Chapter II

ASSAMESE SOCIETY: A BRIEF SURVEY

1. Preliminary Observation:

Society and culture are inextricably blended with each other; it is the society that adopts cultural traits, the vital aspects of the social system. The present social system of any race or group of people has come through various stages of development from its past. It is therefore natural that the root of the present lies in the past wherein the offsprings of the present had been conceived. This can be gathered from the 'Genetic Theory' of modern biology\(^1\); the present is not thoroughly understood discarding the past. The study of the evolution of a particular society therefore gives a convincing idea to assess the pattern and dimension of the culture and civilization long cherished by the people of that society. The seedlings of the present day Assamese culture had also been transplanted in the past; so, one cannot make head or tail of the nature and depth of the culture now flourishing in Assam if one does not look back to the past of the transitional Assamese society.

For obvious reasons stated above, we have to have a quick glimpse at the chronological social history of Assam from past to the present.

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2. Origin and Location of Assam:

Roughly speaking, the pre-historic Assam covered almost the whole of present North-East India wherein the modern province of Assam is centrally located. The most ancient name of Assam was Pragjyotisha, the name as referred to in the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and also in the Puranas\(^2\). Subsequently, the land came to be known as Kamarupa or Kamarupa-Kamakhya as it was famous for magic with the Tantric Shrine of Kamakhya Temple\(^3\). Assam continued to be known as Kamarupa till the advent of the Ahom rule in medieval Assam of the thirteenth century A.D. The nomenclature Assam is associated with and derived from the Ahom or Tai race who migrated into the land and defeated all the earlier settlers\(^4\).

In the Mahabharata age Pragjyotisha included the present Assam along with Jalpaiguri, Coochbehar, Rangpur, Bogra, Mymensing, Dacca, Tippera and parts of Pabna and east Nepal\(^5\). Pragjyotisha as referred to in the Ramayana extended on the north-west as far as the Koshi river besides inclusion of the present Purnia district of Bihar. This is evident from the epigraphic records of the sixth century A.D.\(^6\) The demarcation of Kamarupa as found in the Kalikapurana included the river Kartoya in the west and the Lalita-Kanta in the east; the temple of Kamakhya was in the

\(^2\) B.K Kakati, Mother Goddess Kamakhya, p.1.
\(^3\) E A Gait, A History of Assam, p.234.
\(^5\) K.L Barua, Early History of Assam, p.2.
centre of Kamarupa. The physical boundaries of Kamarupa as described in the ‘Yogini Tantra’ comprised the Brahmaputra Valley, Bhutan, Rangpur, Coochbehar, the north-east of Mymensing, the Garo Hills and Saumara. Kamarupa as mentioned in the Visnu-Purana extended in all directions around the temple of Kamakhya for about 450 miles embracing the whole of Eastern Bengal, modern Assam and parts of Bhutan. These descriptions found in early literature confirm to the fact that Pragjyotisha and Kamarupa were the designations assigned to a common land with variations of territorial boundaries from time to time.

The physical boundaries of medieval Assam had undergone frequent changes and these changes are attributable mostly to the rise of Ahom, Koch and Kamata powers resulting in setting up of separate kingdoms and to the repeated external invasions. Taking into account the territories of separate kingdoms, the medieval Assam was bounded by the Himalayan ranges of Bhutan and Tibet on the north; on the east, the land was bounded by the Patkai ranges of mountain; the Naga Hills separated Assam from Burma (now Myanmar) on the south-east; it was bounded on the south by the Lushai hills and on the south-west by the hills of Tippera and Mymensing; on the west, the area of the land extended to the Garo hills and the river Sonkasa.

The territorial boundary of modern Assam has further contracted as a result of separation of Bangladesh from India and attainment of status.

10. Ibid, p.10.
of fullfledged status of Indian union by Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur and Tripura. Assam is now centrally located in North-east India and is bounded by Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh on the north, Nagaland and Manipur on the east, Mizoram and Tripura on the south and Bangladesh and West Bengal on the west\textsuperscript{11}.

\textbf{3. Geography of the region :}

The ancient Assam which embraced almost the whole of north-eastern region of India, had a unique geographical situation. Lying in the sub-Himalayan zone, the land constitutes a homogeneous natural region of the hills, valleys and plains. The mighty Brahmaputra is flowing from east to west flanked by hills on both the sides. A narrow passage in the west links the region with eastern part of the Indian sub-continent. The geography of the region had profoundly influenced the distribution of various racial groups. The hilly regions were peopled by various tribes and the river valleys of the plains were settled by comparatively advanced tribes and people of Aryan origin\textsuperscript{12}. While the river valleys played a prominent role in building up the foundation of culture and civilization of the region, the hilly areas contributed to the growth of diverse cultures.

