāra-Gopal, Bāra-Gopini, Lāukhar Gasaī, 
Sollosa Gopaī, Sollosa Gopini, Jagat Guru, Jagannāth, Mahāmagāya 
and Thākurānī. There are also gods of Muslim origin— Pir Saheb 
and Nabab Badshā.\(^2\) The Bodo priests are called deoiris. Kherai puja is 
the most elaborate religious service of the Bodos with incantations, 
sacrifices and other offerings, accompanied by the playing of instru­
ments and the dancing of the deodhanis. \(^*\) Puja is also quite

1. S. Endle: Ibid., p.35. The collective worship is called gaṅga 
by the Goalpara Bodos and the place of worship gaṅga-shāli.

popular among them, in which the dance of the deodhani has an important place.

The Brahma sect was introduced among the Bodos by the late Kali Charan Brahma who, after being initiated into vedic Hinduism, set himself the task of reforming the Bodo society through a re-orientation of the old Bodo religious beliefs and practices in conformity with the precepts of the Vedas. A large number of people became his followers and almost all of them are concentrated in the Goalpara district. They perform their religious rites with yantras.¹

Animism also generally characterises the aboriginal religion of the Rabhas. 'Their chief god is called Rishi and is represented by a pot of rice on a bamboo platform, to which offerings of fowls and pigs are made.'² The other gods worshipped by them are Bāikhu (earth goddess), Chāri (identified with Lakshmi), Kānchā (forest goddess), Darmān, Lākāsi etc. Besides, the Rabhas also worship Lānga-Śje who is believed to cause illnesses like fever, pain, etc.³

A large section of the Rabhas have been influenced by Hinduism. Apart from the big number of them who have been formally converted to Hinduism, there are many others who worship Kāli, Durgā and other Hindu gods and goddesses. Worship of Manasā in the form of Mārāi Pujā or Barmāni Pujā is popular with a considerable proportion of the Rabhas.

1. Ibid.
Of the Garos, an appreciable section has embraced Christianity. The traditional religion, the followers of which are called Sansārik, consists mainly of beliefs in various spirits who cause diseases and other misfortunes and are propitiated with sacrifices.

VIII Co-existence

From the foregoing discussion on the various aspects of the religious and semi-religious beliefs and practices of the district a very interesting feature of the religious scene clearly comes out: it is the remarkable atmosphere of co-existence and mutual give and take among the different religious and sectarian groups living here. This may be said to be rare even according to the standard generally prevailing in Assam, which is marked by a high degree of tolerance and an absence of rigidity of attitudes.

That the sectarian divisions have little meaning for the rank of the local Hindus we have already noted. We have also seen how the local Hinduism bears marks of its connections with tribal faiths and how the tribals themselves have been deeply influenced by the local form of Hinduism. Again the local Muslims, as has been pointed out, have traditionally believed in certain gods and spirits associated with their Hindu neighbours and have performed rites and ceremonies which have, if not strictly religious, at least semi-religious significance for the Hindus. On the other hand, not only have the local Hindus accepted a godling, Madār, who has been transformed from a Muslim pir, but the Muslim holy places and holy men have received genuine reverence from Hindus, especially when in distress. Hindus
also take part in the Muslim Madarer Bas ceremony. Even the tri-
bal Bodos have added to their pantheon, apart from a number of Hin-
du gods, one or two Muslim gods. And the world of magic and spirits,
as we know, is a world that is shared by all—Hindus, Muslims and
tribals.

This atmosphere of peaceful co-existence must have prevailed
in the religious field of this region for centuries. The Darrang Rāja-
Vamsāvali, an Assamese chronicle containing the dynastic history of
one of the branches of the Koch Kings and written towards the end of
18th century, narrates an interesting episode which clearly brings out
the parallel existence of shastric and tribal modes of worship in the
past. On the eve of the Koch King Naranarayana’s expedition against
the Ahoms, god Siva appeared to the king in a dream and advised him to
hold a puja in the tribal manner. Accordingly, a festival was held on
the bank of the Sankosh river with sacrifices of swine, buffaloes, he-
goats, pigeons, ducks and cocks. Quantities of rice and liquor were
offered and there was dancing by deodhās. Thus propitiated, the gods
made a prophecy through the deodhās about the king’s victory. Later
the king formally recognised and legalised the tribal mode of worship
by the issue of an order according to which the tract north of the
Gohān Kamal Āli, a highway on the north bank of the Brahmaputra, was
reserved for it, while the Brahmanic form of worship was to prevail in
the southern tract.¹

Another interesting example is provided by Martin who, while
describing the temples and deities of the south side of the Brahmaputra,

makes the following observation: 'The most common object of worship in these temples is Kali; but in some parts a deity, named Langga, which seems peculiar to this division, is much venerated. By the Hindus he is called a god, by the Muslims a saint.' And 'Langga' is most obviously Langa Raj of the Rabhas who are spread over the south bank of the Brahmaputra in Goalpara.