

## CHAPTER II

### ASSAM AND ITS PEOPLE

#### *The Area- Assam*

Geographically Assam hardly seems a part of India. For many centuries, it has occupied a peripheral position, both geographically and politically in relation to the rest of India. The details of the area of Assam are discussed below-

*a) Location:* “Assam is mentioned as Pragjyotisha in both the Epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Pragjyotisha includes not only the whole of Assam and parts of North and East Bengal but also the hill tracts upto the border of China. It is known for the first time as Kamarupa in the Allahabad pillar inscription of Samudra Gupta and in the early *purana*. The boundaries of Pragjyotisha Kamrupa did not remain static or constant throughout, but underwent changes in different for reasons like political or others. The western limit receded from the river Kartoya to the Manah under the Tai-Ahoms, the great Shan stock in South-East Asia, who had ruled the territory from the thirteen to early nineteenth century. Goalpara district which was an integral part of the ancient Kingdom of Kamrupa was occupied by the rulers of Bengal for several centuries, but was reunited in 1874 when Assam was constituted as a separate province comprising the two valleys of Brahmaputra and the Barak and the hill tracts in the middle, north and the north east. Since independent in 1947 major changes have again taken place in respect of its territorial limit: with the exception of two districts- Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills” (Barpujari, 1990: 1-2).

Now Assam serves as a major gateway to the northeastern corner of India. It shares borders with the countries of Bhutan and Bangladesh and is surrounded by the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura and Meghalaya, which together with Assam, are called the Seven Sister States of the country. To the east of Assam lay Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Manipur, to the west lay Bangladesh and Tripura, whereas Mizoram and Meghalaya lay to the south of Assam. Geographically, Assam is an important state of north east India. The position of Assam is between 24-28 degree north latitude and 90-96 degree east longitude. The area of Assam covers 78433 sqr. kms (Taher, 2013: 1). Geographically, Assam can be

divided into Brahmaputra valley in the north, Barak plain in the south, and Karbi Anglong and North Cachar hills that divides the two regions. The state is surrounded by hills and mountains on three sides. There had been frequent intercourse between the people of the hills and the plains. A few of the tributaries of the Brahmaputra are snow-fed but the majority of them depend on the monsoons for their volume. They dry up during winter, but along with the rains swell up and overflow their banks and at times cut for themselves fresh channels through alluvial soil of the valley. Even the mighty Brahmaputra shifted its course from time to time.

**b) History of the Name:** The mythological period of Assam narrates several legendary anecdotes that signify the religious heritage of the state. From Vedic epics to tantric tales, Assam finds special mention in some of the important mythological manuscripts of India. The Danava rulers and Lord Krishna were the two prime mythological figures in the history of Assam. Going by the myths of Assam, it can be said that in the ancient periods, it was a favorite dwelling place of many epic characters. The beginning of the mythological era of Assam started with the domination of the Dynasty of Danava. The archaeological surveys indicate towards the fact that the earliest human communities that appeared in the land of Assam were Australoids and Mongoloids. Known as Kiratas, the Mongoloids were believed to have ruled the entire state of Assam through their capital in Pragjyotishpura.

The province of Assam and its people are very little known abroad. Yet by its earlier name of Kamrupa, it is better known to Hindu India as a land of magic and witchcraft with its famous Tantric shrine Kamakkhya (Kakati, 1989: 1). The province is differently called in different historical period. Its most ancient name was Pragjyotispura. By this name it is referred to in the two great epics- *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* and the principal *Puranas*. “In classical Sanskrit literature both Pragjyotisa and Kamrupa occurs as alternative names of the country. Kalidasa referred to it by both the designations” (Kakati, 1989: 1). “In epigraphic records, the name Kamrupa was first mentioned in the Allahbad inscription of Samudra Gupta in the fifth century” (Kakati, 1989: 1).

“The modern designation of Assam was connected with the Shan invaders of Brahmaputra valley. Since 1228 the easternmost portion of the Brahmaputra valley came under the domination of a section of great Thai (Tai) or Shan race which spread eastwards from the boarder of Assam over nearly the whole of further India and far

into the interior China. It seems curious that while the Shan invaders called themselves Tai, they came to be known as Asam and Acan in contemporary Assamese literature. In modern Assamese they are referred to as Ahom, which is a modern phonetic development of earlier Asam” (Kakati, 1989: 1). According to Ahom tradition the name means “unequaled” or peerless and was applied to them in administration by the local tribes (Gait, 2010: 241). During the periods of 13th century, Assam was ruled by two prime Dynasties of Kamarupa and Ahom. Under the rule of Ahom dynasty, Assam started a new journey towards becoming a developed land of India. It is between 13th and 19th century that several tribal communities also came into the historical forefront of Assam. Kacharis, Chutias and Koch were the prominent tribal groups that were found in the medieval times of Assam. According to Ahom tradition the name means ‘unequaled’ or peerless and was applied to them in administration by the local tribes (Gait, 2010: 241). The Ahoms later on turned back the tide of Mughal conquest in the face of repeated incursions by the governor of Bengal (Gait, 2010: 241). The British first intervened in the area in 1824, when they become part of Mughal Empire but pursued an independent political existence outside and thus began the colonial era of Assam (Gait, 2010: 245). Under British administration the term Assam was originally used to designate the six districts of the Brahmaputra Valley under the control of the commissioner of Assam (Gait, 2010: 244). The post-colonial periods of Assam starting from 1947, witnessed many important events such as- emergence of several separate states like that of Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh, the Assam movement by AASU, the formation of separate states for tribal sects, United Liberation Front of Assam and Assam Students Union etc.

**c) Climate:** Scarcity of materials renders it difficult for us to reconstruct the climatic condition of ancient Assam. But we know from the Chinese traveler Hiuen-Tsang is that the country was “Low and damp”, Shihabuddin Talish, the Muslim chronicler who had accompanied Mirjumlah in his expedition to Assam in 1662, informs that ‘It rains for eight months in the year, and even the four months of winter are not free from rain.’ (Gait, 2010: 141-142). Assam is situated in an area of tropical monsoon climate. Its location, situation and topography have given it its own type of climate which is somewhat different from the other parts of India. It has a tropical monsoon type of climate with dry winter and hot wet summer, and later varies from part to part

within the State depending on location, physiographic and other physical factors. During summer the climate is comparatively hot, but in the winter season it is cold. From May to November the climate is humid.

**Rainfall:** Between March and May when precipitation in northern India is at the minimum, Assam gets some amount of rainfall which keeps the temperature low. Assam experiences an average rainfall 230 cm. The rainy season begins with the onset of monsoon in June and it lasts up to October. Rainfall is heavy and it is the period when the peasants grow paddy in the field. Rainfall peters out slowly during the month of September and it completely stop during the month of October (TaHER, 2013: 5).

**Temperature:** Assam has a moderate temperature. In the plains and foothills of the state, the temperature varies in summer between 28<sup>0C</sup> and 36<sup>0C</sup> and in winter between 05<sup>0C</sup> and 28<sup>0C</sup>. December and January are the coldest months with temperature remaining in between 5<sup>0C</sup> and 28<sup>0C</sup>, while June, July and August are the warmest months with temperature ranging between 28<sup>0C</sup> and 36<sup>0C</sup>. The higher parts of the hills and plateaus of the State record a relatively low temperature from 18<sup>0C</sup> in summer and 2<sup>0C</sup> to 25<sup>0C</sup> in winter (TaHER, 2013: 5). Earthquakes are of frequent occurrences in this region under which structural monuments are liable to collapse and disintegrate in course of time.

**Soil:** Soils have been developed on sedimentary, metamorphic rocks and alluvium under the predominant influence of climate, vegetation and topography Uplands soils are dominated by Ochrepts 33 per cent whereas Aquents 29 per cent and Aquepts 12 per cent are the major soils in valleys and flood plains. Soils are acidic, low in fertility and exchange capacity. The soils of the Central Assam range are generally well developed, moderately to strongly acidic with varying degree of aluminum saturation in sub-soils, high in organic matter and low in cation exchange capacity (Sen, Murali, Dubey, Velayutham 2001: 11,45-52). The soils of Brahmaputra valley and Barak valley are alluvial and fertile. These soils, in general, are very deep, poorly drained to well drained, slightly acidic to neutral. North bank soils of the valley are relatively coarse textured than those of south bank and constitute nearly 60 per cent of the total Entices of the state.