The hilly areas of the region are blessed with geological depositions of the precious minerals like petroleum, coal, lime, iron etc. The river system of the region has not only contributed to material

\textsuperscript{11} P.C Choudhary, \textit{The History of Civilization of the People of Assam to the twelfth Century A.D}, (abbr. H.U P.A), p 20.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid, p.45.
prosperity of the inhabitants, but also helped in contacting rest of India for trade and commerce through water route made possible by the Brahmaputra, the largest navigable river of the region\(^\text{13}\). However, the present province of Assam includes only the hills of Karbi Anglong and North Cachar and the two valleys of the Brahmaputra and the Barak.

The whole of North-East region including the modern province of Assam has a distinctive characteristic of being the world's wettest region in summer with the blessings of the South-West monsoon. The winter is mainly dry. The plenty of rainfalls caused by the presence of hills and dense forests, has made the climatic condition favourable for vegetation and cultivation both in hills and extensive plains of the valleys\(^\text{14}\). All these geographical and topographical features have fascinated the people of India and abroad since remote past.

4. Migration, Racial Types and Ethnic Make-up:

The Assam region falls on one of the migration routes of mankind. From prehistoric age down to the advent of history and onwards, migration of various types of races to this land has been a curious phenomenon. The habitable climatic conditions, favourable environment for cultivation, abundant natural resources and easy access to the land had definitely acted as contributing factors to such migrations. The immigrants of ancient and medieval Assam had migrated firstly through

\(^{13}\) R.C.M, Thompson, Assam Valley, p.45.

difficult and porous mountain passes of Tibet, Nepal and Bhutan; secondly, through the valleys of the Ganges and the Brahmaputra; thirdly, through the Bay of Bengal and Myanmar (the earstwhile Burma) and lastly, over the Patkai passes\(^{15}\).

Anthropologists are of the view that the first ethnic elements infiltrated into prehistoric Assam, were the Negritos and this strain is noticeable in some inhabitants of the Naga hills. The second ethnic elements who followed the Negritos, were the Australoids. The Khasis and the Syntengs bear certain Astroloid strains. The most prominent ethnic group that constitutes the bulk of tribal population both in the hills and plains of the Assam region is the Mongoloid who happened to penetrate into this region from the banks of the *Young-tse-kiang* and the Hwang-ho rivers of western China\(^{16}\). The *Kiratas*, as found mentioned in the *Mahabharata* and *Kalika-Purana*, were the aboriginal inhabitants of the region and it embraces all the races with the Mongolian type of features in the present context\(^{17}\). The Khasis who share some features of Mongoloid stock also exhibit certain Australoid strains. This resemblance clearly indicates the admixture of Australoid and Mongoloid people in the remote past, although the Australoids migrated into this region prior to the Mongoloids\(^{18}\). Ahoms, the most significant race in the history of Assam, is also a branch of the great ‘Tai’ or ‘Shan’ race of the Mongoloid stock. They migrated into Assam from the Yunan province of South-West China under the leadership of Sham-Lung-Pha who was followed by

\(^{15}\) P.C Choudhury, *Op-cit*, p.75.
\(^{16}\) Hutton, Census Report of India, 1931, I, II. p p. 41-44
\(^{17}\) B.K. Barua, *A Cultural History of Assam*, p.5.
Sukapha in the thirteenth century A.D. The existing states were made tributaries of Sham-Lung-Pha\textsuperscript{19}. Khamtis, Phakiyals, Naras and Aitoniyas of the same ‘Shan’ race followed the Ahoms and are now scattered in some parts of upper Assam\textsuperscript{20}.

We have so far come across the migration of non-Aryan ethnic groups. Among the Aryans, the Caucasoids happened to enter Assam from the west in pre-Vedic and post-Vedic periods. Anthropological analysis reveals that Caucasian strains are noticed in upper caste Hindus and Muslims of Assam. Further, there are ample evidences that a race of Mediterranean people came to Assam at a very early stage and such elements are noticed in Assamese population. At the same time, another group of people called Alpino-Armenoids entered Assam alongwith the Mediterraneans, but through a different route\textsuperscript{21}. According to Hutton and B.S Guha, the Alpines entered Eastern India prior to the Vedic Aryans.

The influx of the Aryan speaking Nordic People into the Eastern India is traceable to proto-historic times. Besides the two epics, the \textit{Aitareya} and \textit{Satapatha Brahmanas} refer to the migration of Aryan speaking people to the North-East India. The \textit{Nidhanpur Copper Plate} grant of king Bhutivarman of the sixth century A.D, speaks of special ‘Agrahara’ settlement of more than two hundred Brahmanas for promotion of Vedic religion and culture\textsuperscript{22}.

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item B.K Gehain, “Origin of the Tai and Chao-Lung-Sukapha” and Tasadduq Amanul Hussain, “Burma and the North-East” in Asamiya Pratidin, 4\textsuperscript{th} April,2001 issue, pp. 1,2.
\item B.M. Das, “The people of Assam”, quoted by S.N. Sarma in \textit{A Socio-Economic & Cultural History of Medieval Assam}, p.37
\item B. K. Barua,\textit{Op.cit.} p-8
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
The Medieval Assam had been facing Mohammedan invasions several times during the reign of the Ahoms and the Koches. Although a sizeable number of Muslim population of the Medieval Assam belonged to the early Caucasian racial stock, the rest were the descendants of war captives who permanently settled in Assam.

