

**THE HISTORY OF THE RELIGION OF ANCIENT ASSAM
BASED ON ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE**

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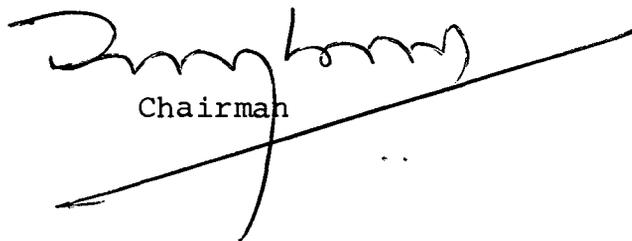
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DECLARATION

It is certified that the material in this dissertation entitled The History of the Religion of Ancient Assam based on Archaeological Evidence, has not been previously submitted for any other degree of this university or any other university.

We recommend that this dissertation be forwarded to the examiners for evaluation.


Chairman


Supervisor

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Rena Laisram

A NOTE ON THE MAPS

An attempt has been made to locate as many sites of religious importance in ancient Assam as possible. The outline of the map used in the dissertation is taken from P.C. Sarma's Architecture of Assam on early medieval temple sites of Assam. A study of the archaeological remains of ancient Assam show that most of the sites which we have been able to locate come within the boundary of the modern state of Assam. Mālinathān, now in Arunachal Pradesh bordering modern Assam is the only exception. Therefore, for all practical purposes this outline of the map serves our requirement.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Assam, as this part of the country is known today, acquired its name in the 13th century A.D. when the Ahoms came to the Brahmaputra Valley. Its most ancient name is Prāggyotiṣa, by which name it is referred to in the two great epics : the Rāmāyana and the Mahābhārata, as also the principle Purāṇas. In epigraphic records, the name Kāmarūpa was first mentioned in the Allahabad Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta of about 350 A.D.¹

It is to be noted at the very outset, that the terms 'ancient' and 'medieval' in the context of the history of Assam has different connotation than those in the context of Indian history as such. The period prior to 1228 A.D. i.e. the year of arrival of the Ahoms is regarded as the 'ancient' period of the history of Assam. Assam treasures many relics of the past. Yet, the early history has not been fully explored.

The objective of my dissertation, is to provide in the light of archaeological evidence (i.e. architectural remains, epigraphs, icons and sculptures) a reconstruction

1. V.A.Smith, The Early History of India, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1904, p. 383.

of the religious history of ancient Assam from the 4th to the 12th century A.D. The pre-Āhom period acquires significance in that it marks the gradual formation of cult worship like that of Viṣṇu, Śiva etc. as also its absorption by the people of Assam with an interesting spirit of mutual tolerance.

Attempts have been made in the past to reconstruct the political, social and religious history of early Assam but much is left to be dealt with. This dissertation is an endeavour at a departure from the earlier works in that its purpose is a projection of a complete picture of religious history of the period under review based solely on archaeological materials. A lot of relevant material can be found in the literary sources as well, such as Kālīka-Purāna, Yoginī-Tantra and Yuan Chwang's accounts, but the authentication of them is a difficult task.

The importance of archaeological evidence in the proper study and authentic reconstruction of this aspect of Kāmarūpa history can hardly be over-emphasized. In the absence of any system of keeping written records of important events in the past, it is on such evidence that historical scholars rely while trying to rediscover the ancient history. However, the available written records of this period are

of great help in corroborating certain aspects of religion as deduced from archaeology and have its utility in achieving greater authenticity of our conclusions.

The epigraphic records constitute an important foundation on which a reliable framework of history can be based. This type of documents may be divided into two classes, viz: 1] local 2] those composed outside, Kāmarūpa. The local epigraphs are of religious nature and the majority of them start with an invocation to god. The outside epigraphs are mainly of political nature and therefore of not much use in the present study. The local variety have come down to us in the following forms 1] rock-engravings 2] copper plates issued by kings 3] engravings on clay or metal seals and 4] inscription on the body of stone idols. Majority of the extant icons belong to the Brahmanic faith. Only a few images of the Buddhist pantheon and only two Jaina icons have been noticed in Assam so far. The icons of the pre-Āhom period are mostly mutilated and lie scattered all over Kāmarūpa. The sculptures served as ornament of the architectural construction and are not found in their original places as those works do not survive to this day. As regards coins, two hoards belonging to the pre-Āhom period have been discovered so far.

The Pāglātek and Dhulāpadung coins however are imitated Gupta coins and may have found their way to Assam from Bengal. Apart from these, no coins of the period under review, belonging to the Kāmarūpa kings, have come to light. The old coins must have been largely melted into bullion or used in ornaments. This explains the absence of numismatic evidence to corroborate the religious history of the early period. It is unfortunate that not a single standing temple belonging to the pre-Āhom period has been found.

The religious history of Assam has not been given much attention till date and forms a minor aspect of the works done so far. The first systematic history of Assam was published in 1905 and its author Edward Gait utilised the earlier writings on Assam in his book entitled, A History of Assam.² In spite of its significance, being the first detailed work on the province, it passes lightly over the early period. Dr. H.C.Ray's Dynastic History of Northern India³; R.B.K.L.Barua's Early History of Kāmarūpa⁴

2. E.A.Gait, A History of Assam, Thacker Spink and Co., Calcutta, 1905.

3. Dr. H.C.Ray, Dynastic History of Northern India, Early Medieval Period, 2 Volumes, Munshiram Manoharlal Publication, New Delhi, 1973.

4. R.B.K.L.Barua, Early History of Kāmarūpa, Lawyers Book Stall, Gauhati, 1966.

and Dr. R.G.Basak's History of North-Eastern India⁵ however all focussed on political or dynastic history.

Local scholars such as K.L.Barua,⁶ R.M.Nath⁷ and P.D.Choudhury⁸ contributed much to the study of archaeological remains in Assam. Useful as the works are, they are mostly in the nature of descriptive accounts with little to offer on the critical analysis in religious studies. B.K.Barua's A Cultural History of Assam (Early Period),⁹ Babu Nagendra Nath Vasu's Social History of Kāmarūpa¹⁰ and P.C.Choudhury's The History of the Civilisation of the People of Assam from the Earliest Times to the 12th Century,¹¹ although, suffers from an absence of critical analysis, form a good base as source books for this field under review. Prof. B.K.Kakati's The Mother Goddess Kāmākhyā,¹² is an admirable introduction to the religious history of Assam. His work however deals with the mother goddess alone and hence partial from my point of view.

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5. R.G.Basak, History of North-Eastern India, Sambodhi, Calcutta, 1967.
 6. R.B.K.L.Barua, op.cit.
 7. R.M.Nath, Background of Assamese Culture, Dutta Baruah, Gauhati, 1948.
 8. P.D.Choudhury, Archaeology in Assam : An Introduction, Govt. of Assam in the State Department of Archaeology, Gauhati, Assam, 1964.
 9. B.K.Barua, A Cultural History of Assam (Early Period), Lawyers Book Stall, Gauhati, 1951.
 10. Babu Nagendra Nath Vasu, Social History of Kāmarūpa, 3 Volumes, Northern Book, New Delhi, 1986 (reprint).
 11. P.C.Choudhury, The History of the Civilisation of the People of Assam from the Earliest Times to the 12th Century, Dept. of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Gauhati, 1966.
 12. B.K.Kakati, The Mother Goddess Kāmākhyā, Lawyers Book Stall, Gauhati, 1961.

The establishment of the Archaeological Survey and its exploratory works in Assam brought to light impressive material remains of the ancient period of the history of Assam. A very important development is the emergence of the Kāmarūpa Anusandhāna Samiti in 1912 with the explicit purpose of promotion of researches in history, archaeology and ethnography.

A mass of information on archaeology is found in the books written by R.D.Choudhury¹³ and N.D.Choudhury.¹⁴ Arun Bhattacharjee¹⁵ has also covered some of the pre-Āhom material remains in his book dealing only with icons and sculptures. B.N.Mukherjee¹⁶ has studied the eastern Indian art styles, a book which is of some use to us as it helps to understand the trends in the eastern region. For epigraphic records, the contribution by M.M.Sharma¹⁷ is significant.

