CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A. Folk culture and the position of the Folk Deities

Folk culture which is more or less synonymous with folklore is an important branch in the study of the socio-anthropological aspects of the human society. And as for folklore, it has been defined in the following way: "For most of this century and the last folklore has referred to those products of the human spirit created outside the written record and kept alive by oral transmission".¹ From the above definition it is clear that in the lore or knowledge, the hard reality of the society and the life struggle of the common folk have been handed down from generation to generation through oral transmission. Richard M. Dorson, the celebrated folklorist, has identified four major fields of folklore. These are: (a) Oral literature, (b) Material culture or Physical folk life, (c) Social folk custom and (d) Performing folk arts.² The present study falls within the jurisdiction of the third field which includes "The religious aspects of

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social folk custom cover the modes of worship that lie outside the established church. Thus, folk religion is a distinct branch of folklore. It is particularly true in the context of the situation in India, which is predominantly considered as a land of religion. Religious beliefs and magical practices in different forms are traced out in the cultural heritage of India from pre-historic period to modern days. Through religious beliefs, ritual practices, myths, chants, spells etc. folk religion provides symbolic expression of the world view and behaviour pattern of the folk society with its own structural functional ways in social reality and literary idiom.

Folk deities are part and parcel of the folk religion. These deities have been emerging from some common factors of the masses of a particular area. To explain these factors, the following lines of R.S. Mann, a sociologist, are noteworthy when he speaks of religion and its impact on the masses. He says "Religious elements are helpful in curing diseases, creating healthy conditions, lengthening the life span, begetting children, in better germination of seeds and growth

of crops; in getting good husbands; in going to heaven after death, in achieving material gain, in cattle protection; in bringing rains and in avoiding calamities like famine and epidemic.³

In cases of some folk deities, the masses name the deity, describe its benevolent or malevolent nature, select paraphernalia required for their propitiation. These deities are either household or general, parochial or universal. In case of some of the deities, though they are within the fold of the Hindu pantheon, their attribution, method of worship etc. are not Śāstric. No Brahmin priest is engaged for the worship of these local deities. Again, our study involves not only Hindu deities of the Pan-Hindu and local-Hindu affiliations but also the deities of the various tribal communities inhabiting the area.

8. Lower Assam as a Cultural Zone

The state of Assam is on the North-east of India. During the British rule the province of Assam was divided into two valleys - Brahmaputra and Surma. The later one is mainly inhabited and dominated by immigrants of undivided

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³ R.S. Mann, Social Structure, Social change and Future Trends, p. 203.
Bengal and hence it is but natural that a separate culture, substantially different from that of the Brahmaputra Valley has evolved there. This portion of Assam has, therefore, been excluded from the scope of our study. The Brahmaputra Valley, on the other hand, comprises the present plain districts of Assam, namely, Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, Jorhat, Golaghat, Nagaon, Marigaon, Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Sonitpur, Darrang, Kamrup, Nalbari, Barpeta, Goalpara, Bongaigaon, Kokrajhar and Dhubri. In this valley Nagaon is centrally located which again subdivides the valley into two parts: eastern portion from Nagaon to Tinsukia is termed as ujami Assam or upper Assam and the western portion from the western boundaries of Nagaon and Marigaon districts to the western boundary of Dhubri district is known as Nimani Assam or Lower Assam. Dr. B.K. Kakati has divided Assam into eastern and western also on the basis of dialectal distinctiveness.6

Upper Assam was ruled by the Ahom kings for six hundred years beginning from the later part of the thirteenth century to the first half of the nineteenth. They subjugated the petty kings and tribal chiefs and other heads of local principalities.

and brought almost the whole Assam under one political homogeneity. Their jurisdiction sometimes extended to the river Mānās which was often taken to be the boundary between the Ahom and the Koo kingdoms. But this position was not of a permanent nature; the boundary was subject to change with the change of the contending powers. Lower Assam, on the other hand, was ruled by the Koo-Kamata kings for a considerable period of time. The brilliant exploits of Cilārāy, a brother of the illustrious Koo king Nāranārāyana had at one time pushed the Koo territory eastward to the present district of Lakhimpur in upper Assam. In fact, these two extraordinarily remarkable royal houses of the north-east India - one ruling in the eastern part and the other in the western part of Assam - rendered profound and immense contribution to the shaping of the socio-cultural life of the people of Assam. Rightly does S.N. Sarma observes “In fact, the impact of the Ahom rule for six hundred years in the Brahmaputra Valley and that of the Koo kings of western Assam on the life and society of the people of Assam in shaping their social and cultural pattern cannot be ignored”.7

Now, Assamese culture in the totality of its manifestation encompasses all the indigenous cultural components

of the entire Brahmaputra Valley, and as such, is one single whole. But at the same time, it has variations in its local manifestations. Assamese culture is like a confluence where two broad streams have mingled - the eastern and the western stream.

This becomes clear when we make a micro-level study, we find that there are differences in the cultural contents particularly at folk level, between the two portions of the state. Political division may have been one of the factors which is responsible for cultural variations of the two portions. Occasional subjugation of the Ahom rulers could not impress upon the people of Lower Assam, especially west Goalpara which was almost completely free from Ahom rule.

