CHAPTER - II

EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMME
FOR COMMUNITY LIVING
IN THE EARLY ASSAMESE
SOCIETY
Community living is a total process and embraces all aspects of human life, i.e., economic, social, cultural, educational, etc. There is enough historical evidence to show that Assamese Society had a glorious past which is indicative of a rich community life formed by many racial blood of different characteristics and of different culture. The social intercourse of the early inhabitants of this valley is a living example of community life, because it was the meeting place of Indian,
Tibeto-Burmese (Burman) and Austrian peoples. The historians of Mediaeval Assam were found handicapped in adequately dealing with the rich culture of the early Assamese society primarily for want of materials in written form, and therefore, history as a source of knowledge of early Assamese society is not as plentiful as one would have wished. Therefore, researchers of community life of early society had to depend largely on materials scattered in various forms in different places. Examples are rock inscriptions, copper plate inscriptions, folk tales, folk songs, folk arts, only to mention a few.

The people constituting the present Assamese society entered Assam from different directions and in different periods. They settled in this fertile valley and mingled with its original culture and tradition. In its transition from less civilised to more civilised culture, exchange of culture took place which enriched its original culture. Assam with her glorious past can significantly claim a place of pride in the ancient cultural history of India.

In the epic age, Assam was known as 'Pragjyotisa'. In the classical Sanskrit literature, by the famous Indian
poet Kalidāsa, Pragjyotisa was also known as Kamrupa. According to Dr. Pirinchi Kumar Barua, the first available epigraphic record mentioning the name of Kamrupa is the Allahabad inscription of Samudragupta, belonging to the fifth century of Christian era. The name of Pragjyotisa or Kamrupa was also found in the Kalika-purana of tenth century A.D. and Yogini Tantra of sixteenth century A.D. both of which dwelt on the religio-geographical history of mediaeval Assam.

The Yogini Tantra traces the frontiers of Kamrupa in this way:

"Nepālasya Kancanāḍrim
Brahmaputrasya Sangamam
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Kāmrūpa iti Khyātah
Sarvasastresu niscitah."

"From the mountain of Kāncana in Nepal up to the confluence of the Brahmaputra, from the Karotoyā to Dikkaravasimśi, in the north the mount Kanja, in the west the Karotoyā, in the east the Diksu, in the south the confluence of the Laksā with the Brahmaputra; this daughter of the mountains, is the territory which all scriptures call by the name Kamarupa". ¹

¹ Barua, Dr. Birinchi Kumar : History of Assamese Literature, p.1.
So the ancient Kamrupa includes besides the districts of modern Assam, the whole of North Bengal including Coch-Behar, Rangpur, Jalpaiguri and Dinajpur. But with the passage of time, due to socio-political forces, the ancient Kamrupa had undergone fragmentation and was reduced to smaller areas, what is now called Assam comprising 78,523 sq.km. and Kamrup district forms only a part comprising 4,533 sq.km. excluding Barpeta and Nalbari sub-divisions, each of which now forms a separate district with effect from 1st July, 1983 and 14th August, 1985 respectively. Thus it is evident that within the span of only four hundred years, there was so much change in the geographical boundary of the then ancient Kamrupa.

According to the epics and the Purānas, the earliest inhabitants of Assam were the Nisādas, Kirātas, and Čiras and other tribes which were known as 'Mlecchas' and 'Asuras'. Linguistic and ethnographic evidences, such as ancient names of different places reveal that the earliest inhabitants of Assam spoke Indo-Chinese language of the Mon-khmer family.

2. Barua, Dr. Birinchi Kumar : History of Assamese Literature; p.2.
From the 5th century A.D., the Copper-plate inscriptions proved the existence of literary activities in early Assamese society. The Hindu kings of Kamrupa of 5th and 6th century A.D. prepared rock or stone inscriptions in different parts of Kamrupa. The Umāchāl inscription of 5th century A.D. has been regarded as earliest specimen of writing in Assam. The writings of British historians like Gait also indicate that Bhaskarvarman of Kamrupa presented finely written books with leaves of bark to king Harsha of Ganges valley.

The eminent historian of Assam, Dr. S.K. Bhuyan observed in this way: "The plentitude of book production of ancient Assam is borne out by the fact that several volumes of fine writing were presented by Bhaskarvarman to his friend and ally emperor Harshavardhana of Kanauj. The present also included a book of aphorisms, which was probably a collection of the proverbs and sayings in vogue in Assam."

Now a days also, several types of songs including ballads, nursery rhymes, devotional songs, festival songs, etc.; are also sung by the village people, especially the cowherd boys while tending the cattle in the fields or in their leisure time recess even though they do not have the rudimentary knowledge of the alphabets. This practice of
mouth to mouth vocal learning came down from one generation to another. This indicates that though there were no written languages of different kinds of learning or educational programmes in the present form, yet the early Assamese society was not found lacking in the spread of education.

Though 5th and 6th century can be marked as a milestone of literary record in Assam, yet mouth to mouth learning or verbal learning started from that period when men expressed themselves by uttering something meaningful, that is to say, the process of verbal learning had its origin before 5th century A.D. As for example, some early Assamese 'Bachan' or sayings are still found to be prevalent among the Assamese people. And later on Dak Mahapurusha composed and compiled these sayings which was later known as 'Dakartoachan'. These are the earliest media of expression circulating from mouth to mouth in the form of poetry, and folk songs. The Assamese people, in general both literate and illiterate accept 'Dakar-bachana' as Vedar Bani and regard these sayings as vedic utterances even now. In this period, education was intensive rather than extensive. The general masses did not have the opportunity to receive formal education but royal class, priestly class, and well-to-do class received education for acquiring religious knowledge and enjoyed their leisure time purposefully. Therefore,
there was a gap between learned few of the elite class and unlearned masses.

The Nidhanpur Copper plate grant records that Bhutivarman, the king of 6th century A.D. granted special Agrahara settlement to more than two hundred and five. Brahmanas? Agrahara was religious gift of land of Brahmanas. This system reveals that the ancient kings evinced keen interest for the spread of education and scholars were found preaching religious education among their devotees. In the history of Indian education system, the then province of Assam or Brahmaputra valley had a glorious civilisation with a rich culture.

In its transition from the earliest period to the modern times, synthesis of culture has taken place and the present culture is nothing but the outcome of such syntheses.

In the 8th century A.D. Sarahapada composed a large number of Carya songs.

