1. Religion :-

Like literature, we do not like to enter into a detailed discussion in the aspect of "Religion" of Medieval Assam. As regards religion, it is quite a known fact that Vaisnavism based on 'Bhagavata Purana' and preached by Sri Sankardeva and his colleagues during the 15th-16th centuries, is the main cult of the period, although other cults and minor sects were not quite out of the scene. About Vaisnavism and its different sects, discussions have already been made by different scholars. Therefore, I propose to devote myself, mainly on 'Rites and rituals' after giving a brief synopsis of the different religious cults and their sects.

It is evident that at least during the 6th-7th centuries A.D., particularly during the reign of king Bhaskar Varman, Brahminical faith or Hinduism had gained a good ground in Assam. As has been said above, Hinduism could not enter deep into the vast non-Aryan population of the early period, as it could during the medieval period. Nevertheless, credit must be recorded to a handful of Brâhmana priests for having spread Hinduism amongst the masses of the non-Aryan population. Before the advent of the Aryans, Assam was the homeland of the Austrics, the Alpines and the different branches of the Tibeto-Burmans; and these various racial elements had laid the foundation of various cults in Assam. The Aryans entered into Assam much later. Numerically they were no match to the vast non-Aryan population. Naturally, Brahmanism had to be modified to a great extent in order to adjust it to the local situation.¹

There were many 'Tirthas' (holy-places) in Assam, some of which are believed to have been originally sacred places of non-Aryans and later on
recognised by the Hindus. But the procedure of worshipping in these 'Tirthas' differs from one another and does not correspond with the procedures prevalent in other parts of India. This is believed to be due to the local modifications, or absorption of local tribal rituals.

Among the various religious cults or faiths that have been in existence in the early period, mention can be made of the cult of the sun-worshipper, Saivism, Tantrikism, Vaisnavism and the different esoteric sects of Buddhism. Towards the last part of the early period, the different liberal sects of Buddhism, such as Bajrayan, Mahayana etc got mixed up with Hindu Tantrikism and came to be more prominent in Assam; rather it may be said that practically they came to dominate over the whole field under the royal patronage of the Pala kings. During the early period, Saivism and Saktism exerted their influence upon the Tibeto-Burman people to a great extent which continued even in the Medieval period. In fact, absorption of non-Aryan rituals and deities and myths are noticed more in Saivism and Saktism than in any other Hindu faith. Some of the sacred places, which originally belong to the non-Aryan people, have been transformed into Hindu sacred places during the early period and among such places the most important are the shrine of Kamakhya and the temple of goddess Tamreswari or Kechai-Khati in the north-east region of Assam. Though the influence of Tantrik Buddhism came to be checked by the Vaisnavite, yet they could not be eradicated from the society and have remained in the society in some forms or other. There are reasons to suspect the influence of esoteric sects upon the religions sects, such as Sahajiyā, Digambari, Rātikhowā, Gopi dhārā etc.

The Vaisnavism introduced by Sri Sankardeva and his colleagues, based on Bhāgavata Purāṇa, was later on divided into four sects, viz.,
Brahma Sanhati, Purusa Sanhati, Nitya Sanhati (Nika Sanhati) and Kala Sanhati. Under each of these main sects there were innumerable Satra institutions which have been carrying on the work of propagating their faith among the people and of initiating the neo-phytes into their sect. There are a few satras belonging to the Vaisnava cult introduced by Sri Chaitanya of Bengal.

We have mentioned that in the last part of the Ahom rule, the Ahom kings had leant towards the 'Sākta' faith and it was the Ahom king Siva Singha who was first initiated to the 'Sākta' faith by one Krisnaram Bhattacharyya of Bengal. The Ahom king rehabilitated Krisnaram Bhattacharyya at Nalachala hill and therefore came to be known as 'Pahbariya Gosāin'. Many of the Ahom kings, after Siva Singha, accepted Sākta faith as their cult. There were few other 'Gosāins' such as 'Mukalimuria', 'Pahumaría', 'Na-gosāin', 'Nāti gosāin' etc. belonging to the Sākta cult.