The Ahoms, after defeating the people of Kamrup, called the defeated people 'dhokari', a derogatory term to identify the people of Lower Assam. But originally the word 'dhokari' came from Dhokkar, an administrative division (Pargana) comprising the district of Goalpara and some districts of present north Bengal. In case of socio-religious variations we may cite the following examples: (a) The Manasā cult which is very popular in Lower Assam, has not been extended its jurisdiction beyond Darrang district, (b) Djāpūli, a

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S. G. Sarus., Asam Budania, p. 7.
popular cultural organisation of our area is almost absent in upper Assam, (a) One act plays of the Vaishnava period which is a popular function of the villagers of upper Assam, are rarely performed in the villages of Lower Assam except in some Sattras, (d) Some village deities of this portion are totally absent there, (e) Bihu, the main festival of Assam, is not observed in the villages of Lower Assam in the manner as it is observed in upper Assam. The equivalent terms for Bihu used in Lower Assam are dem favourite words. (f) Matrimonial relations between the two portions have not become so much popular, (g) Some differences are discerned in social customs and manners between the two parts, (h) Dialectal difference is one of the factors which is responsible for variation in culture in folk level between upper and Lower Assam.

Lower Assam, comprising the area with Darrang district in the east and Dhubri district in the west has been taken as the area of our study. Former Mangaldai subdivision has been uplifted to a district, namely, Darrang and although former Kamrup and Goalpara districts have been divided into several districts, we have retained the old names of the two districts for our convenience.

B. Datta has discerned two "streams" in the culture of this area. One stream from Darrang to eastern part of old
Goalpara and the other one the West Goalpara along with its adjoining areas of North Bengal. Fully agreeing with his observation, we have used the term 'region' instead of 'stream' for our own purposes. Thus the regions will be known as Kamrup-Darrang or the east region and Goalpara or the west region.

Till to the other day, it was the opinion of some people that the culture of this western part was Bengali oriented if not an offshoot of Bengali culture. It is a historical fact that after the downfall of the Koo dynasty the area was ruled by the Muslims. The Muslim rulers introduced Zamindary system of administration in the Goalpara region. Some officers came from Bengal and served the Zamindars in different capacities. It is assumed that these Bengali officers were responsible for introducing Bengali as an official language and also were instrumental in making Bengali the medium of instruction in educational institutions. The Zamindars as a class and the local elite dependent on them also, had matrimonial and other ties with Bengalis (as there were no similar class in the rest of Assam). The Britishers also supported Bengali as official language and medium of

instructions. The ordinary subjects had to show allegiance to their rulers and had to participate in different functions at the instruction of these officers. As a result, the habit of imitation of Bengali ways grew among the masses. Thus an outer layer of Bengali culture is discernable in this region. But if we carefully study the dialects, manners, beliefs and customs prevailing amongst the villagers, we can safely conclude that their age-old traditions are still being retained by them, in respect of ethnic and cultural composition, there is a close affinity among the indigenous people of Kee Bihar, Jalpaiguri of West Bengal and those of Rangpur of Bangladesh (together forming north Bengal) with the indigenous people of this region. Dr. B. Kakati has rightly observed, "Even now the spoken language of North Bengal and Western Assam (Districts of Kamrup and Goalpara) is substantially the same and seems to form one dialect group".10

The history of Assam has a hoary antiquity. In the scriptures and the Puranas the name of Pragjyotish was mentioned. First it was the name of the land and later it became the capital. The name was associated with king Bhagadatta. "In the Orana (25/37, 42) the king is referred to as Pragjyotisapatih

10. B. Kakati. op. cit, p. 5.
and Prag-jiśitasaśa.11 "It has been said in the Kalika Purana that immediately after Naraka of Mithila became king and was placed in charge of the goddess Kamakhya, the name of land was changed from Pragjiśitasaśa to Kamarupa".12

The kingdom of Kamarupa occupied a vast territory. Its western boundary was the river Karatoya and the eastern the Dikrai river. "In the Yagini Tantra which is probably a later work, Kamarupa is said to extend from the Karatoya river on the west to the Dikhu on the east, and from the mountain of Kanjagiri on the north to the confluence the Brahmaputra and Lakhya rivers on the south; that is to say it included roughly, the Brahmaputra Valley, Bhutan, Rangpur, Koo Bihar, the north-east of Mymensingh and possibly, the Garo hills".13 The land was again divided into four divisions called Pithās viz., Ratnapītha, Kāmapītha, Swarnapītha and Saumārapītha. In the seventh century A.D. Kumar Bhaškaravarmen was a famous king of Kamarupa. We can gather some informations about his glory from the account of Ming-Tsang, a Chinese pilgrim who visited Kamarupa during the reign of Bhaskaravarmen.

12. B. Kakati. ibid, p. 11.
After Bhaskaravarman the kings of Salabhanja, Pralambha and Pala dynasties ruled over Kamarupa up to the twelfth century. 

E.A. Gait has stated that the name of Kamarupa was changed to Kamata keeping its western boundary the same i.e. the Karatoya river. But he is not sure of the eastern boundary. He has also not mentioned any probable time when the name had been changed. However, "The capital of Kamarupa was shifted, according to K.L. Baruah, from Guwahati (Kamarupa nagara) to Kamatapur near Cooch Bihar towards the later part of the thirteenth century owing to the pressure of the Kachari power which advanced towards the east up to the boundary of present district of Kamarupa". 