It is known from the biography of Yuan Chwang⁴ that

a learned scholar from Kamrupa went to Nalanda University to participate in a controversial discourse with the Buddhist scholars there. Some well-known scholars of India were also associated with ancient Assam. The renowned historian, K.L. Barua, believed that Kautilya also might have belonged to Kamrupa. Again, during the reign of Salastambha, some noted Buddhist and Brahamana scholars were also there. As for instance, Abhinava Gupta, formerly a Sakta scholar of 9th century A.D. and later converted to Buddhist belonged to Kamrupa. Other scholars like Sankaracarya (788-820 A.D.), Nanaka (1449-1538 A.D.), and Guru Teg Bahadur (17th century) also came to Kamrupa, to hold learned discussions with the reputed scholar Abhinava Gupta. Another scholar Kumarilabhatta also belonged to Kamrupa.

In this way, it was through religious education, that learning came down to masses. As early as in the 17th century A.D. the Assamese language developed from Sanskrit language and originated from Magadhi Apabhransa. The famous Chinese pilgrim Yuan Chwang wrote in his valuable account that their language differs a little from that Mid-India.

Again, to quote, Dr. Birinchi Kumar Barua, "Other specimens

5. ibid, p.385.
6. Barua, Dr. Birinchi Kumar: History of Assamese Literature, pp.6-7."
of the language in its formative period are manifest in the songs and aphorisms composed by the Buddhist Siddhacaryas between the 8th and 12th centuries A.D. and commonly known as Caryās and Dohās. Speaking about the origin of the literary language, Dr. Upendra Nath Goswami stated that the language of the Caryāpadas represents ‘mixture of many tongues and many forms’ and it is both a vernacular and a literary language of eastern India. As a literary language, it continues for centuries together till the Vaishnavite scholars of eastern India considered it to be a good vehicle for their literary compositions. As a vernacular it has been continuing throughout centuries till the present day.7

In course of time, Assamese literature was produced in the language of the region. The language has been called Kāmrūpī language. Therefore, it was the language of Western Assam in early Assamese society. Till the 17th century A.D., this language was prevalent in different parts of Western Assam, though place to place, it had different regional forms. But now the Kāmrūpī language is largely spoken in Kamrup district only as a dialect. Kāmrūpī language cast influence in the writings of pre-Vaishnavite poets like Hema-Saraswati, Madhava Kandali, Durgavara and Manakar, etc.

7. Goswami, Dr. Upendra Nath: An Introduction to Assamese pp. 4-5.
According to historian K.L. Barua, the Kamrupi dialect was originally a variety of eastern Maithili and it was no doubt the spoken Aryan language throughout the kingdom which then included in the whole of Assam valley and the whole of Northern Bengal with the addition of the Purum district of Bihar.

From the ancient writings like Kalika Purana of 10th century A.D. and Yogini Tantra of 16th century A.D., it has become evident that the sense of book learning was not so widely spread as it is to-day. In ancient Assam, though literacy was confined mainly to Brahmin classes, yet common people were not fully illiterate. It is evident that Vyavahāris (lawyers), Lekhakars (scribes) and others copied books, made up accounts and drew up deeds. All these were educated as well as skilled in their own sphere of work. Among the engravers of the epigraphs, sometimes ordinary workmen were also engaged.

In early Assamese society, education was imparted particularly by private individuals, or at village schools provided by the Brahmanas of an Agrahāra village. The Brahmana had to discharge their six-fold traditional duties as they were the recipients of royal grants. Among their

duties, teaching was indispensable. From references in several famous inscriptions, it is clear that the Brahmana villages were responsible for the teaching of Sanskrit, the Vedas, the systems of philosophy and various other branches of learning.

As the ancient kings of Kamrup were patrons of learning themselves, they took special interest in the spread of education. But unfortunately, education was confined only to the upper strata of the society. The mention of a line reading as "Hadjijati huya padhibeka Chāsa Veda"* in the Ramayana by Madhab Kandali lends enough support to the contention that caste distinction got upper hand in the matter of education.

During that period, there were many scholars in ancient Assam who had their education in far off places of learning like Varanasi, Mithila, Navadip, etc. The Brahmins and Kayasthas acquired knowledge in the subjects of practical utility.9

The great Vaishnavite apostle Sankardev received

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* The meaning of this line is 'A low caste desiring to read Veda'.

his education at a 'tol' or 'Chatrasāla' maintained by the Brahmana Guru Mahendra Kandali. This shows that even non-Brahmanas were admitted into above mentioned educational institutions along with the Brahmana students. Though at the early stage of Assamese society, education was confined exclusively to a few belonging to the upper strata of the society, with the passage of time, say, during the time of Sankardev, educational facilities became available to all and as a result of which it was possible to enrich the community life of the people. Sometimes, porches of temples were used as village schools for imparting lessons. Again, in some villages, where there was no convenient place for schools, the village shrines served as centres for popular education by means of which there was constant recitation and exposition of the Rāmāyana, the Mahābhārata and the Purāṇas. The temples were also the scenes of festive gatherings and community rejoicings. These festivals took various forms, but they always included music, dancing, recitation, play and 'pantomine'. In this way, the temples played a significant role in the cultural life of the people.

The Grant of Balvarman describes about the

* 'Pantomine' is a kind of play representing action without words (a play in dumb show).
convocation ceremony which was performed at the end of the prescribed study period 'Brahmacharya'. The most elaborate ceremonies are described in the various 'Sutras' and 'Smriti' texts.

In the early period, both Brahmin and non-Brahmin scholars as well as teachers made extensive travelling throughout the country for holding debates and disputations with the scholars of rival sects. Thereby they improved their philosophical and classical learning. It was customary for the defeated scholar to give up his own doctrines and embrace those of the winner. So was the case with Vaishnavite Guru Madhabdev who was formerly a Sakta but being defeated in the disputation, he accepted the Vaishnavite faith and regarded Sankardev as his spiritual Guru.

Sankardev was also reported to be engaged in disputation at the court of Koch King Naranarayana, with the Brahmin scholars brought from Benares and other religious centres of Northern India. The controversy continued for several days and finally Sankardev gained victory.