Of the vast majority of the non-Aryan population, a considerable number, mostly living in the plains, accepted Hinduism. Those who were living in the hilly regions have been following their own tribal faith and tribal customs. There was a considerable number of Muslims. According to Gunabhiram most of them belonged to the 'Sunni' sect.

2. Rites and rituals:

The Rites and rituals are usually connected with religion. Some of the rites and rituals are observed in course of a festival; among such functions, we can mention the 'Puja' (worship) festival of goddess Durga or Durgotsava, Phalgutsava, Rasotsava etc. Among the Hindu ceremonies, observed in the form of festival, under the patronage of the Ahom Govt.,
the most known were the Durgotsava and the Phalgutsava. The Ahom kings had
been patronising the observance of the Hindu ceremonies even prior to their
acceptance of the Hinduism. Patronage to the Hindu culture became a regular
feature of the Ahom administration after the Ahom kings embraced Hinduism.
As already referred to, the worship of goddess Durga by installing clay
models of the goddess, came to be prevalent in Assam since the reign of the
Ahom king Pratap Singha. But after being initiated to the Sakta faith,
the Ahom kings began to pay more attention to the worship of goddess Durga
by offering animal sacrifice, expenses being met from the royal
treasury. Animal sacrifice was an important feature of the worship of
goddess Durga. Koch king Biswa Singha himself worshipped goddess Durga.

From historical records, it is gathered that Phalgutsava was performed as
a festival in the capital under the Govt. management.

The Phalgutsava is a Vaishnavite festival. It is performed with
great devotion and mirth by all Vaishnavas of the state. It is
specially observed in the Barpeta and Bardowa Satra which are associated
with the activities of Sankardeva and Madhabdeva. Other Vaishnava ceremonies
are the Râsotsava, Jamastami, Ratha-yâstrâ, Jhulana etc. On the next day
to the Jamastami, the Nandotsava is observed. Another Vaishnava function
is the worship of Satyanarayana. This is a new mode of worship of lord Vismu
which came to be prevalent in Assam, perhaps from the reign of king
Satyanarayana and Laksminarayana of Sadhayapuri. As the month of Bhadra is
associated with the birth of lord Krishna and the death of Sankardeva, the
Vaishnavas in the village Namghars and in the Satras observe Namkirttana
daily at regular intervals throughout the whole month. The death and the
birth anniversaries of the Vaishnavite preceptors like Sankardeva, Madhabdeva,
Damodardeva etc. are observed with Namakirtana at day time and Bhāona performance at night. The death and birth anniversaries of the founder preceptors of different Satras, are also observed with due pomp and grandeur by the disciples of the respective sects and Satras.

The Vaishnava functions are devoid of ostentation. Simplicity and devotion are the main characteristics of the religious functions of the Vaishnavas. Detachment towards worldly objects is the main teaching of the Vaishnava cult. But the religious functions of the Saktas are full of rituals and ceremonials and instead of poverty, the Saktaites pray and worship for health, beauty, wealth etc. The existence of the Sakt cult of Hinduism prior to the Vaishnava movement is proved by many scholars on the basis of internal evidences. So also, the prevalence of the worship of Goddess Durga, Kali, Annapurna, Lakshmi, Saraswati etc. is proved both by the existence of icons and literary records. The worship of these goddesses continued during the Medieval period also. The women, for the appeasement of the goddess Sitala, at whose wrath, it is believed, the epidemic of small-pox spreads among the people, perform the chanting of hymn songs, known as 'Ai-nām' or 'Sitala-nām', in the chapels or in the village Namghar, collectively. The Asokāstami or the bathing ceremony, in the holy waters of the river Brahmaputra, on the Śukla-Āstami day in the month of Chaitra, is observed in Assam.