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13. R.D.Choudhury, Archaeology of the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam, Agamkala Prakashan, New Delhi, 1985.
 14. N.D.Choudhury, Historical Archaeology of Central Assam from the earliest period to 12th century A.D., B.K.Publishing Corporation, Delhi, 1985.
 15. Arun Bhattacharjee, Icons and Sculptures of Early and Medieval Assam, Inter-India Publications, Delhi, 1978.
 16. B.N.Mukherjee, East Indian Art Styles : a Study in Parallel Trends, K.P.Bagchi and Company, Calcutta, 1980.
 17. M.M.Sharma, Inscriptions of Ancient Assam, Gauhati University Publications, Gauhati, 1978.

The book entitled Inscriptions of Ancient Assam gives a complete list of the inscriptions and its translations, available till the year of its compilation in 1978.

A few inscriptions discovered after this work is published, is available in the articles in the recent volumes of ~~the~~ Journal of the Assam Research Society. Earlier works such as P.Bhattacharya's Kāmarūpa Śāsanāvalī,¹⁸ published in 1931, also contain list of epigraphs available till then.

The journals made use of have formed an important base for the study. A mine of information is the Journal of the Assam Research Society in thirty Volumes. The other journals made use of are : Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, Proceedings of North-East India History Association, Journal of Assam Sanskrit College, Journal of Bihar and Orissa Research Society, Indian Historical Quarterly, Epigraphia Indica, Archaeological Survey of India Annual Reports and Memoirs of Archaeological Survey of India. Recent contribution to Assam history in general religious aspects as a part of social history in particular, is that of Mignonette Momin's¹⁹ M.Phil dissertation and Ph.D. thesis.

18. P.Bhattacharya (Ed.) Kāmarūpa Śāsanāvalī, Rangpur, 1931.

19. Mignonette Momin, Aspects of political institutions and social structure in Kāmarūpa c.600-1200., M.Phil dissertation, JNU, 1979; Polity and Society of Assam c.600-1200: unpublished Ph.D.thesis, JNU. 1988.

Ancient Assam witnessed the coming of Purānic Hindu faith. The role of the Brāhmaṇas in the spread of this Brahmanical faith forms an important base in the study. Local scholars and other sources show that the original four varṇas i.e. Brāhmaṇas, Kṣatriyas, Vaiśyas and Sūdras did not remain in their traditional position and that even the Brāhmaṇas contracted marriages with the lower classes.²⁰ There are some references to migration of the Brāhmaṇas to Kāmarūpa especially from the 11th century onwards. However, they occur as early as the 7th century A.D. in the Nidhanpur Grant,²¹ while evidence of their existence is offered even earlier by the Bargāṅgā epigraph.²² In Guwākuchi Grant, the donee Vāsudeva was originally from Vainagrāma in Savathi, which has been identified with Śrāvasti on the borders of North Bengal. He was given land at Mandi-Visaya in modern Goalpārā district.²³ Similar references to migration of Brāhmaṇas to Kāmārūpa is found also in the Khanāmukh Copper Plates,²⁴

20. P.C.Choudhury, op.cit, p.334.

21. P.Bhattacharya, Two lost Plates of Nidhanpur Copper Plates of Bhāskaravarman, Epigraphia Indica, Vol. 19, No. 19, 1927-28, p. 118f.

22. N.K.Bhattachali, The Bargāṅgā Rock inscription of Mahārājadhirāja Bhūtiavarman, Journal of the Assam Research Society, Vol. 8, No. 4, Oct. 1941, pp. 138-139.

23. P.Bhattacharya op.cit, pp. 164f.

24. M.M.Sharma, Khanāmukh Copper Plates of Dharmapāla, op.cit, VI.16-22, pp. 232-233.

Subhaṅkarapāṭaka Grant²⁵ and the Kamauli Grant.²⁶

It seems likely that the Brāhmanas who migrated to Assam from the 6th century onwards, belonged mainly to Madhyadeśa and Mithilā. The reason for such migration could be the inducement offered to them by way of land grants. A section of the Brāhmanas were brought to this country for performance of horse sacrifice or for general educational and cultural improvement and granted extensive areas of land by Mahabhūti-varman²⁷ R.M.Nath says that a few copper plates recovered from Sylhet shows that they were all Śaivites and were followers of various Śākhās of the Vedas. These Brāhmanas could have come from Kathiawar of Gujarat and were known as Nāgar Brāhmanas. B.K.Barua opines that the fall of the imperial Guptas, coinciding with the influence of Kāmarūpa over the entire North Eastern region in the later part of the 5th century, caused the migration of a large number of Brāhmanas. The patronage which the kings of Assam extended to learned men and religious teachers attracted a large number of learned men into the country. The Brāhmanas of Assam today follow the Mithila

25. M.M.Sharma, Subhaṅkarapāṭaka Copper Plates of Dharmapāla, op.cit, V.22, p. 248.

26. M.M.Sharma, Kamauli Copper Plate Grant of Vaidyadeva, op.cit, V.34,p.287.

27. R.M.Nath, op.cit, p. 35.

school in matters of social law and even trace their descent from the Brāhmanas of Kānya-kubja (Kanauj) and the tradition says that they migrated to Assam in the time of Naraka.²⁸ It can be surmised now, that the Brāhmanas did migrate to Assam in the ancient period and that they were given land grants which helped them in settling down in the region and further spread the Brahmanical faith. The Nidhanpur Grant alone reveals that the kings adopted a systematic policy of settling Brāhmanas in the kingdom by gifts of land in the shape of agrahārās to further their religious pursuits.²⁹

It follows from the above review of earlier works that although there are some books dealing exclusively on Assam, they have not done full justice to the religious aspect of the period under study. An attempt is made here to fill up this lacunae. The dissertation is divided into five sections ; 1] Introduction, 2] (A) Śaivism (B) Śaktism, 3] Vaiṣṇavism, 4] Miscellaneous cults : (A) Sūrya (B) Other minor deities, 5] Conclusion.

It has been admitted that the sources for the subject are limited. However, the available data throw

28. B.K.Barua, op.cit, p. 119.

29. M.M.Sharma, Nidhanpur Copper Plates of Bhāskaravarman, op.cit, V.25, 11.34-54, p. 52.

a flood of light on the religious history of the period from the 4th to the 12th century A.D. It is hoped that through an intensive study of the materials at hand a more meaningful understanding of the religious condition prevailing in pre-Āhom Assam will emerge.

CHAPTER II

ŚAIVISM AND ŚAKTISM

A : ŚAIVISM

Kāmarūpa seems to have witnessed the worship of Śiva from great antiquity. Literary sources point to the prevalence of the Śaiva cult from the time of such traditional rulers as Naraka and Bhagadatta. The reference in the Mahābhārata of Bhagadatta being eulogised and called 'a friend of Śiva' may perhaps indicate that Śaivism was the religion of Kāmarūpa at the time of this ruler. P.C.Choudhury believes that the worship of Śiva prevailed in the region even before Naraka (pre-4th century). However, the earliest reference from inscriptions is found in the Tezpur Copper Plates of Vanamāla of the mid 9th century which declared 'Bhagadatta attained the illustrious position of the monarch of Prāgjyotiṣa and having come there worshipped Śiva with penance and politeness.'¹

Śiva is generally worshipped in temples and elsewhere in his phallic symbol, although a sufficient number of

1. M.M.Sharma, "Tezpur Copper Plates of Vanamāla", op.cit, V. 5, p.101.

icons representing him in his various manifestations such as Isāṇa, Maheśa, Lakuliśa, six or ten armed Naṭarāja and Bhairava and in composite forms of Umā-Maheśvara and Hari-Hara have also been discovered in different parts of Kāmarūpa. Evidence shows that as early as the 5th century, if not earlier, he was worshipped in his iconographic representation in temples and the faith was popular among all classes of people. If the Yoginī-Tantra is to be believed, the number of liṅgas in Kāmarūpa exceed a million.²

Kāmarūpa houses a good number of temples. But there are not many Śaiva images in them. The reason could be that Śiva-liṅgas were enshrined inside them as the central object of worship. The type of liṅga in concern here is the mānuṣa-liṅga (made by man) of acala type only. The highest Śiva-liṅga discovered in Assam so far, is at Ketakibari, Tezpur.³

The earliest representation of Śiva is seen on the panel of the Sun temple at Tezpur.⁴ Śiva images may be divided into two types⁵: 1] saumya type (naṭarāja, Sadāśiva.