Being highly impressed with the profundity of his scholarship, King Naranarayana honoured Sankardev with valuable presents. Thus Sankardev was recognised as an erudite scholar of early Assamese society who attracted the scholars from far and wide, and thereby bridged the gap between Assam and rest of the country. Besides, the kings
in their courts used to entertain eminent scholars and poets, who were encouraged not only to compose and compile treatises on various subjects but were also given all sorts of facilities for this purpose. The two great epics, for instance, were translated into Assamese at the courts of the Kachari King Mahamanikya in the 15th century and the Koch King Naranarayana in the 16th century. Naranarayana further entrusted Sankardev with the task of translating the Bhagavata Purana from Sanskrit to Brajabuli, Purusottama with the compilation of a Sanskrit grammar, Sridhara with the preparation of a book on Astronomy and Bakula Rayastha with the translation of Lilavati, a book on Mathematics.\footnote{10}

Discovery of a large number of manuscripts of well-known Sanskrit texts in the Vaishnavite monasteries bears an eloquent testimony to the intellectual activities of that period. The Ahom monarchs of that period also set apart a section in their palaces for the preservation of royal manuscripts, records, letters, despatches and maps in the custody of high officials.\footnote{11}

\footnote{10. Darang Rajavamsavali, Stanzas 592-612.}

\footnote{11. Descriptive Catalogue of Assamese Manuscripts, Intro. XVII-XVIII.}
Regarding the curriculum, only scanty information is available. The epigraphs referred to the cultivation of both 'Vidya' and 'Kala'. The distinction between the two is that the former is literary study while the latter is professional activity. 'Vidya' covered four Vedas, the four Upan Vedas, described as Ayurveda, Bhamurveda, Gandharvaveda, and the Tantras, the six Vedangas, Itihasa, Puranas, Sutris, Arthasastra, Narasasastra, Silpastra, Alankara, Kavya, etc. The Pusabhadra Grant refers to a Brahmana well versed in Sruti, Sutriti, Mimamsa, Canakya, (Arthasastra). An early biography of Sankardev known as Katha-Gurucharita reveals that Sankardev studied four Vedas, fourteen Sastras, eighteen Kavyas, eighteen Kosas, Samhitas, Amara Canakya and Yoga Sutra. The above list represents the entire traditional curricula and by no means refers to the specific studies pursued by the young Sankardev. Jyotis-Vedemsa, the science dealing with movements of the planets and stars was extensively studied and the king maintained Daivajnas at his court. These royal soothsayers were required to make forecasts of coming events celestial and terrestrial. Study of Ayurveda, the
The science of indigenous medicine was also encouraged. There was a State Medical Department under the care of a royal physician. Veterinary science was an important off-shoot of the State medicine. Ralph Fitch who visited the Koch-Kingdom in the 16th century observed thus "They have hospitals for sheep, goats, cats, birds, and for all living creatures. When they become old and lame they keep them until they die." The elephantology, the science dealing with characteristics, diseases, cures and training of elephants formed an important subject of study. The Doobi Grant mentioned that even the kings took great interest in the cultivation of the science of elephant lore.

The above illustration vividly brings forth how progressive was the community life of the early Assamese society.

Great stress was laid on the cultivation of the science of music which was associated not only with singing and playing of instruments, but also with dramatic performances and dancing. Yuan Chwang also recorded the prevalence of the custom of singing and dancing at the royal court of Bhaskarvarman.

Ancient literature comprised mainly of songs and

dealt with various rāgas, such as ahir, akasamandala, baradi, belovāra, bhatiyali, Calani, devajini, devamohana, dhanasri, suhai, vasanta, under which the songs were sung. These songs and rāgas themselves bear eloquent testimony to the fact that both mārga and desya music had already advanced in the Sangita Sāstras. Besides music, playing of musical instruments was considered an integral part of rituals in religious ceremonies. There was evidence to indicate that dancing was cultivated and was held in high esteem. Even Siva was depicted in temple architecture in dancing poses. Sankardev cultivated gandharba vidya and was an acclaimed master musician (Bara-Gayana) and dancer. He taught his disciples the art of music, dancing and play (bhāona). The custom of keeping dancing girls in temple establishments was in vogue and the decorative dancing figures formed an integral part of temple architecture. In some parts of Kamrup district, even now, women take part in religious dances known as Deodhani. An interesting manual on dancing, similar to the Bharata's Nātyasāstra, was compiled under the name Hastamuktavali, to cater to the dramatic requirements of the province.

Considerable importance was attached to the art of painting. The Nidhanpur Grant refers to portraits hung on walls of royal palace. The actual remains of early pictures are three drawings on the Guākuchi Plates of Indrapala. The early Assamese literature lends support to the antiquity of painting. Harivara Vipra of the 14th century A.D., while writing the Babrubāhana Parba mentioned about paintings on walls. The Vaishnavite movement led by Sankardev had cast profound influence on the blossoming of art and painting. He himself painted celestial figures on scenes for popular dramatic performances known as Cihna-Yātra. The services of skilled painters were requisitioned even to decorate manuscripts by sketching appropriate figures.

The art was encouraged and cultivated down to the time of the Ahoms which is reflected in a large number of illuminated manuscripts, such as Gitā-Govinda and the Bhāgavata Purāṇa. Some of the book illustrations contained scenes from the Ahom Court life. These illustrations which are on Sāci leaves made extensive use of red, blue, and yellow colours in a balanced and harmonious way.

The above mentioned authoritative documents amply testify to the existence of definite curriculum of study for the benefit of the community life. Lovers of Art who
were interested in acquiring knowledge on the intricacies of art and painting were greatly benefited from the book illustrations, temple architectures, and wall paintings of early period. Thus they could also disseminate their own knowledge through the medium of art, painting and the like.

The Yogini Tantra of the 16th century makes special mention of writing and engraving of letters on materials, such as earth, bark, leaves, gold, copper and silver. Engraving of letters on rocks played a significant role by way of preserving the inscriptions permanently. The clay seals of Bhaskarvarman found at Nalanda clearly indicate that letters were written on clay. Royal decrees and grants were largely recorded in copper plates. Most of the early manuscripts of Assam were also written on the strips of barks of the Sāci tree (Aquilaria Agallocha). Presents offered by king Bhaskarvarman to his ally Harsavardhana consisted of books written on such leaves.

