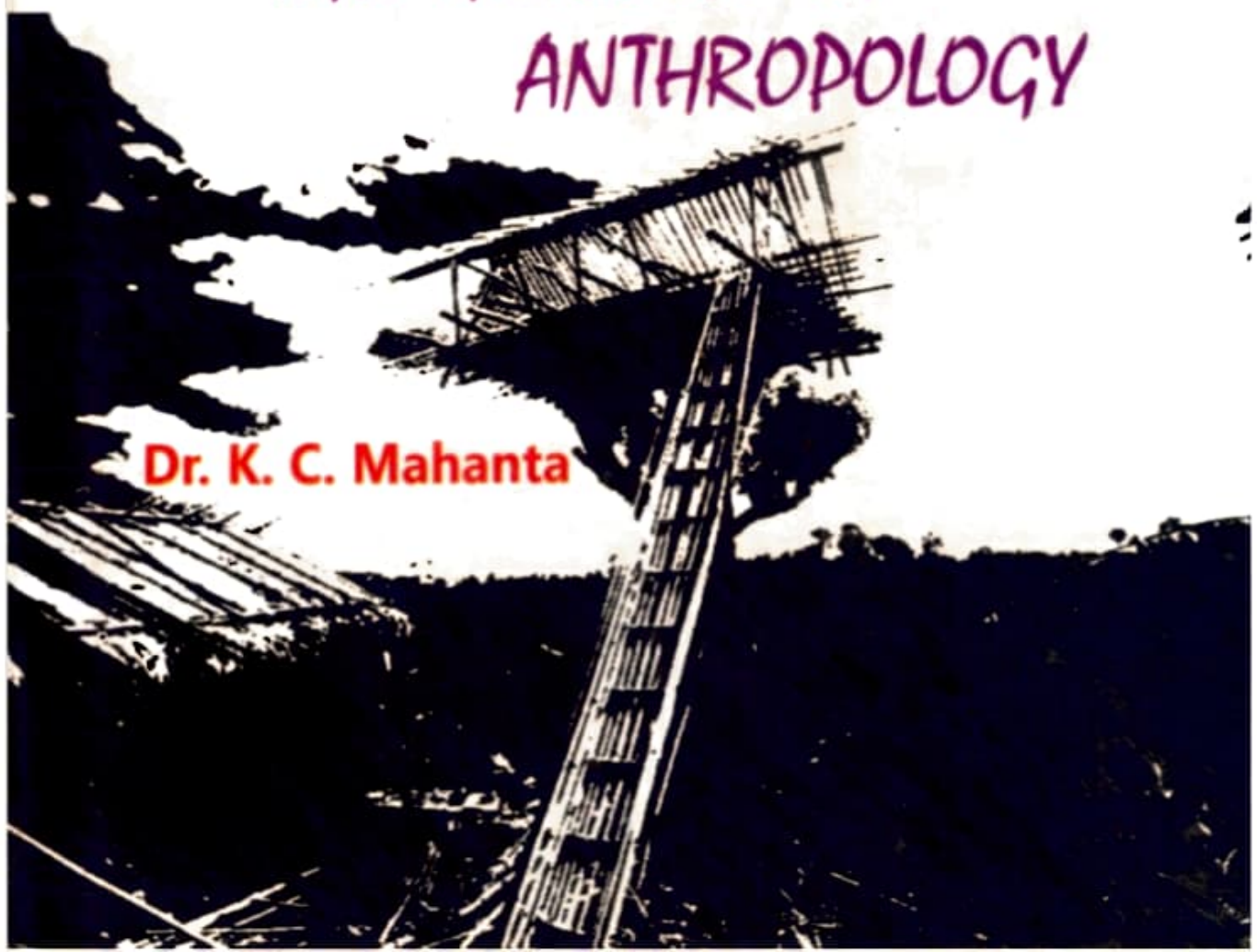




North East India

*THE HORIZON OF
ANTHROPOLOGY*

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NORTH EAST INDIA

The Horizon of Anthropology

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KALPAZ PUBLICATIONS

DELHI-110052

North East India : The Horizon of Anthropology

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ISBN: 81-7835-656-2

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**Published in 2008 in India by
Kalpaz Publications
C-30, Satyawati Nagar,
Delhi-110052
Phone : 9212729499
E-mail: kalpaz@hotmail.com**

***Lasser Type Setting by: Rudra Computer Graphics, Delhi
Printed at : Singal Print Media, Delhi***

Vaishnavism in Assam and its Impact on the Noctes of Arunachal Pradesh

The sub-Himalayan ranges in the North-east India are the habitat of a large number of distinctive tribal folk with diverse dialects and socio-cultural norms. The people have been in contact with the non-tribal population of the Brahmaputra valley in Assam since last several centuries. Vaishnavism, one of the several major Hindu faiths, has been having impact on but one tribe of the North-east, namely, the Noctes, since more than three hundred years back.

The tribes of North-east India formed a socio-political unit of pre-British Assam comprising the hill ranges and the valley of the Brahmaputra. Assam is known to be the great melting pot of diverse races and cultures. Men and material and communication of thoughts and ideas have been mixing up, though at a very slow pace, since time immemorial, throughout the whole sub-Himalayan region. Despite this mobility, not many tribes inhabiting the hill ranges did come under the ambit of the Vaishnavite cult, that once swept the length and breadth of the valley region. Prior to the advent of this new wave in the sixteenth century as a pan-Indian religious resurgent phenomenon religion and socio-cultural life in Assam and for that matter in the whole of North-east India, was

beset with heterogeneous socio-cultural, norms and ideologies. Distinctive cultural norms prevailed among various ethnic groups inhabiting the region. Religious beliefs and practices were far from being organised into any creed or ideology. Personal and group safety could, then be realized through magico-religious performances and worship and control of nature and natural phenomena. The people were largely animistic, having beliefs in multitude of supernatural beings.

This paper is based on both literary work and field survey. The historical perspectives that have come up in this paper have been derived from various sources on Assam history. Unstructured interviews for a little more than three months over a period of four years since 1979 were undertaken for understanding the present day functioning of the neo-religion professed by the people.