2. N.D.Choudhury, op.cit. p. 106.

3. R.D.Choudhury, op.cit. p. 81.

4. R.D.Banerji, "Exploration : Pre-Āhom Art and Architecture", Archaeological Survey of India Annual Report, 1924-25, p. 96.

5. Arun Bhattacharjee, op.cit. p. 14.

and also such syncretistic images as Harihara and Umāmaheśvara); 2] ugra type (Bhairava and Tripurāntakā mūrtīs). In Assam, only two icons seem to be of Sadāśiva, one belonging to the 10th century now in Assam State Museum, and the other of the 10th-13th centuries in the compound of Assam State Museum.⁶ Śiva as Naṭarāja is found from the bed of the river Brahmaputra, near Uzan Bazar now in Assam State Museum, Madankāmdev-parvat of the 10th century and the west side of Kāmākhyā wall of 9th-12th century.⁷ Three icons of Harihara have been found. The Assam State Museum possesses those which were found at Deopānī and Urvaśi.⁸ The Umāmaheśvara images are also preserved in the Museum. They belong to a period from the 9th to the 12th century A.D.⁹ Of the ugra mūrtīs¹⁰ of Śiva in Assam, the images of Bhairava are by far the largest. Seven icons of this representation have been identified so far, of which the first image hails from Kāmākhyā. The same site depicts the image in three phases two of them datable to about the 9th-10th centuries and the third about the

6. Ibid., pp. 14-15

7. Ibid., pp. 15-16

8. Ibid., pp. 17-18

9. Ibid., pp. 18

10. Ibid., pp. 19-20

10th-11th centuries. Two images are housed in the Assam State Museum and two others recovered from Madankamdev-parvat and Kāhilipārā. Aghora¹¹ images are not common in Assam. A solitary image of this ugra aspect of Śiva is noticed at Deul-Govinda dated about the 8th-9th century A.D. In a four-handed image, the deity is shown holding a long triśūla with his right front and the left back hands. The right back and hand holds a daṇḍa while the left front hand holds a kapāla. Above the triśūla, a miniature human figure is visible. The mundamālā worn by the deity is very prominent and adds an uncanny feature to the terrible looking deity. Other forms of Śiva images found include the Lakuliśa or the twenty-eighth avatāra of the deity. Though rare, two miniature images of this form have been found.

The most important aspect of Śiva is Maheśa. Maheśamūrti, as mentioned in the Śaivāgamas, is the fully manifested Supreme Śiva. In Assam, a sandstone image in the vajrāsana (meditating) pose with ten arms, five heads, faces of four of which alone are visible, is found. The heads bear jaṭāmukuta which are the characteristic head-gears of Śiva. Nandī, the bull vehicle is represented below.¹²

11. R.D.Choudhury, op.cit, p. 69.

12. B.K.Barua, op.cit, p. 203.

Sculptural representations of Śiva on temples etc. are not common. The worship of the deity in his phallic symbol would have made the sculptural representations rare in Kāmarūpa. But some were obviously produced in Kāmarūpa following the Pāla idiom e.g. the Maheśvara found at Gauhati.¹³ Dvarāpāla and dvarāpalikā as door-keepers of the Śaiva temple at Gachtal, Nowgong etc. hold Śaivite symbols such as śūla and pāśā. Apart from such representations there are those of Nandī, the vehicle of Śiva, sculptured on stone slabs as in Ākāśigaṅgā. Most of the sculptures served as ornament of the architectural constructions and are not found in their original places, as those works do not survive to this day. Depiction of Śiva in association with some mythological episodes is now housed in the Assam Provincial Museum. The illustration is the story of Śiva killing the demon Andhakāsura. The deity is shown with four hands in two of which he bears a triśūla at the end of which is pinned the body of Andhakāsura, the left lower hand holds the kapāla. The third eye here is prominent.¹⁴

Not a single standing temple belonging to the pre-Āhom period has been noticed so far. However, erection

13. B.N.Mukherjee, op.cit, p. 27.

14. B.K.Barua, op.cit, p. 205.

of Śiva temples by kings of Kāmarūpa is proved beyond doubt by the concrete evidence from epigraphs of that period. Vanamāla repaired the fallen lofty temple of Hṛtakāśulin,¹⁵ Ratnapāla studded the earth with white-washed temples enshrining Śambhu.¹⁶ Erection of Śiva temples are also referred to in the Gachtal Copper Plate Grant of Gopālavarman¹⁷ and the Assam Plates of Vallabhadeva¹⁸ The only memorials of ancient Kāmarūpa consist of scattered objects and jungle-clad mounds in sites like Gauhati, Tezpur, Nowgong, Sibsāgar and Sadiyā, rendering a reconstruction of the early architecture of the province difficult. In Assam, as in other parts of India, no clear distinction can be made between a shrine dedicated only to Śiva and the one dedicated to Viṣṇu. Remains of both Śiva and Viṣṇu shrines exist at Bargāngā.

By far, the inscripational records that have come down to us constitute a significant base for a study of Śaivism in Assam. Majority of them start with an invocation

15. M.M.Sharma, "Texpur Copper Plates of Vanamāla", op.cit, V.24, p. 103.
16. M.M.Sharma, "The Gauhati Copper Plate Grant of Ratnapāla", op.cit, V.10, p. 186.
17. M.M.Sharma, "The Gachtal Copper Plate Grant of Gopālavarman", op.cit, V.21, p. 215.
18. M.M.Sharma, "Assam Plates of Vallabhadeva", op.cit, VV. 13-14, p. 298.

to god and almost all of them, with the exception of a few, are made to Śiva. Here, various virtues and powers adoring kings are compared with those of the divinities like Indra, Viṣṇu, Śiva, Varuṇa and so forth. The queens are compared to Śacī, Aditi, Padmā, Pārvatī and Lakṣmī. The epigraphs clearly indicate the pre-eminence of Śiva worship as seen from the invocations in many of the Copper Plates of the period. Many kings of ancient Assam described themselves as Parama Māheśvara declaring themselves unquestionably as great champions of Śiva. They were for the most part, exclusive devotees of Śiva. This would almost justify the claim in Kālikā-Purāna that the land was reserved by Śambhu for his own domain.¹⁹

Epigraphs of Assam of the pre-Āhom period reveal that the kings were great patrons of Śiva. Bhagadatta, who was so devoted to Kṛṣṇa worshipped Śiva with great penance.²⁰ Vajradatta had an unblemished faith in Śiva.²¹ The Nidhanpur Grant describes Susthitavarma's devotion for Śiva.²² Further, Harjaravarman, is described as Parama-Māheśvara.²³

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19. Maheswar Neog, Religions of the North East, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 1984 p.4.
20. M.M.Sharma, "Tezpur Copper Plates of Vānamala", op.cit, V.5, p.101.
21. M.M.Sharma, "The Uttarbarbil Copper Plates of Balavarman III", op.cit, V.8, p.133. and "The Nowgong Copper Plate Grant of Balavarman III", op.cit, V.8, p.144.
22. M.M.Sharma, "Dubi Copper Plates of Bhāskaravarman", op.cit, v.2, p.25.
23. M.M.Sharma, "Tezpur Rock inscription of Harjaravarman", op.cit, 1. 2, p.85.