The present-day Assam has also been receiving streams of both Hindu and Muslim immigrants from neighbouring Bangladesh since independence and concomitant partition. In addition, there are Nepalis, Sikhs, Buddhists, Tea-garden labourers, Biharis, Rajasthanis and other groups of people who have migrated from their respective homelands and settled down in Assam for livelihood and on grounds of profession. Thus, Assam has been a refuge for so many groups of people at different periods of her dynamic history and prehistory.

In view of the fact that so many people of diverse races had infiltrated into Assam since remote past and assembled here with distinct cultural traits, it was natural that there had been an admixture of racial elements and the consequent transfusion of racial strains had contributed to an ethnic make-up and composite culture glorified with unity in diversities. The process of assimilation through 'give and take' worked here superbly for enduring power of all races, Aryans and non-Aryans, Hindus and non-Hindus and thereby contributed towards weaving the Assamese social fabric. In fact, Assam may be "looked upon as a

federation hall, where the most ancient and the most modern, the most antiquated and the most up-to-date, are found to meet together upon terms of perfect cordiality”

5. Society:

There is every reason to believe that the early developments in India took more or less the same course as in contemporary Assam. The caves located in some mountains of southern India were inhabited by prehistoric Paleolithic man. Such developments convince that the designs of cave arts noticed in the walls and roofs of the caves located in Cherapunji of Meghalaya are indicative of intercourse of Paleolithic men in these caves. These tribes did not have any social activity and had no distinction with wild animals. They were merely savage hunters. The stone-cave recently discovered in Andha Mahapahar of Goalpara district, Assam has been identified by the Archeologists to be a refuge of prehistoric nomadic tribes.

“To constitute a proper society, a set of human beings must be in some productive relationship which involves the creation and transfer of surplus.” The savage hunters gradually passed on to the Neolithic culture which was the earliest prehistoric culture in ancient Assam as is evident from the widely distributed Neolithic celts all over Assam. The

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24. N.N Vasu, *Social History of Kamarupa*, pp.1,2
25. B. Foote, *Indian Prehistoric and Protohistoric Antiquities*, p.11
28. D.D Kosambi, *The culture and civilization of Ancient India in Historical outline*, p.34.
Neolithic men comprised the Australoids who introduced the shouldered Neolithic hoe, terraced rice cultivation, rearing of animals, joint family system, ophiolatory and matriarchy, megalithic burials and division of people into different segments on occupational grounds. Besides, they acquired the knowledge of iron melting, rearing of Mooga and Eri, manufacture of garments from grasses. However, at a latter stage, these people were displaced and sub-merged in most places for the fresh wave of Mongoloid people²⁹.

As the society crossed over from lithic age to metal age, the Aryan contact with non-Aryans and pre-Aryans not only contributed to the socio-economic development of the latter, but also helped building a religious super-structure. The modern Hindu way of life is therefore an assimilation of Aryan and extra-Aryan elements. The Aryans streamlined the earlier social divisions in accordance with Varnasrama Dharma and divided the society into four major classes on professional grounds e.g. the Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Sudras. In course of time, this social division had become synonymous with ‘Jati’(caste)³⁰. Subsequently, a large number of new castes, sub-castes, social groups and sub-groups had emerged as a result of ethnic fusions, economic pursuits, religious and ecological impacts, adoption of new professions and similar other factors³¹.

³¹. S.N. Sarma, A Socio-Economic and Cultural History of Medieval Assam, p.51
5.1. Social Institutions:

Family and marriage are the two premier social institutions of the Assamese society. Hinduism is the key religion in Assam. The Hindu way of life has been based upon joint family system guided by the patriarchal principles\textsuperscript{32}. Except the Khasis and Garos, who are affiliated to matriarchial system of family, the other tribes now follow patriarchal principles of family system as a result of admixture with the people of Aryan origin\textsuperscript{33}.

The \textit{Manusamhit\a} recognized separate modes of marriages for the Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Sudras\textsuperscript{34}. Most of these early modes of marriages have lost their significance in the present day context. The most popular mode of marriage now in practice among all castes and classes of Assamese society is the \textit{prajapatya} type of marriage.

5.11. Economic pursuits and standard of living:

The economy of Assam has been predominantly a rural economy based on agriculture since remote past. The origin of agriculture in Assam is traceable to ‘jhum’ cultivation which is still noticed among some hill tribes\textsuperscript{35}. In course of time, the crude ‘jhuming’ of primitive technology was replaced by more advanced technology of cultivation with the use of ploughs brought and introduced by the Aryans. This technological change

\textsuperscript{32} P.C.Choudhury, \textit{Op-cit}, p.320.
\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Ibid}, p.321
\textsuperscript{34} B.K.Barua, \textit{Op-cit}, p.130.
\textsuperscript{35} Hutton, \textit{Op-cit}, p.444.
definitely increased the overall productivity and brought about a dramatic change to the primitive rural economy.

