B: CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

I. Topic of the Study:

The Dak-vacanas or the maxims of Dak found in the Assamese language are being apparently regarded as one of the oldest compositions in the history of the Assamese literature and it has profusely enriched the stock of the Assamese verbal art. They are of a very high popularity particularly among the rural folk attaining the high veneration like the vedic utterances—"dākar vacan vedar bānti"1, thus said by no reader nor critic from outside but by the author(s) in the midst of the vacanas itself and so impresses the bearers of them accordingly.

The vacanas are being believed to have been composed by one Dak who is claimed to be a historical figure and a distinct legend relates him to Varahmihira as his son born to a potter woman of Lehidangara near Barpeta. Although the legend lacks credibility2 to the elite learneds, still more than eight hundred vacanas as found in a recent authentic collection3 are running with immense popularity particularly in the rural Assamese folk society after this enigmatic name. Of course, the number of the vacanas in different printed collections as well as in manuscripts vary remarkably. Besides the vacanas now available in written form there are still some more running in oral tradition awaiting their preservation in black and white. The vacanas are divided into different prakaraṇas (i.e., chapters) and the consistency

1. Sarma, N.C. (ed.): Dak-Pravacan (Guwahati, 1987) P. 17
2. Infra: Ch. II (I): "The Assamese tradition."
3. Sarma, N.C.:op-cit.(kindly see the comment by Prof. P. Goswami in 'Foreword') P.i
of subject matter is seen maintained in a prakaraṇa. However, the word prakaraṇa has not been used in all cases. Some chapters have been named by using the words like lakṣana (symptoms), kathana (narration), krama (order) etc. Some specimens may be cited for example: (a) Janma prakaraṇa, (b) Grhini lakṣana, (c) Parityāga kathana, (d) Halabāhana krama etc. This irregularity however does not mean any difference.

The vacanas chapterwise discuss, rather advise about the subjects like child birth and rearing, religion, judiciary, ethics, politics, folklore, cookery, vice and virtues of a housewife, avoidables, symptoms of rain, choice of cattle, order of ploughing, agriculture, astrology, deadly moments (in astrology), symptoms of a move, symptoms of a house, qualities of matters (medicine), vice and virtues of men and women respectively, use and measures of stick and handles etc. It is seen from the subjects discussed that they are not of high intellectual order, but revelation of practical wisdom gained through day-to-day experiences in rural agrarian society.

These vacanas deserve a complete and methodical study which may provide interesting informations on various aspects of the Assamese folklife. Such a study would help in establishing it as a tradition bearing its traditional unity with the folk societies of other regions of India and elsewhere where also the Dāk-vacanas prevail in different languages as well as in different names.

It is often seen that different terms namely, aphorisms, sayings and maxims are being equally used in English by different scholars with no difference to mean those vacanas. Amongst these terms, it is of course difficult to accept only one of them discarding the others altogether since each of them has some distinct features and suits some of the vacanas according to their merits. What is meant is that all the vacanas do not fall in the same category and therefore demand different
categorical names, such as aphorisms, sayings, maxims etc. This situation has been best explained by an eminent folklorist in the following lines.

*The sayings of Dak Purusa are of an aphoristic character."* The essence of an aphorism" as John Morley observes," is the compression of a mass of thought into a single saying". It is, as he says, good sense brought to a point. Some of the sayings are of the nature of maxims, in that they enjoin rules of conduct. Maxims and aphorisms are usually an expression of cultural sanctions. 4

It is seen that P. Goswami has used three terms such as aphorisms, sayings and maxims to denote the vacanas of Dak in different contexts. We also feel that adherence to only one of these three terms would limit their perceptions (i.e., of the vacanas) and therefore the three terms have been accepted for use as per the suitability. However, in case of necessity of putting only one word in the title, we have preferred the vernacular word vacan for being mostly in vogue, to facilitate various perceptions according to their nature. The word vacan originating from Sanskrit means advice, suggestion, order, statement etc.

II. Field of the Study:

The Ḍāk-vacanas may be called as good as guiding principles for various aspects of life of the rural folk or bearers of them. The proposed study concerns three important areas and we have, for convenience, divided the programme of the study into three parts.

The Ḍāk-vacanas are current in many regional societies of

India, particularly in the Northern belt. While they are current with enormous popularity for their so-called credibility in the rural folk societies, the elite learned are concerned mostly with scholarly retrospections on them. Consequently, considerable amount of literature on the Ḍāk-vacanas have been published in almost all the regional languages of the Northern India as well as in English too. The sayings of Ḍāk prevailing in different regional folk societies in different languages but almost in the same form and with the same legends behind, attain the weightage of a multi-regional folk tradition of India.