That Vanamāla had patronised Śaivism is referred to in the Tezpur Grant of Vanamāla. The epigraph opens with an invocation to the same deity.²⁴ It mentions a Śiva temple which was endowed with matchless villages, people, elephants and courtezans.²⁵ The same king reveals his deep faith in Bhava.²⁶ King Balavarman III opens the Nowgong Grant with an invocation to Rudra.²⁷

The Gauhati Grant Opens with an invocation to Śambhu and Paśupati and their consorts Gaurī and Gaṅgā.²⁸ Śiva, probably under the influence of Tantric Buddhism, came to be conceived as Ardhayuvatīśvara - the embodiment of two unifying principles.²⁹ The deity has been eulogised in a variety of ways. For example, the Bargāon Grant gives a description of Śiva's tāṇḍava dance stating that the water

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24. M.M.Sharma, "Tezpur Copper Plates of Vanamāla", op.cit, V.1, p.101.
 25. M.M.Sharma, "Tezpur Copper Plates of Vanamāla", op.cit, V.24, p.103.
 26. M.M.Sharma, "The Uttarbarbil Copper Plates of Balavarman III", op.cit, V.12, p.134.
 27. M.M.Sharma, "The Uttarbarbil Copper Plates of Balavarman III", op.cit, V.1, p.135.
 28. M.M.Sharma, "The Gauhati Copper Plate Grant of Indrapāla", op.cit, V.1, p.185.
 29. M.M.Sharma, "Khanāmukh Copper Plates of Dharmapāla", op.cit, V.1, p.230.

of the Lauhitya was made beautiful by the reflection falling on it from the dancing figure of Śāṅkara who was engaged in making quick time music in his primeval form, who assumed numberless forms for the welfare of the world.³⁰

The kings of Kāmarūpa predominantly worshipped Śiva.³¹ The Sign ॐ (anji)³² found at the commencement of the inscription of Vanamāla even before svasti (also found in the subsequent Copper Plate Grants, excepting the first and the second Copper Plate Grants of Ratnapāla) is interpreted by P.P.Bhattacharya Vidyavinod as the form of the snake-shaped kula-kundalini that resides in susumnā. This symbol is a distinct Śaivite symbol and the kulakundalini, according to him is the Śakti of Śiva that remains coiling round the Svāyambhu (self begotten) liṅga at mulādhāracakra. The invariable association of Śiva and Śakti shows that Śakti here is not the supreme power but is a constant companion of Śiva in bringing about creation.

All the Kāmarūpa kings upto Dharmapāla (i.e. upto 12th century) patronised Śaivism. Leaving aside kings of purāṇa fame, inscriptions left by kings of Kāmarūpa bear

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30. M.M.Sharma, "Bargāon Copper Plate Grant of Ratnapāla", op.cit, V. 1, p.160.
31. D.Sarma, Kāmarūpa Śāsanāvalī, ed., tr. by P.D.Choudhury & Others, Publications Board, Assam, 1981, p.148.
32. P.P.Bhattacharya, Vidyavinod, "The Sign ॐ in Ancient Copper Plate Inscription of Kāmarūpa", Journal of the Assam Research Society, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1933, pp.10-11.

undeniable proof of their faith. In the Copper Plate of Bhāskaravarman, he salutes the deity of his choice (i.e. iṣṭa-deva) the holder of pināka (bow). Besides this record, the ambassador sent by King Harshavardhana to his court talks about his deep faith in Śiva as thus 'Even from childhood, this is his firm resolve, that he would not bend his head before anything else than the pair of the lotus-like feet of Śiva.'³³ The Copper Plate of Harjaravaraman has an adjective 'Paramamāheśvara' (i.e. a great devotee of Śiva) attached to it.³⁴ The inscription of Vanamāla has the anji sign on it. The temple mentioned in the same inscription seem to have existed during the reign of his ancestors so that these kings were devotees of the Mahādeva from generation to generation. The capital Hārūppeśvara could have been a name taken after the name of a Śivaliṅga.³⁵ That Balavarman III was a devout follower of Śiva is known from his inscriptions.³⁶ The Copper Plate

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33. P.P.Bhattacharya Vidyavinod, "Mahādeva - The Iṣṭadeva of the Kings of Kāmarūpa", Journal of the Assam Research Society, Vol. 2, No. 1, April 1934, p.3.
34. M.M.Sharma, "Hāyuñthal Copper Plates of Harjaravarman", op.cit, p.92
35. P.P.Bhattacharya Vidyavinod, "Mahādeva - The Iṣṭadeva of the Kings of Kāmarūpa", op.cit, pp.1-6.
36. M.M.Sharma, "The Uttarbarbil Copper Plates of Balavarman III", op.cit, V. 1, p.133.

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inscription of Ratnapāla also opens with a verse in praise of Śiva.³⁷ Indrapāla himself in his second Copper Plate Grant is referred to as having 'his head painted with the pollens of the lotuses of the feet of Hara (Śiva) and Girijā (Pārvatī)'.³⁸ Of the last king Dharmapāla, two Copper Plate Grants have been discovered. The first one have in the opening verse an obeisance to Śiva in his half-male, half-female form. In the second Copper Plate inscription of Dharmapāla, however, there is no reference to Śiva, only the sign anji (ꣳ) occurs at the beginning. Probably Dharmapāla became inclined towards, Vaiṣṇavism at a later stage of his life. Yet it would not be correct to surmise that he became fully converted to this faith - the sign anji (ꣳ) would not have appeared in that case.³⁹

Not only kings, but deep reverence was shown to Śiva by the Brāhmanas. The Kamauli Grant refers to a Brāhmaṇa called Śrīdhara who took a vow to undergo penance and starvation to propitiate Lord Somanātha (i.e. Śiva)⁴⁰ ... Various epithets are attributed to Śiva

37. M.M.Sharma, "The Bargāon Copper Plate Grant of Ratnapāla", op.cit, V. 1, p.160.

38. P.P.Bhattacharya Vidyavinod, "Mahādeva - The Iṣṭadeva of the Kings of Kāmarūpa", op.cit, p.5,

39. R.D.Choudhury & D.Chutia, "A Note on the Archaeological Finds at Narakāsura Hill", Journal of the Assam Research Society, Vol. 19, 1970, pp.23-35.

40. M.M.Sharma, "The Kamauli Copper Plate Grant of Vaidyadeva", op.cit, Vol. 26, p.26.

in the several inscriptions so that it brings before us almost a complete picture of his Purāṇic greatness. That Śaivism was fully developed in ancient Assam with its sub-cults is seen in the way the deity was invoked in the praśasti. He is invoked as Parameśvara⁴¹, Paramamaheśvara,⁴² Ādideva,⁴³ (the first God), Mahādeva,⁴⁴ Maheśvara⁴⁵ and Mahāvarāha (the great boar).⁴⁶ His beneficent nature is indicated by references to him such as Śambhu⁴⁷ (the benign one), Śaṅkara⁴⁸ (the beneficent one) and Prajādhinātha⁴⁹ (lord of the people).

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41. M.M.Sharma, "The Bargāon Copper Plate of Ratnapāla", op.cit, V. 15, 11.32-33, p.163.
42. M.M.Sharma, "Tezpur Rock Inscription of Harjaravarman", op.cit, 1.2, p.85.
43. M.M.Sharma, "Khanāmukh Copper Plates of Dharmapāla"; Subhaṅkarapāṭaka Copper Plates of Dharmapāla", op.cit, V. 1, p.22,
44. M.M.Sharma, "Assam Plates of Vallabhadeva", op.cit, V.13, p.298.
45. M.M.Sharma, "The Parbatīyā Copper Plate Grant of Vanamālavarmadeva", op.cit, V. 25, 11. 47-48, p.124., Tezpur Copper Plates of Vanamāla, op.cit, V. 29, 11. 21-23, p.105.
46. M.M.Sharma, "The Gauhati Copper Plate Grant of Indrapāla", op.cit, V. 2, p.185.
47. M.M.Sharma, "The Bargāon Copper Plate Grant of Ratnapāla", op.cit, V. 1, p.160.
48. M.M.Sharma, "The Gauhati Copper Plate Grant of Indrapāla", op.cit, V. 1, p.185
49. M.M.Sharma, "The Gauhati Copper Plate Grant of Indrapāla", op.cit, V. 3, p.181.

Rudra indicates Śiva's fierce character. His able qualities are mentioned in the Uttarbarbil Copper Plates of Balavarman.⁵⁰ In pre-Āhom Assam the archaeological sources reveal that Śiva is conceived both in the abstract and concrete divine form. In his anthropomorphic form, he appears with familiar myths and legends, clustering round him. Inscriptions bring about various names in connection with the Śiva myths such as Hāṭakaśulin,⁵¹ Hara,⁵² Kāmeśvara,⁵³ Ardhayuvatiśvara,⁵⁴ Paśupati,⁵⁵ Gaurīpati,⁵⁶ and Somanātha.⁵⁷ Śiva is offered loving adoration by the kings who visualises the deity even surpassing god Kāmā in beauty. The Gachtal Copper Plate Grant of Gopālavarman (C.1080 A.D.) makes a comparative assessment of beauty between Lord Śiva and the river Lauhitya.

