CHAPTER IV

Daily Life of the Assamese People

As regards the daily activities of the Assamese people, no detailed account is available to us from any source, but as regards higher officials and pontiffs of the religious institutions, descriptions are found in the biographies, chronicles and other records. However, from the observance of the working-day of an Assamese man, which surely has connection with the previous period, something can be said. The working day of an Assamese man begins from the rising of the sun and ends between 9 to 10 P.M. at night generally. They take their meals, generally four times a day. The main meals are taken at noon and at night and at morning and sunset, they take light refreshments. Hunter says that an Assamese cultivator generally takes three meals a day. Of course, those who are poor and cannot afford to manage four meals, they are to remain satisfied with three or two meals a day. In the evening, up to the time of their supper, the Assamese people, mostly the cultivators, remain busy in bamboo, cane or wood works, in order to equip their houses with necessary house-hold materials. It is in the evening time that the Assamese people generally make their agricultural implements, hunting and fishing instruments and other things of comfort and domestic necessity. During the Ahom rule, doing of such works at night by the male persons of the family before they go to bed, was compulsory. The women of the cultivators' equally share their husbands' toil in cultivation work. As regards the daily activities of the women, it will be discussed in a relevant chapter. During the Ahom rule, both male and female persons had their daily routine of compulsory works. Every woman had to get up from their bed before dawn and was required to husk at least one 'Don' (five seers) of
paddy. In the evening, before going to bed, every woman had to spin at least forty cocoons. In each village there was an officer to supervise the works of the village people; anybody found neglecting his or her duties was punished.

The common people, in those days, could make very little time for sports and pastimes. The children could, however, make time for games and sports. As the adult populations had very little time to indulge in games and sports, they observed their festivals and functions with great eclat and enthusiasm and also participated in games and sports and various other rural amusements. The middle and the aristocratic class, however, had ample time to spend in indoor games, such as, 'Paci' (playing with cowries), 'Pasa' (playing with dice), 'Chaupat' (another kind of dice-playing) 'Baghbol' (hold the tiger), 'Pati' or 'Mogul-pati', 'Baikunthayatra' etc. and they played these games usually at night or at noon, after meal. The common people however, took part in these games and sports, usually along with their occasional festivals.

It is the custom of all the Hindu people to take bath in the morning and then to devote to prayer and worship of god in their respective family chapel, in conformity with their religious moorings. In Assam, the Caste Hindus, that is the Brāhmanas, Kayasthas and the Kalitas including the upgraded ones and the converts, after performing their purificatory rites, take their morning repast or break-fast and then begin their daily work. Anybody who was an officer of some prominence, having his own establishment, had to attend his court in his own 'Chorā' (outside house), where he had to dispense justice of the cases brought by his tenants and settle other official
matters. In one of the biographies of the Medieval Saints, people are divided into four categories, viz, the 'Uttama' (the good), the 'Uttamottama' (the best among the good) and the 'Prakrita' (the common). The best among the good, always makes themselves pure by taking bath after discharge and then by praying and worshipping God, in the morning. An officer takes his morning tiffin with 'Chira' (parched rice, pounded), sugar, milk etc. and attends his daily court in his outside house called 'Chora' where he dispenses justice in the cases brought by his tenants. At mid-day, the court adjourns till sunset. In the meantime, the officer takes his mid-day meal and then rests for some time. Again after slight refreshments, he attends the court. At night after dinner, he generally discusses important political matters (if he is a higher officer) with his subordinates and then retires to the bed after taking some sweets as light refreshment.

In the religious institutions like Satras, the Adhikār or the Mahanta (i.e. the head pontiff of the Satra) and the devotees are required to follow an exhaustive daily routine. In a Satra institution the daily works are done more on organisational basis than on individual line. For instance, let us now cite an example of the daily works done by a religious head of a Satra in those days. Describing the daily activities of Balkunthānath Bhattacharyya, popularly known as Bhattadeva, it is said that he performed his daily duties accurately with great reticence. He followed the orthodox rules and duties of a Brāhmaṇa. "Early in the morning after 'Snāna' (bath) he performs his morning prayer 'Sandhyā'. Then he joins the recital of the Holy names in the Namghar (prayer Hall), where the disciples begin it from the very dawn of the day. The recital continues for six 'dandas'*; then he reads out few chapters

* A danda is equal to 24 minutes.
from the 'Bhāgavata Purāṇa' and explains them to the 'Bhaktas' (devotees), for at least another six 'daṇḍas.' Then for two 'daṇḍas' he reads some verses written in 'Pada-chanda' and ends it by reciting the Holy names. After this, enjoying the dance of the 'Naṭuās', he returns to his residence for his mid-day bath and worship. At the end of the worship he reads 'Srimad-Gītā' for sometimes. Then resting a while, after mid-day meal, he goes to his 'Chhātra-sāl' (a Sanskrit teaching school) and teaches students there. At sunset, he again attends the 'Nama-Kirttana' (recital of Holy names) and giving a discourse from 'Bhāgavata-Purāṇa' he returns for his evening prayer. Thus, daily twelve times, the recital of the 'Nama-Prasanga' is observed in the Satra." The other Satra-heads and Satra institutions, more or less, follow the same routine. The elderly persons of the village, who can afford time, gather together in the village Nāmghar, either at mid-day after their meal, or at night before meal, where the sacred books like the epics and the 'Purāṇas', specially the 'Bhāgavata Purāṇa', are read aloud by the 'Pāṭhaka' (reader) or by a Brāhmaṇa of the respective villages; explanations of the inner contents of these religious books are also made along with such readings. The gatherings for listening to the religious books or other religious discourses, in the village Nāmghar or in the temple compound, increased on the 8th, 11th or 15th day of the fortnight of the lunar month or on other days having some religious significance. In the 'Kathā-Guru-Charit', it is said that Sankardeva and Madhavdeva themselves, with their followers held such discussions sitting in the paddy fields, after the harvest is removed, in the dry seasons. Sankardeva and Madhabdeva used to spend their leisure time in writing books or rendering the sacred books into Assamese verse. These works have been traditionally followed by their adherents and subsequently the Satra-heads of the Vaisnava faith. The other devotees of
the Satra institutions spent their leisure time in cultivation work in
their homestead or engage themselves in other art or craft. In fact, the
Satras were reputed Centres of art and craft in the Medieval period, and
the tradition has been continuing till to-day. 7

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