Ethnic Background

North-east India comprises a long, narrow, alluvial plain through which flows the mighty river Brahmaputra and a chain of mountains that are the extension of the Himalayas in the north. The northern region is covered with these high mountains and was largely inaccessible. According to Hutton, racial and cultural affinities of the hill tribes of North-east India that can be traced with those of South-east Asia, Indonesia, Philippines etc. had their passage across the North-eastern mountains since palaeolithic times (cf Sharma, 1979) Sharma opines that the present day use of certain crude agricultural tools made of iron, much alike the North-eastern Neolithic tools and practice of the most primitive slash-and-burn cultivation by the Garos, the Kukis and various Naga tribes of the region, are suggestive of their survivals from neolithic and pre-neolithic times.¹ He cited Godwin Austin reporting in 1875 about the Kukis of the State of Manipur using prehistoric celt-like stone tools set into a wooden handle for weeding grasses in the *jhum* field. The people who entered North-east India through various passes from South-east Asiatic countries during prehistoric time were of Mongoloid stock. They largely settled in the hilly regions keeping the alluvial plains almost barren and desolate till the historic period when we see the region being populated by

advanced literate immigrants from the great Indo-Gangetic plains of Northern India. The various tribal groups formed the basic substratum of population in the North-eastern region before the advance and large-scale settlement of the Aryans in the Brahmaputra valley. The Kiratas, the Mlehas, the Asuras, the Nishadas and others, referred to in the great ancient Hindu scriptures like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, were none but the autochthons of the region. They had their own diverse linguistic affiliations that were known to be akin to Tibeto-Burman and Mokhmar groups of languages² (Choudhury, 1966).

Ethno Religious Features

These sub-Himalayan tribal groups of people are believed to have professed till recent past animistic beliefs and practices along with the worship of nature which was a common phenomenon among the tribes of the region. This can be understood when we see the sun and the moon being personified as gods called Dony-Polo³ and worshipped by a number of present day Arunachal tribes. The people were obviously polytheists, believing in the worship and propitiation of multitudes of gods and spirits. Barua (1969) is of opinion that offerings of sacrificial blood were known to be the customary feature of all religious beliefs and practices. Various animals like elephants, cows, goats, buffaloes, ducks, fowls etc. were known to be sacrificed in the ceremonies. Despite being polytheists the people were not lacking in the concept of a high god, or creator god, who was conceptualized as being an omniscient, omnipresent and omnipotent, benevolent supernatural being. Yet worship through idol did not develop among any tribal community during this period. Supernatural beings were attributed anthropomorphic value and quality. The all-powerful high god manifests its existence and power as a guardian deity of the community as a whole. Propitiation of the supernatural beings through idoltry was a development that came to be superficially added to, but not incorporated in, the animistic beliefs and practices after the tribals came into contact with Vedic people. Besides having a belief in the existence of the creator god, the tribal communities performed various rites and ceremonies and made offerings to their respective

spirits and supernatural beings that were believed to be the presiding deities of the household, of the paddy field, of the forest and of the river and the stream.

Vedic Cults

The immigration of the pre-Aryan groups of people from the Indo-Gangetic basins to the Brahmaputra valley continued ever since the Rigvedic Period dating back to 3,000 years B.C. in the Indus basin down to the reign of the Pala kings in Assam in the tenth and the eleventh centuries A.D., when it appeared as a formidable and perceptible force in the region. The successive immigrations over the centuries brought forth a hard-core pan-Indian religious system in the form of Vedic ritualistic ideas during the pre-Vaishnavite period in Assam. The Vedic ideas consisted of the cult of fertility, or the worship of the phallus; which was symbolized in the form of the Mother Goddess Durga, Manasha or Kali whose propitiation was accompanied with animal sacrifices. The cult of fertility formed the basis of Saktism and Tantrism that flourished and developed a strong foundation in Assam. The temple of Kamakhya situated atop the Nilachal Hills near Guwahati, the capital of Assam, is the seat of tantrik and Sakti worship. Gogoi (1976) is of opinion that the *Kalikapurana* of the eleventh century A.D. gives us a vivid account of Kamrup, as pre-thirteenth century Assam was known as being the land of Tantrik worships. These and other evidence such as temple relics in various parts of Assam show that Saktism was embraced as popular faith by the common masses, especially in the valley region. Gogoi also opines that the ancestors of Sankardev and Madhavdev, the chief Vaishnava abbots of Assam in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, worshiped Sakti with animal sacrifice and offerings of blood, a practice that stands in sharp contrast with that of Vaishnavism.

Despite the enormous popularity of the Tantrik and Sakti cults in the pre-Vaishnavite Assam, the faith could hardly act as an unifying integrative force as it lacked any soft and gullible elements that the common man especially the illiterate tribal people could imbibe and practise. The impact of multifarious doctrinaire religious conceptions that characterised the successive waves of

including the peripheral tribal territories, during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. It swept across the tribal regions especially those lying adjacent to Assam. One such region was Tirap, the land of the Noctes of the State of Arunachal, who embraced the new faith without for saking much of their traditional beliefs and practices.

The Vashnavite Cult

In this context it will be relevent to understand the basic ideological Vashnavite tenets as propounded by Sankardev and Madhavdev and subsequently modified into more than one form by their followers. Sankardev's creed was based on the monistic theory of god and His *Awatar* (incarnation), Sri Krishna, as the ultimate source of refuge of the initiated. The doctrine "with its allegiance to one Supreme God, its abhorence of animal sacrifice, its freedom from esoteric rites and its simple ceremonial consisting only of hymns and prayers" is known as the *Eka Saran Bhagavati Dharma* in Assamese (Barua Bahadur : 1933: 308). The followers of the Vaishnavite school of Mahapurush Sankardev are called Mahapurusias after the epithet "Mahapurush" meaning the 'great soul'. The initiated ones are to pass through a strict code of restrictions in eating, drinking and in manifesting public conduct, They are prescribed to live an austere life and perform regular worship with mere devotional songs and prayer and strictly forbidden to offer animal sacrifice and drink. The offerings of the Vaishnavites consist of unparboiled rice, gram, fruit, curd and molasses. As against the idol-worship of the Sakti cult, Sankardev introduced certain far-reaching innovations in Hinduism in the form of congregational prayer with devotional songs, music and dance and dramatical performances called *bhaonas* to enthuse devotional feelings in the mind of the common people. The essence of his philosophy was derived from the Bhagvat Geeta, the holy scripture of the Hindus, to propagate it among the masses, he established *Satras* or monastries, modelled after the pattern depicted in the Naimisharanya of the Bhagvat Geeta. The *Satras* came into existence in the first part of the sixteenth century as an indispensable part of the Assamese socio-cultural life. In the early

sorts of spiritual deprivations in the other world. *Asarantias* are treated as outcastes and impure and debarred from taking part in religious and social functions.