50. M.M.Sharma, "The Uttarbarbil Copper Plates of Balavarman III", op.cit, VV. 1-2, p.133.
51. M.M.Sharma, "Tezpur Copper Plates of Vanamāla", op.cit, V. 24, p.103.
52. M.M.Sharma, "Deopānī Viṣṇu image inscription", op.cit, V. 1, p.306.
53. M.M.Sharma, "Guwākuchi Copper Plate Grant of Indrapāla", op.cit, V. 25, ll. 52,60,61, p.201.
54. M.M.Sharma, "Subhāṅkarapāṭaka Copper Plates of Dharmapāla", Khanāmukh Copper Plates of Dharmapāla, op.cit, V.1, p.230.
55. M.M.Sharma, "The Gauhati Copper Plate Grant of Indrapāla", op.cit, V. 2, p.185.
56. M.M.Sharma, "Assam Plates of Vallabhadeva", op.cit, V. 10, p.297
57. M.M.Sharma, "Kamauli Copper Plate Grant of Vaidyadeva", op.cit, V. 26, p.264.

Both in the Subhañkarapāṭaka and Khanāmukh Grants, he is conceived of as 'having half his form as woman and having on the neck a blue lotus... lofty breasts and appearing in dreadful sentiments.' The Nidhanpur Grant alludes to his overcoming Kāma (cupid) by mere sight.⁵⁸ He is further described as having his usual weapons, khatvāṅga, paraśu, pināka and śūla. His vehicle is the bull and he has a girdle of snakes.⁵⁹ He resides on the peak of the mountain Kailāśa,⁶⁰ is the lord of Gaurī, and has the Ganges on his head.⁶¹

Śiva claims the highest temple in Assam. The ruins of a Śaiva temple dating from 600 A.D. resembling the Gupta temples at Bhumra, Nachna-Kuthara and Deogarh, have been unearthed at Tezpur.⁶² There are ruins of two ancient Śiva temples near Dhanukhana hill on the north bank of Brahmaputra. These are considered by K.N.Dikshit as pointing to the Tezpur Grant 829 A.D. of Harjaravarman.⁶³ Even after Brahmanisation, the Ahom monarchs erected more

58. M.M.Sharma, "Nidhanpur Copper Plates of Bhāskarvaraman", op.cit, V. 2, p.50.

59. Ibid.

60. M.M.Sharma, "The Bargāon Copper Plate Grant of Ratnapāla", op.cit, V. 15, ll. 30-34, p.163

61. M.M.Sharma, "Tezpur Copper Plates of Vanamāla", op.cit, V. 2, p.101.

62. R.D.Banerji, "Exploration: Pre-Āhom Art and Architecture", op.cit, p.32ff.

63. Maheswar Neog, Religions of the North East, op.cit, p.7.

temples to god Śiva than to any other deity and Śiva temples continued to be erected till the latter part of the 18th century.

Many monuments related to this deity, are found in Assam, which are now in ruins. Some of them are datable while the rest offer little clue for dating. Some of the undated temple ruins which have come down to us, where Śiva-liṅgas or images are found, include Dudhnath temple in Dhubri,⁶⁴ Nandeśwar temple, Bhumiswar Śiva temple, Chengal Mahakal, Bhairabthān, in Goalpārā,⁶⁵ Baneswar, Swathan, Nagsankara etc. in Nowgong,⁶⁶ Dāh-Parbatiyā and Mahā-Bhairava Mandir, in Tezpur (Darrang).⁶⁷ Śiva images are also noticed in North Lakhimpur and Bura-Burdhan⁶⁸ and Mālinithān in Dibrugarh also had ruins of Śiva temples and liṅgas.⁶⁹ Ancient remains in association with this deity also exists in many more sites in this region. Śiva-liṅgas are also seen in Śri Sūrya Pāhār in the Goalpārā sub-division.⁷⁰ Madan-Kāmdevthān and Chaigāon Merghar ruins in Gauhati⁷¹ are datable to

64. P.D.Chaudhury, op.cit, p.31.

65. Ibid. p.32.

66. Ibid. p.41.

67. Ibid. p.45.

68. Ibid. p.57.

69. Ibid. p.58.

70. Ibid. p.33.

71. Ibid. p.38.

about the 9th and 10th centuries. Ruins of Śiva temples dated probably around the 10th century are found in Ākāśigaṅgā and Gachtal remains in Nowgong.⁷² The best and earliest specimen of sculptural art of Assam is the Dāh-Parbatīyā ruins. Remains of a Śiva temple exist here. At Numalīgarh, about twenty-two miles from Golaghat town, is found the remains of an old Śiva temple. There is a small shed in this Śiva Dol⁷³ monument enshrining a Śiva-liṅga which is regularly worshipped. It is dated in the 9th century. Of the 10th century remains there is the Phulbāri⁷⁴ ruins in Garo hills, where a few Śiva-liṅgas are lying scattered.

Śiva is addressed in many ways. Names such as Parameśvara, Maheśvara, Iśvara etc. which appear in the epigraphs, are purely Sanskrit. Pinākin, another name of Śiva is mentioned in the Nidhanpur⁷⁵ and Tezpur Plates.⁷⁶ The Bargāon Grant of Ratnapāla describes him as one who resides in the region of the Kailāśa mountains.⁷⁷

72. Ibid. pp.42-43.

73. Ibid. p.56.

74. Ibid. p.58.

75. M.M.Sharma, "Nidhanpur Copper Plates of Bhāskaravarman", op.cit., V. 1, p.50.

76. M.M.Sharma, "Tezpur Copper Plates of Vanamāla", op.cit., V. 2, p.101.

77. M.M.Sharma, "The Bargāon Copper Plate Grant of Ratnapāla", op.cit., V. 15, 11. 30-34, p.163.

Since both Rudra and Śiva of the ancient period of Assam were depicted as ferocious, there is a tendency to retain the ferocious characteristics but making it auspicious with certain good attributes. An attempt has been made to change even the ferocious character of Rudra into a gentle one in the Uttarbarbil Copper Plates and the Nowgong Plates of Balavarman III.⁷⁸ It talks of Lord Rudra who is capable of dispelling the darkness of the world and at the same time be the cause of peace of the world.

The belief and worship in the Triad (Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva) saw a modified version in the combined worship of five cult gods i.e. Viṣṇu, Śiva, Śakti, Sūrya and Gaṇeśa with the chosen deity in the centre and the four around them. The fusion was represented by one deity Ardharīśvara and Hari-Hara, which were amalgamations of Śiva and Śakti and Viṣṇu and Śiva respectively. The idea of such worship probably was to enhance tolerance and understanding among the believers. The worship of Śiva simultaneously with others is not uncommon in Assam. Bhāskaravarman, a devotee of Śiva,⁷⁹ claimed to have

78. M.M.Sharma, "The Uttarbarbil Copper Plates of Balavarman III", "The Nowgong Copper Plate Grant of Balavarman III", op.cit, V. 1, p.133.

79. M.M.Sharma, "Dubi Copper Plates of Bhāskaravarman", op.cit, V. 59, p.25.

descended from Viṣṇu and was of Vaiṣṇava family.⁸⁰ Though Vanamāla was devoted to Śiva,⁸¹ it is not unlikely that he was influenced by the later Buddhism. Dharmapāla showed his devotion not only to Śiva but also to Devī or Ardhayuvatiśvara,⁸² Dharmā⁸³ and also Viṣṇu.⁸⁴ Vaidyadeva himself worshipped Viṣṇu besides Śiva.⁸⁵ He is described as the great devotee of Śiva as well as that of Viṣṇu.