**River:** The River Brahmaputra flows along the middle of the plain following a course which runs from the north-east to the south-west and then in the westwards direction and finally towards the south beyond Dhuburi. The Brahmaputra plain has a gentle

gradient with a large number of tributaries within Assam, like- the Dihang, the Dibang and the Lohit merge near Pasighat and the new mighty river is known as the Brahmaputra. Lots of other rivers flow in Assam. All most all of these are Subsidiary River of the mighty Brahmaputra. There are three rivers flow in the middle part of Barpeta town, namely- River Na-Khanda, River Maranadi and River Chaulkhowa.

**d) Flora:** Assam has a good measure of plant diversity because of monsoon evergreen forests, tropical semi evergreen forests, most deciduous forests, riparian vegetation, marshes and grasslands. The monsoon evergreen forests have tall trees, intertwining climbers and lianas, epiphyte, saprophyte and dense undergrowth. The presence of very tall trees like *halakh* (East Indian almond) and many varieties of orchids is a noteworthy feature of this type of forest. The tropical semi evergreen, most deciduous forests provide immensely valuable hard woods like *saal* (Indian dammar), *teak* (teak), *nahar* (ironwood tree), and *gamari* (white teak). The riparian vegetation as well as the vegetation found in the swamps and marshes support tall grasses like *nal* (tall reed), *ikara* (thatch grass) and *tara* (galangal) (Taher, 2013: 8).

**e) Fauna:** The rich vegetation of the state supports numerous varieties of animals from worms and insects to mammals. Assam has wildlife sanctuaries, the most prominent of which are two UNESCO World Heritage sites- the Kaziranga National Park, on the bank of the Brahmaputra River, and the Manas Wildlife Sanctuary, near the border with Bhutan. The Kaziranga is a refuge for the fast-disappearing Indian one-horned rhinoceros. The state is the last refuge for numerous other endangered and threatened species including the white-winged wood duck or *deohanh*, Bengal florican, black-breasted parrotbill, red-headed vulture, white-rumped vulture, greater adjutant, jerdon's babbler, rufous-necked hornbill, Bengal tiger, Asian elephant, pygmy hog, gaur, wild water buffalo, Indian hog deer, hoolock gibbon, golden langur, capped langur, barasingha, Ganges river dolphin, Barca snakehead, Ganges shark, Burmese python, brahminy river turtle, black pond turtle, Asian forest tortoise, and Assam roofed turtle. Threatened species that are extinct in Assam include the *gharial*, a critically endangered fish-eating crocodilian, and the pink-headed duck (which may be extinct worldwide). For the state bird, the white-winged wood duck, Assam is a globally important area. In addition to the above, there are three other National Parks in Assam namely Dibru Saikhowa National Park, Nameri

National Park and the Orang National Park (Choudhury, 1996: 82-83). Assam has conserved the one-horned Indian rhinoceros from near extinction, along with the pygmy hog, tiger and numerous species of birds, and it provides one of the last wild habitats for the Asian elephant. Kaziranga and Manas are both World Heritage Sites. The state has the largest population of the wild water buffalo in the world (Choudhury, 2010: 35), The state has the highest diversity of birds in India with around 820 species. With subspecies the number is as high as 946 (Choudhury, 2000: 90), the mammal diversity in the state is around 190 species (Choudhury, 1997: 30).

### ***People of Assam***

The indigenous and long settled inhabitants are recognized as Assamese, not only in language but also in the total way of their life style. Now the details of the people of Assam are discussed below-

***a) Ethnographic Profile:*** Assam is the home land of a large number of populations of various ethnic affiliations having disparate socio-cultural heritage and speaking different languages. They entered Assam through different routes from different directions and different intervals of time. The people of Assam can be divided in to several groups on the basis of religion, race, language etc. During the last few decades with the advancement of scientific knowledge, discovery of sophisticated apparatus and instrument, formulation of new methodology, new anthropological thoughts and concepts also have developed. Genetic concept of race has remarkably influenced the earlier anthropological approach to the study of ethnic groups in any geographical area. The racial criteria of earlier times are being gradually replaced by several markers and their gene frequencies. While interpreting biological observations very often emphasis is given on changeability of physical features and population dynamics caused by diverse factors. Ongoing processes of this nature have brought many changes in the biological characteristics of several population groups of Assam (Das, 1981: 34). In such changing situation the importance of studying ethnic elements in a people has obviously been diminished in present time. But at the same time it must be admitted that to outline the ethnological background of the people of a country even now classical or conventional approach of anthropology is followed.

On the basis of some anthropometric data, A.C Haddon found several ethnic types in Assam. (1) Dolichocephalic-platyrrhine type (Pre-Dravidian) is strong among the

Khasi, Kuki, Manipuri, Kachari etc; (2) Dolichocephalic-mesorrhine type (Nesiot element) is noticed in the Naga and other hill tribes; (3) Mesocephalic-mesorrhine types occurs in India among the Lepcha and Murmi and in certain castes in Bengal and Bihar; (4) Brachycephalic-leptorrhine type which came from the north and is related to the Eurasiatic group; (5) Brachycephalic-platyrrhine is a variety of the Pareocean (Haddon, 1924: 116).

B.S. Guha refers in the census of India (1931) six main races in the population of India: Negrito, Proto-Australoid, Mongoloid, Mediterranean, Western Brachycephal and Nordic (Das, 1990 in Barpujari 1990: 11). On the basis of hair form and certain elements of material culture, Hutton, Mills and others have pointed to the existence of a Negrito strain in Assam. Hutton is of opinion that the earliest occupants of India were probably of the Negrito race and this element formed one of the earliest strains in the people of the hills of Assam (Haddon, 1922 cited in Das, 1990: 13). One of the most important racial elements in the context of studying ethnic history of Assam is the Australoid. The Australoids are known by different names like- Pre-Dravidians, Prto- Australoids, Vedda, and Nishada. They are characterized by dolichocephalic head, marked broad nose, dark brown skin colour, short stature and wavy hair. They resemble the Caucasid in respect of many characteristics and hence they are considered as a sub-division of the Caucasoid by the name Archaic Caucasoid (Das, 1990 in Barpujari 1990: 13). Among the various Bodo tribes of Assam there appear certain Australoid ethnic traits (Haddon, 1922 cited in Das, 1990: 13). When individual tribes of the Bodo group are considered separately, one would find that the Rabha, Garo and Mikir Have Dolichocephalic head form in India. There is no doubt that the tribes of north-east India are predominately Mongoloid. The Mongoloid populations entered into region through various routs at different times. Though these populations differ from each other in respect of certain traits of physical feature, culture and language, yet basically they are of Mongoloid origin and speak languages which could be grouped under a broad heading Tibeto-Burman. Linguistically, the Tibeto-Burman group as a whole is divided into two main branches; North Assam and Assam Burmese. The north Assam branch is formed by the various Arunachal tribes. The Assam Burmese group includes three groups- Bodos, Nagas and Kuki-Chins (Das, 1990 in Barpujari 1990: 17). The Ahom of the Tai or Shan group of the Mongoloids entered Assam in the thirteen century. They conquered Assam and settled themselves mostly in Upper Assam. Another race came to Assam was Alpines or

Armenoids. They have been described as brachycephalic with leptorrhine noses. But among the present day people of Assam, Alpine characteristics are insignificant. The high caste Assamese are by and large mesocephalic. In this context mention may be made of the Kalitas of Assam who were supposed to have been of Alpine origin and who had early settlements near about Sadiya (Kakati, 1989: 59). It is generally believed that the Kalitas or their ancestors entered India from the west, settled in Upper India, and ultimately entered Assam, and they were Ksatriyas. The Indo-Aryans predominate in the valleys of the Indus and the Ganges. In the Gangetic valley they form a continuous chain up to western Bihar. Beyond that limit the Indo-Aryan elements occur sporadically in eastern Bihar, Bengal and Assam. In these regions this type is mostly confined to the people of upper castes. It must be admitted that the physical features of all the Indo-Aryans living in different parts of India are not the same. Hybridization, ecological changes and other biological causes may be the factors responsible for such ethnic variations.