In the fourteenth century A.D. the Kamata kingdom was ruled by the Khan or Khan dynasty and was overthrown by Hussain Shah of Guwa in 1498. For a few years the Kamata kingdom was ruled by the petty chiefs of the Bhuyans and the leaders of the tribal groups. Biswa Dinha alias Bisau founded the Koc kingdom in the sixteenth century and thence the kingdom was known as Koc kingdom. Koc power reached the zenith of its glory during the reign of Narenarayana and "before his death the kingdom was divided; and Balspara

14. E.A. Gait, ibid, p. 42.
15. S.N. Sarma, op.cit, p. 3.
with Kamrup and Darrang was made over to his nephew, Raghu Rai, who is claimed as the ancestor of the present Bijni family. In 1614, the Mohammedans invaded the Koe kingdom and the portion was under Muslim rule for a considerable period. Ultimately, the Goalpara region came under the British rule in 1765 and the rest of Koe kingdom i.e. Kamrup and Darrang was under the Ahom rule to the time of Yandabo treaty, 1826. Then the two districts along with other parts of Assam came under the British rule.

Goalpara had experienced many administrative changes during the British rule. In 1822 it was formed into a separate district known as north-east Rangpur, which together with Garo hills frontier was placed in charge of Mr. David Scott ....... After the accession of Assam in 1826, Goalpara was annexed to the Assam Valley division, but in 1867 was transferred to the newly created Kuch Bihar Commissionership. In the following year it was placed for judicial purposes under the judicial commissioner of Assam and it was finally incorporated in the new province when Assam was erected into a separate administration in 1874.

C. Geographical Location and Topography

The geographical boundary of the area covered by the

study can be demarcated as follows: On the north there lies the Bhutan hills, on the east Sonitpur and Magoon districts, on the south Meghalaya State and on the West Bangladesh and West Bengal. Thus the area is situated in between the national and international boundaries. The mighty river Brahmaputra is flowing through the area separating it into south and north banks. Various tributaries are feeding the mighty river. There are hills and forests, rivers and rivulets, elevated and depressed lands as well as flat and marshy lands in the area. People have to face drought and heavy monsoons, storms and earthquakes, wild beasts and venomous serpents, floods and epidemic in their way of life. Yet, they regard nature as the source of their hopes, fortunes and fertility.

D. Demographic Composition

All the regions of the area are mainly inhabited by the people of the Indo-Mongoloid or Kirata stock. These people are the Bodo-Kacharias, the Rabhas, the Karbis, the Hajangs, the Garos etc. The Koes or Rajbansis, who occupy a remarkable position in respect of population in the region are also assumed to be of the same stock, although at present they are within the fold of Hindu hierarchy. An interesting legend is narrated in <i>Darrang Rajbanswali</i> as regards to the origin of the Koes. According to the legend
the Kossas were Ksatriyas originally, but to protect themselves from the wrath of Parsurama who vowed to take revenge upon the Ksatriyas by removing them, concealed their identities being merged in the Rec population by marriage. However, the Rajbansis of north Bengal and Goalpara regions are akin to the Goalpara of the Kamrup region and are included in the Hindu castes. Besides them, there are caste Hindus, such as, the Brahmans, the Kayasthas, the Debajnas, the Kalitas and some schedule caste people. There are Muslims, few Jains, Sikhs and christians. According to the Handbook of Statistics published by the Government of Assam, 1978, the total Hindu and Muslim populations of Goalpara, Kamrup and Darrang districts are 45, 50, 353 and 20, 46, 843 respectively. The tribes have been included in the Hindu fold.

E. Aryan Settlement and Aryanization

It is not an easy matter to ascertain the probable time of Aryan migration to and settlement in this north eastern front of India. Some scholars are of opinion that the land was inhabited by the tribes before the Aryan

19. For detail tribal population, see Sura chap. VI.
migration took place. "But there is hardly any doubt that they (Aryans) arrived at a fairly early period either as a result of invasion or by means of peaceful penetration. Assam's early contact with Aryan India is revealed by references in the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Dr. P.C. Choudhury has argued that the migration of the non-vedic Aryans known as the Alpine was started before the Mongolians to Pragjyotisa through the north-west side. Further, he says "The presence of non-vedic Aryans in Assam is pointed out by a number of writers and it is believed that the Assam Valley was Aryanised long before central and Lower Bengal". Again he wants to connect the Kalitas as referred in the biographical literatures of medieval period, and the Kalitas, the Kavvashas and the Brahmins with the Alpines. However without entering into controversy, we can conclude that the Aryan migration and Aryan settlement had started very early.

Our study will be incomplete if we do not give a short description of different routes through which the penetration the non-Aryans as well as the Aryans took place. "The possible routes of migration were three or four: first through the

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north or the mountain passes of Tibet, Nepal and Bhutan, Second through valley of the Ganges and the Brahmaputra from India and the west; third by sea or the Bay of Bengal, passing through Bengal or Burma and fourthly the Assam Burma routes, one over the Patkai passes in the north-east, leading from the Lidu - Margherita road to China through the Hukawng Valley in Burma and the other through Manipur and Cashar in the south-east or south of Assam.22 Perhaps the Aryana entered Assam through the west and the Mongeleside through the north-west and north-east routes.