The process of preparing writing materials from bark was not very different from that found in the Ahom period of the 13th century. Edward Gait in an appendix to his 'History of Assam' has given details of the process of preparing Sāci-pat in the Ahom period, according to which writing pens and holders were made of bamboo, reed,
copper, bell-metal, gold and iron. The holders were long and usually measured a cubic in length. The ink was made from peculiar ingredients, such as Silikha (Terminalia Cilerina) and the urine of bulls. The important characteristics of Assamese ink was its tenacity to glossy and slippery surface. The use of invisible ink, especially in love letters and diplomatic documents was of special significance. The king of Coch-Behar once sent to the Ahom Monarch Khora-Raja(1552-1611 A.D.) a letter written in invisible ink, which puzzled the experts of the Ahom Court till a learned mathematician deciphered the document by reading it in darkness where the letters appeared in their unexpected brightness as they were written with the sap of earth worm.18

There are several passages in some famous inscriptions which suggest that the Kamarupa kings took personal interest in sanskrit literature. In the Gauhati Grant of Indrapala, his father Purandarpala is described as a well-known poet. King Dharmaraja was also a poet of considerable merit and he was regarded as the Chief of the circle of poets. He also composed the first eight verses of his Puspabhadra grant.

18. Descriptive Catalogue of Assamese Manuscripts, intro, XVI-XVII.
The anthology of Saduktikarnāmṛta contains ten verses by one named Dharmapala, who according to Sri N.N. Dasgupta, is none but the king Dharmapala of Kamrupa.19

The poetic composition in the epigraphs is a clear pointer to the level of literary activity of that period. Many of the poetic compositions may be classed among the best specimens of the literature of the period. The superb diction, the easy flow of the verse, and the lively narration of historical events put them into a class of secular literature by themselves. The various rhythm used in the compositions are handled with very great dexterity. From a study of these compositions, it appears that composers were influenced greatly by the classical authors and their classical kāvyā style. This is supported by their adoption of many passages from the works of Kālidāsa, Banabhatta and others.

Apart from prescribing various rites and procedures of worship, Kalika Purana also gives valuable information regarding the religious condition prevailing in medieval Assam. Though the Yogini Tantra and Harācāurisambhād are compilations of much later period, they preserved many earlier traditions.

19. King Dharmapala of Kamrupa as poet, J.A.R.S. IV, pp. 56-57. It is also to be noted that Dharmapala's records mention the names of two court poets, namely, Prasthana Kalasa and Aniruddha.
According to Dr. G. Tucci, an authority of some Tibetan manuscripts, at least, one of the composers of songs Baudhā gān o Doḥā, namely Mānanatha, a fisherman hailed from Kamrūpa. Among the other literary productions were the unwritten songs and ballads. The songs connected with the episode of Behula, Lak hindīr and the worship of Manasa, the snake goddess were popular and their popularity pervades up to the present time.

At the end of the 15th century A.D., noble king of Kamata of Kamrupa named Durlabhārayana was a great patron of poets and scholars. He encouraged poets to write verses in Assamese. It was in his court that Assamese language found a support to thrive for the first time. Hem Sarasvati in his Prahlad-carita praised his patronage. The two other celebrated poets who enjoyed royal patronage from the Kamata kings were Kavi ratna-Sarasvati and Rudra Kandali, authors of plays based on plots from the Mahabharata.

In about the 13th century A.D., the greatest of the pre-Vaishnavite poet Chadhāb Kandali undertook the stupendous task of translating the whole of the Sanskrit epic Ramayana into Assamese verse. A large number of Assamese words were first recorded in Kandali's Ramayana, and he used many of the colloquial expressions in literary works. He dedicated his life to the welfare of
mankind by explaining and uttering the theme of holy epic Ramayana. Sankardev who gave the greatest impetus to the cause of Assamese literature in the succeeding century had great honour for him and Sankardev was charmed with his graceful and moving rendering of the Ramayana. 20

From the descriptions given in the ancient scriptures of 14th century A.D., there emerged a clear picture of contemporary social life, their customs, traditions, including moral and spiritual education. There was evidence of self-help and co-operation in the community life of ancient Assam. This kind of devotional literature imbued the bond of oneness among the people of different castes and religious faiths which paved the way for building up a harmonious community life. Sankardev established the spiritual equality of all men. He deeply believed in and was influenced by the Karma-Yoga of Gita. That Sankardev himself was a unifying force is evident from the fact that his disciples belonged to different castes namely Gabinda from Garo, Paramananda from Lishing, Harotom from Hote, Jami from Kochari, Paramananda from Jorhat (Scheduled Caste), Gabinda from Bodi (Goldsmith), Somdhar from Shutiya and Chand when from Mohammads. 21

20. Borua, Dr. Syamnath Borua: History of Assamese Literature pp. 11-12, Sahitya Academy, 1964 New Delhi.

21. Meeg, Dibakar: Yama-ramayana of Sankardev in Assamese
Sankardev introduced newness and his teachings brought about transformation in the social fabric of Assamese society. He rejuvenated the dormant spirit of Assamese people by establishing Satras and Namghars. The Satras not only served as seats of religious learning and residential schools but also provided forums for discussions and debates to which religious leaders and scholars from other places were invited. Besides religious education and monastic practices, the disciples were engaged in secular learning, such as cultivation of art and craft, skill and technique of their village crafts. The village people regard Satra as a sacred place and through these institutions, they exchanged new ideas about life and world, gather new experience and knowledge of religious scriptures.

Namghar is a place for community prayers where people assemble for mass prayer by reciting 'Kirtan-ghosa', 'Nam-ghosa', etc. Apart from discussions of verses and slokas from devotional literature, people gather to discuss and solve many of their day-to-day problems in a spirit of cooperation. In the villages, the Namghar also serves as a panchayat hall where the villagers assemble to settle disputes and to solve the common problems to the satisfaction of the entire community. Namghar thus functions as a village court.
The Namghars as community centres play a significant role in political and judicial matters. The Namghars are public institutions and their affairs are conducted on a purely democratic basis, so that every household in the village has equal voice in the management of their affairs. The villagers contribute their labour and resources to build and repair, provide necessary building materials, look to their proper maintenance and thus in a variety of ways foster social solidarity and self-discipline. The Namghar plays a remarkable role in the socio-cultural life of the community as it constantly brings good conduct, ethics, morals, cleanliness, and personal hygiene and thus serves as an agency for informal community education. In a way, its functions are similar to Ashrama of ancient Gurukul system.