In the light of the pro-Vaishnavite hysteria prevailing in the sixteenth century Assam, an attempt is made in this paper to examine the extent of Vaishnavite impact upon a tribal community, namely, the Nocte of the district of Tirap in North-east India who are known as a lone people amidst a large number of tribes to embrace Vaishnavism some two and half a centuries back. The Nocte country and the whole mountainous territory lying to the north and east of the Brahmaputra valley has been the habitat of a miscellany of tribes varying in language and culture. The Ahoms maintained a policy of conciliation with occasional display of force towards the tribal people. The relationship between the two groups of people was far from being enemical by and large. With a view to assimilating non-Ahom local people into the Ahom-fold socio-cultural and political alliances were forged. The Ahom administration was so geared as to enable the non-Ahom tribal people to have free and friendly intercourse with the people of the plains. The age old good neighbourly relationships received a set back when statutory restrictions through what is known as Inner Line Regulation were imposed on the entry of plains' people in the hills by the Britishers.⁷

The Noctes

The Noctes form one of the dominant tribes in the Tirap district of the State of Arunachal in North-east India with a population of 98,306 souls (Census of India, 1971). The people are distributed in nearly 63 villages that are widely scattered in mountainous regions, a few of them being located at a height of more than 4,000 feet. In 1961, the district headquarter township was established at Khonsa that is located on a plateau over 5,000 feet high. In olden days Khonsa was one of the prominent villages which enjoyed socio-political prerogatives over a number of other Nocte and their cognate Wungcho villages. Nocte villages are, in general, thickly populated with rows of houses situated along a ridge, or, often, at the top of hillocks. The tribe includes four regional

groups, namely, the Tut Nocte, the Laju or Barat Nocte, the Hakhun Nocte and the Hawa Nocte. Each regional group is divided into large number of exogamous clans. The regional grouping is based on socio-political allegiance of the people to the paramount chief called Raja who exercises his traditional socio-political prerogation over this region. At the village level the regional grouping is not at all significant; here it is the clan that counts most for marriage and intra-tribal activities.

Intercourse with Assam

There are many Nocte villages adjacent to the plains of Assam, and the people have long been accustomed to the plains for trade and seasonal work in the tea gardens of Assam. Ever since long past, the Noctes were in the habit of paying regular visits to a number of Upper Assam towns like Naharkatiya, Joypur, Margherita, Dibrugarh etc. These places were regularly visited by the Noctes, especially in the winter months of December to February, for procuring certain essential commodities like salt, match boxes, iron-tools, bell-metal dishes and beads and bangles from the plains. The river Buridihing which has its source from Tirap mountains flowing northward to join the Brahmaputra, served as a water way to take Nocte entrepreneurs to the areas in the lower reaches of the river.

It can well be perceived that free intercourse and movement of men and material, long before the British period, actually laid the foundation of socio-cultural relationship between the Noctes and the Assamese in the past. One can notice this relationship to be most outstanding in the field of socio-religious contact. The Vaishnavite movement in Assam had a direct effective influence on the Noctes of Tirap and was instrumental in converting a large section of the population into Vaishnavism.

It is with a view to making a first-hand enquiry about the practice of Vaishnavism by the Noctes, that I visited a village called Lapnan in 1978, near Khonsa. It could be learned from an interview of a number of knowledgeable persons of the village that they adopted the Vaishnavite faith some twelve to fifteen generations back at the instance of Goswami Adhikar of Chaliha Bareghar Satra

of Mezenga near the town of Nazira in Upper Assam⁸. Further investigation brought to light a folk-tale, or a folk-belief, regarding adoption and practice of Vaishnavism by the Noctes. It goes as follows: Nearly fifteen generations elapsed that in one of the regional groups in the Nocte country, one **Lotha** Khunbao was the Raja. Once in his dream he received a divine command to undergo *saran* under a Vaishnavite Guru and adopt religious faith under him. Accordingly, he went out in the company of a few attendants in search of the Guru. One day on the bank of the Buridehing river, somewhere near the town of Naharkatiya, he put into two pieces of green bamboo tube a certain quantity of a gold and silver separately and let them flow along the current of the river. And he in the company of his attendants was following the course of the bamboo tubes down the bank of the river. A man from the Baregher Satra which was then under the spiritual headship of one Ramdev Ata was taking bath in the river. He tried to catch hold of the tubes, but they drifted away. He then informed Ramdev Ata of the matter. The Ata offered prayer at the river bank putting up a *sarai* containing prayer offerings and invoked the tubes reverentially to come closer to him. The tubes floated toward the river bank and the Ata caught hold of them.⁹ **Lotha** and others being impressed by the miracle followed the Ata to the *Satra*. All the inmates of the *Satra* got terrified on seeing the ferocious-looking Noctes. Then **Lotha** introduced himself as the Raja of the Noctes and expressed his desire to get converted into the faith of the Ata. The Ata declined to initiate him as kings and women were customarily beyond the scope of ritual initiation as per Vaishnavite norm. At this the **Lotha** got mentally upset and decided to commit suicide for not getting himself initiated under the Ata, who then intervened and advised him to have patience.

A few days passed. One evening the Ata was participating in staging a drama in which he acted putting on soiled and dirty clothes and thus perfectly disguising himself in the act. But **Lotha** could easily identify the Ata. The Ata was pleased. He immediately agreed to initiate **Lotha** and all his subjects into the Vaishnavite faith. From that time **Lotha Khunbao** became famous as an ardent devotee and came to be known as Norrottam¹⁰ for his godly character.

It is known from historical records that Ramdev Ata was the first apostle to bring in new elements in the *Eka Saran Bhagavati Dharma* so as to make it acceptable to the tribal folks. The result was the emergence of a new cult called *Kal-Sanhati* at the instance of Ramdev Ata. It virtually defied teetotalism, the pristine feature of the *Eka Saran Bhagavati Dharma*, and propagated partaking of meat and fish and drinking of liquor along with secret night-worshipping. The elemental modification of the Vaishnavite faith paved the way for its acceptance by the Noctes.