In the first part of the study, we focussed our attention in this multi-regional feature. While chapter I presents the 'Introduction' along with 'Field of the study', 'Importance of the study', 'Works so far done in this field', 'Scope of the study', 'Hypothesis of the study' and 'Methodology' adopted for the study; chapter II surveys the available traditions of Ḍāk in India and abroad. Chapter III attempts in 'Search for Historicity of Ḍāk, since we proposed a special reference to the Assamese version of the Ḍāk-vacanas, in chapter IV we reviewed all the available printed editions of them in Assemese, focussing our attention to the theme, nature and structure of the vacanas. Then discussed the features of the Assamese Ḍāk-vacanas as oral literature. This chapter comprised of four headings would help formulating a sort of theoretical concept about the vacanas, their author, their background of composition and their prevalence.

The second part contains content analysis of the Assamese Ḍāk-vacanas. Folklore is the mirror of the people. Therefore, this item of Assamese folklore has been attempted to study by means of content analysis with a view to retrospecting different aspects of the Assamese folklife of a by-gone age. This part has been presented in three chapters. These are accordingly Ch.V - Socio Political and Religious life as reflected in the Ḍāk-vacanas, Ch.VI - Astrology, Belief, Folk-medicine
and Folk-cookery as reflected in the Ḍāk-vacanas, and Ch. VII- Men and Women as reflected in the Ḍāk-vacanas.

The third part contains the discussion on the 'Social functions of the Ḍāk-vacanas' in Chapter VIII. Then arrived at a conclusion in Chapter IX derived out of the whole study under the title 'Concluding Remarks'.

The field of the study has been thus demarcated in the said three parts incorporating the subjects mentioned above and is expected to achieve the desired completeness.

III . Importance of the Study;

A study on the Ḍāk-vacanas demands *inter alia* two things in priority order, such as—(I) Fixation of the time of composition of the vacanas, and (II) Possible attempt to indentification of Ḍāk.

About the time of composition of the vacanas there are controversies all along. The popular legend of Ḍāk's birth that filially relates him to Varahmihira, the famous astronomer of the Gupta Age, the pointers suggesting the influence of Buddhism in the composition of the vacanas, the prominent pre-vaishnavite Hinduistic characteristics of some religious doctrines as envisaged, and likewise the Islamic influences too marked by the use of few Arabic and Persian words

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6. (a) Necog, D: *Naton Poharat Asamīya Sāhityar Baraśīj* (Guwahati, 1993) Pp. 43-44
   (b) Ibid: P. 46. Md. Shahidulla, K.L. Barua also have been quoted by the author in support of the contention.
   (c) Goswami, P.: op-cit. Pp. 77
   (d) Ashutosh Bhattacharrya quoted by N.C Sarma in *Ḍāk-Pravacan*, P.154
   (e) Bhuyan, S.K.: Studies in the Literature of Assam (Guwahati, 1962), Pp. 6-7
over the pre-existing Buddhistic influence on the *vacanas*\(^9\) the unambiguous profession of monotheism as a religious doctrine with advice to submit to Lord Krishna alone\(^10\) marking the overwhelming influence of Neo-vaishnavism\(^11\) have encouraged different scholars to decide different times of composition of the *vacanas* ranging from the 6th-7th centuries to the 16th-17th centuries. Each of the opinions wanting self-completeness despite apparently holding some credentials and standing contrary to the others can hardly satisfy one. In view of this situation that none of the propositions mentioned above can help us in fixing the time of composition of the *Ḍāk vacanas* quite reasonably we prefer to contribute to the view put forwarded of late after conducting a very methodical study by a scholar that the *Ḍāk vacanas* running on oral tradition for centuries entered into the written tradition being associated with the name of an enigmatic author some one hundred or one hundred and fifty years ago\(^12\). A detailed discussion included later on\(^13\) shows that the very name of this enigmatic author belongs only to a tradition instead of an individual. As result of running on oral transmission for centuries, as the tradition could have tinged with different religious faiths prevailing over the land from time to time so also changed the language structure which ultimately found in record to be one of not earlier to the early nineteenth century\(^14\). However,

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10. Sarma, N.C. : op-cit : (a) P.12- \(\text{źire nabantę Kṛṣṇa pāw} \)
\(\text{sabe bidambana jānibā māw} \)
(b) P.23- \(\text{biḥā karibā eke sundari} \)
\(\text{śmaran karibā kebale hari}...\)
13. Infra : Chapter III (Search for Historicity of *Ḍāk*)
the want of any trace of the Burmese invasion (mānar ākraman) of 1821 A.D., the worst national tragedy of the Assamese people till then, we think that the maxims of Ḍāk (or the Ḍāk-vacanas, as have been being called) might have taken the written shape prior to that event i.e., around the first decade of the nineteenth century or in the very last part of the eighteenth century.