Archaeological remains of Śaivite character are found all over Assam in at least thirty five sites. Some of them are icons; some on door frames where the deity is depicted with or without consorts in association with other deities, while many of them are liṅgas. From Ākāśigaṅgā⁸⁶ we find an icon of Nandī dated to 9th-10th centuries

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80. M.M.Sharma, "The Nowgong Copper Plates Grant of Balavarman III", op.cit, V. 12, p.134.
81. M.M.Sharma, Ibid., VV. 12, 22-23.
82. M.M.Sharma, "Khanāmukh Copper Plates of Dharmapāla", "Subhaṅkarapāṭaka Copper Plates of Dharmapāla", op.cit, V. 1, p.230
83. M.M.Sharma, "Puṣpabhadrā Copper Plate Grant of Dharmapāla", op.cit, V. 7, p.263.
84. M.M.Sharma, "Puṣpabhadrā Copper Plate Grant of Dharmapāla", op.cit, V. 1, p.262.
85. M.M.Sharma, "Kamauli Copper Plate Grant of Vaidyadeva", op.cit, V. 28, ll. 47-50, p.286.
86. R.D.Choudhury, op.cit, p.80.

carved in stone along with a dwarf Śiva-gaṇa . Śiva-gaṇas ; are sometimes depicted along with the figure of Śiva and other Śaiva deities. A beautifully sculptured image of a yogī or a bhakta of Śiva in relief on a plaque of terracota have been found at Kukurmutā,⁸⁷ Gauhati, and is now preserved in the Museum in Gauhati. Āmbāri⁸⁸ reveals a beautiful image of Naṭarāja. Twelve Śivaliṅgas and four images of Nandī are also found here in the group of a good number of big-sized images of many other deities. Another icon of Naṭarāja with six hands is found in Bāmuni Hill.⁸⁹ The same site also possesses image of Bhairava⁹⁰ in the sthānaka attitude. Icons of Gajāsurasamhāra Tripurāntaka form of Śiva is noticed both in Deopānī and Barālimārā-Satra. At Deopānī⁹¹ the image has two hands. R.M.Nath, says that the attributes of the god here is not clear. The other image is four-armed in the

87. Ibid. p.80.

88. Ibid. p.239.

89. T.A.G.Rao, Elements of Hindu Iconography, Law Printing House, Madras, 1914, Vol. 1, Pt. 1, pp. 31-32.

90. R.D.Choudhury, op.cit, p.69.

91. Ibid. p.71.

sthānaka attitude. Except the traces of triśūla held by the deity, no details can be traced. Dāh-Parbatiyā houses the ruins of a Śiva temple dating from 600 A.D. which has been called by R.D.Banerji as the "oldest temple" in Assam.⁹² One piece of the remains show the figure of Śiva in the Lakuliśa form, seated, with a rope tied round his leg. Lakuliśa, as is his usual representation, is seen here seated on padmāsana, a matuliṅga (citron fruit) in the right hand and staff in the left. One of the important sites where Śiva images and other ruins related to the deity occurs is Gauhati. Found on the bank of the Brahmaputra, near Gauhati, is an icon of Śiva in the Naṭarāja pose, now in Assam State Museum.⁹³ Carved out of a round block of granite, the deity is seen dancing on the back of Nandī. It has ten hands. The āyudhas of the hands are clockwise: triśūla, bāna, daṇḍa, khetaka, khadga, akṣa-sūtra, sarpa, an unidentified āyudha which is broken, probably held in abhaya or varada mudrā. The body of the deity is in atibhaṅga pose. The usual alaṅkāras deck the body of the deity. The image is dated in the 10th-11th centuries and is one of the excellent

92. Maheswar Neog, Religions of the North East, op.cit, p.4.

93. B.K.Barua, op.cit, p.204.

nr̥tyamūrtīs of Śiva. Another Naṭarāja image, now in Assam State Museum is dated in the 9th century.⁹⁴ This image from Gauhati is seen along with that of Kārttikeya and Nṛtya Gaṇapati on a slab of granite stone. The deity is ten-handed, shown in a dancing pose on the vāhana and Nandī looking at his master, turning his neck upwards. Another Śiva image in the form of Maheśa⁹⁵ is found at this site, now in the campus of Assam State Museum. The image is placed within a big circle seated on a pūrṇavikaśitapadma of which only six petals are extant. Seated in vajrāsana, both soles are exposed to the view. The god has five heads, the faces of four of which alone are visible, Nandī the vāhana, is depicted below the āsana.

Two images of Bhairava, now housed in the Museum, was found at Gauhati.⁹⁶ One figure stands in a prostrate human form holding a khadga and a kapāla in the hands. The god is crowned with kirītamukuta which is an uncommon feature and he does not wear a muṇḍamālā. The other image is in the dancing posture like the image of Nṛtya-Bhairava from Madankāmdev-parvat. It has four hands but the objects in them are mutilated. Still another form of Śiva is found here in the Gajāsurasaṁhāra

94. R.D.Choudhury, op.cit, p.60.

95. Ibid. pp.60-61.

96. Ibid. p.68.

Tripurāntaka form.⁹⁷ Five of them are found, some in mutilated condition. A ten-armed Śiva on a stone slab is in a private residence at Gauhati. The four armed Śiva holds a ḍamaru, triśūla, gadā and akṣamāla in its hands . flanked by the figures of female attendants. Another mutilated figure of the god crowned with jaṭāmukuta, holding a triśūla in one of the hands, is in the Assam State Museum. Depicted in a terracota plaque is another image which is two-handed, in a sitting posture, and below the deity Nandī is present. Another seated figure in mutilated condition is found here. A figure of Gajāsurasāmhāra -Tripurāntaka was noticed at Gachtal⁹⁸ in yoga pose with four hands, along with the worshipping figures of the gaṇas. The deity stands with akṣamāla in the right hand and triśūla in the left hand on dvāraśākhā and śirapatti. Ruins of at least two Śiva temples are seen here. The presence of a figure of Śiva and figures of Śaivite deities, Śivaliṅga etc. amply proves that the temples were dedicated to Śiva. Along with the figures of Śiva on doorjambs and lintels are those of Gaṇeśa, yogis, gaṇas etc. Sculptured on a block of granite, in Hengrābāri, Dispur⁹⁹ is an icon of Bhairava in the sthānaka

97. Ibid. p.70.

98. Ibid. p.71.

99. Ibid. p.68.

attitude with two hands holding a khadga and a kapāla.
 Bhairava images are also found in Kāmākhyā.¹⁰⁰ A rock-cut,
 four-handed image from this site in crude form, is dated
 in the 8th-9th centuries on stylistic grounds. This image
 is different from others in that it stands on a prostrated
 figure putting his legs apart. Another eight-handed
 Bhairava image, was found here. Madankāmdev-parvat¹⁰¹ is
 another site where Bhairava image is seen. Sculptured in
 a block of granite and dated 9th century A.D. is this
 Nṛṭya-Bhairava with four hands. Below the pīṭha a bull
 is shown. The same site also bears a figure of
 Gajāsurasamhāra Tripurāntaka. There is a similar figure
 of Śiva seated on a bull, at Mikirāti.¹⁰² A peculiar image
 of an ugra aspect of Śiva, preserved in the Assam State
 Museum is recovered from Numaligarh.¹⁰³ The left front
 hand holds a dhanu which is distinct. The back hands rise
 up and they might hold the skin of the elephant behind
 the head of the deity, like a prabhāvalī as in the case
 of Gajāsurasamhāra-mūrti. The pīṭha on which the deity
 dances is not clear. Close observation confirms that
 it is a Gajamuṇḍa (elephant head). R.D.Choudhury believes
 that it represents the Gajāsurasamhāra-cum-Tripurāntaka

 100. Ibid. p.67.

101. Ibid. p.69.

102. Ibid. p.71.

103. Ibid. p.70.

mūrti i.e. Sanghatamūrti (composite image) of Śiva, which makes it a rare icon.¹⁰⁴ At Śri Sūrya Pāhār,¹⁰⁵ also, the Gajāsurasamhāra Tripurāntaka figure of Śiva is found. The same kind of sculpture dated 11th-12th centuries depicted in yogāsana is found in Uzan Bazar, Gauhati.¹⁰⁶

A number of icons of Nandin is found in Kāmarūpa. In Hājo¹⁰⁷ there is an image of Vṛṣabha-vāhana of Śiva, depicted in a sitting-posture, with a distinct hump, no bell on his neck, and without any decorative garment on his body. Dated in the 9th-10th centuries, the vāhana is depicted independently with a mālā on the neck and rope in the nose. At present, the image is in front of the Numalīgarh temple. In one modern temple at Mornoi¹⁰⁸ in Goalpārā district an image of Nandī is seen. The Nāmghar (a place for chanting of the deity's name) houses, in addition, an image of Sūrya and a Śiva-liṅga of the pre-Āhom age. Both the images found in Mājgāon,¹⁰⁹ Tezpur, carved along with the images of Gaṅgā (in one case Yamunā) and Dvārapālas are dated in the 9th century. In both the cases, he stands in tribhaṅga posture. At Gharporā Cuburi

104. Ibid. p.70.

105. Ibid. p.72.

106. Ibid. p.72.

107. Ibid. p.79.

108. Ibid. p.80.

109. Ibid. p.79.

of Mājgāon village, ruins brought from a site of a temple is noticed. At the bottom of the two śaṅkhas, one preserved in sanctuary and other lying near the ruined temple, Nandī in its anthropomorphic form is seen. Looking at the dvāra-sākhās and the sirapattis one may justifiably conclude that the temples were dedicated to Śiva. The temple is assigned to the 9th A.D. Another icon of Nandin is at Renbeng¹¹⁰ near Nowgong.