Besides Satras and Namghars, Nam-kirtana or devotional recitations were also introduced by Sankardev. Nowadays also, every Assamese family is used to reciting the prayers composed by Sankardev and Madhabdev. Among the notable religious books found in every Assamese household are 'Kirtanghosa' and 'Namghosa'. Though a distinguished sanskrit scholar, Sankardev did not write his scholarly works in sanskrit because he realised that sanskrit was not within easy reach of the common people.
but at the same time, he translated the scholarly works of sanskrit in a language commonly understood by the people. The Indian saints, poets, bards, and folklorists used local communication media that established instant rapport with the listeners. And Sankardev was no exception to this. His soul aim was to render service both to the illiterate and educated people. He tried to introduce educational reforms and felt that such reforms must be started from the grass root level. He himself translated major portion, namely books I, II, III, VII, VIII, IX, X, and XII of the Bhagavata Purana. But as it was really difficult for one man to translate the entire text, he allotted the work of translation to his disciples.

Among the different kinds of dances which are prevalent in the Brahmaputra valley since time immemorial, mention may be made of folk-dances, like Bihu dance, Ojapali dance, puppet dance, and Deodhani dance, etc. which are popular in every nook and corner of Assam including Kamrup.

Religious dramas which are known as 'Ankiya Nat' are performed in village Namghars or improvised stage on some auspicious occasions like religious ceremonies.
Apart from entertainment value, these dramas served as a powerful vehicle in educating the village people about the subject-matter of the two great epics, namely the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. The introduction of masks and effigies in the presentation of religious performances like 'bhaona' apart from making it lively and fascinating aroused mass appeal among the members of the community. Through the medium of such dramas which are performed with the joint cooperation of different classes of people, it was easy to educate the people at large.

These are nothing but means of audio-visual aids of spreading religious, cultural and moral education in the modern concept. With the passage of time, more and more improvements have been brought about on scientific lines.

The special feature of the above mentioned performances is that they provide entertainment and relaxation to the down-trodden masses and divert their attention, albeit, temporarily, from their woes and miseries of life. The performances leave indelible impression on the audience and encourage them to face the hard realities of life.

The religio-cultural movement led by Sankardev brought a renaissance to the Assamese society which
raised the status of intellectual, social and economic life of the common people, otherwise it is doubtful whether Assamese culture would have attained the status and richness now it has enjoyed.

The Kayasthas generally received their training in their vocations under the guidance of a professional expert. This signifies the importance of vocational education in the process of learning. During that period, students from Assam went to the centres of learning of other States for pursuit of knowledge. For instance, Kanthabhusana of the Maguri village near Hafo went to Varanasi for education in the Vedanta under the guidance of a scholar named Brahmananda. Koch-king Naranarayana and his brother Chilaraya had their education at Varanasi for learning grammar, the Puranas, Sruti, Smriti, Mimamsa and military practices under Brahmananda Sanyasi. Another scholar Bhaskara Vipra got thorough learning in the Vedanta at Tirhut, while Asurari, son of Bharari Chakravarti, had his education at Navadvipa and acquired the title of 'Bhattacharya'.

It is known that Acarya, Kandali, Misra, Upadhyaya, Bharati, etc. are scholarly titles and these are conferred by royal patronage or by an assembly of
In those days, scholars set out from one educational centre or royal assembly to another in search of opponents to enrage themselves in disputations. The victorious ones were awarded titles, presents, certificates (Jaya-patra) or medals (bānā) and the vanquished were asked to relinquish such titles and honours.\(^{23}\)

Again, under the patronage of Koch king Naranarayana, scholarly works were done on Arithmetic, Sanskrit grammar, and Astrology. Astrology, the science of future forecasts was widely cultivated in this country and numerous manuscripts are found on the subject in different places.

This amply testifies how ancient Kamrupa was enriched by the visits of a galaxy of eminent scholars. It is said that after returning from the first pilgrimage at the age of 44 years and spending 12 years in the different parts of India, Sankardev made some innovations in the dramatic art and displayed Cihna-yātra, a dramatic

\(^{22}\) Neog, Maheswar : Sankardeva and his times, 1965; p.96.

\(^{23}\) op cit., p.97.
representation with paintings. It is significant to note that Sankardev himself prepared these paintings on cotton made paper known as Tulapat. He invented several kinds of musical instruments which were used either singly or in combination appropriate to the ceremonial occasion. Some of the musical instruments which were once in use in early Assamese society but lost popularity were revived and improved upon.

The faith in one single Deity of Vaishnavism united the disintegrated Assamese society under one roof during 15th and 16th century. And truly speaking, from this period onwards, the various forms of community prayer, community singing, community feasts, community festivals, community feeling and thoughts, etc. began to take shape due to dedicated mission of Sankardev. It opened a new vista of community education in the early Assamese culture which had benefited both the lettered and unlettered people of the Brahmaputra valley. So profound was the influence of Vaishnava culture that people from different castes took part in dining. For example, Kaivartas, Kalitas, Kochas, Brahmanas and others assembled and dined together during his time. Sankardev even asked his Muslim disciple Čandśāi to make distribution of food stuff among the disciples while dining together.
In course of his pilgrimage, in all the places of stay, where Sankardev temporarily lived, he engaged himself in the task of propagation through the process of congregational chanting of prayers, songs, dramatic performances and religious discussions. The people were also imbued with the new faith of Vaishnavism. This sort of gathering of people for religious discussions and other purposes largely contributed to the growth of unity and cohesion in the community life.

Speaking on the spiritual power of Sankardev in winning the heart of the people, the noted scholar Dr. Banikanta Kakoti observed in this way, "Sankardev had given Assam a new life, letters and a State. Rulers have come and gone and their kingdom perished in the dust, but Sankardev's State endures and broods in the general heart of men, his power survives". 24

Madhabdev organised and reconstructed the Barga Satra for which it became a model institution of religious learning. The administration of the Satra was democratic in nature. Actually it was Madhabdev who introduced the system of placing the sacred scripture on the holy alter to say prayers instead of worshipping the

24. Kakoti, Dr. Banikanta: Mother Goddess Kamakhya, p.87.
image of a deity. The religion is not the exclusive right of an single individual but it has universal appeal to the general masses. The service of humanity is the service of God is the motto of Vaishnava movement. The very principles of democratic rights, like removal of untouchability, secularism, etc. were vigorously practised by Vaishnava reformers of 17th and 18th century. Thus it acts as an agency of spreading the important principles of education or learning among the common people of interior villages. Generally, his movements were village-oriented and not necessarily connected with the seat of administration. The word "Satra" is a corrupt form of the sanskrit word "Sattrā". In Sanskrit literature, the word has been used in two senses, firstly, in the sense of an alms-house, and secondly, in the sense of a sacrifice lasting from a few days to a year or more.  