Conversion to Vaishnavism

In the absence of any historical, or documentary, evidence it is difficult to ascertain the original form of Vaishnavism that entered into the Nocte society. Looking to the present day status of the Nocte Vaishnavism, one can safely say that it was not the pristine form of *Eka Saran Bhagavati Dharma* as preached by Sankardev and Madhavdev, but an amalgam of certain Vaishnavite features with traditional animistic belief. The people made choice of those Vaishnavite elements that appealed to them and fitted to their socio-religious norms most. It is to be noted in this connection that the fundamental features of the *Eka Saran Bhagavati Dharma* no longer existed by the time Ramdev Ata started his proselytising work in Upper Assam. After the demise of Madhavdev, his principal disciples developed sectarian feelings, and as a result a four-fold division emerged from the original Vaishnavite faith. Ramdev Ata who converted the Noctes into Vaishnavism belonged to one such division already referred to above as *Kala-sanhati* that was founded on the basis of performance of certain esoteric devotional worship. It prescribes the use of meat and drink as offerings to Hara and Parbati, the supreme divine couple of the Hindus, - features that are essentially characteristic of a Tantric, or esoteric cult. Thus the original Vaishnavite concepts became highly metamorphosed in order to suit and fit the exotic socio-cultural norms of the tribal masses of Upper Assam and those of the hill regions. The basic tenets of *Kala-sanhati* cult as enunciated by Ramdev can well be comprehended from a series of orally handed down devotional songs called *Yugut Vicar* still sung by devotees, both male and female at

ritual congregations. It is through the ceremony of *Saran* imparted by Ramdev that the Noctes entered into the fold of Vaishnavism without much losing faith in their traditional tribal concepts. *Eka Saran Bhagavati Dharma*, unlike Vedic concepts, could be embraced by all and sundry without distinction on the basis of caste, creed or birth. Yet it had posed as an obstacle to its adoption and practice by the Noctes to whom meat and drinks form the primary items of food in their day-to-day menu. It is here in relaxing the restrictions on the use of dietary items that the Vaishnavism displayed a good deal of flexibility so as to widen its horizon to be acceptable to the Noctes. Unhampared by any restriction on the consumption of traditional food items, the Noctes by and large underwent initiation into the order of the reformed Vaishnavite sect of *Kala-sanhati* under the spiritual hardship of Ramdev Ata.

Conclusion

Vishnavism could make headway among the Noctes on account of two inherent factors of the new faith : One, the people are impressed not much by the concept of surrender to one God or Lord Krishna meaning *Eka Saran* but by the equalising spirit of the *dharma* or faith. Second, the people developed a fascination, or rather an inclination, for undergoing *saran* in order to earn what they call *dharm*, that is, religious merit. Whenever there arises an individual or collective sense of crisis or abnormality, they make it a point to visit the *Satras*, especially the Chaliha Bareghar Satra of Nazira, for the purpose of earning *dharm*. This is believed to be efficacious to help to avert any imminent abnormal situation. People are seen to aspire after *dharam* which they believe, gives them healthy life, good harvests, plenty of wealth, abundance of games in the forests and many children.

As in Assam, the Nocte villages, too, have *namghars* that serve as a place of congregational worship when the Satradhikar visits the village once a year or two. The visit of the Satradhikar provides the people with an occasion for unusual religious activity in the village. It is an occasion for novices for undergoing *saran* by accepting religious directives from the Satradhikar. *Sisyas* offer the "Satradhikar *sidha-bhojani* and *guru-kar*, their annual ritual liability, and thereby, they believe, they earn *dharam*.

The Nocte Vaishnavite faith is conspicuous by the absence of any devotional song, dance or staging of any religious drama called *bhowna*, the cardinal features of pristine Vaishnavite faith. These were all extra-religious devices to popularise the Vaishnavite faith among the Assamese masses, but they did not find their expression among the Noctes. These features in fact never got into the community at all as there was no systematic missionary effort at mass-proselytizing the people through their use as media for religious teaching. What Vaishnavite traits are seen at present among the Noctes were all chosen and acquired by the people themselves on their own accord, and are being followed up by the present generation. It is through choice that the Noctes have since adopted and practised certain select traits of the *Eka Saran Bhagavati Dharma*. And those traits are those that serve the people's immediate purpose most. Prospects for material prosperity and individual and group well-being had been the motivating force in the acceptance of Vaishnavism in conjunction with traditional animistic beliefs. The new concepts, however, could hardly flourish and expand its horizon of influence over the last three centuries and odd and have remained as a superficial adjunct to the traditional tribal religion ever since.

Notes

1. Ever since the British occupied North-east India in 1826, the Garos, the Kukis, the Nagas and many other tribes has their geo-political identification with the State of Assam. Some of these erstwhile Assam tribes now belong to the new States of Manipur, Nagaland, Mizoram and Arunachal that have been carved out of Assam in the post Independence period in India.
2. The Tibeto-Burmans and the Moxhmar are two important sub-families of the Indo-China linguistic family of India. The Moxhmar speakers are believed to be the Hills of the earliest inhabitants of proto-historic Assam. Presently they are confined in the Khasi Hills of the State of Meghalaya. The Tibeto-Burman sub-family comprising three groups viz. Naga, Kuki-Chin and Bodo, includes all the surviving non-Aryan

languages of the plains of Assam, the Garo Hills and the North Cachar Hills.

3. Donyi-Polo, the Sun-Moon duality, is endowed with light that illuminates the world and lifts the cover of darkness. Donyi-Polo does not symbolize the creator god but stands aloft in an ethical grandeur above the rest.
4. Casteism, a complex, all pervading, socio-religious system, of the Hindus in general is based on occupational specialization. Throughout his life, a Hindu is conscious of his caste affiliation.
5. In general, none of the multifarious sects of Hinduism, in the course of its long history, save Vaishnavism, did indulge in systematic proselytisation. Ever since its inception, Vaishnavism, however, has been having a zeal for its propagation.
6. The Ahoms, often called the Tai-Ahoms, form one of the major groups of population in Assam. They are the offshoot of the great Tai or Shian group, who entered Assam, from Upper Burma by the north-east route in the early part of the thirteenth century, with a religion, culture and political system of their own. In course of time they got Hinduised and gave up their language and adopted Assamese. The Ahoms reigned over Assam for nearly six hundred years till 1826, when the British annexed the Ahom territory with British India.
7. Inner Line Regulation was enacted in 1873 in order to bring under control the commercial relations of British tea planters and others of the Brahmaputra valley region with the hill tribes. As per provision of the Regulation no outsider could go without an official pass beyond a certain line that was drawn along the foothills of the whole northern and north-eastern tribal area.
8. Past time is invariably referred to structurally by the Noctes. Here the time is recounted in terms of generations.
9. Sarai is a bell-metal tray fitted on an identical metal stand. In the Assamese society it is an object that act as a symbol of prestige of its possessor. The larger the size, the greater is the prestige value.