Ruins of Śiva temples are found in at least nine sites in Assam. A temple assigned to the 7th century finds its remains in Pāglātek.¹¹¹ A modern temple is being constructed in its place. The Śivaliṅga belonging to the old temple has been installed in the modern sanctuary. Both stone and brick remains are noticed in Kenduguri. The most prominent among them is a group of brick temples popularly known as Nā-Nāth. Each of the cella contains a Śiva-liṅga with a yonī-pīṭha at its base. These ruins are assigned to the 11th-12th centuries A.D. In Pañcaratnaghāt,¹¹² on the bank of Brahmaputra, is found a temple in ruins with stone carvings. The huge Śivaliṅga which might have been installed in the garbhagrha of the temple is still in site.

110. Ibid. p.80.

111. Ibid. p.133.

112. Ibid. p.134.

The peculiarity of the liṅga lies in the fact that the liṅga portion is quite short compared to the height and circumference of the yonipīṭha. Two huge votive stupas are seen cut from two solid rocks almost in the style of Śiva-liṅga. Jogījān¹¹³ must have been a place of Śiva worship. This place contains extensive remains of temples, probably five dedicated to Pañca-Rudras. A Śiva temple probably of pre-Āhom period is found at Numalīgarh.¹¹⁴ Ruins of exactly similar nature was discovered at Tezpur on the ruins of Bāmuni Hill and Dāh-Parbatiyā. This is ascribed to Harjaravarman who ruled in 829-30 A.D. as has been proved from a stone inscription on the bank of the Brahmaputra at Tezpur. There is however no doubt that this temple was the work of a Hindu king who ruled this part of the country long before the Kachāris or the Ahoms came in. The Tezpur Śiva temple of the 10th century presents five miniature temple ruins with phallic emblem of Śiva in each of the stone door frame. To the west of Tezpur on a hillock are the ruins of a Śiva temple, the liṅga there still being worshipped by itinerant sādhus in the open. The name of the deity is Tiṅgeśvara¹¹⁵ and was probably set

113. P.C.Choudhury, op.cit, p.441.

114. R.M.Nath, "Ruins of the Śiva temple at Numalīgarh", Journal of the Assam Research Society, Vol. 2, No. 1, 1934-35, pp. 7-9.

115. Maheswar Neog, Religions of the North East, op.cit, p.4.

up by the Kāmarūpa King Tiṅgyadeva of the 12th century. In some of the niches are seen figures of Sarasvatī, Śiva and Durgā seated in their conventional style so common in North India. Śiva temple ruins are found also in Madankādev-parvat.¹¹⁶ The dominance of Śaivite sculptures of an erotic nature conclusively proves that this temple was a centre of Śiva worship. Among the assortment of sculptures are included the six-handed Bhairava, four handed Śiva, Naṭarāja and Sūrya. Dated in the 12th century, the surviving portion of the Pañcaratha (plan with five recesses) temple prove that this was one of the finest medieval temples ever built in the Brahmaputra valley.¹¹⁷ Remains of a Śiva temple of a slightly later period i.e. 2nd quarter of the 13th century is found on a small hill at Negritting¹¹⁸ in the Golaghat sub-division of Sibsāgar district. The deity of the present temple, a huge banaliṅga about three feet in height was discovered during the reign of an Ahom king. On the ruins of the old temple, a new one was constructed.

A rare liṅga, made of bronze, have been found at Kāhilipārā, Gauhati, the only one of its kind.¹¹⁹ Terracottas of Bhaitbari (Garo Hills), among other deity representations,

116. R.D.Choudhury, op.cit, p.143.

117. Ibid. p.229.

118. Maheswar Neog, Religions of the North East, op.cit, p.5.

119. R.D.Choudhury, op.cit, p.81.

includes one seated in Mahārājalīlāsana pose on the bull vehicle, head adorned with jaṭāmukūṭa which is taken to be that of Śiva.¹²⁰

Recent excavations have revealed more sites connected to Śiva. At Upper Langtha around Barpathar, is a large and heavy stone outlet believed to be the outlet of a Śiva temple.¹²¹ Still lying in situ, it was learnt from the local people, that a Śiva-liṅga was already removed from the above site and handed over to the management of the Śiva temple situated near Dubarani. Telisal site, in around the same place, also revealed a Śiva-liṅga besides many other objects. A stone idol considered important is found from Pabhajan Tea Estate around Barpathar.¹²² This stone idol was engraved in a profile view on a single piece of stone.

A study of inscriptions and archaeological remains discovered so far, reveal that all the kings of Kāmarūpa upto Dharmapāla patronised Śaivism. In the Copper Plate inscription of the families of Pusyavarman, Sālastambha and Brahmapāla (4th to 12th centuries A.D.) Śiva emerges as

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120. G.N.Bhuyan, "Notes on the Terracottas of Bhaitbari (Garo Hills)", Journal of the Assam Research Society, Vol. 20, 1972. p.9.
121. P.C.Saikia, "A Note on some Archaeological Relics in and Around Barpathar (Golaghat) Assam : An Appraisal", Journal of the Assam Research Society, Vol. 25, 1979-80, p.34.
122. Ibid. p.34.

the only God (iṣṭadeva) to be worshipped by these kings and other deities like Viṣṇu and the Devī are only cursorily noticed. The kings usually claim their descent from Naraka, Bhagadatta and Vajradatta, the latter two themselves are depicted in the inscriptions as votaries of Śiva.¹²³ Śaivism was fully developed and had various sub-cults as seen in the way Śiva is invoked in the praśastis. It is thus evident that the early Hindu kings of Assam were for the most part exclusive devotees of Śiva. Śiva seems to have been the guardian deity of the kingdom. As can be deduced from the finds, Śiva is worshipped in Kāmarūpa, both in iconographic and phallic representations, also in composite forms of Umā-Maheśvara and Hari-Hara. Śiva temples of Assam notices the performances of natīs or dancing women (who cannot be termed temple women or devadāsīs in the strict sense of the term).¹²⁴ King Vanamāla of Kāmarūpa (Hārūppeśvara) of the 9th century A.D. built a temple dedicated to Hāṭakaśulin Śiva and endowed it among others with Vedyās or sacred prostitutes.¹²⁵ Hence evidence shows that as early as 5th century A.D., if not earlier, Śiva was worshipped in temples and the kings of Assam (pre-Āhom period) professed a religion that veered around Śiva as the supreme deity.

 123. P.P.Bhattacharya Vidyavinod, "Mahādeva, the Iṣṭadeva of the kings of Kāmarūpa", op.cit, p.2.

124. Maheswar Neog, Religions of the North East, op.cit, p.8.

125. M.M.Sharma, "The Parbatīyā Copper Plates of Vanamālavarmadeva", op.cit, V. 24, p.122 ; B.K.Barua, op.cit, p.120.

B : ŚAKTISM

'Śaktism' has been defined by Sir Charles Eliot as the worship of 'a goddess of many names and forms who is adored with sexual rites and the sacrifices of animals or when the law permits of men.'¹²⁶ The birth-place of Śaktism is considered to be in the north-eastern region of India (Assam and Bengal) where it still holds ground.¹²⁷ This sect was the most powerful one in Kāmarūpa by the 12th century A.D. when its chief scripture in that land, Kālikā-Purāṇa was written.¹²⁸

The association of Śaktism with Tantrism has been emphasized in many a study of the 'female cult'. It is important to distinguish between the two for a deeper understanding of Śaktism. It may be mentioned that Tantrism has four principle ramifications : Śakti, Śaiva, Vaiṣṇava and Buddhist. It means rather the use of spells, gestures, diagrams and various magical or sacramental rites which

126. Sir Charles Eliot, "Hinduism in Assam", Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, London, 1920, p.1152, cited in Maheswar Neog, Śaṅkardeva and His Times: early history of Vaiṣṇava faith and movement in Assam, Dept. of Publication, University of Gauhati, 1965, p.82.