If we go back to medieval Assam we can gather information from the Kathapuranarita that a war broke out between the kings of Kamata and Ganga kingdoms. As a treaty seven families of Brahmins and seven families of Kayasthas known as Bhara Chuvana were sent to Kamata to propagate Aryan culture.23 The Aryana did not impose their culture forcibly or hurriedly over the indigenous people. Rather, they accepted some of the customs and beliefs practised by the autochthones and included them in their own culture with slight alteration or giving new names. The aborigines, on the

other hand, accepted whole heartedly a better way of life, a better culture which were developed amongst the Aryans. In this connection the following remarks of N.R. Roy are worth mentioning: "Inevitably they were led to a position where they had to enter the Indo-Aryan fold of Hindu Brahmanical communities who in their turn and in the process, accepted and incorporated, especially at the rural agricultural and folk level, not a few of the ideas, images, symbols, deities, rites, rituals, beliefs, customs, myths and legends of the erstwhile non-jati Janas... However the elements which I have just referred to are known in our tradition as Lokachara and Desachara as distinct from Sastrachara or the priestly and textual commandments". The above statement is applicable in the context of Assam.

In the pre-Canašara period the rulers of Kamatê and Barāhi had patronised some poets to render into Assamese some sanskrit texts. Mahamanikya or Mahamanisha, a king of Barāhi kingdom patronised Madhava Kandali to render the Ramayana into Assamese verses. This Mahamanikya is supposed to have been of Kirata origin. Sri Sankardeva, Madhavadeva, Ramasarvatī, Bhattadeva and some other poets of the Vaishnava

period composed poetical and prose works basing on the
Ramayana, the Mahabharata and Bhagavata purana episodes.
They used Assamese as the literary language. Thus, Assamese
had become the common language of the people inhabiting in
the Koo-Kamata and Ahom kingdoms. Sri Śankardeva had given
a list of the people of different tribes living during his
time in the Assam region. They were the Kirātas, the Kashāris,
the Khāsia, the Gāros, the Mirīs (Mising), the Yavanas, the
Kankas, the Gowālē, the Assames (i.e. Ahoms), the Mulikas,
the Rajakas, the Turukas the Kuwācas (Kooes?) the Pleccas
(Mac ?) the Candālas and so on. All these people, he
proclaimed, became purified at the company of the devotees
of Hari.

"Kirāta, Kashāri Khāsi gāra miri
Yavana kanka gowālē
asama mulikā rajaka turuka
Kuwāca plecca candāla
 śapita nara hari savakara
Sannata gawira hove 25"

A number of the communities listed above are tribes. It is
interesting to note that many of the disciples of Sri

25. Bhagavata Purana. Canto II.
Sankardeva belonged to these tribes. After the demise of the great saint his disciples continued to follow his doctrines of example of welcoming the tribes into his fold. Thus thanks to the Vaishnava saints in Assam we have tribe-caste continuum here rather than a tribe-caste hiatus. The Kocs of Assam are the best example. The process of "Aryanisation" in Assam can be summed up with the following lines of Dr. B.K. Barua: "They not only established Aryan settlements with their own people but brought the earlier inhabitants to their fold by giving them Aryan religion, rites and language. In this process of Aryanisation even tribes' names were changed to caste names. Thus the Koc which was originally used to designate a tribe has become in later years the name of a recognised Aryan caste into which are absorbed converts from the Kocharia, the Lalung, the Mikir and other original tribes". 

F. A Few Anthropological and Sociological Concepts: their relevance in the present study

(i) Great tradition and little tradition

Robert Redfield has discussed the two terms thoroughly in his essay on "The social organization of Tradition".

26. See EMIRA Chap. VI.
"How shall we begin to take mental hold of this compound culture that deserves a special word, "Civilization"? Let us begin with a recognition, long present in discussions of civilizations, of the difference between a great tradition and little tradition. (This pair of Phrases is here chosen from among others, including "high culture" and "low culture", "folk and classic cultures", or "popular or learned traditions". I shall also use "hierarchical and lay culture"). In a civilization there is a great tradition of the reflective few, and there is a little tradition the largely unreflected many. The great tradition is cultivated in schools or temples; the little tradition works itself out and keeps itself going in the lives of the unlettered in their village communities. 20

We also have stated that both the traditions are interdependent. "Great spires have arisen out of elements of traditional tale-telling by many people, and spires have returned again

again to the peasantry for modifications
and incorporation into local cultures.**

We may take the Aryan culture as an example of great
tradition and that of non-Aryan as little tradition in the
context of our study. The little tradition, on the other
hand, finds its way either to mingle or to identify itself
with the great tradition. If we carefully study the non-Aryan
deities we find that some of their deities are identified
with the pantheons of the Hindus. Moreover, it is observed
that some Hindu customs, manners and religious faiths have
been accepted by the tribes in their social life. Thus we
find the amalgamation of both the traditions.