Under the prevailing feudal system in medieval Assam, the kings donated cultivable lands to the Brahmins and nobles who in turn, rented out the land to the peasants\(^{36}\). In the process, the major portions of the products had to be transferred to and consumed by the landlords and the indigenous labourers were concomitantly left with no surplus.

Paddy, the major crop in Assam, was cultivated extensively from the 6\(^{th}\) century A.D. The accounts of Yuan Chwang of the 7\(^{th}\) century A.D., give a description of the irrigation system introduced in cultivation and abundance of jackfruit and coconut in Kamarupa\(^{37}\). *Arthasastra* refers to the existence of the arts of weaving and sericulture in ancient Assam\(^{38}\). In continuity of this tradition, silk garments and other sericultural items were manufactured in medieval Assam. Besides, articles of ivory, gold, iron, clay, bamboo, wood and cane were produced at village level. The people of medieval Assam had also some sort of trade and commerce with the neighbouring hill tribes\(^{39}\). In villages, transactions were made by barter system. *Kathaguru Charita*, however, refers to the use of the Koch coins in western Assam and Ahom coins in central and eastern Assam\(^{40}\).

\(^{36}\) I) Nowgong Grant, line-36 and II) Bargaon Grant, line-56.
\(^{37}\) Watters, Yuan Chwang, II, p.185.
\(^{39}\) M.L. Bosc, *Social History of Assam*, p.46.
\(^{40}\) *Kathaguruconta*, pp. 83, 312, 515, 553.
In modern Assam, Industrial and Green Revolutions have brought about unprecedented changes to the age-old economic pursuits of the people. Large scale industries have been set up and more emphasis has been given to augment agricultural production with the use of improved seeds, manures and modern technology.

Although in medieval Assam, the standard of living of the people was befitting to the level of self sufficiency, in modern Assam regional disparity in respect of economic development has resulted in sluggish growth in all sectors which, in turn, has brought about a disparity in standard of living of the people as compared to the other parts of India. Further, the changing attitude of the people towards life resulting from advancement in science and technology has created three classes of people in society with distinctive life styles; while the few people belonging to the upper and middle classes maintain a high standard of living, the vast majority of the lower class people are found to be undernourished. The social mobility of the lower class people from rural to urban areas in search of livelihood has been displaying a gloomy economic picture of the present day Assam.

5.III. Religion, Popular Beliefs and Superstitions:

It is evident from the early literatures that Hinduism was the dominant religion in ancient Assam as today. Although Saivism, Saktism, Vaisnavism and some other minor cults consolidated Hinduism, both legend and history point to the fact that Saivism was the most popular
form of Hindu religion in early Assam with flavour of non-Aryan beliefs and practices\textsuperscript{41}. Such non-Aryan beliefs and practices designated as ‘Kairataja Dharma’ was the religion of the aborigines\textsuperscript{42}. In fact, the foundation of Hinduism was laid on the ‘Kairataja’ cults. The existence of countless Siva temples in Assam points to the extensive Siva worship since prehistoric time\textsuperscript{43}. Despite prevalence of various cults in the present day Assam, Siva is extensively worshipped by all tribes and non-tribes.

Although \textit{Aryadharma} or Brahmanical religion is traceable to the Vedas, it was introduced in Assam after the non-Aryan tribes had laid the foundation for various cults like cult of fertility, head-hunting, human sacrifice, rites connected with the dead, ancestor worship, belief in heavenly bodies, magic, sorcery etc.\textsuperscript{44} ‘Kalikapurana’ speaks of the settling of large number of Brahmanas by Naraka\textsuperscript{45}. This tradition of settling Brahmanas in Assam was continued till the Ahom rule in medieval Assam. These Brahmana settlers used to spread \textit{Aryadharma} with royal patronage and converted and brought various non-Aryan tribes into the fold of Hinduism.

In the tenth century A.D, Goddess Kamakhya emerged as the principal deity for Saktism and Kamarupa became the centre for Saktism and Tantrikism\textsuperscript{46}. ‘Kalikapurana’ popularized the ‘Sakti’ and ‘Tantrik’

\textsuperscript{41} B. Kakati, \textit{The Mother Goddess Kamakhya}, p. 10.
\textsuperscript{42} Yogini Tantra, 2/9/15-16.
\textsuperscript{43} S.N Sarma, \textit{Op-cit.}, p.190.
\textsuperscript{44} P.C Choudhury, \textit{Op-cit.}, pp.389,393.
\textsuperscript{45} \textit{Kalikapurana}, V-112, 121, 124.
\textsuperscript{46} B. Kakati, \textit{Op-cit.}, p-16-21.
cult of Kamakhya throughout India\(^{47}\). The elements of Tantrikism such as use of magical practices, revolting rites, use of wine, belief in efficacy of mantras, sex worship etc. have non-Aryan affinities\(^{48}\).