**b) Caste and Community:** The early inscriptions refer to the traditional castes and professional communities in Kamrupa or ancient Assam. From thirteen century onwards fresh waves of Brahmanas from Gunda, Kanauj and other parts of North India migrated to Assam. Some learned Brahmana families were also brought by kings to reinforce the Brahmanical tradition. From medieval religious biographies the existence of a large number of *tols* or *chatrasalas* manned by Brahmana scholars are known. The Brahmanas married their girls before attainment of puberty and did not personally plough their field. They earned their livelihood by means of agriculture, teaching, priestly duties and services to the state. The Daivajnas known as *ganaka*, being professionally astrologers, study astrology and earned their livelihood mainly by astrological calculations. The earliest reference to the Daivajna is found in the Kamauli grant of Vaidyaveda of the twelfth century. References to the Daivajna are found in the medieval literary works of Durgavara and in land grants of the Ahom Kings. The Kayasthas, originally a professional class, were engaged in maintaining accounts and serving as scribes. In the Nidhapur grant of Bhasarvarmana both Karanikas and Kayastas are mentioned. During early medieval period some Kayasthas managed to carve out principalities for themselves under the control of the Kamata kings. Sankardeva's family hereditarily enjoyed the office of the chief among the Bhuyans, mostly of the Kayastha community. The Kalitas are more numerous than the

Brahmanas or Daivjnas in Assam. They are scattered all over the Brahmaputra valley. The origin of the Kalitas is obscure, but since the beginning of the fourteen century they have been occupying a respectable status in the Assamese social life. It has not been definitely established whether any relation, ethnic or cultural, exists between the Kalitas of Assam and those of Orissa and Uttar Pradesh. Whereas the Kalitas of Assam are caste Hindus and those of Orissa and Uttar Pradesh are treated as backward tribes. Assamese scholars' like- P.C. Choudhury and K.R.Medhi have tried to prove that the Kalitas of Assam originated from the Alpine stock that migrated to eastern India before the Vedic Aryans. According to the *Katha-guru-charita*, there was a Kalita desa on the Himalayan foot-hills in the north-eastern region where the ancestors of Gopala Ata lived (Lekhuru, ed 1952: 96-98). The Keots occupy the position next to Kalitas. The origin of the Keots has not been dealt with by any scholars either from the anthropological or from the cultural point of view. But it is beyond doubt that the term originated from the Sanskrit Kaivarta which became *kevatta* (boatman) and finally Keot. The Koches or the Rajbangshis are related to the Bodo-Kachari group of Indo Mongoloid stock. When a section of them after assuming the political power came under the religious influence of Brahmanas and Vaisnava preachers and were converted to full-fledged Hindus they assumed the name Rajbangshi or Koch. Although they are not given the status of the Kalitas or Keots, yet they are assigned a higher status in the caste ladder. The Ahoms are also considered as a separate caste. They were the ruling dynasty for six hundred years and started accepting Hinduism from the sixteenth century. It may be mentioned that the community gradually developed and increased in number in course of centuries since its arrival in the thirteen century by absorbing local people into its fold.

Tribes man, both unassimilated as well as semi-assimilated, spread over the entire valley governed by their age-old customary laws, practices and institutions. In regard to settlements, Bodo-Kachari elements spread over the entire Brahmaputra Valley and some parts of the Barak valley. In course of time many of the tribal people were converted to Hinduism and became Koch or Saraniya Kachari and gradually adopted Assamese as their mother tongue. There were large settlements of the Garo, Khasi, Karbi, and Bodo-Kachari tribal people in the south bank of the Brahmaputra. The Karbis mainly resided in the Mikir Hills in the southern parts of central Assam. The Khamtis, the Doaneans, the Tai-phakes, the Turungs, are small Buddhist communities

which migrated to the north-eastern region of Assam from early part of the eighteenth century.

In Assam there seems to have been little or no distinction of castes from professions and each caste or tribe practiced all the arts which are known in the country. They were farmers, traders, blacksmiths, carpenters, extractors of oil, potters, weavers, dyers etc, but they had not the art of shaving, washing or bleaching, working in leather or of making sweet-meats, butter and ghee. Barring a few professions, it is true; all others could be practiced irrespective of caste or creed. Thus goldsmithy, blacksmithy etc., could be adopted as professions by a Kayastha or a Kalita or by a Keot.

*c) Demography:* Demography is quantitative study of human population and changes in them that result from births, deaths and migrations. Human population holds the pivotal position in the socio-economic and political structure of a society. The significance of demographic changes lies in its impact on the administrative and political structure of the system. Assam is known as the melting pot of diverse cultural elements, the Indo-Aryans and the Austro-Mongoloids being the central one. As a result of the long-term migratory flow into it, Assam is linguistically and ethnically the most diversified State in India and even in the world context. Major components of its social mosaic are Hindus (64.89 per cent) and Muslims (30.92 per cent). In terms of language, the major indigenous language the major indigenous linguistic group is the Assamese. The schedule caste and schedule tribe communities represent 6.90 per cent and 12.40 per cent respectively according to the 2011 census (Goswami, 2013 in Deka 2013: 112-113). According to the census report of 2011, the total population of Assam is 26, 638,407, which constitute about 2.59 per cent of the total population of India (Population Census Report 2011. Higher population concentration was recorded in the districts of Kamarup, Nagaon, Sonitpur, Barpeta, Dhrubri, Darrang and Cachar. As per 2011 census, total population of Assam was 31,169,272. The total population of the state has increased from 26,638,407 to 31,169,272 in the last ten years with a growth rate of 16.93 per cent. The Assamese Hindus are the largest community people in Assam. The population of Assamese Hindus in Assam is 11,379,000 making up 36.50 per cent of Assam population at 2011 census. The People of India project has studied 115 of the ethnic groups in Assam. 79 69 per cent identify themselves regionally, 22 19 per cent locally, and 3

trans-nationally. The earliest settlers were Austro-Asiatic and Dravidians speakers, followed by Tibeto-Burman, Indo-Aryan speakers, and Tai-Kadai speakers. Forty-five languages are spoken by different communities, including three major language families: Austro-Asiatic (5), Sino-Tibetan (24) and Indo-European (12). Three of the spoken languages do not fall in these families. There is a high degree of bilingualism. In 2011, literacy rate in the state was 73.18 per cent. Male literacy rate was 78.81 per cent and female literacy rate was 67.27 per cent. In 2001, the census had recorded literacy in Assam at 63.3 per cent with male literacy at 71.3 per cent and female at 54.6 per cent. Urbanization rate is recorded at 12.9 per cent. The density of population in Assam which was 42 persons per sq km in 1901 census rose to 482 persons per sq km in 2011 census.

But not all those who return themselves as Assamese speaking are considered to be Assamese. The term Assamese is sometimes used to refer to those people who are citizens of Assam. In this sense it includes the tea garden labour and Maymensinghi settlers. More generally however, it is used to denote the indigenous and long settled inhabitants who are recognized as Assamese, not only in language, but also in the cultures and the way of life (Cantlie, 1984: 124). The vast numbers of people residing in the state live in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society and speak languages belonging to three major groups: Austro-Asiatic, Tibeto-Burman and Indo-Aryan (Goswami, 1992: 33). Assam is often regarded as the melting pot of a large number of ethnic tribes and races, living together in an environment of harmony and peace. At the time of the 1961 census there were 16307 inhabited villages in Assam with an average population of over 500 per sq. km (Census of India 1961, vol.iii, Assam: 113).

**d) Language:** Assamese is the main indigenous and official language of Assam, while Bengali holds official status in the three districts in the Barak Valley and is the second most widely spoken language of the state (Distribution of the 22 scheduled languages, census of India (Registrar General and census Commissioner, India 2001, January 4, 2014). Traditionally Assamese was the language of the commons (of mixed origin – Austroasiatic, Tibeto-Burman, Prakrit) in ancient Kamarupa and in the medieval kingdoms of Kamatapur, Kachari, Sutiya, Borahi, Ahom and Koch. Traces of the language are found in many poems by Luipa, Sarahapa, etc. in Charyapada (c. 7th–8th century AD). Modern Assamese language consists of two main currents. The speech

as represented by the Kamrupi and Goalpariya dialects of western Assam constitutes the main current of Assamese language flowing from one end of the state to the others. Moreover, Assamese in its traditional form was used by the ethno-cultural groups in the region as lingua-franca, which spread during the stronger kingdoms and was required for needed economic integration. Localised forms of the language still exist in Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh. The form used in the upper Assam was enriched by the advent of Tai-Shans in the 13th century (Gogoi, 1986: 120-125). Linguistically modern Assamese traces its roots to the version developed by the American Missionaries based on the local form in practice near Sibsagar (Siwoxagor) district. Assamese (*Osomeeya*) is a rich language due to its hybrid nature with its unique characteristics of pronunciation and softness. Assamese literature is one of the richest.