(ii) Universalization and Parochialization

Hokim Harriot has used the terms 'universalization'
and 'parochialization' in his famous book Village India.
He has selected an Indian village Kishan Garhi by name,
where he has witnessed some festivals of the villagers.
According to him "By definition, an indigenous civilization
is one whose great tradition originated by a 'universalization'
or a carrying forward of materials which are already present
in the little traditions which it encompasses". 30 He has cited

29. Robert Redfield, ibid, p. 40.
chasm tying festival of India as an example of universalization. In the context of Assam it may be clarified that Manasa the goddess of snake was first worshipped by the cowherd boys by sacrificing a grass hopper for regaining their cows. But afterwards she was worshipped by the womenfolk and then by the males. Now in some places she is worshipped in Sástric rites and has been universalized.
Instances may be multiplied.

Perschialization is on the other hand, "a downward transmission of cultural contents from great to little traditions". The same author has cited example of cow-nourisher worship celebrated in Kishen Garhi village. It was originally Gebardha Puja which was introduced by Sri Krishna. Now the meaning of the word has been misinterpreted and instead of cow-nourisher soulding wealth (geber + dhan) is propitiated by the villagers. "To refer to this kind of transformation of cultural contents which is apparent in the festival of cow-nourisher worship - the down and devaluation of great traditional elements - a term is needed. For this movement, which is the reverse of 'universalization', I suggest the term 'perschialization'. Perschialization is a process of localisation......31 The worship of Sri Krishna

31. Meikin Harriot. ibid, p. 200.
as a cow-protector (gorakhiya) by the cowherd boys in some places of our area, can be taken as an example of personalization. Because Śrī Kṛṣṇa has lost his other epithets here and has become confined to a single epithet with very limited attributes.

(iii) Sanskritization

The term coined by M.N. Srinivas in his analysis of caste system in modern India. Dr. S.K. Chatterjee also used the term from cultural and linguistic points of view.32 But for the upward mobility of the depressed class to the social hierarchy, Srinivasas explanation is, perhaps, more acceptable to the sociologists. "A low caste was able, in a generation or two, to rise to a higher position in the hierarchy by adopting vegetarianism and testotarianism, and by Sanskritizing its ritual and pantheon. In short it look over, as far as possible, the customs, rites and beliefs of the Brahmins and the adoption of Brahmanic way of life by a low caste seems to have been frequent, though theoretically forbidden. This process has been called 'Sanskritization' in this book in preference to 'Brahmanization' as certain vedic rites are confined to the Brahmins and to other twice born castes.33 Srinivas has subsequently widened his scope of

definition of 'Sanskritization' when he says "Sanskritization is a process by which a 'low' Hindu caste, or tribal or other group, changes its customs, rituals, ideology and way of life in the direction of a high, and frequently, twice born caste ....." Further he says "Sanskritization is not confined to Hindu castes but also accrues among tribal and semitribal groups such as the Bhil of western India, the gonds and orans of central India, and the Pathis of Himalayas. This usually results in the tribe undergoing sanskritization claiming to be a caste, and therefore Hindu".  

From the above statements of the eminent scholar it is clear that first he has argued for the 'low' caste and then widened his argument for the tribes. Now we can site some example in respect of Assam. The Naths of Assam who were once recognised as 'low caste' has been sanskritised later on. "The transition from a depressed caste to the fold of caste Hindus resulted in the acquisition of a new status by the Naths which can be analytically explained in terms of sanskritization - a process which operated in Assam as in the rest of India". The Naths have abandoned their caste

34. M.N. Srinivas., Social change in modern India, pp. 6-7.
35. B.Dey & D. Lahiri. Consenacy of caste and social mobility in Assam, p. 74.
name 'Julu' and have become Jogi or Nath. The appellation 'Devi' has been used by the women and Nath or Dev Nath by the males of the said community. Moreover, they wear sacred threads to recognise themselves with other 'twice born' castes of the Hindu society. The Hiraa, the Banivas, the Nanita and some other schedule castes people have been moving towards Sanskritization. Similarly, the tribes of the Mongoloid stocks are consumed to this social change.

G. Different Hindu Sects

(1) Saivism

From the remote past down to the present day Saivism has been playing an important role in the religious outlook of the Hindus. Mention is made of numerous sacred places in the Kali Purana and many of them are dedicated in the name of Siva. It is also mentioned in the same scripture that Siva was worshipped by the Kiratas, before Naraka who was supposed to have introduced the cult of mother goddess in old Kamrup. "From historical records it appears that all the Principal royal dynasties of early Assam were in some way associated with Siva". 36 Siva Sinha who founded the

36. S.K. Kakati, Mother goddess Kamakhya, p. 11.
royal dynasty of Kos Bihar was a staunch devotee of Siva and he claimed to be the descendant of the god. Ahom king Rudra Sinha rendered into Assamese the Sanskrit Śiva-Purāṇa.