In the Western Assam, especially in Kamrup district, there exists an institution similar to the Satra called Sat Sāṅgī-math (association of holy persons) which is popularly known as 'Sāng'. It is called Satsangi, because heads of at least five such institutions

form a sort of association having an acārya who presides over their religious meetings. It is also a Vaishnavite institution having a prayer hall, where idol of some deity is preserved and worshipped. These Satsangi maths came into existence in the early part of the 18th century and some of the organisers of these institutions managed to procure land grants and māiks (serving men) from the Ahom kings, especially from Siva Simha (1714-1744).

There are many such 'Sacos' in Kamrup district alone. Assam including Kamrup district is the land where the people of various ethnic groups with various shades and grades of culture and heterogeneous beliefs lived together unitedly. The land which is famous from the early period as a place of Tantricism and Saktism turned into a land of Vaishnavism.

In the 17th century A.D., the glory of Assam as the land of devotional cult spread as far as distant Rajasthan. It is evident from historical record that when Ram Singha, the Rajput General of Aurangzeb, was engaged in a bloody warfare with the people of Assam, his wife warned him through a message about the consequences of waging war against the people of eastern kingdom (Assam) where there is a universal Nāma-kirtane in that land and

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by invading it Hajjumkan (Hajumdala) did not live long.

There is no gainsaying the fact that social life of a region is profoundly influenced by its religion. No exception to this. From the early days, Kamrupa was recognised as a centre of religious cult and the existence of quite a number of temples and shrines amply testifies this.

There is enough evidence to indicate that Vaishnavite teachers were primarily responsible for dissemination of knowledge among the masses. There are numerous instances in the Katha-Gurucharita which suggest that both men and women were equally interested in the pursuit of knowledge.

It appears that due to proliferation of satra institution during the period from 1550 A.D. to 1800 A.D., every Assamese village came under the religious domain of one or the other satra and its influence gradually penetrated into the neighbouring tribal areas.

Five hundred years ago, Sreemanta Sankardev had cast profound influence on the people of the Brahmaputra valley through the propagation of cult of Neo-Vaishnavism, which gave a new dignity and meaning to individual life without distinction of castes and creeds. He did not
confined himself to the cult of Vishnu, but he
established a new social order in the mercenary society.
He fought against corruption, superstitions, hatred,
ignorance, untouchability, inequality between man and man,
and above all social evils through the influence of his
Vaishnavite movement. This faith was so highly enriched
by literature, drama, music, poetry, songs, dances, etc.
that it had attained the status of a distinct school and
charmed the community with unity and oneness. As for
example, he gave equal status to socially down-trodden
communities at par with the higher castes by installing
them as Jatis (devotees) and Ishantas. Both through social
and religious reforms, he gave a new dimension to the
community life of the Assamese people. In fact, he gave
the people the very best in Indian thought and
literature. There is no doubt that these activities of
Sankardev through the medium of Vaishnavite movement
improved our civilisation and culture, broadened the
horizon of intellectual and imaginative world of people
and spread the programme of literacy as effectively as
is now done by the Adult Education Programme launched by
the Government during the plan periods. Five centuries
ago, Sankardev remarked that the people of India should
feel proud of being born in this holy land Bharatvarsha,
because of her past heritage which was very rich in spiritual literature and thought. Then he made this observation, he had also the Assamese society in mind because the ancient Kamrupa had close social and cultural link with Bharatvarsha (India).

Nearly five hundred years ago, Sankardev established the spirit of democracy extensively in Assam. Like the first English translator of the Bible and father of English prose literature, John Wycliff, Sankardev by translating the rare epics of Sanskrit literature into commonly understandable Assamese language (mother tongue) distributed the nectar of religion among the masses, which formed the first practical step in the foundations of democracy. This shows that Assamese scholars of early period like Sankardev and Madhabdev were so well-versed in Sanskrit that if they wished, they could write their literary works in Sanskrit and could earn much wider reputation.

Sankardev established the spiritual equality of all men and contributed a lot for the advancement of learning and literature in Assam by establishing the institutions of (1) Satras and (2) Namghars.

Satra: The Satra institution established by Sankardev played a significant role not only in the sphere of

Plate I
Shri Shri Dev Damodardev
Adidham; Patbasui Satra
Barpeta;
The present Researcher
is seen standing in front
of the archway to the
Satra.

Plate II
Community gathering with
a puja mandap in the background
at Rukminigaon ( Beltala )
Guwahati sub-division.
religion but also in other fields of learning. He established several Satras throughout Assam, even in backward and interior areas, which served as important socio-cultural centres of community life of early Assamese society. One of the important contributions of Satra institution was the upliftment of backward classes. The socially down-trodden classes like the untouchables and weaker sections of the society were encouraged to embrace Vaisnavism. The spirit of fellow feeling and brotherhood that flourished in the atmosphere of freedom and equality generated by the Satras, considerably reduced the barriers of castes and creeds. The notable feature of the Satra was that it served both as a seat of religious learning and residential school. The discussions and debates were held in the Satras to which religious scholars were invited.

Speaking on the system of education, Sir Richard Livingstone remarked that there was much to be said for these methods of debates and discussions; besides religious education and monastic practices, the Dakats (devotees) were engaged in secular learning such as cultivation of art and craft.28

A well established Satra was not only a

religious centre but also it acted as a school and library for rural community. It is said that existing ancient books were preserved very carefully and the worn out books were replaced by new ones, which were carefully and laboriously copied by the followers of Vaishnava cult. It was also customary for a Satradhikar (religious head of the Satra) to perform a play composed by himself on his accession to Superiorship. The Satras made substantial contributions to the development of literature. Devotional lyrics, dramas, and religious kabyas were composed, dramatic performances were regularly held not only to entertain but also to educate the rural masses. Among the notable literary cum historical contributions of Satras, mention may be made of biographies of Saint and Satra chronicles. Satra developed schools of classical dance and music in Assam. Though it was entirely religious in outlook, it had its educative value which helped in the moral and spiritual development of community life. The art of wood and ivory carving was practised and figures of deities and doll-like figures of gods and goddesses were beautifully carved out of wood and ivory by artisans of some Satras.