The word Dimasa etymologically translates to "Son of the big river" (Di- Water, ma-suffix for great, sa-sons), the river being the mighty Brahmaputra. The Dimasa word "Di" for water forms the root word for many of the major rivers of Assam and the North East India like Dikrang which means green river, Dikhow which means "fetched water", Diyung (huge river) etc. The Brahmaputra River is known as Dilao (Long River) among the Dimasas. Many of the towns and cities in Assam and Nagaland derived their names from Dimasa words. For example- Dimapur (a capital of Dimasa Kingdom), Dispur, Hojai, Diphu and Khaspur (Goswami, 1954: 34-35). Bodo is an ancient language of Assam. Spatial distribution patterns of the ethno-cultural groups, cultural traits and the phenomenon of naming all the major rivers in the North East Region with Bodo-Kachari words (e.g. Dihing, Dibru, Dihong, D/Tista, Dikrai, etc.) reveal that it was the most important language in the ancient times. Bodo is now spoken largely in the Western Assam (Bodo Territorial Council area). After years of neglect, now Bodo language is getting attention and its literature is developing. Other native languages of Tibeto-Burman origin and related to Bodo-Kachari are Deori, Mising, Karbi, Rabha, and Tiwa (Goswami, 1954: 34-35).

There are approximately 7 lakhs Nepali speakers spread all over the state forming about 2.2 per cent of Assam's total population. Majority of the Nepali speakers are found in the district of Sonitpur where over 3 lakh people speak in Nepali language.

There are speakers of Tai languages in Assam. A total of six Tai languages were spoken in Assam. Two are now extinct.

- Tai Phake

- Tai Aiton
- Khamti
- Khamyang (critically endangered)
- Ahom (extinct)
- Turung (extinct)

The Tai Ahom language (brought by Sukaphaa and his followers), is no longer a spoken language today. The language is receiving increased attention for research after centuries of usage by the Bailungs (traditional priests), (Gogoi, 1986: 134). Bengali is the official language in Barak Valley and the widely spoken language. Sylheti, a dialect of Bengali is mostly spoken in the region of Barak Valley. Sadri, a dialect of Hindi, Santali, Kurukh and Mundari is spoken by the 6 millions tribal population (Tea tribes ) spread in the tea garden dominated districts of Assam. They were brought as tea estate labourers by the British from the tribal heartland of central-eastern India to Assam during the 1860s. They are mostly found in the districts of Upper Assam and Bodoland Territorial Administration Districts.

***Economy:*** The economic life of a country is generally controlled by three factors, the geography of the landscape, the climate and the general habit of the people inhabiting it. Assam is furrowed by two large rivers, the Brahmaputra and the Barak, while the mountains and hills on the different fringes give rise to innumerable rivulets that help the irrigation of the land, augmented further by the largest amount of rainfall in the province. Inhabited by men of diverse ethnic origin in this topographical set up, the economic pattern of the land assumed diverse characters. If we agree to the view that the Austro-Asiatics were one of the earliest inhabitants of the land and then it may be inferred that they for the first time introduced there the cultivation of rice and certain common fruits and vegetables. They also seem to have introduced the method of taming the elephant and the horse.

Economy of Assam today represents a unique juxtaposition of backwardness amidst plenty. Growth rate of Assam's income has not kept pace with that of India's during the Post-British Era; differences increased rapidly since the 1970s. While the Indian economy grew at 6 per cent per annum over the period of 1981 to 2000, the same of Assam's grew only by 3.3 per cent. In the Sixth Plan period Assam experienced a negative growth rate of 3.78 per cent against a growth rate of 6 per cent of India's. During the post-liberalized era (after 1991), the gaps between growth rates of

Assam's and India's economy widened further. In the current decade, according to recent analysis, Assam's economy is showing signs of improvement. In the year 2001-2002, the economy grew in 1993-94 constant prices at 4.5 per cent, falling to 3.4 per cent in the next financial year. During 2003-2004 and 2004-2005, in the same constant prices, the economy grew more satisfactorily at 5.5 and 5.3 per cent respectively. The advanced estimates placed the growth rate for the year 2005-2006 at above 6 per cent.

In the 1950s, soon after the independence, per capita income in Assam was little higher than that in India; it is much lower today. In the year 2000-2001, per capita income in Assam was INR 6,157 at constant prices (1993-94) and INR 10,198 at current prices, which is almost 40 per cent lower than that in India. According to the recent estimates, per capita income in Assam at 1993-94 constant prices has reached INR 6520 in 2003-2004 and INR 6756 in 2004-2005, which is still much lower than the same of India (Deka, 1961: 32-45).

Sectoral analysis again exhibits a dismal picture. The average annual growth rate of agriculture, which was only 2.6 per cent per annum over 1980s, has unfortunately fallen to 1.6 per cent in the 1990s. Manufacturing sector has shown some improvement in the 1990s with a growth rate of 3.4 per cent per annum than 2.4 per cent in the 1980s. Since past five decades, the tertiary sector has registered the highest growth rates than the primary and secondary sectors, which even have slowed down in the 1990s than in the 1980s. Agriculture accounts for more than a third of Assam's income and employs 69 per cent of total workforce. Assam's biggest contribution to the world is its tea. Assam produces some of the finest and most expensive teas in the world. Other than the Chinese tea variety *Camellia sinensis*, Assam is the only region in the world that has its own variety of tea, called *Camellia assamica*. Assam tea is grown at elevations near sea level, giving it a malty sweetness and an earthy flavor, as opposed to the more floral aroma of highland teas. Assam also accounts for fair share of India's production of rice, rape-seed, mustered, jute, potato, sweet-potato, banana, papaya, areca-nut and turmeric. Assam is also a home of large varieties of citrus fruits, leaf vegetables, vegetables, useful grasses, herbs, spices, etc. which are mostly subsistence crops. Assam's agriculture has yet to experience modernization in a real sense and is lagging behind. With implications to food security, per capita food grain production has declined in past five decades. On the other hand, although productivity of crops increased marginally, still these are much

lower in comparison to highly productive regions. For instance, yield of rice, which is staple food of Assam, was just 1531 kg per hectare against India's 1927 kg per hectare in 2000-2001 (which itself is much lower than Egypt's 9283, USA's 7279, South Korea's 6838, Japan's 6635 and China's 6131 kg per hectare in 2001). On the other hand, although having a strong domestic demand, 1.5 million hectares of inland water bodies and numerous rivers and streams and 165 varieties of fishes, fishing is still in its traditional form and production is not self-sufficient.

Apart from tea and petroleum refineries, Assam has few industries of significance. Industrial development is inhibited by its physical and political isolation from neighbouring countries such as Myanmar, China and Bangladesh and from the other growing South East Asian economies. The region is landlocked and situated in the eastern most periphery of India and is linked to the mainland of India by a flood and cyclone prone narrow corridor with weak transportation infrastructure. The international airport in Guwahati is yet to find airlines providing better direct international flights. The Brahmaputra suitable for navigation does not have sufficient infrastructure for international trade and success of such a navigable trade route will be dependent on proper channel maintenance and diplomatic and trade relationships with Bangladesh.

Assam is a major producer of crude oil and natural gas in India. Assam is the second place in the world (after Titusville in the United States) where petroleum was discovered. Asia's first successful mechanically drilled oil well was drilled in Makum (Assam) way back in 1867. The second oldest oil well in the world still produces crude oil. Most of the oilfields of Assam are located in the Upper Assam region of the Brahmaputra Valley. Assam has four oil refineries located at Guwahati, Digboi, Numaligarh and Bongaigaon with a total capacity of 7 MMTPA (Million Metric Tonnes per annum). Bongaigaon Refinery and Petrochemicals Limited (BRPL) is the only S&P CNX 500 conglomerate with corporate office in Assam. One of the biggest public sector oil companies of the country, Oil India Ltd. has its plant and headquarters at Duliajan.

Although having a poor overall industrial performance, there are several other industries, including a chemical fertiliser plant at Namrup, petrochemical industries at Namrup and Bongaigaon, paper mills at Jagiroad, Panchgram and Jogighopa, sugar mills at Barua Bamun Gaon, Chargola, Kampur, cement plant at Bokajan, cosmetics plant of Hindustan Unilever (HUL) at Doom Dooma, etc. Moreover, there are other

industries such as jute mill, textile and yarn mills, silk mill, etc. (Deka, 1961: 32-45) Unfortunately many of these industries are facing loss and closer due to lack of infrastructure and improper management practices.