The extensive remains of ‘Vishnu’ temples and archaeological finds of ‘Surya’ or ‘Vishnu’ images in Assam are indicative of ‘Vishnu’ worship and prevalence of ‘Vaisnavism’ in Assam some time in the past ages. ‘Kalikapurana’ describes different incarnations of ‘Vishnu’\(^{49}\). The form of ‘Vaisnavism’ prevalent in Assam prior to the advent of ‘neo-Vaisnavism’ was ‘Vasudevis’\(^{50}\). Sankardeva, the legendary Vaisnavite reformer introduced and preached ‘neo-Vaisnavism’\(^{51}\).

Although Hinduism was the dominant religion of Assam since remote past, Buddhism, Islamism and Christianism were also prevalent in late medieval and medieval Assam in a smaller scale. However, the most important feature of the religious history of ancient and medieval Assam was the process of conversion of various non-Aryan tribes of plains into Hinduism\(^{52}\).

The stronghold of Hinduism is still noticed in Assam. The followers are now broadly divided into ‘Saktas’ and ‘Vaisnavites’ and at the same time, there are pantheists who are seen to have followed both the cults. A notable feature of Hinduism in Assam is the prevalence of

\(^{49}\) *Kalikapurana*, 81/82.
\(^{50}\) M. Neog, ed. *Pracya Sasanavalii*, Appendix-‘A’
some folk beliefs among the followers. These popular beliefs invoke propitiation of some folk deities. Such folk deities are incorporated in Hindu pantheism.

Kamarupa, the ancient Assam was known to the rest of India as the land of sorcery and magic. Aniruddhadeva, the founder of ‘Mayamara’ sub-sect produced a cobra in an empty pitcher by his magics. ‘Kamaratnatantra’ incorporates prescription as to how by incantations and magical tricks a man can be subdued, won over, made hostile, killed and freed from evil influences. The use of spells and incantations for removing venom of snake-bites is still noticed at folk level. Belief in ghosts and spirits and driving them off by applying spell or incantation has crept into the folk life of Assam since medieval age. However, with the spread of modern education at all levels, most of the superstitious beliefs and practices have lost their grounds. Still, the role of astrologers and fortune tellers in day-to-day life of a section of the people is noticed.

5.IV. Festivals and Celebrations:

As in other parts of India, festivals are a part of traditional culture in Assam. As such, so many festivals are celebrated in Assam although with local variations. The origin and background of these festivals are traceable to the religion and magic of the early inhabitants. Music and dance have also been associated with most of these festivals. Among the

dominant festivals observed in Assam since hoary past, mention may be made of the Bihu festivals, Bhatheli, Deul, Shivaratri, Pachati, Me-dam-me-fie, Kherai Puja festival of the Boros, Ali-Aye-Lrigang of the Misings, Baikho Puja festival of the Rabhas, Jon-bil-Mela of the Tiwas, Chomangkan festival of the Karbis and so on. The birth days of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva are also observed as commemorative festivals. Besides, the pan-Indian festivals like Janmastami, Saraswati puja, Diwali, Holi, Durga puja etc. are observed in Assam in their localized forms. The Muslims, who form the religious minority in Assam, observe Idd-ul-Fitr blended with Islamic doctrines. The Christians of Assam also celebrate Christmas festival.

5.V. Weaving and Spinning:

Weaving and Spinning have been intimately connected with the womenfolk of Assam since the time of Kautilya's Arthasastra. Assamese women excel in spinning yarn and weaving clothes therefrom. Although silk and pat fabrics were manufactured all over Assam in early times, the manufacture of such fabrics is now confined to a few pockets like Sualkuchi and Titabor. The cotton fabrics woven by the Assamese women in handloom are seen in colourful designs.

57. P. Goswami, Op-cit, p.3
58. I.P. Vidyarthi, Art and Culture of N E. India, p.87
59. Hamilton, An Account of Assam, p.61
5.VI. Dresses:

Cotton, silk and *pat* fabrics manufactured by women weavers in Assam are embellished with brilliant coloured geometrical and floral designs. Medieval literatures and chronicles point to the use of *dhuti* (lower garment) and *cheleng* (light wrapper used as upper garment) by the common man. *Gamocha* (cotton towel) was an indispensable feature of Assamese male dress\(^60\). The use of *paguri* (a head dress) by the male was regarded as a symbol of distinctive status. The distinctive garments of the women were *mekhala, riha* and *chadara*\(^61\). The *Assam Buranji* of Haliram Dhekial Phukan gives an exhaustive list of dresses used by the people of Assam in pre-British days. This list includes *chola, eriya kapoor, tangali, hasati, bar-kapoor* etc. along with other dress items\(^62\). Medieval literatures and histories are however silent about the use of *blouse* by Assamese women. There is every reason to believe that the fashion of wearing *blouse* came to Assam through the British. Most of these traditional dresses are now seen to be worn in Assamese society on special occasions. These dresses have now been replaced by fashionable dresses coming in from outside of Assam.