The epics and the puranas were generally illustrated and the pictures had all combinations of
colours. In the religious atmosphere of the Satras, the art of book illustration was developed with great dexterity by unknown painters. The cultural life of Assam since the 16th century A.D. largely centred round the Vaishnava movement and Satra institution.29

Namghar: The institution of village Namghar was the miniature replica of the Satra, which served as the centre of village activities. It was a congregational prayer hall where members of different communities assembled for prayer. It administered a close spiritual control over the members of the village community, and united them together for a common purpose. Entry to some of the Namghars is restricted to only male members and this practice continued even to-day. For example, women are not allowed to enter the Namghar of Sarupeta Satra. Of course, there are Namghars which are managed entirely by women. The Namghar was like a village parliament and various kinds of disputes were settled there and judgment pronounced by the elderly members of the village was accepted. Only the complicated cases which could not be settled in the Namghar were referred to the superior of

29. Sarma, Dr. S.N. : The Satra Institution of Assam Aspects of the Heritage of Assam, p.35.
the Satra or to the higher authority of administration.
All the villagers irrespective of castes and creeds participated in the cultural activities performed during the religious occasions. This sort of participation in cultural performances provided a platform to express their individual talents. These activities enabled the villagers to enrich their community life. The common people were able to utilise and enjoy their leisure time usefully and thus broadened their mental horizon.

Islamic Culture: Again during the time of foreign invasion in Assam the Assamese language came into contact with Islamic culture in the 11th and 12th centuries. As a result, Assamese Ajapir Jikir and Jari songs, based on Sufi religious teachings and containing Perso-Arabic vocabularies found a place in Assamese language through Piras and Fakirs. This also largely contributed to the integration of community life in the early Assamese society.

Literary Development During Ahom Period.

Though the growth and development of early Assamese society dates back to earlier than 12th century A.D., it was actually during the Ahom
regime (1228 - 1826 A.D.) that the Assamese society received impetus for all-round development under the patronage of the Ahom kings. Since the Ahoms ruled over Assam for six hundred years, they left lasting impression on life and culture of the land, the impact of which is reflected in modern Assamese society. Prior to the entry of the Ahoms to Assam, the north-eastern region, especially the Brahmaputra valley was politically disunited. The Ahoms unified it and identified it as one State under a strong Government. The notable feature of the Ahom reign is that they improved the economic, political, cultural and social life of the people despite successive Muhammadan invasions.

The noted historian Sir Edward Gait paid rich tribute to the literature of the Ahoms when he wrote thus "When the Ahoms invaded Assam at the beginning of the 15th century, they were already in possession of a written character and literature of their own." 30

The recording of history in written form in the Brahmaputra valley for the first time was started during the Ahom regime. The Buranjis (history) constituted an

unprecedented and glorious chapter in Assamese literature. Commenting on this unique historical literature, Sir G.A. Grierson rightly observed "The Assamese are justly proud of their national literature. In no department have they been more successful than in a branch of study in which India, as a rule, is curiously deficient. The historical works or Buranjis are numerous and voluminous. A knowledge of Buranjis was an indispensable qualification to an Assamese gentlemen." (Linguistic Survey of India). 31

Again, during the reign of Ahom king Siva Singha, one Kavichandra Dwij translated the Dharma Purana into Assamese poetry and one personal attendant called 'Badh Ligira' had its expression presented in the form of painting. 32 The Assamese versions of the puranas were made by translators, some of whom came from the commoners, who were in constant touch with the land they lived. Therefore, they wrote in simple style and had reflected in their writings many popular myths, legends, folk-lore and cultural traditions. Some of the poems though did not have much literary value, they were read

32. Sarma, Dr. Satyendra Nath: (Quoted from an article (in Assamese) by Dr. Sarma published in the Book 'Assamiya Jatir Itivritta' Edited by Shri Giridhara Sarma p. 80).
by village people even now with great avidity, because they were rich in educational content. Many Sanskrit texts dealing with varied subjects like, medicine, astronomy, arithmetic, dancing and architecture were translated under royal patronage.

During the reign of the Ahom kings, though the educational system of Vedic age was in vogue, education, in effect, was restricted to the Brahmans and the nobles of the royal families. The common people were deprived of the benefit of education in schools run by the gurus in the 'tols'. The 'varis', the 'paiks' (serving people) did not have access to formal education. The study of history was an indispensable part of education for the members of the royal families and for the members of the Ahom nobility. The practice of imparting instructions to the Ahom priests in Ahom religious scriptures and history continued from one generation to another. Unlike the modern times, education in those days was imparted through medium and methods suited to that period. For example, the tols, satres, naaghars, priests, etc. were some of the important media that embodied knowledge and experience and activities of the ages in different fields. The chanting of chronological history in Ahom language at the time of 'Chaklang' or Ahom marriage ceremonies
was indicative of respect for the past history and for the matter their forefathers, and this practice continues among the Ahoms till to-day. There was evidence of women education in a limited scale. Particular mention may be made of Chouching Kunwari who was an enlightened and educated queen. It is said that the fort of Garhgaon was made according to her advice. Ahom ladies helped and controlled the management of state affairs. Muleswari Kunwari, a commoner, who became a queen set up a school in the capital of Ahom king to teach the ladies the art of weaving and spinning. A couple of Ahom queens were lovers of education and they encouraged the production of literary works under their liberal patronage. Dr. N.K. Basu in his book "Assam in the Ahom age" mentioned that due emphasis was given to learning of Sanskrit during the Ahom regime. Lakshmi Singha before becoming king had his education in the "tol" of a pandit named Ramnanda. Again, Ramchandra Barpatra could translate 'Yogini Tantra' into Assamese, because he had adequate knowledge in Sanskrit education.

This shows that during the Ahom period, many original works of Sanskrit literature were translated.

into Assamese language commonly understood by the people of that period and thus contributed to the enrichment of community life.

The Ahom kings constructed temples, tanks, dedicated to Śākta gods and goddesses and these temples became the seats of Śākta culture. The religious text on Śākta culture written in both Assamese and Sanskrit languages were recited and explained in these temples and this immensely contributed to the development of literature.34

The Ahoms brought about a cultural synthesis among the country people by diverse creeds. The Ahom kings did not altogether abandon their ancestral religion and practices, though side by side, they adopted hindu religion and hindu way of life. The coronation ceremonies were solemnised by both Ahom and Hindu rituals, assumed two names, one in Assamese Hindu form and another in Ahom.35

The intermingling of two cultures largely contributed to the social unification of community life. The present practice of giving two names to one individual

34. Barua, Dr. Birinchi Kumar: History of Assamese Literature, p. 75.
35. op cit. p. 77.
perhaps originated from the Ahom customs. This, however, requires further research before any definite conclusion could be drawn.