**f) Kinship system:** Man does not live alone in society. From birth till death he is surrounded by a number of people. Some of these people are his relatives, some are friends some are neighbours while all others are strangers and unknown to him. He is bound to all those people who are related to him either on the basis of blood or marriage. The relations based on blood or marriage may be close or distant. The bond of blood or marriage which binds people together in group is called kinship. According to the Dictionary of Anthropology, kinship system includes socially recognized relationships based on supposed as well as actual genealogical ties. These relationships are the result of social interaction and recognized by society. ‘The most universal and the most basic of these bonds are based on reproduction; an inherent human drive is called kinship’ (Mazumdar and Madan, 1990: 90). There are two kinds of such bonds found in the society. This is- 1) bond between spouses and their relatives on both side and bond between parents and their children and that between children of the same parents. “The Assamese recognize two categories of kin comprehended in the term *mitir-kutumba* i.e. affines and agnates. The *kutumba* is usually identified with the agnatic line or house (*bamsa*) and *bangsa* connected by marriage becomes affines (*mitir*) of one another” (Cantlie, 1984: 25). There are two consanguine groups- *bangsa* (the descent group) and the family (Cantlie, 1984: 25). In Assamese society the descent group is defined by descent in the male line from a common ancestor within seven generations (Cantlie, 1984: 26). Some say the descent group lasts forever and that no marriage should take place as long as any connection can be traced, but in practice few men can name their great grand fathers (Goswami, 1982: 53) In Assam commensality is seen as the defining criterion of a single family. In every household there is one kitchen and rice pounder. Division of a joint family is understood as eagling separately (Ali and Medhy, 1982: 106-109).

Affinity is conceived in terms of the translation of women, both physically and ritually from one descent group to another. Affinities usually persist for two generations. (Ali and Medhy, 1982: 136) A son in law is required to visit his wife’s parents at least three times a year at the seasonal festivals and his children will know and visit their mother’s house where their maternal uncle lives. The descent group is

defined by descent in the male line from a common ancestor within seven generations. Some say the descent group lasts forever and that no marriage should take place as long as any connection can be traced, but in practice few men can name their great-grandfather.

**g) Marriage:** Every kind of human grouping comes into being, and is maintained through a process of recruitment by which various persons become its members. In every human family the majority of its members are recruited into it by being born into it. But before children can be born, some women or men must be recruited into it. A family comes into being through such a communication of spouses. Marriage is the socially recognised form of such recruitment through communication. ‘Marriage is formal union of man and woman by which they become husband and wife.’ (Soanes, 2003: 548). The dharmasastra writers speak of eight forms of marriage- *brahma*, *prajapatya*, *daiva*, *arsha*, *asura*, *gandharva*, *rakshasa* and *paisaca*. These eight forms of marriage may be grouped under the following heads:

1. Marriage in which the father made a gift of his daughter- *brahma* and *prajapatya*.
2. Marriage which more or less resembled the sale of the girl, however insignificant or veiled that may be *daiva*, *arsha* and *asura*.
3. Marriage or union effected without the consent of the father or the guardian- *gandharva*, *rakshasa* and *paisaca* (Chattopadhyaya, 1990: 218).

One ancient custom that is followed even today among the higher castes of Assam or elsewhere in India is that, the would be wife should not be *sapinda*<sup>1</sup> or direct blood relationship of the groom. Though thus there is no doubt that we can trace the influence of Aryanism on the marriage system of ancient Assam, still it is not unlikely that the matrilineal society of the Khasis and the Garos may have influenced the *stri-acara* rites of the higher caste Hindus. On the other hand while according to the orthodox view, endogamy is the general rule as a restriction on marriage, “with the hill tribes there is usually no definite prohibition against marriage beyond the tribal limits, and endogamy is nevertheless well-established in practice (Chattopadhyaya, 1990: 224).

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<sup>1</sup> Sapinda relationship arises between two persons through their being connected by particles of one body.

In Assam every separate ethnic and religious group follow its own system of marriage though the majority of its population follow the Hindu system. Of the eight kinds of prescribed marriages only the *prajapati* system is now prevailing among the Hindus.

Among the Assamese Hindus, marriage is first contracted by negotiation and prohibited degrees on both sides are always carefully avoided (marriage-assam online portal/ [online.assam.govt.in](http://online.assam.govt.in)). Marriage is prohibited within the descent group for seven or nine generations reckoned by matrilineal descent from a common male ancestor. Marriage is also prohibited with the daughter's line consisting at her related by cognate decent from a common ancestor within 5 generations. (Cantlie, 1984: 89) In practice, however, marriage take place when the old people can no longer trace any relationship, possession of a common *gotra* (clan) name is also a bar to marriage (Ali and Medhy, 1982: 174-175). A *gotra* takes its name from a permit in ancient times and membership indicates relative patrilineal descent from the off springs or disciples who shared his grazing ground. In practice, however, the *gotra* system limits the choice of spouse only in the case of the Brahmins and perhaps a few *Kayastha* families, as almost all the other castes are members of *kashyap gotra* within which marriage is allowed (Cantlie, 1984: 90). Non Brahman castes require a *gotra* name only for the performance of Vedic rites and if as often happens a man does not know his *gotra*, the priest will assign him to *kashyap gotra* (Cantlie, 1984: 90).

One ancient custom that is followed even today among the higher castes like, *Haribhakata* (fellow initiate) acquires a common soul which enables them, even if of different castes to eat together. They address each other as *tavai* (father), *amoi* (mother). One cannot marry the sister of the other and cannot their children intermarry (Gogoi, 1990: 79). The same prohibition applies in the case of the *sakhi* (friend) of groom and the friend of bride who is closely associated with the pair in the wedding rites and become identified with them. The groom usually acts as his *sakhi* (Gogoi, 1990: 69). Marriage by negotiation and elopement are seen in the Assamese society.

**h) Religion:** Religion is an integral part of any community or society, necessary for its development. It is often considered as an organized approach for leading a fulfilling and happy life. Religion means 'the belief in and worship of a God or Gods or a particular system of faith and worship' (Soanes, 2003: 755). Hinduism, being the major religion in Assam, comprises about 64.9 per cent of the total population ([www.bharatonline.com](http://www.bharatonline.com)). There are two sects of Hinduism such as *sakta* and

*vaisnava* are found among the Hindu People of Assam (Sharma, 1990: 327). The common features of the religious practices of most of the primitive people may perhaps be named as fertility cult and ancestor worship often assuming the form of phallic worship and headhunting. These features may be identified in some way or other of the megalithic remains of ancient Assam. Since the practice of raising megaliths still continue with some of tribes, it is difficult to be defining about the date of these remains. Nevertheless, the megaliths, even those raise in recent times, afford us as a glimpse into the primitive religion representing the similar religious beliefs and practices. From earlier times *saktism*, the cult of worshipping a female Goddess is found in Assam. Traditionally Kamrupa has been recognized as the principal center of the *sakta* cult with its chief temple of Kamakhya. Through the ages Kamakhya has remained the most celebrated center of the *sakta* cult in Assam. The *Kalika Purana* has been composed in ancient Kamrupa for the very purpose of glorifying the Goddess Kamkhya. As related in *Kalika Purana* the genital organ of the Devi fell at Kamakhya, when her dead body has been carried hither and thither frantically by Lord Siva. The hill where Kamakhya is situated represented the body of Siva himself (Sharma, 1990: 317-318). A majority of Assamese Hindu is the *vaisnavas*. The *vaisnavas* do not believe in idol worship and perform the *nama-kirtana* where the glory of lord Vishnu is recited ([www.assam.org](http://www.assam.org)). Assamese *vaisnavism* is institutionalized at village level in the *namghar*. The *namghar* is the local community hall within which its members ordinarily live their lives. In every village there is at least one and usually several *namghars* whose members from a 'religious congregation consisting of a restricted association of household who combine specially for the religious purpose for maintaining a local centre of devotional worship (Cantlie, 1984: 144). The Hindus of Assam have certain peculiar customs and rituals which may be termed as the popular religion. The tribal contribution to the religion of Assamese Hindus is perhaps of the greatest order in the domain of this popular religion. As an example we may mention the *bihu* festival which is observed by the Hindus of Assam with a religious fervour. It will be seen that the kings often made gifts of land to the Brahmins on the occasion of the *Bahag bihu* and *Magh bihu* for gaining religious merits. On these occasions the Hindus say prayers and *naam-prasangas* and offer *naivedyas* as a part of their religious life. A judicious analysis however would show that the *Bahag bihu* had an origin in the primitive fertility cult, as evidenced by its songs and dances which are full of sexual symbols and

significance (Gogoi, 1990: 88). The *Magh bihu* too may be traced back to the primitive harvesting festival.