One of the most important religious festival is the 'Ambuvaci' festival held at Kamakhya, in the month of Āṣadhā. Now a days people from all over India come to the temple of Goddess Kamakhya during this festival. The Ambuvaci is popularly called 'Āmati' or 'Sāth'. In the Siva temples, at different places of the country, the Śiva Chaturūḍḍasi is observed. Most
of the people of the Tibeto-Burman stock worship their God Siva and Goddess Parvati according to their tribal manner. Elsewhere in our discussion it is stated that the koch king Naranarayan allowed the Kacharfs including the Koch and Mech, living on the northern side of the Gohainkamala Ali to worship God Siva according to their own tribal manner. While in the temples of the south, he ordered the Brāhmaṇas to conduct the functions. Further, there is a reference to worshipping God Siva by the Koch people by offering sacrifice of duck, pigeon, pig, buffalo, cock, goat and with wine and cooked rice. The deodhai (the tribal priest) danced to the rhythmic beating of the Madal (drum).

In the districts of Goalpara, Kamrup and in the Mangaldal subdivision, the worship of Goddess Manasa (the serpent deity) was prevalent and it is still prevailing. The worship of Goddess Manasa is performed during the summer seasons. The Hindu month Śrāvana is considered the best for the performance of the Manasa Puja. The 'Ojah-pali' nṛtya or Deodhani nṛtya is an integral part of the worship of goddess Manasa. In the Marai-puja (another name of the Manasa puja), performed by the Kachari people, the Deodhani nṛtya is an unavoidable and essential part. In lower Assam, particularly in the district of Kamrup, along with a marriage ceremony, the worship of goddess Manasa is also performed.

The puja functions are more or less predominant of Tantrik rites, which mainly consisted of Japa (Meditation), Homa (oblation) and Tarpana (libation). The followers of the Saiva and Sākta cult offer animal sacrifice at the altar of the God or Goddess. As to the offering animal sacrifice, the procedure at different temples, specially in the Siva temple, differs from each other. Instead of cutting, in some of the Siva
temples, the animal is sacrificed at the altar by wrenching the neck. 'Kālikā purāṇa' and 'Yogini Tantra' mention a large number of animals which were considered suitable for sacrifice. 'Kālikā purana' and 'Yogini Tantra' refer to the human sacrifice also. Human sacrifice was particularly offered in the temple of Goddess Kechāi-Khati in the north-east region of Assam, where the worship of the Goddess was conducted by the tribal priest known as 'Deuri'. 'Kālikā-purana' and 'Yogini Tantra' refer to many sacred places associated with God Siva and Goddess Parbati with detailed procedure of performing the puja ceremony. It is not possible to give description of all the puja ceremonies, performed in these temples. Dr. B.K. Barua, makes an attempt to describe exhaustively the puja functions and other ceremonies including those prevalent among the non-Aryan people in his work 'Asamar Loka Sanskriti'. Even then, his list cannot be considered as complete.

Bestowal of fig gifts in the form of daily necessities and gold or silver to the Brahmanas and mendicants on the 'Chaitra-Samkrānti' day, is considered best. On the day of the eclipse of the moon or the sun, the bestowal is considered good. While he was at his royal camp at Gauhati, king Rajeswar Singha, on the occasion of the eclipse of the full moon, bestowed handful of gold to Aswakranta temple. He further granted lands as donation to the Brahmanas and other pious men on that occasion.

From the historical and biographical records, it has been shown elsewhere that the temples and the tanks which were either constructed or re-constructed under the order of the Ahom or Koch kings were dedicated to the gods or Goddesses according to Vedic rites.
The Hindu people perform many purificatory ceremonies and rites which are associated with these great events of the life, viz., birth, wed-lock and death. Of these three great events the marriage and the death are the most important. Although these events are connected with individual life, the ceremonies and functions in these events must be performed in the presence of the people of the society and hence they may be attributed as social functions. In all the functions connected with the three events, at least in the last two events, the presence of social gathering is unavoidable. About marriage we have discussed in detail in the chapter of 'Marriage and the position of Women'. For the marriage ceremony a day is selected found auspicious in the calculation of the Brâhmana priest or the astrologer, with the consent of both the parties, that is of the bride-groom and the bride. The marriage ceremony commence generally three or five days earlier. In case of a marriage ceremony in the royal family or in the house of a noble or high ranking people, it is found recorded in the chronicles, that it commenced even seven or nine days earlier. Many customs and rites are performed during all the days of the marriage ceremony. In all the days of the marriage ceremony the bridge-groom and the bride are bathed ceremonially in the evening by the women by bringing water from a tank or a nearby river. On the day of the commencement of the marriage ceremony ornaments and dresses, along with other things are sent ceremonially from the house of the bridegroom to the bride's house. This is called 'Tekelidā' or 'Jorondā' or 'Telarbhaṛdā' in Assamese.