- 10 Norrotam-Etymologically 'noro' means 'man'; 'ottam' meaning 'the best'. 'Norrottam' the best of man.

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Vaishnavism Among the Noctes : An Ethnographic Study

Since time immemorial the entire North East India comprising primarily the northern sub-Himalayan forest belts and the snow and rain-fed river system of the Brahmaputra and the Barak with their sprawling narrow valleys has formed the homeland of diverse socio-ethnic and socio-linguistic communities. Amidst these diverse landscapes, the valley of the Brahmaputra has since formed the fountain-head of great traditions (Redfield, 1956 : 42) radiating various socio-cultural norms to the outlying peripheral regions mostly inhabited by multiple tribal folks in the North East. The process of interpersonal contacts between the people of the valley and those of the outlying highlands over the last more than two millennia has been constantly at work bringing in a good deal of enculturations and assimilations of the people's norms and material components in the hills as also in the valley. Apart from material components for day-to-day use, there has been a constant flow of aesthetic ideas from the valley region to the highlanders over the last more than two thousand years. From time to time the ideological components entering the tribal lands brought in refinement and awakening in the tribal life process to a certain degree amidst a host of age-old traditional norms. It might be noted the

Brahmaputra valley region received most aesthetic socio-cultural components from the heartland of the Indian sub-continent ever since Vedic times. The pan-Indian caste system, the various Vedic faiths and rituals and observances, family patterns and marriage systems, the kinship systems, etc., all developed and got nourished over several millennia in the heart of the vast sub-continent. All these basic socio-cultural traits got percolated through the length and breadth of the country including the far-off Brahmaputra valley. Most of these pan-Indian norms got consolidated and eventually assimilated amongst the basically non-tribal population of the valley. Some of these select pan-Indian norms came to be imbibed by the tribal population of the region. One such specific aesthetic component of socio-cultural life was the Vaishnavite faith that was cherished and adopted by a singular tribe of the North East, namely, the Noctes of Arunachal Pradesh nearly three hundred years back. The age-old beliefs and practices among them were far from being organised into any creed or ideology. Personal and group safety and welfare could then be realized through magico-religious performances and worship and control of nature and natural phenomena. The people were largely animistic, having beliefs in multitude of supernatural beings.

The paper is based on both literary work and field survey. The socio-historic outlines incorporated in the paper have been derived from various sources of Assam history, chronicles, folk-tales and folk-stories. Unstructured interviews for a little more than three months over a period of four years since 1979 were undertaken for understanding the present day functioning of the neo-religion adopted by the people.

The People and the Habitat

The Noctes form one of the major tribes of the Tirap district of Arunachal Pradesh occupying the central region of the district. The habitat is most undulating with hills ranging from 2500 ft rising to 6000 ft in altitude towards the Burmese (Myanmar) border. It is a country full of luxuriant evergreen commercially important vegetation. A rich variety of wild and domestic animals and birds comprises the fauna of the area. The Nocte land is criss-crossed by

the Tangsa and the Singpho. Concerning the head size, the Noctes are predominantly dolicho to mesocephalic, their head being the shortest and narrowest of all the three other groups of tribesmen. Also the Noctes possess the smallest head circumference of all the other three groups. The Nocte face is of mesoprosopic and mesene type. While the Noctes possess the longest nose of all the three groups, in mean nasal index, they (the Noctes) come under mesorrhine class. Concerning occurrence of ABO blood groups, the frequency of A blood is higher than B. With regard to finger ridge pattern among male Noctes, whorl, and loop occur almost in equal frequencies, the whorl and loop ratio being more or less 1 : 1. Among female Noctes, loop predominates.

Intercourse with the Brahmaputra Valley

Ever since the inception of Ahom sovereignty in Assam, the Noctes had maintained close relations with the Assamese of the Brahmaputra valley. The evidence of the early relations could be had from some of the material possessions preserved by some Nocte chiefs since the days of the Ahom kings. The Noctes who were called the Nagas by the Assamese people used to come down to the plains for trade. The Ahoms had control over them, and this control was mainly for the possession of the brine springs. The British since around fourth decade of the last century recorded various events among the Noctes in their annual administrative reports.

There are many Nocte villages adjacent to the plains of Assam; the people of these villages have long been accustomed to the plains for trade and seasonal work in the tea gardens of Assam. Ever since long past, the Noctes were in the habit of paying regular visits to a number of upper Assam towns like Naharkatiya, Joypur, Margherita, Dibrugarh, etc., especially in the winter months of December to February. These visits were undertaken for procuring certain essential commodities like salt, match boxes, iron tools, bell metal dishes, bowls and buckets and beads and bangles from the plains. Such visits by Noctes to the plains have become few and far between since the onset of the eighties as Khonsa, the district headquarters town, and other townships developed by leaps and bounds over the years. Prior to the development of vehicular surface

traffics to the Nocte country till late fifties of the 20th century, the river Buridihing which has its source from the Tirap mountains flowing northward to join the Brahmaputra served as a water way to take the Nocte entrepreneurs to the areas in the lower reaches of the river. It can well be perceived that free intercourse and movement of men and material, long before the British period, actually laid the foundations socio-cultural relationship between the Noctes and the people of Brahmaputra valley in the past. One may note that this relationship was most outstanding in the field of socio-religious interaction. The Vaishnavite movement in Assam had direct effective influence on the Noctes of Tirap and was instrumental in converting a large section of the population into Vaishnavism.