The other religions such as Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism etc. are also practiced in Assam. According to the 2011 census, 61.5 per cent were Hindus, 34.22 per cent were Muslims (Census of India, 2011). Christian minorities 3.7 per cent are found among Scheduled castes. Bodos account for 40 per cent. Other religions include Jainism (0.1%), Buddhism (2.0%) Sikhism (0.1%) and Animism (amongst ,Khamti Phake, Aiton etc. communities). Out of 32 districts of Assam, 9 are Muslim majority according to the 2011 census of India. The districts are Dhubri, Goalpara, Barpeta, Morigaon, Nagaon, Karimganj, Hailakandi, Darrang and Bongaigaon.

*i) Festivals:* Festival is that which we may call ceremony or merry making or a jubilee. These are the external expression of social behavior and the symbolic representations of situations. Modern festivals emanated from the beliefs and magical rituals of the ancient community. In the Oxford Dictionary the meaning of festival is- (i) a series of performances of music, plays, films/movies etc. usually organized in the same place once a year, a series of public events connected with the particular activity or idea (ii) a day or period of the year when people stop working to celebrate a special event, often a religious one (New Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary, 2005: 567). Festivals form an essential aspect of a culture. Assam has a rich cultural heritage as it is a land of composite cultures and it is a land of great social and cultural diversity. The development of culture of a society is expressed through its activities. It is closely related to the rites and rituals, art and practices of the society. Through the different periods of history; different ethnic groups have enriched Assamese culture with their contributions. Assamese people celebrate most colourful festivals because Assam is a perfect fusion of heritage of different tribes and sub tribes from time immemorial. The festivals of Assam are mainly agricultural, but also include religious and social flavours. From the various festivals and rituals one can easily understand the rich and raw culture of Assamese people. The major festivals of Assam are divided in four categories. These are (1) Religious festival (2) Agricultural festival (3) Folk festival and (4) Other festival.

The most important social and cultural celebration of Assam is the *bihu*. It is celebrated in Assam by both tribal and non-tribal communities and is basically seasonal and agricultural. There are three *bihus*- *rangali bihu*, *kangali bihu* and

*bhogali bihu*. This festival is observed with great enthusiasm irrespective of caste, creed and religious affinity. *Rangali bihu* is observed in mid- April. It is observed by dancing and singing in open spaces as well as in the houses. The second important *bihu* is the *bhogali bihu*, a harvest festival celebrated in mid January. It is celebrated with community feasts. The *kangali bihu* is observed in mid October. The name *kangali* means poor, because by this time of the year which is before the harvest is low in a common man's house (Gogoi, 1990: 90). The *bhatheli* or *suari* festival is primarily a magical rite associated with fertility cult current in the district of old kamrup, Goalpara and Darang. The Bodos of Assam also observe it as *bhatheli* meaning- going down the stream (Gogoi, 1990: 92). The *maho-ho* festival of the undivided districts of Kamarupa, Goalpara and Darang respectively show similarity of purpose. The *ambubashi* or *ameti* is another seasonal festival based on the fertility cult (Gogoi, 1990: 99). This festival is celebrated in Kamakhya temple with religious fervor. As most of the native population of Assam is *vaisnavite* Hindu, So that the cultural life of Assam is interwoven with the activities of two important cultural and religious institutions the *satra* and the *namghar* (www.assam.org, assamese people and their culture). The *vaisnavite* Hindu people observe all the *satra* centric festivals like- *doul jatra* (the festival of colours) *janmastami* (birth anniversary of Lord Krishna) *kirtana* (Death anniversary of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva). Especially at Barpeta *satra doul* festival is observed in a grand way. Seasonal festivals, such as Durga puja, Lakshmi puja, Kali puja, dewali, Sivaratri etc. may be considered as calendaric. The festivals of Muslims such as Muharram, Sabebat, Ramzan, and Idd-uz-zaha are calendaric. Similarly Good Friday and Christmas are also observed here. The non tribal Hindus, the tribals and the Muslims possess their own set of sacramental festivals associated with rites of life-cycle. The life cycle festivals are limited to birth, death and marriage rites. An important rite is annaprasanna, ceremony of putting rice in a child's mouth for the first time. The Tai-Ahom community celebrates death rite, known as the *medam-me-phi*, with elaborate procedure with oblation to the dead and sacrifices to the God (Sarma, 2013: 235).

**j) Food:** Every state of India has different food habits and style of cooking. Indian traditional cuisine is a blend of vegetarian and non-vegetarian food items. Assam is popularly known as the land of Red River and Blue Hills. Assamese food habits imply the food items consumed by the majority people of Assam. During medieval Assam

acquired and develop its own ethos in respect of food, drink, dress and articles of daily use and luxuries. In their food habits majority of the people were non-vegetarians, a majority belonging to upper castes took vegetarian diet. Even the Brahmans who were invariably vegetarians in almost all other regions of India were non-vegetarians in Eastern India. The digest-writers of Kamarupa on *dharmasastras* have also accepted, though with reluctance non-vegetarian diets for upper caste Hindus of Assam. The *Yogini-tantra*, (*Yogini Tantra*, 2/5/289-91) a work of the sixteenth century, gives a long list of fishes, animals and birds that could be offered to gods, goddesses and *sradhas* (memorial). The list of animals suitable for offering is goat, deer, musk-deer, whisk-deer, iguana, tortoise, hare, wild bear and rhinoceros (Sarma, 1994: 199). Rice was the main item of food. Assam produced varieties of fine, superfine and rough rice for different use. From different varieties of rice not only the two principal meals were prepared but also the breakfast and tiffin, viz. *muri*, *akhai*, *cira* (preparation from fried paddy and rice) were made. Cakes of different varieties were also prepared from pounded or powdered rice. The *Katha-gurucarita* gives a long list of sweet and dishes which included *dadhi* (curd), *dugdha* (milk), *ksira* (condensed milk), *lavanu* (butter), *ghrita* (clarified butter), *madhu* (honey), *paramanna* (rice boiled in milk sugar), *akhai* (parched paddy), *cira* (flatted rice), *zeni* (sugar), *puri-luchi* (wheat-cake fried in ghee), *pitha* (cakes prepared of rice powder) (Lekharu, 1952: 212) Sankardeva, in his rendering of a book X of the *Bhagavata Purana* gives an exhaustive list of different sweet and delicious eatables in different places (Sarma, 1994: 199). Some of these no doubt are found in the original Sanskrit texts, but most of them were local preparations. The preparations quoted in the Assamese version are various curries having different flavours: sugar-cane, *akhai*, *cira* sweet balls of rice-powder, molasses, fragrant banana, curd, milk, honey, ghee, rice-cakes, ripened jack fruits, rice boiled in milk and sugar, a mixture of milk, condensed milk, cream, sugar-candy, refined sugar and preparation of fried in ghee (Sarma, 1994: 199). Nowadays also such kinds of dishes are eaten by the Assamese people. *Dal* (pulses), *paleng-sak* (garden spinach), *jali komora* (tender pumpkin), *jira-marichbata* (pasted pepper and cumin seeds), *kacu-sak* (edible arum shoots), *kach kaal* (green banana), *rau-machar gada* (back portion of the carp fish), *citalar kalathi* (the lower thorn less part of the *cital* fish), soup of *magur* fish and *mula* (radish), with the sol fish with jujube fruit, tender castrated goat, cane-shoots, fried pieces of *brinjal*. Assam is very rich in different varieties of citrus fruits, the juice of which with or

without mixing water was also served. Among high caste Hindus indulgence in wine or spirituous liquor was considered a great sin. But tribal people cultivated the habit of drinking liquor from childhood and it is a must in all their social and religious gatherings. Liquor is brewed from rice, and is called *lao-pani* or *joo*. The Assamese are addicted to chewing *tamol-pan* (areca-nut and betel leaves) with lime and tobacco. Sometimes clove, cardamoms, camphor etc. were added to make it tasteful. It is offered to guests as the first item of entertainment; the offering of *tamol-pan* in a tray or *sarai* is considered a great honour to person or persons concerned. The *Yogini Tantra* has remarked that the women of Kamarupa are habitually addicted to *tambuls* (Sarma, 1994: 199). The staple food of the Assamese people is rice. Typically, an Assamese plate would contain *bhat* (rice) with *dal*, *masor jool* (fish curry) or *saak* and *bhaji* (assam en.wikipedia.org). Rice is one of the main dishes in Assam and variety of different rice are grown and eaten in different ways- roasted, rounded, boiled or just soaked. Fish curry or simply fried fish is one of the most important dishes. Birds like ducks and pigeon are also used as dishes. Pork and Mutton dishes are mainly popular among the younger generation. Another favorite combination can be loochi with curry or *bhaji* which can be vegetarian or non- vegetarian, and *asar* (pickle). Two main characteristics of a traditional meal in Assam are *khar* (apatiter) and *tenga* (swore). The food is usually served in bell-metal utensils. Some portable items made from rice are *muri*, *ankhoi*, *chira*, *sandah* (made from rice) etc. *Pitha* is a kind of rice cake makes an integral food item of the Assamese plate during the festival of Bihu and other major occasions.