Just after the attainment of the puberty, in all Hindu communities, some rites and ceremonies are performed. The girl is to observe fast for some days if she attains puberty in an inauspicious moment. A ceremony is
performed on the 7th or 9th day in which women are the only participants. This marriage is called 'Noai-tolani-biya'.

The Ahoms perform their marriage ceremony according to their tribal system known as 'Chaklang'. As we have stated elsewhere, that the Ahom kings, according to the convention, married from the original seven clans of the Ahoms, to Assam. But occasionally they married girls from the family of the high ranking Hindu officers such as Phukan, Barua etc. with the consent of the parents, according to Hindu rites. When they have married girls from the Ahom community the marriage was performed by the 'Chaklang' system. But in both the case the girl was taken to the king's palace and marriage was performed. In a 'Chaklang' marriage or in a Hindu marriage, the 'Joran' (Sanskrit - 'Yotana') ceremony is performed on the day of the commencement of the marriage. If the bridegroom is a king, then valuable ornaments and dresses befitting the dignity of a king were sent to the bridegroom's house from the house of the bride. According to the 'Chaklang' system, the bride takes her seat by the left side of the bridegroom. All the things offered as dowry to the bride and dresses and ornaments offered to the bridegroom are kept by his side. Raised trays, called 'Sari', filled up with betel-nut and betel-leaf from 10 to 20 in number and pillows from 10 to 12 in number are kept. Then an old person, or a high ranking Ahom officer, who knows the family history of both the bride and the bridegroom, tells the history of both the families. After this, the bridegroom smells a mixture of five sweets (milk, curd, sugar, ghee, honey), washes his mouth picking the teeth with the stiff part of a thatching grass and then chews betel-nut. Each one of these actions are successfully done for twenty one times. When this is over, the old person advises the bride and the bridegroom and after each of the advice, a sound
is made for the hearing of the bride and the bridegroom by jerking seven or nine cowries packed up in a piece of cloth.

About cremating dead bodies and the performance of 'Sraddha' by the Ahoms ceremony have been already discussed. The procedure of entombing the dead body of a king is elaborately described in the 'Deodhai Asam Buranji'.

The function of entombing the dead body of a king is a lengthy one. The description given by Shihabuddin is short, but it is almost the same as described in the 'Deodhai Asam Buranji'. The description given by Shihabuddin runs thus: "The common people bury their dead with some of the property of the deceased placing the head towards the east and the feet towards the west. The chiefs build vaults for their dead, and place therein the wives and servants of the deceased after killing them together with necessary articles for a few years, including various kinds of gold and silver vessels, carpets, cloths and food stuffs. They cover the head of the dead very strongly with stout poles and bury in the vault a lamp with plenty of oil and one living lamp attendant to remain engaged in the work of trimming the lamp. From the ten vaults which were opened (by the Mughals) property worth nearly ninety thousand rupees was recovered. One of the marvels was that from the vault of one of the queens of this country who had been buried eighty years ago, a gold betel-casket was taken, within which the betel leaf was still green". The cremation of the dead body, among the Ahom kings, was first introduced by king Rudra Singha. After the burning of the dead body the ashes were entomed. In the 'Deodhai Asam Buranji' it is stated that the Ahom kings desisted from placing human beings in the vaults of the dead kings, after they have turned into devoted disciples. The performance of the 'Adya-Sraddha' like the Hindus, perhaps came to be introduced from the reign of the Ahom king Rajeswar Singha. Along with the 'Adya-Sraddha', like the Hindus, they
performed 'Brsotsarga' and 'Barotsarga' also (Vide 'Racial Admixture and Hinduisation'). During the period of the observance of the uncleanness at the death of an inmate or birth of a child, among the Hindu people, including the Hinduised, the whole house is put under a taboo.

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