CHAPTER VII
SOME SOCIO RELIGIOUS OBSERVATIONS

After a detailed study of the temples and shrines of Dhubri district, it is observed that the religious scenario of this locality is very interesting. The historical background of the district shows that diverse ethnic-culture groups had come to settle down in this region with diverse aims and objects, and gradually they merged with the local people at different times. The phenomenon of this type of population growth is reflected through the most important agencies like temples and shrines which offer an extremely rich field for socio-religious study. In fact, these institutions are the indication of consciousness of the people in society to preserve and propagate their respective religious faiths. Dhubri district, the gateway of western Assam always played a significant role towards the heterogenous religious behaviour of the society. But inspite of the impact of different religious sects, most striking feature is the sense of co-existence and tolerance which always prevailed among the different religious and sectarian groups living together in this region. It is very remarkable, indeed.

It is always observed that in the field of social and religious
thoughts and ideas, a process of give and take has prevailed among the Hindus and the Muslims since the rise of Mohammedan empire in India. The number of the Muslim settlers during the period under review was smaller in proportion to that of the Hindu population. The result is that they had to remain completely isolated from their ancestors, and they had been greatly influenced by the local culture, habits and religious beliefs and practices. In case of the native Hindus also, due to the close contact with the Mohammedan settlers certain noteworthy changes took place in their social and cultural life.

On the other hand, in respect philosophical concepts and religious ideas, as Dr. S. Radhakrishan observes, “there were number of schools, among the Hindu and the Muslim thinkers some borrowed elements from one another but others to find a synthesis between the two.”\(^1\) It is found that the local Mohammedan people of Dhubri district associated themselves directly or indirectly with various beliefs, practices, rituals and ceremonials which they accepted from their Hindu neighbours. B. C. Allen says about the Muslims of Goalpara that “they are said to be fairly well grounded in the principles of their faith and

2. Allen, B. C., Goalpara District Gazeteer, 1905, p.57
to have been little affected by the Hindu superstitions.”² For example, Muslims are known to have taken active part in many Hindu religious functions like Śītalā-pujā, Mārāi-pujā, Bāṅs-pujā etc. A Muslim Pir has been transformed into a Hindu godling, Mādār. It is found that on the occasion of the Mādārer-ceremony decorated bamboo poles representing Mādār or other deities are taken in a ceremonial procession with music and dance. The principal decorated bamboo pole represents Mādār, while the other minor poles represent both Muslim and Hindu deities. Among the Muslim deities mention may be made of Fatemā, Bārud or Burikā, Satya-Pīr, Fowaz etc., while the Hindu deities mostly represented are Kāli and Mahāmāyā. Thus, Mādār has a very big number of votaries among the people of both the communities.³

During the Koch rule when the Padmapurāṇa was codified, there is an indication of twelve famous Gitāl (compared with the Sūtradhāra in a Vaiṣṇava dramas), five of whom were Muslims with participation of Hindu Dohār (Pāli), composed Satya-Pīr, Monāiyātrā, Guṇāijātrā through which Hindu-Muslim unity was propagated. In the same way some popular shrines of this locality, viz., Sannyāsīr-thān, Madarer-thān, Manasār-thān, Burā-Burīr-

³. Dutta, B : A Study of the Folk Culture of the Goalpara Region, pp. 78-79
thān etc. are maintained by both the Hindu and the Muslim community of the locality. Manasā-thāns have great influence upon both the Hindu and the Muslim population.

On the other hand, it is a fact that a large section of the Hindus regularly visit the Māzārs and Dargāhs with great respect, and they believe that their wishes are to be fulfilled by offering prayers or lighting candles in these holy places. “Pāṅch-Pīr Dargah” of the Dhubri town situated on the bank of the river Brahmaputra, is the best example of it. A large number of devotees, irrespective of their caste and creed, visit this holy Dargāh pay respect for the fulfilment of their wishes.