Traditional Religious Features

By far all tribesmen the world over appear to be polytheists. The tribal people of North East India also have not been an exception to this universal norm. Animistic beliefs and practices involving the worships and propitiation of various gods and tutelaries have since time immemorial formed the core of the religious ideology among the Noctes, as among other North-eastern tribesmen. Most of these beliefs and practices are based on, or emanate from, the worship of nature. The people thus worship and propitiate multitudes of gods and spirits for personal as well as group welfare and for averting untoward events of life. Despite being a polytheist people, they also manifest faiths in the existence of a high god or creator god, who is conceptualized as being an omniscient, omnipresent and omnipotent, benevolent supernatural being. Supernatural beings are attributed anthropomorphic value and quality. The all powerful high god manifests its existence and power as a guardian deity of the tribe as a whole. Propitiation of the supernatural beings through idolatry is certainly a development that has come to be superficially added to, but not incorporated in, the animistic beliefs and practices, after the tribesmen came into contact with Vedic people. Besides having a belief in the existence of the creator god, the tribal communities perform various rites and ceremonies and make offerings to their respective spirits and

spiritual beings that are believed to be the presiding deities of the household, of the village, the forest, the river and the stream.

Popular Traditional Belief

The Noctes' conceptualization concerning the existence of the high god and the tutelary supernatural beings is a highly variable one. No two Nocte villages manifest identical ideology in respect of the nature and attribute of the high god or the supernatural beings. Nevertheless, the Noctes in general believe in the existence of a high god whom they call *Jauban*, *Jongban* or *Tesong*. He dwells in the earth being the cause and effect of all happenings in the life of an individual. He manifests a duality of character - both good and evil. His benevolent temperaments brings in happiness and prosperity and his evil disposition is accompanied with miseries and misfortunes. These two aspects are referred to as *Kat Jauban* and *Wang Jauban* respectively. In some villages the two aspects are manifested by *Rang Jauban* and *Ha Jauban* the former dwells in the sky and the latter in the earth looking after and protecting the village.

The Noctes also believe in the existence of many other spiritual beings dwelling in the jungles, ditches and rivers and streams and causing various ailments like fever, cough, dysentery, etc. The soul of a person dying unnatural death is believed to turn into a dreadful spirit. People are mortally afraid of such a spirit. In order to avoid the dreadful spirit of a person dying an unnatural death, the body of the deceased is highly mutilated with a view to immobilizing the spirit.

Apart from the belief in a array of spirits and demons, the Noctes perform a variety of rituals that are believed to be efficacious for the welfare and well-being in the life of man. The Nocte believes that proper performance of rituals can bring about economic betterment and prosperity in the life of an individual. Further performance of certain rituals whenever occasion demands can avert the incidence of death, disease and misfortune.

Having had a cursory study of Nocte traditional rituals and beliefs, it is pertinent to gauge the salient features of the Vedic cults that prevailed in Assam prior to Vaishnavite florescence in the sixteenth century.

Vedic Cults

It is a fact of history that immigration of the pre-Aryan groups of people from the Indo-Gangetic basins to the Brahmaputra valley continued ever since the Rigvedic period that dates back to 3000 years B.C. The flow of immigrants from the Indus basin that was obviously a slow and steady process over the centuries continued down to the reign of Pala Kings in Assam in the tenth and the eleventh centuries A.D. By this time, the pan-Indian immigrants came to be a formidable and perceptible force in the Brahmaputra valley region. The successive immigrations over the centuries brought forth a hardcore pan-Indian religious system in the form of Vedic ritualistic ideology during the pre-Vaishnavite period in Assam. The Vedic ideas consisted of the cult of fertility, or the worship of the phallus, that came to be symbolized in the form of Mother Goddess Durga, Manasha or Kali. Ever since this proto-historic time of Naraka and Bhagadatta of the Mahabharata fame, the seat of the Sakti cult symbolized by Mother Goddess Durga, alternately, also called Mother Goddess Kamakhya in Assam has been in existence at a temple atop a hillock called Nilachal to the west of the city of Guwahati. The Kamakhya temple as it is called is "famous for its practices in magic and sorcery in the medieval history of India" (Goswami, 1960 : 37).

The cult of fertility that developed eventually had its basis of Saktism and Tantricism that flourished and had its sway all over Assam. Gogoi (1976) is of the opinion that the Kalikapurana of the eleventh century A.D. gives us a vivid account of Kamrup, as pre-thirteenth century Assam was known, as being the land of Tantric worships and ritualism. Apart from the Kamakhya temple, many temple relics in various parts of Assam show that Saktism was embraced as a popular faith by the common masses, especially in the valley region. Gogoi (ibid) also opines that the ancestors of Sankardeva and Madhabdeva, the two chief Vaishnava abbots of Assam in the fifteen and sixteen centuries, were the ardent followers of Saktism with animal sacrifice and offering of blood, a practice that sharply contrasts with the tenets of Vaishnavism.

The enormous popularity of the Tantric and Sakti cults in the pre-Vaishnavite Assam proved to a fragile one eventually at

the advent of the Vaishnavite faith with its lofty but simple thematic appeal. The esoteric cults of the pre-Vaishnavite could hardly act as a unifying integrative force as they lacked any soft and gullible, elements that the common man especially the illiterate tribesmen could imbibe and practice. The pre-Vaishnavite doctrinaire religious conceptions that characterised the successive waves of the pre-Aryans and the Aryans, could hardly have any impact whatsoever on the people other than those of the valley region. Consequently, the tribesmen of the outlying hilly areas remained outside the pale of the pan-Indian dogmatic esoteric cults. The complex philosophy involved in these cults could hardly be imbibed by the preliterate primitive tribesmen of the North East. The Tantric forms of religious beliefs and practices of the Hindus were structurally akin to the animistic belief and practices of the tribal inhabitants of pre-Vaishnavite greater Assam. Notwithstanding this similarity, the pre-Vaishnavite tenets of Hinduism, on account of having rich literary medium of expression, could have no impact upon the illiterate tribal folks of the region. A high extraneous sense of caste superiority coupled with a sense of religious and socio-cultural chauvinism on the part of the pan-Indian immigrants probably acted as a barrier against spread and penetration of socio-religious ideas among the tribal masses of greater Assam. Prior to the advent of Vaishnavism in the sixteenth century, there was no proselytising mission of any kind in Assam, nor was there any direct contact between the immigrant neo-settlers in the Brahmaputra valley and the tribal masses of the region. Lack of continuous day-to-day direct contact between the valley-dwellers and the highlanders practically precluded any exchange of socio-cultural norms and ideology among the two sets of people. It is through the egalitarian spirit and a sense of humanism and fellow feeling on the part of the Vaishnavite exponents in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that the neo-faith could penetrate into sections of certain tribal groups of people of the region. The Nocte of present day Arunachal Pradesh form one of the outstanding tribal groups of people that embraced Vaishnavism long before western proselytisation came into vogue in this part of the country around early nineteenth century.