**k) Art and Crafts:** The tradition of a place finds expression in the local art and craft. Even a cursory look at the various handicrafts and handloom products made in Assam will amply justify this statement. The artists and artisans of Assam are known far and wide for their exquisite craftsmanship. In addition to the world famous silk products, bamboo and cane products of Assam have also occupy an important place in the handicraft industry of the state. With the spread of the *vaisnavite* movement the mask and paintings industry also developed. There is a sense of simplicity and styles in the skills of the Assamese crafts man and this is what makes their products so unique and charming.

The abundance of bamboo and cane in the forest of Assam has made it easier for the local people to use these raw materials in the manufacture of various bamboo and

cane products. Handloom comprises of one of the oldest industries in the northeastern state of Assam. It is known far and wide for its rich textures and designs. So much importance is attached to the industry that it is customary for every young Assamese girl to acquire the skill to weave, in order to qualify for marriage. Similarly the goldsmith knew how to produce excellent products with new designs and textures. Masks are used in theatrical performances depicting various characters and this is one of the most popular industries of Assam. Masks are known as *mukhas*, are said to be the base of the Assamese culture and tradition. They revolve around the Assamese tribal myths and folktales. Since ages, these masks have been the centre of each and every cultural event in the state. In the same way metal craft industry is one of the oldest cottage industries of Assam. The traditional paintings of Assam served as a source of inspiration to thousands of art lovers across the country. Wood craft is also traditional art and culture of Assam.

**1) Education:** Education means the acquisition of knowledge and experiences as well as the development of values, skills and attitude which help a person to lead a better or wonderful life. From the epigraphic and literacy sources it can be safely presumed that the ancient Indian system of education and curriculum are prescribed by the *dharma-sutras* (Sarma, 1990: 287). Those were also followed in Kamrupa. The formal education imparted in *tols* and *pathsalas* was not widespread as to cover all sections of population. It was mainly confined to the upper stratum of the society, like- the Brahmins, the Kayastas and the Kalitas. Under the *gurukula* system, from the *upanayana* (initiation) till the ceremony of *samavartana* (convocation) the pupils studied at the house of his teacher and carried on his academic life according to the code of conduct prescribed by the *dharma-sutras*. According to Gautama a student should devote twelve years to study one Veda. The curriculum for all the castes was not identical, although a modicum of certain fundamental branches of studies was imparted to all. In the case of Brahmin pupil, emphasis was laid on the knowledge of the Vedic studies. With the passage of time the Vedic study came to be regarded as a secondary importance for the Kshatriyas and the Vaishyas. In the Arthashastra of Kautilya, it is held that the education of the Kshatriyas, especially of the royal princes, should include the study of the triple Vedas. Similarly the education prescribed for the Vaisyas was vocational-oriented besides a superficial knowledge of the Vedas and Vedangas (Sarma, 1990: 289). So far as the study of the Vedas and ancillary branches including different systems of philosophy are concerned, the

burden of imparting instruction was shouldered by the Brahmans. But the vocational or technical education befitting the Kshatriyas and the Vaishyas was probably left to professionally skilled persons who either acquired proficiency through the hereditary process or imbibed through professional guilds.

Nowadays Assam occupies a distinct place in the field of education among the whole north eastern region of India. The overall literacy rate of Assam is 64.28 per cent, where the literacy rate of male is 71.93 per cent and female 56.03 per cent. Large numbers of educational institutions are established here imparting education to the students of entire north eastern region. Formal education starts in schools with elementary, secondary, higher secondary. Then the students move to a college and pursue education in a stream he is interested in. The Directorate of Elementary Education of Assam organizes numerous activities to universalize Elementary Education (UEE). The Elementary education in Assam includes classes from Class I to Class VII, within the age group of 6 - 14 years of students. Secondary and higher secondary schools in Assam covering class tenth and twelfth respectively. Assam has set up many educational institutions for higher studies following high standards to impart education in the field of engineering and management. The Government of Assam provides free and compulsory education for children till the age of 14. The requirement for technical education has been increasing gradually as a result the government has paid more attention in this field and set up many esteemed institutions in Assam. Assam has 5 universities namely Indian Institute of Technology, Guwahati (Guwahati), Assam Agricultural University (Jorhat), Dibrugarh University (Dibrugarh), Gauhati University (Gauhati), Tezpur University (Tezpur) and Assam University.

**m) Dress and Ornaments:** Assam manufactures three kinds of silk, viz, *endi* (cotton silk) *muga* (a kind of golden coloured silk) and *pat*. (Sarma, 2013: 202) *Gomceng* and *mejankari* were the finest varieties of silk which were mainly used by the gentry and members of the royal family. Usually cotton clothes were worn, but on ceremonial or official occasions apparels of *muga* and *pat* were used. In medieval biographies of *vaisnavite* preachers we come across certain areas or villages known for producing silk. Budha Ata, one of the foremost disciples of Madhabdeva hailed from Tantikuchi where silk cloths were produced. Ananta Kandali, one of the junior contemporaries of Sankardeva, in his autobiographical reference to his ancestry gives an interesting

description of the locality in which silk was produced in abundance. He refers to Hajo which probably included Suwalkuchi which still produces *muga*, *pat* and *endi* ((Sarma, 1994: 203). Haliram Dhekiyal Phukan gives a list (Haliram.112-3) of dresses used in Assam during the pre- British days. The Vaisnava literature and the Manasa cycle of kavyas contain numerous references to apparels used in early Assam.(Ramananda, a biographer Sankardeva of 17<sup>th</sup> century, describes the dress of the great saint thus: *sire sukla pag, pitapacara gawat/raktavarna bhuni pindhi katti prdesat/divya malatira mala pindhiya sirat/sugandha candana lipinsarva sarirat* means with white turban on the head, a yellow wrapper on the body, a garland of galati flowers on the turban and sweet scented candana paste all over the body, Sankara dressed himself. The common man used only two pieces of cloths, viz. *bhuni or dhuti* as the lower garment and *pacra or cellang* (light wrapper) as upper wear. A cotton towel having coloured borders was also indispensable. The use of *jama* (coat) *chauga* and *askan* or *chapkan* (long flowing shirt) and *ijar* (pant) probably came to be used by the nobles and officers towards the later part of Ahom rule, though the Koch kings and nobles of western Assam and Cooch Behar might have used them earlier because of the influence of Muslim Bengal. A short coat, called *mirjai* reaching upto the waist was also used. According to the *Deodhai Buranji*, *tangali* (waist band) *bachowal* (waist cover) and *hashati* (hand-towel) were adopted by the Dihingiya Raja from the Barabhuyans of the north bank after shifting them to the south bank in 1505 (Rajkumar, Itihase suwara casata Basar,p.843). The use of *paijar* (a kind of shoe) was the exclusive privilege of the kings and nobles, the common people were not entitled to put on *paijar*. They used *kharam* (a wooden sandal) and *phanti* (a flat wooden slipper with straps) when necessary.

As a protection against the sun and rain people used country made *japi* (sun-shade) of various dimensions. Some of these were decorated with artistic designs and ornamentation. The smallest one resembling a sola-hat was used only against the sun. The biggest one called *barjapi* about seven or eight feet in diameter was symbol of prestige and nobility. It was usually carried by a servant alongside the lady or the noble. Married ladies used *sarudaiya japi*, the surface of which was often decorated with red velvet and designs. The earliest reference to umbrella is found in the *Manasa-kavya* of Mankar, an early sixteen century poet. Mankar describes Madhavdeva as carrying an umbrella and a stick while approaching *Durga* for alms (*Hate lathi laila gosain kandhe laila chati/ calia devara deva yathai parvati*).