On the other hand, local Muslim population are inclined to worship Manasā as well as Śītalā goddess with great devotion. The impact of these religious practices may be seen more particularly in the rural areas of this region. The remarkable feature in the religious beliefs of this locality is the blending of great tradition with the little tradition in which the local deities being living examples of the process of “universalization” and “parochialization”.⁴ An important instance of co-existence of the Hindu-Muslim communities is the popularity of Satya-Pīr

⁴ Dutta, B : *A Study of the Folk Culture of the Goalpara Region*, pp. 69
Md. Phayzalla was the composer of *Satya-Pîr*. Probably this is the most valuable document of Hindu-Muslim unity and religious tolerance.” The name of Satya-Pîr still holds its importance. It is believed that he was a Hindu from Rajshahi district converted to Islam, and Satya-Pîr was his title only. Satyanārayaṇa-PUJĀ is an important religious function of the Hindus in western Assam, and Coochbehar. It is interesting to note that in the writings of Satya-Pîr, it is mentioned that “*Jei Satyanārayaṇa sei Satya-Pîr/* duī kule loiche sevā kariyā jāhir // [Satya-Pîr is the Satyanārayaṇa, he who receives devotion from both the sides (Hindus & Muslims) in his two forms. Again, in the Paṇcālī of Satyanārayaṇa “*satya-pîr nāme pûjā karibe javane / erupe karibe sevā jār jei mane.//”*\(^5\)

The existence of many old Muslim religious institutions shows clearly that though the Muslims were smaller in number in comparison to the Hindu population, yet they had ever been considered as an important part of the locality and always enjoyed equal privileges both in social and religious matter. The impact of the harmonious relation between the Islam and Bhakti cult pervaded the field of fine arts and material culture of the local people. Such a fine relation between the Hindus and the Muslims of this locality undoubtedly create a secular outlook in the society right in the

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17th century A.D. It is the indication of a mutual respect and religious tolerance which prevailed in the society since long time. Even during the Pathān rule, there was no difference among the devotees. The followers of Ghāzi or Pīrs were not restricted within the Muslim community. According to Munsi Abdul Karim, Sahitya-visharad, a number of Padāvalīes were composed as a result of emotional feelings of the Islāmic Poets. On the other hand, Gitikāvyas are nothing but a memoir of the Hindu and the Muslim communities. It seems that Suffistic Islām had many points in common with the Vedānta-Yoga as well as the ideology of higher Hinduism. The way of the Sufi (Safina Tarique) was, therefore, easily a successful step in bringing the Hindus to a closer understanding of the Islām and vice versa. It is a fact that through the doctrine of Sufism, there found a considerable amount of spiritual understanding between the Hindu and the Muslim communities all-over the country. Due to the Sufi influence the Krishnatarikā idea was gradually developed in the Muslim society which is still prevalent in some places from Bilāsīpārā to Boṅgāigāon areas of the north bank and Mānkachar and its neighbourhood of the south bank of Dhubri district.

In case of rural areas, it is found that the religious shrines or places of worship are always considered as an integral part of a
locality, be it Hindu, Muslim or tribal. Except a few well built structures that have been found, others are simple bamboo or thatched houses or at best a small tin roofed huts.

In Muslim villages, the mosques are usually modest thatched houses. Only in case of prosperous villages brick-built structures with minarets are to be seen. There are some common restrictions which are maintained both in Hindu, Muslim, Šikh, Jain establishments. For example a devotee has to enter the Hindu temple, Muslim shrines, Buddhist temples, Šikh Gurdwar or Jain temples with barefoot covering his or her head.

In the matter of co-existence and religious tolerance, another interesting example is provided by Martin who described the temples and deities of the south bank of the Brahmaputra. According to him “the most common object of worship in the temple is Kāli, but in some parts, a deity named Laṅggā, which seems peculiar to this division is much venerated. By the Hindus he is called god, by the Muslim a saint” And “Laṅgga” most probably Lāṅgā Rāja of the Rābhā tribe who are spread over the south bank of the Brahmaputra in the Goalpara region.

Though Buddhist temples are not seen in the Dhubri district, the impact of Buddhism is remarkable in the socio-cultural life of

the people of this locality. According to Gunabhiram Barua, the so called Kaivarta (Fisherman /Dom) community was originally the followers of Buddhism. According to the Dharma-marigala-kāvyā, Lāusena, the army chief of “Mahipāla with his naval army (Kaivarta) crossed the Brahmaputra river at the junction of Dhubri.”

7 Probably this community is responsible for introducing the songs of Kāti-pūja, Banś-pūja which are very common as well as popular among rural section of people of the society. Kāti pūja or the worship of god Kartikeya is performed mainly by the womenfolk of the fisher-class of this locality.

Again, it is also observed that during the time of the Pāla kings Gorakṣanāth-panthīs propagated Buddhism in this region and the songs of Gorakṣanāth were also composed in this locality. From the traditional songs of North Bengal the birth place of Gorakṣanāth was at Jalpeśh or Mechpārā (Goalpara). But, according to Grierson, “Gorakṣarnāth was a Nepāli Buddhist (Yogi). Coins of Nepāl bear the legend shows “Śri Śri Śri Gorkṣanāth”.