Rai Bahadur Ganesh Chandra Barua has mentioned that Siva worship in the linga form was introduced by a king named Jalpaiguri of present Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal. 37

In the medieval period of Assam Saivism had a wide popularity. Śrī Sankardava, the preacher of the neo-Vaishnavism in Assam, was named after Śiva as Sankara. It is mentioned in the Kāthā-puruṣa-carita that Kusumbarā, the father of Sankardava propitiated Gopālaya Śiva to bless him with a son. Madhava deva the closed disciple of Sankardava once received order from his elder brother to worship Śiva on the Śiva Caturdassī day. Rāmasandra, a biographer of Śrī Sankardava gave the description of the religious atmosphere in Assam before neo-Vaishnavism. He wrote "People did not worship Kṛṣṇa or perform the deeds sacred to Hari. They on the other hand, would fain worship Bhairava and consider it to be the greatest religions. They made offerings of blood of tortoises and goats to the deity and as a sacred drink (Prasada)." It is mentioned in the Darrang Raj-vamcavali a chronicle of the

Koa dynasty, that once king Naranarayana undertook a military expedition against the Ahom king. Before the expedition he worshipped Siva according to the Sāstric rites. But Siva appeared before him in a dream and exhorted the king to worship him in tribal mode of rites. Accordingly the king made arrangement for performance of rites by the Kachāri soldiers on the bank of the river Senkoe. Ducks pigeons, country liquor, cooked rice were offered and buffaloes, suine, cock and he-goats were sacrificed. Elephant dance was also performed. Afterwards Naranarayana issued an order that in the temples lying on the north bank of the Brahmaputra (north side of Kohal Kanal Road) Siva would be worshipped by the Kossa, Kossa and the Kachāri in accordance with their traditional rites and on the south bank of the river by the Brahmin priest. From the above it is clear that Siva was worshipped according to both Sāstric rites as well as tribal methods. There are some dancing women known as Naṭi in the Siva temples. These women were known as dalubangana which can be found from the land grant of king Vanamala Dova (9th century). These were temple women till the other day in the temples of Majo (though Majo is a Vaishnav temple) and Dubi.

The women led an unmarried life. "A curious practice of animal sacrifice is in vogue even now in the Saiva temples of Assam. On the occasion of the Siva Caturdasi festival castrated goats are strangled to death in the precincts of the temples". 40

In spite of the wide popularity of Saivism there are no definite Saiva guru and ascetics in Assam. Siva is venerated by all sections of people irrespective of Vaishnavites and Saktas. Saivism has been mixed up with the Saktism and Siva and Sakti are revered equally.

(ii) Saktism

Saktism was a predominant religion in Assam since the days of Narakesara. It is mentioned in the Kalika Purana that at the instruction of Visnu Naraka introduced Devi worship at Nilacal hilly. Kamakhya is the Yoni Pitha of the Trinidade as the genital organ of Sati had fallen on the hilly. It is mentioned in the same scripture that Kamakhya came herself secretly to satisfy her amour (Kama) with Siva. Mother goddess and goddess of love seem to mingle together in Kamakhy. Dr. B.K. Kakati has thoroughly discussed the

probable etymology of the word Kāmākhyā and inferred that the word is of Austro origin. Further he states "On the basis than of similarities in mere sound and sense in the formation of skt. Kama, Austro Kamo, Shinto Kami and also on the basis of correspondence of certain rites and customs, it may be tentatively assumed that the Yoni-goddess sprang up amongst peoples with leanings towards ancestor-worship and believing in the productive powers of an ancestral mother and that she migrated into Assam with the migrations of the Austro peoples. From the above it is evident that Kāmākhyā was originally a deity of some tribes and later on she was Aryanised. There were Gāro or Mac Pujārīs in the temple. King Biswa Sinha got first information about the deity from an old woman belonging to the Mac community. Even now she is the most popular goddess amongst the tribes. The religious history of Assam centres round Kāmākhyā and she is assumed to be the manifestations of many Austro and local goddesses.

The ancestors of Sankardova and Radhawadeva were staunch śāktas. The appellation Devī-dāna was conferred to Candibara, the great grand father of Sankardova. A stone

Image of Candi was the object of worship of Sankardeva's father. 42

Madhavadeva argued with Sankardeva in support of Devi worship. Biswa Sinha, when he was a cowherd boy worshipped an image of Durga by sacrificing a grass hopper. Though Sankardeva preached neo-Vaisnavite religion, devotion to the goddess was not totally abandoned by some of his disciples. Once vyaskalai, a disciple of Sankardeva let loose a pair of pigeons in the name of Sitala when his son suffered from small pox. "In the Thakur carita Vidyananda describes the religious beliefs of the Barnagar locality in Kamrup in these words : These people were not conscious of the Great way (Vaisnavism); and Sakti (Saktism) then reigned supreme. They sang songs of Hari; but then when the autumn came they installed a ghata (Pitcher representing the goddess) each in every one's house. 43 The belief is still in vogue amongst the woman folk of the regions.

There are a good number of temples and shrines dedicated in the name of the Devi. The Ahom and the Ass

kings were chief patrons. The goddess is worshipped in her different manifestations such as Mahāśēvā, Kāli (Bhairavi), Tukresvari, Bhagavati, Al, Bāhavāsari, Kesāl Khāiti etc. Durga Pūja has become almost a national festival not to speak of our regions but all of Assam. The cult may be traced in folk art and architecture, songs and tales, beliefs and superstitions. If we make a thorough survey of the regions we find that the cult is more popular in Goalpara and Darrang regions than Kamrup. Tribals are more or less Sāktas.