5.VII. Food and Drink:

It is evident from early and medieval literatures that both vegetarian and non-vegetarian diets were prevalent in Assamese society

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in the past and rice was the staple food as today. The extensive cultivation of paddy of different varieties met the day-to-day requirements of rice\textsuperscript{63}. Rice and milk were used for preparation of different varieties of cakes and sweets. Medieval literatures mention various types of cake and sweet dish. These include laddu, paramanna, pat-pitha, dahi, kshira, akhai, cira, khiricha, rice-cakes, pheni-pitha\textsuperscript{64} etc. Besides, curries of lentil and green gram pulses, vegetables like brassica, mallow, spinach etc. were also used for preparation of various curries which were included in the two principal meals of rice. The breakfast of bora chaul and komal chaul, the two varieties of soft rice, was very popular in Assamese society.

The non-vegetarian menu included mutton, pork, meat of duck, pigeon, tortoise, deer and varieties of locally available fish\textsuperscript{65}. But the most favourite curries of the Assamese have been the sour and alkaline preparations. It is still observed in some Assamese household that while taking meals, alkaline curry is taken first followed by other curries and lastly, sour curry or curd is taken. Chewing of betel vine and areca nut after taking meals is another favourite habit of the Assamese which was introduced by the Austriks\textsuperscript{66}.

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\textsuperscript{63} Nababharat pbd. Yogini Tantra, 2/5/289-291.
\textsuperscript{64} S. N Sarma, Op-cit, pp. 246-47, 250.
\textsuperscript{65} P. C Choudhury, Op-cit, p. 132.
\textsuperscript{66} ibid, p 328
Rice beer and other intoxicated liquors brewed from rice were favourite drinks of the tribes\textsuperscript{67}. The habit of drinking tea and coffee was developed in Assamese society only in the nineteenth century\textsuperscript{68}.

Due to change in habit and taste of the people, some of the traditional dishes have now been replaced by Indian and foreign dishes. Still, rice is the principal food and all sections of the people are accustomed to taking it.

5.VIII. Bamboo, Wood and Cane Work:

Bamboo, wood and rattan cane extensively grow in Assam. Every Assamese household, tribal or non-tribal, is found to be equipped with implements and containers like scoop, platter, basket, hand-fan, mats, fishing and agricultural implements, weaving and spinning implements etc. made of bamboo, cane and wood. The royal palace of Jayadhvaja Singha was made of wood and bamboo by Assamese artisans\textsuperscript{69}. The typical thatched houses of rural Assam are also made of bamboo and wood.

\textsuperscript{67} Kalika-purana 49/9, 54/18, 60/45-46, 70/14. Yogini-tantra, II/7, 19
\textsuperscript{68} S. N Sarma, Op-cit, p. 250.
\textsuperscript{69} Gait, Op-cit, pp.141-142.
Assam is traditionally rich in performing arts. The ambit of performing art includes song and dance as well as drama. Song and dance alongwith the musical instruments may fulfil the demand of music.

Two streams of music, i.e. classical and folk, have come down to the present generation from the hoary past. While classical music is bounded in ragas, talas and in methodical order, folk music has come down through oral transmission accommodating the changing trends of time.

Classical music had evolved on the traditions of folk music. The earliest reference to ragas is found in the Kalikapurana. Classical music was prevalent in the elite circle of medieval Assam. Borgeets the devotional lyrics associated with Vaisnavite culture, bear certain affinities with classical music. Besides, the vocal tradition of classical music in Assam is alive in the Vyaha-Samgitas performed by Vyahar-Ojapali of Darrang district.

On the other hand the Bihu song, Kamarupi-Lokagit, Goalpariya-Lokagit, Zari, Zikir, Ciyanit, Biyanam, Ballad, Boat-playing song, Nangeli-git, Mahut-git and large varieties of other ceremonial songs prevalent among the rural folk of Assam have

71. O.C. Ganguli, Ragas and Raginis, pp.27-29
72. S. N Sarma, Op-cit., p.288
contributed to the rich heritage of folk music of Assam. These songs are orally transmitted over the generations.

5.X. Dance:

The types of dance prevailing in Assam are broadly categorised into classical and folk type of dances. The nati dances of the Saivite and Vaisnavite temples resemble the classical dance modes advocated in Srihastamuktavali. The gestures and movements displayed by the Viyahar-Ojapali also have some classical flavour. Rasa-nritya, Chali-nritya, Rajagharia-nritya, Dasavatarara-nritya and a few creative dances are exclusively confined to the Vaisnavite Sattras and are performed in unique Sattriya style. The distinctive movements of hands, limbs and feet in these Sattriya dances bear classical character.