The study thus unveils the identity of Ḍāk, the enigmatic author, from a mysterious individual to an widespread tradition reflecting the life of the rural people of different regions of northern India in general and of Assam in particular of a by-gone age.

IV. Works so far done in this field:

The importance of the study can be well perceived from the records of works so far done in this field and from the still prevailing confusion over the topic, for almost every work propounding an opinion differing with many others in most cases. In a subsequent chapter, the Assamese editions of Ḍāk-vacanas have been critically reviewed. In this occasion therefore, we have only attempted to cast an overview on the critical evaluations of the Ḍāk-vacanas excluding the mere collections of them. Again in the just preceding discussion the works of D. Neog, D. Bharali, M. Neog, N. C. Sarma, K.R. Medhi, S.K. Bhuyan and P. Goswami have been mentioned, of which the first four works have been written in Assamese and the rest three in English.

It is obvious that any scholar attempting to write a history of the Assamese literature of the early period can no way avoid a discussion on the Ḍāk-vacanas. Therefore, all the noted historians of the Assamese literature and culture have dealt with the subject in their works with

15. Infra : Chapter IV (The Assamese Editions of Ḍāk-vacanas)
works with their self imposed limitations. Historians like D.N.Bezbarua\textsuperscript{16}, K.L.Barua\textsuperscript{17}, H.C.Goswami\textsuperscript{18}, S.N.Sarma\textsuperscript{19} and those mentioned above have contributed their might in studying the subject. Concentrating specifically on the folk literature of Assam L.Gogoi in his \textit{Asamiy\=a Lok S\=ahityar R\=uprekha} \textsuperscript{20} and S.Sarma in his \textit{Asamar Lok S\=ahitya} \textsuperscript{21} also discussed the subject with scholarly command. Besides these works there are still few deserving mention.

(1) Before writing \textit{Asamiy\=a S\=ahityar R\=uprekha} in 1962, M.Neog wrote an article named \textit{D\=akar vacan vedar b\=ani} and incorporated in a collection named \textit{Asamiy\=a G\=iti S\=ahitya} (1958). The same author again in an edited collection of Assamese phrases and idioms discussed about the maxims and the author(s) \textsuperscript{22}.

(2) Likewise P.Goswami also other than in his \textit{Folk Literature of Assam} incorporated an article on the subject named \textit{'Hesiod \=aru D\=akpurus'} in his Assamese book \textit{Asamiy\=a Jana S\=ahitya} (1948) which is a comparative study between D\=ak and Hesiod. Moreover the author has explained few maxims of D\=ak to establish his contention in one article \textsuperscript{23} in his book \textit{J\=ap\=anar Jana Kr\=stii \=aru Any\=anya R\=acan\=a} (1984).

(3) A.C. Barua in his \textit{D\=ake Bole \=sun\=a up\=\=ay} (1964) has explained the socio-economic conditions, aspirations as well as the traditional weather study of the Assamese people contained in the maxims of

\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Asamiy\=a Bh\=u\=sa \=aru S\=ahityar Bura\=nj\=i} (Jorhat, 1913).
\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Early History of Kamrupa} (Guwahati, 1988).
\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Asamiy\=a S\=ahityar C\=aneki} (Part-I/ Calcutta, 1929).
\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Asamiy\=a S\=ahityar Sam\=ik\=q\=at\=mak Itib\=rt\=t\=va} (Guwahati, 1984).
\textsuperscript{22} Rajkhowa, Benudhar : \textit{Asamiy\=a Khan\=qul\=ak\=ya ko\=ya}, (Jorhat, 1961).
\textsuperscript{23} \textit{G\=awar Lok Aj\=\=in ne'} Pp. 31-34.
Dāk particularly in regard to agriculture. In the 'Introduction' the legend of Dāk has been incorporated along with the running controversies, however indecisively.

(4) S. Rajguru in 'Introduction' of his book Asamīyā Prabhād (Nowgon, 1972) has incorporated a brief but original study on Dāk and the vacanas.

(5) Another author B.L. Choudhury in a very short discussion along with assessing the social relevance of the maxims of Dāk tried to mark out the stage of social evolution wherein the maxims might have been composed that it was perhaps the transition of the Assamese society entering into patriarchy after breaking down of matriarchy 24

Thus it is seen that the subject has attracted many a scholars to work upon to a considerable extent. But all the works taken together it could be seen that the entire area is yet to be pervaded through. Amongst all the works so far done and mentioned above, the latest one by N.C. Sarma 25 being very methodical in nature, larger in extent, fuller in informations even of extra-territorial connections and praiseworthy in critical evaluation is a commendable work as rightly appreciated as a learned commentary 26