(iii) Vaishnavism

Vaishnavism had gained ground in Assam even in remote past. The legends of Narasura, Dvaja and Bhismaka prove that Viṣṇu-Krṣna was well known here. The relics, epigraphs, coins, inscriptions, grants etc. prove its antiquity. The Kalika Purana mentions as many as five incarnations of Viṣṇu who were worshipped in different places. "These are Hayagriva worshipped in Manikuta (Haje); Fish incarnation, worshipped in the Matsayadhvaja mount to the east of Manikuta, Madhava in the form of Bhairava, named Pandunatha in Rakasakuta, the Boar incarnation in the citravaha mount and vasudeva krṣna in the Dīkharvasini region. The epithet Narayana is also mentioned hither and thither. Moreover, the legend of

Parasurama is associated with the mighty river Brahmaputra. Scholars are of opinion that before the preaching of neo-vaishnavism by Sankardeva, the method of Vishnu worship was in tantric form.

Sankardeva preached the neo-vaishnavite religion in the fifteenth century A.D. His religious outlook was based on the Bhagavata Purana and the official name of his religious was "Eka Sarana Nama Dharma", the religion of surrender to supreme one by reciting his name. He totally discouraged worship of deities other than Krishna. There is no room for untouchability in his religion. His new ideas and philosophy songs, drama and other literary works educated and attracted the masses and became his disciples. His proselytes founded Satras and Namghara or Kirten Charam in every nook and corner of the state. The Satras stood as an institution of social reform. To quote Dr. B.K. Kakati: "These regional institutions framed moral laws and controlled the activities of society. As miniature replicas the Satras, village Namghars were built and the Namghars combined the functions of a village parliament, a village court, a village school and a village church. These institutions served as sheet anchors to Assamese society in the midst of continually shifting political circumstances. The often shook to their
very foundations under the blast of the rulers' fury, but stood erect again when the fury was spent. But whether in the sunshine or under the clouds, they were regarded as the vital centres of life and worthy of the gift of all that was prized and loved best. 45

After the demise of Sankardeva and some of his staunch devotees, some esoteric practices crept into the Sattaras founded by Gopal Ata and his followers. This esoteric cult is known as Rāja Khavor or night worshipping. In lower Assam the cult is known as Purna Sevā, Mary Sevā Pathi nacīvā etc. They perform some rites at dead of night secretly. Women devotees are indispensable for the performance of their rites. Non-devotees are not allowed to enter the close-door prayer house.

Influence of Vaishnavism in the life and lore of the people of Assam as a whole and in particular to our area is still immense. Either in Sraddha, or marriage, or new birth or any other ceremonies, Nīma Kirtana is the concluding function of a Hindu family. The first flow of milk of a cow is offered in the name of Rakhal Gosain i.e. Krana. The first handful rice after the harvest is offered as

The birth anniversary of Śrī Kṛṣṇa and Dauletadeva are observed in a befitting manner in every congregational prayer house. The cult of Jagannatha of Puri, Orissa, has some influence on the people. Every year the women of Kamrup region performed Yama-Kirtana in the month of Jathra or Ahara in the name of Jagannatha. Among the tribes, Vaisnavism has an indirect influence. They have accepted some of the Vaisnava deities and propitiate them in their own method. The Pati Radhae chant the word Heribel even in the worship of their indigenous deities. As for example, they cite, "Langa Lakhik cinti Heribel"—Let us utter, the word "Heribel" bowing down before Langa-Lakhi". Even in the funeral procession, the popular words "Heribel" are chanted.

The impact of Gaudia Vaisnavism of Caitanyadeva is also noteworthy. The sect entered in Assam during the sixteenth century A.D. Madhurādāsa Budhā Āti, a foremost devotee of Madhavadeva was a Gauda Vaisnava before he met Madhavadeva. Another disciple of Madhavadeva, Gopala Āti by name, was linient towards Gaudia Vaisnavism before his conversion to sankarite vaisyam. At present there are many devotees of the said sect in Goalpara region. Gaudia Matha have been constructed in towns and remote villages of the regions.
M. Some minor sects

Scholars like Dr. B.K. Baruah, M. Noog, P.C. Choudhury are of opinion that Buddhism was prevalent in Assam. They also opine that old Kamrup was the seat of Tantric Buddhism. Some of the Siddhasarayas of the Vajrayana sect are assumed to be born in old Kamrup. The present Hayagriva temple at Nagoa is claimed by the Bhutanese to be of Buddhist origin. It is learnt from the Katha-surya-carita that crypte Buddhism was in vogue during the days of Sankardeva. It may be inferred that tantric Buddhism merged with the Sakti cult in later period and as such a separate sect could not survive here.

The existence of solar cult can be traced from the very name Pragjyotisa which was mentioned in the smitas and other writings of the puranic period. "The prevalence of the cult is proved by the existing remains of temples dedicated to the sun, and many icons of the deity, found in Doh Parvatia, Gaipur, Tezpur, Pandu, Sadiya Sukravara Suryyapahar and other places of this ancient land."

scholars are of opinion that sun worship mingled with the fire worship and traces can be found from the harvesting festival i.e. Bihu. It is also discussed by some eminent scholars that Dharma cult is associated with the sun cult.