The Assamese women were expert weavers. There was a strong belief that unless a wife could clean cotton, spin yarn and weave martial attire for her husband within a night he might not return victorious from the fight. Wearing apparel of the females generally made of cotton was mainly *buku kapor*, *riha* or a scarf and *mekhela* or a waist coat. These two with a *challeng* (wrapper) formed the whole dress of women. The finest textiles both cotton and silk, referred by Dhekiyal Phukan were hitherto worn by the members of the royal family and dignitaries (Sarma, 1994 in Barpujari 1994: 204).

Ornaments of gold, silver, ember and copper studded with jewels were used by both males and females. As in the case of dress, restrictions existed in use of ornaments also. According to satsari Asam Buranji, Bhaga Raja (1641-1644) passed prohibitive orders not to use gold ornaments by the commoners. The use of luxurious articles was also prohibited. How far these restrictions were observed in practice cannot be ascertained because a large variety of ornaments are recorded in medieval literature and chronicles. Probably no such restrictions existed in the regions ruled by the Koches and Muslims. Madhava Kandali of the 14<sup>th</sup> century mentions *batrisa alamkara* (thirty two varieties of ornaments) specifically mentioning *mukuta* (crown), *kundala* (ear-ring), *satasani* (seven stringed necklace), *napura* (anklet), *pagari* (probably tinkling bells) *kankana* (wristlet or bangles) *keyura* (armlet) *ratnanguli* (gold ring), (Lekharu, 1952: 211).

Haliram Dhekiyal Phukan, gives an exhaustive list of ornaments used by the people of Assam (Haliram, 114-5). According to him no male or female in Assam remained unadorned without ornaments. Men used to wear *keru* (clove-shaped ornament) and *loka-para* in ears, *mala-mani* (necklace of coral beads) around the neck and *gamkharu* (bangles) in the wrist. The common people, who barely managed to live from hand to mouth, could not afford to put costly ornaments but a chain of coral beads very often adorned their necks. Besides the ornaments noticed in the early literature and chronicles noted above- the Assamese also used *bena* (a necklace having a crescent-shape pendant), *gejera* (almost like a *bena* with a slight difference), *sithipati* (an ornament worn on the parting of hair), *dugdugi* (a bejeweled pendant), *cakali* (a circular gold ornament of the neck) and a few others. Besides gold and silver, ornaments of bronze were used by the poor people.

Nowadays Assamese people wear very simple dresses and mostly weak hand loomed clothes. The traditional dress worn by womenfolk of Assam is called *mekhela-chadar*

or *riha-mekhela*. This traditional dress is made from cotton or silk and *muga* silk which are the pride of Assam. Now a day's some women and almost all the girls like to wear *salwar* suit, *sari* and other modern dresses. The traditional dress worn by the men folk of Assam is *churia* or *dhoti* and *kameez* or shirt and over it a *chadar* known as *cheleng* is spread ([www.jaiaaiaxom.com,assam](http://www.jaiaaiaxom.com,assam)).

Assam is a peripheral state of India and seems hardly a part of India, geographically and politically. The indigenous people who have settled here for a long time are called Assamese. People outside Assam knew very little about its people. The ancient name of Assam was Kamrupa. It was also known as Pragjyotishpura. This is a name with which Assam was referred to in the two great epics of the Ramayana and Mahabharata. Assam state is surrounded by hills and mountains on three sides, but it is not entirely cut-off from Tibet of China and south East Asia lying beyond them. There has been movement of men, materials, plants and animals directly and indirectly between Assam and the above mentioned areas. Assam, along with rest of the north-east India is transitional zone between south Asia and south-east Asia. Locationally Assam is bordered by two foreign countries, namely, Bhutan and Bangladesh and seven Indian States, namely, West Bengal, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura and Meghalaya. Assam is situated in an area of tropical monsoon climate. Its location, situation and topography have given it its own type of climate which is somewhat different from the other parts of India. It has a tropical monsoon type of climate with dry winter and hot wet summer, and later varies from part to part within the State depending on location, physiographic and other physical factors. Assam is fairly rich in vegetation and it supports numerous varieties of animals from worms and insects to mammal. It will be evident that Assam was the home of the two major races of mankind, the Caucasoid and the Mongoloid and also the Australoid. With the advent of the Mongoloids of the Tibeto-Burman stock from the north and north east, the Australoids were pushed to the more infertile regions. In course of time the Mongoloids and early Caucasoid partially or wholly absorbed the old Australoid strains, yet in the lower stratum of the population the traces of the later element are discernible. Evidently Assam is the meeting place of diverse ethnic strains which contributed to the evolution and development of different racial groups and culture of north-eastern India. The illegal influx-triggered high population growth of Assam is tremendously straining the economic and political set

up of the state, creating immense pressure on the land use, natural resources and existing socio-cultural fabric unique to the region. The excess population of the unauthorized immigrants and their descendents is a potent cause for retardation of progress as well as a threat to peace and stability in the state. Villages of Assam are usually made up of families from a number of distinct castes. The caste system although it exists, is not as prominent as in other parts of India. Among the Assamese, a form of Hinduism exists with two contrasting emphases, that of caste and sect. In caste, one finds polytheism, hierarchy and membership by birth, and collective ideas of humanity, mediation of ritual specialists, rites conducted in Sanskrit through priest, complexity and extravagance of ritual, multiplicity of image and salvation through knowledge or works. In sects, one finds monotheism, egalitarianism among believers, membership by invitation, individual ideas of humanity, direct access to spiritual revelation, worship conducted in the vernacular by the congregation, simplicity of worship, incarnation of God in the written word and salvation through faith and mystical union. Occupation is an important factor in the making of castes, artisans and specialist caste usually being considered lower status than cultivators and numbers of castes are subdivided on this basis. Assam has all the important attractions like hill resorts, pollution free environment, water, natural game sanctuary etc. which together provide an excellent potential for an important tourist belt. The emerging development perspective in terms of economically integrating the North East with the south east Asia holds out a great promise for the development of the region in general and Assam in particular. To achieve these goals, collective initiatives should be taken for developing a unified single market by resolving border disputes, removing barriers to movement of goods, labour and capital, developing inter-state transport and communication, harmonizing policies and developing common strategy for research and development, utilizing water resources and developing tourism. The *bamsa* is a closely-knit affective group of neighboring houses characterized by mutual support and strong feelings of involvement and comprehension. Men are usually very interested in the affairs of their agnates whether they are on good terms with them or not. In Assam every separate ethnic and religious group follow its own system of marriage through the majority of its population follow the Hindu system. Of the eight kinds of prescribed marriages only the *prajapati* system is now prevailing among the Hindus. The fluid nature of marriage in Assam enters in to the nature of the caste process. Caste affiliation at the local level is chiefly defined by kinship and affinity.

The festivals of Assam represent different traditional behavior constituting a composite culture of the state. The festivals follow the same pattern of founding on a myth, celebrating at appropriate time of the year or at a time befitting the occasion and merry making, but always maintaining the essence of association with the natural processes. The festivals of Assam serve a great cause by encouraging different communities to live in harmony, irrespective of belief, custom and level of development. Assamese food habits imply the food items consumed by the majority people of Assam. Because of the geographical characteristics of the area in the broader sense, both the tribal and the non-tribal people use particular food items as their principal food for lunch and dinner. Nowadays like other people, Assamese people especially the new generations are attracted to have junk foods. Assam is the confluence of a number of tribes and culture and this is reflected in the traditional handicrafts but in recent times due to the effects of globalization changes have been seen in the patterns and designs of Assamese art and culture. The artists created a tradition of about many years of art and painting in Assam. A few artists of the *satras* kept the flame burning till early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The devotion of the artists to the cause of art, which imbibed from the aesthetic of the *bhakti* movement to create something great and grand, contributed to their survival. Assamese as an Aryan language has retained every distinctive characteristic of the mother language, but it has discarded some elements to borrow more efficient ones from languages locally available. Nowadays Assamese people wear very simple dresses and mostly weak hand loomed clothes. Globalization has influenced the young generation to wear the modern dresses and ornaments also.

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