V. Scope of the Study:

Despite a good amount of works being done upon the subject as mentioned above, it was felt that in a good number of them complacency was indulged in to a considerable extent so as to rely on the ready-made informations, repetitions of suspicion arousing comments only without convincing assertions and undesired brevity

25. Dāk-Pravacan (ed.) : Guwahati, 1987
26. Ibid : Kindly see the 'Foreword' by P. Goswami
of discussion instead of digging down the matter to the possible depth. Moreover, the discussions are sporadic and partial in nature. 'Partial in nature' because almost in all cases the exercises concern only one or two aspects each ignoring the rest. These limitations provided us with the scope to further probe the tradition of *Dāk* and bring the intended completeness of the study. This helped us to gather another anecdote about the name of the village where *Dāk* was believed to born in although the whole thing stands logically untenable.²⁷ The contradictions inherent in the traditions emanated from different versions of the legend of *Dāk* such as regarding his birth, community, life-span, death and above all the personal entity itself needed a conclusive study and this has been taken care of while discussing the Assamese tradition of *Dāk* in Ch. II. This study of the contradictions supported by the findings in other chapters paved the way to confirm *Dāk* as a tradition instead of an enigmatic author who had also been claimed by some other lingual traditions of India as well. Similarity here can not refute originality.

In want of content analysis in a methodical nature and in fuller extent, the study on the maxims of *Dāk* so long remained incomplete. Therefore, an analytical study on the contents has been attempted with a view to retrospect our own cultural past. This only provides the scope to ponder over how our forefathers endeavoured for a peaceful and prosperous community life.

Moreover, this study provided the scope to collect the maxims of like nature still running on oral tradition²⁸ and to assess the educative values and social relevances of some of such maxims which we have presented in a subsequent chapter²⁹.

²⁷. Infra: Chapter II. Foot Note no. 26
²⁸. Kindly see the Appendix–
²⁹. Infra: Ch. VIII (Social Functions of the *Dāk Vacanas*)
VI. Hypothesis of the Study:

Variations of text in respect of subject-matter as well as in number of the maxims and the legend associated somewhere in full and somewhere in part along with its fabrications in different printed editions of *Dāk vacanas* enabled forming the hypothesis that:

(I) *Dāk*, instead of an individual author of historical authenticity as has been being held is rather a tradition of collective knowledge of a people.

(II) The maxims are, instead of high intellectual exercise, rather the expressions of practical wisdom of a people proclaimed for larger interest to teach the inexperienced or the future generations. A collective well-being is the main thrust of the maxims.

(III) Uniformity of the backgrounds of experiences or more specifically speaking, uniformity in mode of traditional lives made it possible to evolve uniform traditions in different regional societies in India even existing far off. Hence the tradition of *Dāk* as evolved in Assam so also could evolve in Rajasthan and elsewhere.

(IV) An interesting picture of a lost society that belonged to us is being heaped down the maxims.

VII. Methodology:

The study has been carried out by consulting relevant books and journals to a large extent. Among the books consulted there are Assamese, Bengali, Hindi, English, Oriya and Sanskrit books, the traces of which will be found in due places. However in reading the Oriya books for want of command over the language and the script, I took the help of an Oriya gentleman. Few Assamese journals were also consulted.
Besides the printed books and journals six manuscripts (five in sāncipāt and one in tulāpāt containing the maxims of Ḍāk in three different libraries were also consulted in the process. Two of them with serial nos respectively 2372 and 2887 were found in the Manuscript Department of the K.K. Handique Library in the Gauhati University while three with serial no respectively 112, 527 and 1405 were in the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Assam, Guwahati and the rest was in the library of the Kamrup Anusandhan Samiti, Guwahati. Barring the one with the serial no 2372 in the K.K. Handique Library (G.U) the rests are incomplete in content and the texts in places in some of them are also illegible. However, all these manuscripts have been gone through and particularly used in comparative study for understanding the maxims in regard to their variations.

Field work had been carried out in several places to collect the maxims of Ḍāk still running in oral tradition. Few maxims thus collected have been presented in Appendix-I at the end of the book and some such maxims have also been used to explain concerned contentions. In the process of field work interview were held with some informants with a view to collect new materials. The relevant materials thus collected have been used in explaining our contentions with full mention of their sources.

Emphasis has been given in the comparative aspect of the study. In the part I where the different regional traditions of Ḍāk have been discussed, the Assamese tradition has also been compared with all the available regional Ḍāk traditions of India such as Bengali, Oriya, Bhojpuri, Maithili, Rajasthani etc. with the help of few similar maxims
in each case. In the process, the other available folk traditions although namingly different but similar in content like Khanā, Bhāḍḍālī etc. have also been compared to establish the uniformity of different traditions.

Besides the comparative study critical analysis have been carried out to bring out the findings in other chapters.