The Nath cult is corroborated by Mainamatisaran and Govindananda Giri. The badlaa of Janakadhara narrates about the cult. In the medieval literature mention is made of the Jaina. Gorkenath or Germath who has been defied, is still a popular deity of west Goalpara. But the cult, as it is observed has mingled with the Saiva cult.

I. The Kirata-Oriented Religion of this Area

It has already been discussed that three major cults of Hinduism were prevalent in Assam since the pre-historic and historic ages. That the land was inhabited by the tribes, particularly, the Indo-Mongoleide before Hinduisation is evident from the Yoginittantra. The scripture tells us about the religion practised by the people of this area. It is mentioned there that the indigenous tribes followed their traditional beliefs and practices designated as "Kirataja dharma" i.e. the religion of the Kiratas. According to the

48. See Saura Chap. II.
Yogini tantra. "There is no asceticism and long vow, and everything could be eaten in Kamarupa, the Yoginipitha where the Kairatja dharma prevails. Nonvegetarian diet must not be discarded, nor bramhacharya be observed. No sin accrues from contact with different castes. Women should be enjoyed after their monthly period. They are generally addicted to chewing tumbula with Pan. Turtles, bear, ducks and pigeon could be avoided at the risk of being punished for committing a sin". It is clear from the above description that tribal customs and practices influenced Hindu religion.

3. Tribal Religion

The subject has been discussed thoroughly in Chapter VI. It is difficult to give an exact definition of 'Tribal religion'. Some western scholars have termed it as 'animistic'. Some scholars use the term 'primitive' in case of tribal religion. The comprehensive explanation forwarded by D.N. Niyumdar is, "Primitive religion is characterised by a belief in an impersonal power and a struggle with this power

49. Translated from Yogini Tantra by S.N. Sarma, op.cit., p.199. 50. See Śuktas, Ch. VI.
of mastery of life and all that it stands for; this conception of power varies from group to group. The power or powers that are supposed to influence human life and happiness act favourably or unfavourably and these which are good are worshipped and those which are malevolent are propitiated and this dichotomy of attitude characterises the primitive mind. If we carefully examine the above statement in the context of our study, that the tribes believe in impersonal powers, that their deities whether they are benevolent or malevolent, are worshipped and propitiated.

K. Religious Tolerance

Religious tolerance is an important characteristic of the people of Assam particularly in folk level. This tolerance and mutual co-operation extend beyond the sectarian divisions within Hinduism to cover inter-religious relationship. For example, the Muslims in spite of their Islamic beliefs and practices, have traditionally Hindu gods and goddesses. There are some Mahapara Deo belonging to the Muslim community in Mangaldai area. Siva Kali, Ram are some of the deities

51. D.N. Mozumdar, Assam and Culture of India, p. 417.
when they propitiate on different occasions. Even some tribal deities are venerated by all sections of people. Martin has observed, "In some parts a deity named Langga which seems peculiar to region is much venerated. By the Hindus he is called a god by the Muslims a saint." The Hindus and the tribes also propitiate some Muslim Piras or Saints who have been deified.

L. Choice of the topic and methodology

The area of our study has certain distinctive socio-cultural traits attributable to the ethnic composition of the people as well as to the historical background. The Goalpara region occupies a special position having been the meeting ground of different cultural trends.

Although the majority of population of the region is composed of Hindus, the religious beliefs and practices current among big section of them do not conform to those of standard Hinduism. Apart from the universally accepted gods and goddesses a large number of minor gods and goddesses are worshipped and propitiated at the folk level in particular localities and/or by particular communities. Any comprehensive study of these gods and godlings has not so far been attempted.

Again there are the deities of the tribal communities inhabiting the regions. Although, strictly speaking, out side the periphery of Hinduism, they are at various levels of acculturation through constant contact with Hinduism. Investigation into the nature of tribal gods and goddesses as attempted here, can also help in the understanding of transformation taking place both in Hinduism and the tribal religions.

Microlevel studies of such nature have been recognised as capable of high lighting the peculiarities of local religious phenomena only to emphasise the truth of the fact that an almost uniform process of contact and fusion has been at work through out India.

The present work is an attempt to trace the evolution, method of worship, social and anthropological aspects of the deities of the regions in folk level. It goes without saying that for the collection of material for such a work field investigation is a must. It has been my endeavour to do as much of field study as possible to collect relevant information at first hand. In this field survey I have applied questionnaire method with some persons who have first hand knowledge of the subject. But it has not always been possible to get information by this method from the bearers of the
tradition as the person concerned are either half literate or illiterate. Moreover, withholding of facts by the involved persons is something which a student of folklore has often to face. Therefore, more stress has been given to the observation method. At the time of worship of some deities, I have attended personally and observed the performance. It has helped me to gather a vivid picture of the village deities and to examine the subject thoroughly. In the course of the field work I have also made use of tape-recording and photography for the sake of authentic documentation. At the sometime, consultation of books and other materials in the libraries has helped me to gather theoretical knowledge about the subject.

The standard transliteration method has been followed as far as practicable.