Eka Sarana Bhagavati Dharma

In this connection it is worthwhile to look into the pristine ideological tenets of Vaishnavism called Eka Sarana Bhagavati Dharma as enunciated by its exponents Sankardeva and Madhavdeva in the sixteenth and seventeenth century and subsequently modified into more than one form by their followers. Sankardeva's creed was based on equality and brotherhood. Its philosophy was founded on the monistic theory of God and *Awatara* (incarnation), Lord Sri Krishna, as the ultimate source of refuge of the initiated. The doctrine "with its allegiance to one Supreme God (*Adwaitabad*), its abhorrence of animal sacrifice, its freedom from esoteric rites and its simple ceremonial consisting only of hymns and prayers" form the salient features of the Eka Sarana Bhagavati Dharma in Assamese (Barua, 1933 : 308). The followers of the Vaishnavite School of Mahapurusha Sankardeva are called Mahapurusias after the epithet "Mahapurush" meaning the "sublime soul". The initiated ones called the "Saraniyas" are expected to observe a strict code of socio-ritual discipline and are supposed to pass through a strict code of restrictions in eating, drinking and in pursuing the socio-religio-cultural life. They are strictly forbidden to offer animal sacrifice and drink and are prescribed to live an austere, pious and puritanical life performing regular worships and singing and reciting of devotional songs and saying prayers in the morning and evening. The ritual offerings of the Vaishnavites consist of unparaboiled rice, gram, fruit, curd and molasses. With the advent of Sankardeva's monistic doctrine, the age-old idol worship of the Sakti cult waned and its place was steadily taken over by certain far-reaching innovations in Hinduism in the Brahmaputra valley in the form of congregational prayer and devotional songs to the accompaniment of the playing on the *Khol*² or *Mridong*³ and *Tal*⁴. Sankardeva's most remarkable unique innovation in the preaching of Vaishnavism is manifest in the introduction of dance and music and dramatical performances called *bhaonas* as media of propagation. These unique devices were adopted in order to enthuse devotional feelings in the mind of the common people who got motivated adopting the neo-faith in no time. The essence of Sankardeva's Vaishnavite philosophy was

multifarious purpose as a prayer house, a venue of village assembly, a cultural school, a village court or as an agency of social control. A *namghar* is, in fact, a mini parliament in every single village in Assam.

A *Satra* as a socio-religious institution functions under the religious and spiritual authority of an executive cum religious head called Mahanta or Satradhikar who is assisted by a deputy known as Dekaadhikar. A Satradhikar holds office for life. After his demise, the office is succeeded by his deputy, the Deka-adhikar. A Satradhikar is a spiritual guide and a teacher of spiritual knowledge. He is one who is supposed to be well versed in most spiritual literatures and legends. It is the Satradhikar who is also called *Ata* provides spiritual teachings and guidance to the devotee-disciples called *bhakata* or *sishtyas*. The process of imparting this spiritual value to devotees under a Satradhikar is called *Saran*, that is, initiation into the order of the Vaishnavite faith. *Saran* as a life long effective process introduced by Sankardeva brings about discipline and serenity in the material pursuits of life of the initiated. It is the spiritual recognition of a devotee or an adherent of the faith. Sankardeva formulated *Saran* as constituting the following elements: *nam* (simple utterance of the name of Sri Krishna as God incarnate in devotional songs, prayers and recital of scriptures), *deo* (Sri Krishna), *guru* (spiritual guide) and *bhakat* (congregation of devotee-disciples or self individual). Sankardeva by his extraordinary skill and intellect, devised diverse methods through the use of self-composed songs, verses and couplets and instrumental music, tune, art, dance and dramatical performances to inculcate the intent of surrender to God incarnate, Lord Krishna. He made diverse aesthetic elements of culture as adjuncts to the spread of the Vaishnavite faith among the Assamese masses, preaching the creed of *Eka Saran*, that is, surrender to one Supreme God Almighty, Lord Sri Krishna. The missionary and proselytizing activities of Sankardeva and his closest disciple Madhavdeva brought about an era of great Vaishnavite movement and religious transformation among the downtrodden and low caste backward people. Himself a great poet, playwright, composer, artist and thinker and philosopher of the devotional or *Bhakti* school,

interviewed. It could be learnt from a cross-section of village elders that their forefathers some 15 generations ago adopted the Vaishnavite faith from the Ram Dev Ata of Chaliha Bareghar Satra of Mezenga near the town of Nazira in Upper Assam.

The Noctes are a singular tribe and a lone people to embrace Vaishnavism nearly two-and-a half centuries back amidst a large number of tribal groups inhabiting the sprawling whole mountainous territory to the north and east of the Brahmaputra valley. It is not that the Noctes adopted pure undiluted pristine Vaishnavism. By the time the Noctes came to practise Vaishnavism, it underwent a good deal of modification especially after the demise of the prime abbot Sankardeva and his close associate and follower Madhavdeva. It might be noted that Sankardeva introduced neo-Vaishnavism in Assam with the prime objective of weaning away the lowly so-called low-caste and untouchable people. Being in the lowest rung of the socio-cultural hierarchy, they were in fact the downtrodden section of the population who professed the age-old Vedic *Varnashrama* dharma¹⁰. The pursuit of the Vedic norms has ever since created the highly rigid caste-based social stratification in the Hindu society as a whole, paving the way for breeding atrocious discrimination between the so-called high castes and the low castes. Sankardeva's neo-Vaishnavism threw a ray of hope for ending this age-old social discrimination. It enthused a sense of equality and brotherhood among all adherents of the neo-faith. The change over to the new behavioural socio-cultural ideology is manifest in the Vaishnavite scriptural epithet "*Kukkura-Gardabha-Chandalaro-Aatma-Ram*", meaning literally and freely "even the scavenger, the dog and the ass have the similar sublime souls". The faith ordains in adherents simply to utter the name of Sri Krishna and to listen to His name being uttered and sung and to follow a puritanical teetotal life. A large section of the Assamese people regardless of caste, creed, language or faith, got converted into the new order of life. Sankardeva himself initiated a large number of Brahmins and Sudras including Kaibarttas and other low caste people besides a Muslim, a Garo, a Bhutiya, a Mishing, a Naga, a Kachari and an Ahom. During the life time of Sankardeva the Eka Saran Bhagavati Dharma flourished and remained intact.

restrictions on the consumption of traditional food items, the Noctes by and large underwent initiation into the order of the reformed Vaishnavite sect of Kala Samhati under the spiritual leadership of Ram Dev Ata.