During the Ahom period, adequate steps were taken for the spread of education. To popularise mass level education, pocket editions were also compiled, especially of the popular books. There is evidence of an Ahom Pocket book containing sixty leaves each of size 1½ inches by 3 inches being sent from Managoldoi by Shri Laksmikant Barua to Shri Hemchandra Goswami in the early part of 19th century. There was another pocket book of songs known as 'Citar-Pakala' in the collection of Hemchandra Goswami.

Though quite a number of Assamese manuscripts were compiled during the Ahom period, there was no systematic attempt to collect these manuscripts for preservation until Sir Archdale Earle, the then Chief Commissioner of Assam took steps in 1912 to collect these valuable manuscripts by deputing Shri Hemchandra Goswami for this purpose. These manuscripts are now preserved in the premises of Kamrupa Anusandhan Samiti.

36. Goswami, Hemchandra: Descriptive Catalogue of Assamese Manuscripts, Published by the University of Calcutta on behalf of the Govt. of Assam, 1930. p.XV.
From time immemorial, the Bihu as nature festival has come to play a significant role in the Assamese society. The people of Assam, who lived traditionally as farm peasants paid a sort of primitive devotion to nature. This manifested itself in the observance of popular festivals described as the 'Bihus' which in fact commemorate the changes of seasons. There are three Bihus and each has a distinct characteristic of its own. For example, 'Bohag Bihu' which marks the beginning of Assamese new year and falling in the month of April indicates the arrival of spring season, when the nature is bedecked with new dress in the form of new leaves and blossoming flowers. The nature assumes a gay mood enchanted by ubiquitous voice of the Cuckoo, reverberating through the hills and dales of the countryside. 'Bohag Bihu' is the symbol of merriment and rejoicings. The community folk singing, community folk dance, community gathering, apart from symbolising the unity and oneness among the various groups of people of community life inspire the people to live and to face the stern realities of life courageously.

The famous Bihu dance of the Assamese is celebrated on the occasion of 'Bohag Bihu' which is
also known as 'Rangali Bihu' because of the mirth and merriment that go with it. The Bihu dances are a superb expression of art and disport. The emotional appeal of Bihu songs constitutes the themes of love and nature. The Assamese folk songs including the Kamrupi folk songs, apart from depicting literary beauty and echoes of joys of day-to-day life of common people cast profound influence on the mind of the people. Because of their popularity and thematic value, the folk songs rolled down from mouth to mouth down the generations among the old and young alike.

In some parts of Kamrup district, 'Bohag Bihu' is also known as 'Chat Bihu' because this Bihu lasts for at least seven days. People express their merriment through the joyful rhythemic expression of songs and dance almost throughout the month of 'Bohag'. Under the royal patronage of Ahom kings, the widely scattered popular Bihu festival became the national festival of Assam. Bohag Bihu also symbolises the festival of fertility. The singing and dancing together of people acts as a unifying force for integration of community life.

There is another Bihu called 'Magh Bihu' which falls in the month of January. This festival which marks
the harvesting of crops is also called 'Bhogali Bihu', because people have enough foodstuff to prepare different items of delicious refreshment and their granaries are full of varieties of grains just harvested from their fields.

According to Sociologists, to the early man, community fire had a distinct place in the utilitarian context of life. In fact, it was the centre of social life; ancient art, song, dance and music – all these grew out of social gatherings by the fire side. In short, human civilisation originated and developed out of the fire side around which the early men met. To the primitive people, fire was necessary not only for protection from the onslaughts of winter but also for protection from wild animals. The utility of fire has rolled down from generation to generation and the 'Magh Bihu' which is celebrated in this part of the country centering round a bon fire or community fire is a living example of ancient custom. The community dining and community prayer is an essential feature of 'Magh Bihu'. This custom fosters the feeling of unity and cohesion in the community life.

A third Bihu is known as 'Kati Bihu' which falls in the month of October. It is also called 'Kongali Bihu'
which means a festival of austerity because during this period, the granaries of foodgrains are almost empty, except those of the rich cultivators. This Bihu synchronises with the completion of transplanting operations of crops and it is customary for the farmers to light earthen lamps in the agricultural fields and to say prayers for bestowing good crops. The lighting of earthen lamps before the Tulsi plant for the whole month in every Hindu household is a common practice and thus goddess of prosperity is propitiated. Among the three types of Bihus the 'Kati Bihu' is insignificant from the point of view of colour and ceremony.

Assamese Society And Its Present Form

The present Assamese society is a fusion of cultures of the past and it depicts the finest example of unity in diversity. The biggest single group of people living in the north eastern region was the 'Mongals'. The Aryans and the Mongals assimilated themselves in the land between Bilorai and Kartoya rivers. The Koches, the mochas, Dimchas, Chutias and Ahoms ruled the ancient Kamrup which assumed the name 'ASSAM' after the Ahoms started ruling the territory. The compilation of time-based chronicles and history was the greatest contribution of the Ahoms to the realm of Assamese literature.
The assimilation of people belonging to various ethnic groups forming the Assamese society is the finest example of national integration. The living together of various ethnic groups in peace and harmony and to think in a global perspective is indispensable for a harmonious community life, because none can live in isolation.

The materials presented in this chapter conclusively prove that early Assamese society had access to learning process from a variety of sources.

The visits of saints and learned scholars from various parts of India and their participation in debates and disputations in the royal courts of Ahom and Koch monarch, as well as in monasteries under the patronage of the kings and the religious gurus immensely contributed to the richness of the local culture. Moreover, the exchange of thoughts and ideas among the galaxy of eminent scholars from within and outside the State helped in the dissemination of knowledge to the masses.

Besides the study and serious discussions of
various wide-ranging subjects starting from history, religion, philosophy, logic, and literature to astronomy, mathematics, economics and medicine including veterinary science, during the period of early Assamese society paved the way for growth and development of modern Assamese culture with an integrated community life embracing all faiths and religions and laid the foundation for the development of a strong and prosperous nation.