Among the folk dances of Assam, the Bihu dance has assumed immense importance since the concluding decades of twentieth century. The celebration of spring time Rongali Bihu of Assam is marked by Bihu dance performances. This will be treated elaborately in a following chapter. There are many other folk dances which deserve mention. The Kali-Chandi and Bas-Puja dances of undivided Goalpara district, the Mahoho dance of Kamrup and Darrang districts, the Deodhani dance associated with Manasa puja are some of the dance forms prevalent in folk tradition of Assam. Some dance like movements are also noticed in

74. M. Neog(ed), Srihastamuktavali, p.36
75. S.N. Sarma, Op-cit., p.300
76. M. Neog, & K. Changkakati (ed), Sattriya Nritya Aru Sattriya Nrityar Taj, p.6
the hymn-singing Thiya-Nam and Bhortal-Nritya of Barpeta region. The Muslim zari singers also perform a kind of ring dance with hand gestures.\textsuperscript{77} Besides, the rich cultural heritage of the tribes of Assam is being prominently manifested in the Bagurumba and Ranachandi dances of the Boros, Gumrag dance of the Misings, Chathar dance of the Rabhas, Haidang-Hussari of the Sonowals, Boka-Nas of the Tiwas, Chakeroi of the Karbis and so on.

5.XI. Theatrical Performances:

The oldest institution of performing art in Assam was the Ojapali. Theatrical element is noticed in Ojapali performance while the Oja exchanges dialogues with the Dainapali. Ojapali theatre art existed in Assam prior to the advent of neo-Vaisnavism and Sankardeva used this medium for propagating Vaisnavite faith.\textsuperscript{78} But the proper theatrical performance in Assam came into existence with the theatrical show of Chinha-yatra, an unwritten play organised by Sankardeva. This was followed by enactment of a number of written devotional plays known as Ankiya-Nat. Sutradhara is the leading role in the enactment of Ankiya-Nat popularly known as Ankiya-Bhaona and Sankardeva is believed to have derived this role from the role of Oja in Ojapali performance.\textsuperscript{79}

The Dhuliya-Bhaona of undivided Kamrup district and the Khuliya-Bhaona of Darrang district are two important theatrical

\textsuperscript{77} B. Datta, N.C. Sarna, P.C. Das, \textit{A Hand Book of Folklore Material of N.E. India}, p. 207
\textsuperscript{78} S.N. Sarma, \textit{Op-cit.}, p. 293
\textsuperscript{79} Ibid, p.294
institutions prevalent in the folk tradition of Assam. However, the existence of Khuliya-Bhaona is hardly seen now-a-days. Kushan-gan, Pala-gan and Bhari-gan are other theatrical institutions of undivided Goalpara district. Of these, Bhari-gan is now facing extinction. Puppet-play is another theatrical institution of Assam. The descriptions of Chaya-Putala in Kathaguru-Carita lead us to believe that puppet-play existed in Assam before the advent of neo-Vaisnavism.

Some Yatra Dals (theatre groups) existed in some places of undivided Kamarupa and engaged in theatrical show in open platforms on the occasions of some religious festivals. The existence of such Yatra-Dals is seldom noticed now-a-days and they have been replaced by mobile theatre groups having large collapsible auditoriums equipped with all modern facilities for performing a theatrical show.

6. Language and Literature:

Assamese is a neo-Indo-Aryan language which belongs to the eastern variety of Magadhi apabhrams. The Assamese script had evolved out of the Pan-Indian Brahmi. The process of evolution continued till the Assamese letters took their present forms around the twelfth century A. D.

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81. Kathaguru-Carita, p.28
The racial composition of Assam exerted greater influence on its prevailing language. The diversified races atuned to distinctive dialects assembled here and in course of time contributed to the growth and development of a common speech called ‘Assamese’. Although the vocabulary of Assamese language is largely derived from Sanskrit, a good number of Assamese words owe their origin to the Mon-Khmer-Family language and Tibeto-Burman language. The Tibeto-Burman speaking Boros also had to digest some words amicably from Aryan dialects because of the prolonged contact with the Aryans. Besides words from other neo-Indo-Aryan languages, the vocabulary of the Assamese language is enriched with Arabic and Persian words. However, the most outstanding feature of the modern Assamese language is that a fairly large number of English words and expressions have percolated into it.

The specimens of ancient Assamese literature are found in Charyapada which was written in the last stage of the Magadhi apabhramsa. The mystic songs known as Charyapada or Doha composed by the Buddhist Siddha Charyas bear testimony to the earliest Assamese literature. The language of these songs shows certain affinities with the modern Assamese language. Kalikapurana and Yogini Tantra are specimens of early Sanskrit literature which were written in ancient Assamese.

The existence of a number of unwritten literary works in the form of Bihu songs, cowherd songs, pastoral ballads, incantations, riddles,
proverbs etc. constitute a noteworthy feature of ancient Assamese
literature. These forms of literature are orally transmitted to the present
from some unknown past and they have now been reduced to writing88.

However, the written literary works in Assam took a progressive
trend, with the patronage offered to Harivara Vipra and Hema Saraswati
by king Durlavanarayana of Kamata kingdom in the fourteenth century
A.D. Harivara Vipra composed Lava-Kusar Yuddha and Vabruvahanar
Yuddha and Hema Saraswati composed Prahlada- Çajita and
HaragauriSambada with royal patronage89.