Conclusion

The Noctes are a turbulent warlike tribe. The history of almost every one of the villages in the Nocte country is replete with treacherous head-hunting raids. Apparently the tenets to Vaishnavism with its serene sublime philosophy of surrender to one God, *Eka Saran*, in the person of Sri Krishna could hardly be fitted with the socio-cultural ethos of the people. The people being obsessed with the annual ritual of head-hunting drive, Vaishnavism certainly stood out as an anti-thesis of the people's age-old norms. Despite this social incompatibility, Vaishnavism could make headway among the Noctes on account of two inherent factors of the new faith. One, the people are impressed not much by the concept of surrender to one Supreme Almighty God in the person of Sri Krishna meaning *Eka Saran* but by the egalitarian spirit of the *dharm* or faith. Second, the people developed a fascination, or rather an inclination, for undergoing *Saran* under a preceptor in order to earn what the Noctes call *dharam*, that is, religious merit. The people treat *dharam* as immensely valuable; it can avert various mishaps and misfortunes. Whenever there arises an individual or collective sense of crisis or untoward happening, the Nocte make it a point to visit the *Satras*, especially the Chaliha Bareghar Satra of Nazira, for the purpose of acquiring *dharam*. It could be learnt from the Noctes themselves that their *Guru* of Chaliha Bhareghar Satra also used to visit the Nocte villages quite regularly till the fifties of the last century. In the second half of the century the visits of the *Guru* have become few and far between. Yet the people have never parted with the faith. They are seen to aspire after *dharam* which they believe gives them healthy life, good harvest, plenty of wealth, and abundance of games in the forests and many children.

As in Assam, some Nocte villages also have miniature *namghars* that serve as a place of congregational worship at the

time of the Satradhikar's visit. The visit of Satradhikar provides the people with an occasion for unusual religious activity accompanied with great merriment and rejoicings. It is an occasion for novices for undergoing *Saran* by accepting, religious codes of conduct from the Satradhikar. *Sisyas* or the disciples offer the Satradhikar *Sidha-bhojani* and *Guru-kar*, their annual ritual liability, and thereby, believe, they earn *dharam*.

The Nocte Vaishnavite faith is conspicuous by the absence of any devotional song, dance or staging of any religious drama, called *bhaona*, the cardinal features of the Eka Saran Bhagavati Dharma. These were all extra-religious devices to popularise the Vaishnavite faith among the Assamese masses. In accordance with Assam's puritanical Vaishnavite observances, recital of scriptures and singing of religious chorus called *nam kirtan* by a congregation of devotees is held at the *namghar* on every *gurubar* or Thursday. The Noctes who live a very hard and arduous life are very much preoccupied with foraging for day-to-day food from morning till evening. Concern for sheer survival negates most aesthetic diversions including congregational assemblage and prayer. Further certain extra-religious devices like dramatical performances never got into the community at all as there was no systematic missionary effort at mass-proselytizing the people through their use as media for religious teaching. What Vaishnavite traits are seen at present among the Noctes were all chosen and acquired by the people themselves on their own accord. It is through choice that the Noctes have since adopted and practised certain select traits of the Eka Sarana Bhagavati Dharma. And these traits are those that serve the people's immediate purpose most.

In recent years the Noctes evinced interest in adopting some new features like holding and practising of *nam-kirtan*, *bhaona*, etc. Datta (1978 : 253) reports that since 1966 Nocte disciples were imparted training in performing *nam-kirtan* for running *namghars* and that Sri Sri Gopal Krishna Dev Goswami, the Satradhikar of Chaliha Bareghar Satra, performed *bhaona* of 'Ram Bijoy', 'Kalkunjabadh', 'Khatasur Badh', 'Laba Kusar Yudha', 'Khudrakar Yudha Yatra' and 'Dimba Kunja Badh' in the *namghars* at Namsang, Borduria and Khonsa. Traditional aspirations for material

prosperity and individual and group well-being have since kept the people attached to some superficial features of Eka Sarana Bhagavati Dharma in conjunction with the traditional animistic beliefs. In view of the acceptance of some new features of Vaishnavite faith in recent years, as noted above, it could well be anticipated that the Noctes will veer round the pure and pristine form of Vaishnavism in the foreseeable future.

Notes

1. *Endi* : A kind of silk cloth, normally used as a wrapper in the winter time as warmer, obtained from species of silk cocoon that feeds on the leaves of the castor plant. It is alternatively called as '*Aree Kapor*'.
2. *Khol* : A kind of drum, made of earth burnt and fitted with animal hide on either extremity to be played with bare hands to produce rhythmic sound.
3. *Mridong* : A kind of drum, like a *Khol*. It is somewhat more slender and longer than a *khol*.
4. *Tal* : Cymbal, made of brass.
5. *Namghar* : is a house traditionally built of thatch and wooden posts on ground plinth, presently being replaced by cement concrete pillars and C.I. sheet roofings. The structure is meant for congregational prayer besides occasionally serving as a village assembly.
6. *Manikut* : is the temple where the Bhagavat Geeta is placed on a holy pedestal.
7. *Hati* : is hutment to serve as residence of permanent celebrate devotee-employees of the *Satra*.
8. *Batchara* : is a guest house.
9. *Assamese* : was what has been described at page 165. The Assamese personality narratives have undergone considerable metamorphosis ever since the post eighties.

10. *Varnashrama* : concerns the duties of persons towards both the *Varnas* and the *ashramas* in their interrelationship with each other.

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