8 In addition to these songs of Banś-pūja, Hudūm, Kāti, Sonārāy etc. were prevalent since long time which have now become a part and parcel of Goalpariya folk songs.

7. Chakravarty, Ghanaram, Dharmamarigal Kāvyā, (B), pp. 143-64
Another important religion introduced during the period of our study was the Sikhism. Though the Sikhs are very small in number as shown in the demographical chart, they play a vital role in the socio-religious history of this locality. During the time of the Assam invasion Ramsing was accompanied by the ninth Sikh Guru Tegbahadur and five Mohammadan Pîrs who were instrumental in propagating the ideal and philosophy of Islâm in this locality. In the sameway, a section of the followers of Guru Teg Bahadur also stayed here and introduced Sikhism in Assam. The Sikh community in Nowgong even today claim that they are the descendents and followers of Guru Teg Bahadur. So it proves that, like the immigrant Muslims, Sikhs too were assimilated with the indegenous people of this region. The influence of the neo-Vaiśṇavite religion also is marked by the existence of several Satras and Namenharas established in this locality under the initiative of the Great saint Saṅkaradeva, Mādhavadeva, Dāmodardeva and others. These types of religious institutions played an important role in the religious life of the local people. Along with the spread of neo-Vaiśṇavism in the 16th century, a good number of Satras and Namenharas sprang up in this locality.

Another most interesting and remarkable feature in the locality is the predominating elements composed of the Rajbanshi's who
are native Hindus and consider themselves as the descendents of the Koch tribe. It is observed that the form of religion of the Rajbanshi community is a form of Hinduism with the admixture of some aboriginal rites and rituals. Gods and goddesses such as Hari, Śiva, Dūrgā, Kālī, Manasā, Lakṣmi, Kārtikeya and so forth are honoured and worshipped by them. Maṇḍapā or huts are erected where pūjās are offered to these deities along with Burā-Thākur, Burī-Thākurāṇī, Suvacanī, Madan-Kāmdeva, etc. who are very common among the village communities. Some malevolent godlings like Jakha, Jakhī, Māsāṅg etc. also are worshipped by the village community to ward off the evil spirits from their households. The wild animals, such as tigers are also worshipped in an anthropomorphic form known as Sonārāya. A community shrine is a place of public worship where most of the popular gods and godlings of local religious importance are installed community shrines also known as Dashjaniya Dhām. Though shrines dedicated to Sonārāya are not fixed, but it is occasionally found that he has a high place assigned to him in the community shrine. The worship of Sanārāya is specially associated with the young section of people belonging to the west Goalpara region. Sonārāya is considered as Thākur (god) by the local people and pūjā is offered during the winter period. The
young men collect donations from house to house and a feast is arranged by them. The bhog is offered to the Sonārāya for the safety of the cattle which are under the control of the cowherd boys.

It is also observed that fairs and festivals are closely connected with religious life of the people. The multiplicity of gods and goddesses of the Hindu religion leads to the introduction of various types of fair and festivals, observed and enjoyed by the devotees of the same religious faith. Generally, fairs and festivals always interlinked with traditional religious beliefs, are invariably held in the temple campus. It is always found that the ritual part of these festivals are concerned with particular religious group but the festivities are open to all as a taken of joy. Temples and shrines are also used for promotion of cultural solidarity of concerned communities. For example, Nāmgharas, Satra, Hari Sabhā, Kālībāri, Gurudwār, Mosque etc. always take leading role for preservation of their respective cultures among the people.

In fact, festivals are nothing but the external expression of social behaviours. All Hindu festivals are more or less religious in character. But there are some festivals which cover both religious and social sides. Socially, these functions give an opportunity to all the people, irrespective of their caste and creed. Because, the
ritual part of such festivals are concerned with the particular religious group, but the festivities are open to all. Thus, festivals also play an important role in striking unity and integration among the people of different religious faiths. *Melā* or religious fairs are generally related to festivals. There are some *melās* which seem to be regional or local in character. The *Sāt Biśuār melā* is the most important one among them, *Śiva Rātrir-melā*, *Jhulan-yātrār-melā*, *Āśokaśṭamir-melā*, *Charaker-melā*, *Baranir-melā*, *Rathayātrār-melā* etc. play vital role in the socio-religious life of the people of this locality.

It is, thus, seen that the Dhubri district was a meeting ground of different religious faiths through the ages.