The Valmiki Ramayana translated by Madhava Kandali into
Assamese verses and the Panchali Kavyas of Durgavara, Mankar and
Pitamvara Kavi were other literary works of medieval Assam90. However,
the Vaisnavite literatures of Medieval Assam were typical for the use of
‘people’s language’. The great Vaisnavite apostle Sankardeva himself
composed six dramas, several devotional Kavyas and more than two
hundred devotional Borgeets91. Madhavadeva also made significant
contribution to Vaisnavite literature through his Nam-Ghosa, Bhakti-
Ratnavali, Adikanda-Ramayana, Arjun-Bhanjan Nat, Jhumuras and a
large number of devotional Borgeets92. Besides, a number of books on
astronomy, astrology, arithmetic and grammar written with the patronage
of Koch king Naranarayana and books on medicines, elephantology,

89. S.N. Sarma, Op cit, pp. 177, 178.
90. Ibid, p. 178.
91. Ibid, p. 179.
diseases, ethics and politics written during the Ahom rule, have added to the volume of medieval Assamese literature.

'Assamese Bible', the first printed book of Assam was printed in the year 1813. The hoary Assamese literature received a new dimension with the advent of the British rule in Assam and the printing press was first installed in Assam in the year 1835. With the active role of the Christian Missionaries Assamese grammar, dictionary and a few other books were published\textsuperscript{93}. But Assamese literature entered the modern age with the publication of \textit{Orunodoi} in the year 1846. Through \textit{Orunodoi}, the modern Assamese literature made a promising start and subsequently flourished in all branches of knowledge.

\textbf{7. Education and Learning :}

To receive and to impart education were considered to be the foremost duties of the \textit{Brahmanas} since the days of the \textit{Vedas}\textsuperscript{94}. Prior to the introduction of the art of writing, education was imparted orally only in \textit{gurugrihas}\textsuperscript{95}. Subsequently, \textit{Sanskrit Tolas} and schools were established and maintained by the \textit{Brahmanas} with royal patronage. The curriculum of education in these centres comprised mainly study of the \textit{vedas} and other \textit{dharma sastras}, astronomy, astrology, ayurveda, music and dancing\textsuperscript{96}. Study of \textit{vedas} was however restricted to the \textit{Brahmana} pupils only. As \textit{tantrikism} gained popularity in early Kamarupa, the non-

\textsuperscript{93} B. K Bhattacharya, \textit{Dersah Basarar Asamiya Sanskritit Abhumuki}, pp. 62, 63.
\textsuperscript{94} B. K Barua, \textit{Op-cit}, p. 150.
\textsuperscript{95} \textit{Nawgong Grant of Balavarman}, v. 31.
\textsuperscript{96} \textit{Puspavadra Grant of Dharmapala}, v. 14.
Aryan people were attracted towards tantrik education made available by the trantrik Buddhists97. Yuan Chwang also described Kamarupa in the seventh century A.D as an important centre for learning98.

The system of education in medieval Assam was more or less liberal and organised. Formal education in philosophy, grammar, literature, astrology and astronomy was given in tolas and pathsalas by well-versed gurus or adhyapakas; informal education related to arts and crafts was either transmitted hereditarily or imparted through the professional guilds or khels99. The gurukula system in which the pupils were required to stay in the teacher's house or in the school campus, was prevalent in medieval Assam100. As in today, ambitious students proceeded to other centres of higher education situated outside Assam101.

Evidently, the advent of the British rule in Assam brought about drastic changes to the outlook of the people towards education. The age-old curriculum of studies was supplemented with western pattern of curriculum by the British administrators. They established a number of educational institutions particularly in urban areas. But the western education of the British, which ignored the welfare and progress of the indigenous people, was confined to the elite circle only and it served the economic and political interests of the British102. The British system of education was subsequently replaced with a liberalized modern education

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97. Guwahati Grant of Indrapala, v. 16.
98. Wallers, The Life of Huen Tsiang, p. 185.
100. Ibid, p. 159.
102. Prosenjit Choudhury, Socio-Cultural Aspects of Assam in the 19th century, p. 27.
policy introduced in independent India. This modern education could touch the mass people. Assam now shines in almost all the branches of learning made available by the progressive modern education.

8. Conclusion:

The foregoing brief survey of the Assamese society gives us an insight into the social life of the people from past to the present. It has been seen that the Austric people of the neo-lithic age were the first inhabitants of ancient Assam to begin with cultivation. They were subsequently driven away to the hills of the south-west by the Mongoloids who happened to come to this land after the Austric people and became indigenous tribe of this region at a later stage. The notable social developments at this stage were introduction of cultivation, rearing of animals and division of the people on grounds of occupation. Such developments must have given rise to hopes and aspirations, rites and rituals among the people. The Aryan contact at a later age helped the non-Aryans come above the existing social level. In the long run, the indigenous culture of Assam took a concrete shape with the fusion of Aryan and non-Aryan cultural elements.

In fact, the seeds of the present-day civilization and culture of the whole North-East India had been sown in early Kamarupa. All these findings are expected to help us to a considerable extent in treatment of our proposed study in the following chapters.