127. Maheswar Neog, *Ibid* ; Winternitz, M, A History of Indian Literature, tr. by Mrs. S. Ketkar, University of Calcutta, Calcutta, Vol. 1, p.252.

128. Maheswar Neog, *Ibid*.

accompanies Śāktism but may exist without it. Śāktism therefore, in essence, is the worship of a goddess with certain rites.

Kāmarūpa is better known as a land of magic and witchcraft, with its famous Tantric shrine of Kāmākhyā, with which it is frequently associated together (Kāmarūpa - Kāmākhyā). This is mentioned in the Allahabad Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta of middle 4th century A.D.¹²⁹ This epigraph mentioned the name 'Kāmarūpa' for the first time.¹³⁰

Abundant material on the subject are found in the two principal Sanskrit works viz. Kālikā-Purāṇa and Yoginī-Tantra, both believed to be composed in or near about ancient Assam. The composition of Kālikā-Purāṇa is placed around 10th or first half of the 11th centuries A.D. Iconographic descriptions of several Śākta goddesses are given here but surprisingly, archaeological data, belonging to a period earlier than 9th-10th centuries are very scarce. If the Kālikā-Purāṇa gives a mythical interpretation of the origin, of the Yonī Goddess, the Yoginī-Tantra takes no notice of the myth and gives a different account, stressing the creative symbol of the Yonī.¹³¹

129. D.C.Sircar, The Śākta Pīthas, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1973, p.15.

130. B.K.Kakati, op.cit, p.1; V.A.Smith, op.cit, p.383.

131. B.K.Kakati, op.cit, p.35.

The prevalence of worship of goddess Kāmākhyā goes back to antiquity. It was under the banner of this goddess that the first kingdom in ancient Assam was built. Tradition has it that was over her emergence and recognition as the presiding deity of the state that the Śaivites and Vaiṣṇavites went into a silent conflict and Naraka, the first builder of the state, lost his life. Naraka's Kāmākhyā has been patterned in the conception of the mother goddess as a primordial deity, associated with and patronised by Viṣṇu.¹³² Naraka himself seems to have been brought up in Śakta surroundings.¹³³ Kāmarūpa is the seat of the deities Kāmeśwari and Kāmeśwara in the east.¹³⁴ However, no mention is made in the early land grants about this goddess. The earliest reference to Mahāgauri (Devī) is the Tezpur Copper Plate of Vanamāla of middle 9th century.¹³⁵ Literary sources are also silent about the goddess prior to 9th century. The Chinese pilgrim Hiuen Tsang who lived for sometime at the court of the Kāmarūpa King Bhāskaravarman (C - 600-50 A.D.) did not mention about the goddess Kāmākhyā. Therefore, it is not improbable that the presiding deity of Kāmarūpa did not quite attain her pre-eminence in the days of Hiuen Tsang.¹³⁶

132. Ibid. p.33.

133. Ibid. pp. 16-17.

134. D.C.Sircar, op.cit, p.13.

135. M.M.Sharma, "Tezpur Copper Plates of Vanamāla", V. 29, ll. 11-13, op.cit, p.104.

136. D.C.Sircar, op.cit, p.15.

The worship of the goddess is said to have been introduced by the Asura Naraka, King of Kāmarūpa.¹³⁷ However there is no archaeological or inscriptional record to support this. In conformity to her name, he is said to have changed the name of the kingdom from Prāggyotiṣhpura to Kāmarūpa.¹³⁸

The temple of Kāmākhya near Gauhati is now the chief centre of Śakti worship in Assam. The original Kāmākhya temple was destroyed during the Muslim invasion early in the 16th century, and the present temple was re-built. The temple contains no image, but a symbol : a yonī representing the procreative force of the mother goddess.¹³⁹ This temple is hence unique from other temples of the Devī in different parts of India. The absence of any image of the goddess is significant here. Within the temple there is a cave, in a corner of which stands a block of stone on which the symbol of a yonī has been sculptured. The stone is kept moist from the ooziings of a natural spring within the cave.¹⁴⁰ In respect of antiquity and importance,

137. N.N.Bhattacharyya, The Indian Mother Goddess, Indian Studies, Calcutta, 1971, p.30.

138. B.K.Kakati, op.cit, p.35; D.C.Sircar op.cit, p.15. The original name of the goddess Kāmākhya was Kāmā, a shortened form of Kāmarūpa.

139. B.K.Kakati, op.cit, p.39.

140. Maheswar Neog, Religions of the North East, op.cit, p.106.

Kāmākhyā, surpasses most of the shrines in other parts of India and particularly of the eastern part.¹⁴¹

Pīṭha means āsana or seat. The places where pieces of Sati's dead body fell are said to have become pīṭhas i.e. holy seats or resorts of the mother goddess in all of which she is said to be constantly living in some form together with a Bhairava i.e. form of her husband, Śiva.¹⁴² The religious crystallisation seems to have taken place originally on the basis of a group of four pīṭhas at a time which may coincide with the appearance of the early Tantras. These four pīṭhas are supposed to represent the four cardinal points, though from the beginning the region of Kāmarūpa enjoyed a privileged position in the scheme.¹⁴³ The name of the hillock where Kāmākhyā stands in Nīlācala (blue mountain). The mountain represents the body of the Śiva himself and at the time of the falling of the genital organ of Satī on it, the mountain turned blue in colour. The goddess herself is called Kāmākhyā, because she came here secretly to satisfy her amorous passion (Kāmā) for Śiva.¹⁴⁴

141. S.K.Chatterji, The Place of Assam in the History of Civilisation of India, Gauhati University, Gauhati, 1955, pp. 12-13.

142. D.C.Sircar, op.cit, p.7.

143. D.C.Sircar, op.cit, Forward.

144. B.K.Kakati, op.cit, p.34, Śiva is said to have carried the dead body of his wife, Satī hither and thither in frantic sorrow. At Nīlācala hill, a part of the dead body having fallen, makes it a pīṭha of the Devī.

Kāmarūpa is a great pīṭha, where Śiva with Durgā (the daughter of Himālaya) is present always. It is not known whether the inhabitants of ancient Kāmarūpa i.e. The Kiratās were votaries of the Mahādeva or the goddess, his consort.

Kāmākhyā, Tripurā, Kāmeśwari, Śivā and Sārādā are described in the Kālikā-Ṣurāṇa, as the five forms of Devī. Tripurā is the original form (Kumarī) and is also known as Tripurā-Bhairavī. However, this form of Kāmākhyā as a spouse of Śiva belongs to later periods. The Devī assumes different forms according to her wishes. Cāmuṇḍā is one of the terrific aspects of the Devī, Goddess Kālī being another dreaded form of Śakti. The Simhavāhinī Durgā also represents the goddess in a different form, however in a benevolent mood. Mahiṣamardinī is the ugra form of Durgā and one of the important Śakti goddesses. Sometimes, she is presented in the Śānta (pacific) form also. All local and independent deities such as Umā, Kālī, Kāratā and Cāmuṇḍā came to be regarded as manifestations of Kāmākhyā or Durgā in different circumstances.¹⁴⁵ In connection with Śiva, she is found in such combinations as Umā-Maheśwari and as Pārvatī, Śiva's wife.

145. B.K.Kakati, op.cit, pp. 35-70.

The worship of Śakti in the yonī form may explain the comparatively lesser popularity of the iconographic representations. Architectural remains of temples associated with the Devī of the pre-Āhom period are also very few.

Monuments connected to the Devī number at least nineteen. The remains so far discovered, reveal individual goddess worship as also its worship in connection with Śiva. Those that can be specifically grouped under the pre-Āhom category of remains include the Viṣṇu-Janārdana monument¹⁴⁶ in Gauhati dated in the 9th century A.D. where the image of Devī exists along with those of Śiva, Gaṇeśa, Sūrya and Viṣṇu. The Kāmākhyā temple¹⁴⁷ houses a yonī-pīṭha within a sanction built of stone. Madankāmdevthān¹⁴⁸ in the same sub-division, where images of Śiva-Pārvatī exist in an ancient temple, may be dated about the 9th and 10th centuries. At Devithān¹⁴⁹ there is a monument, dated in the 9th century, where the principal image is that of a goddess perhaps of Mahīśamardīnī Durgā. Nābhāngā Cāmuṇḍa monument in Nowgong¹⁵⁰ subdivision and the Umā-Maheśwar image at

146. P.D.Chaudhury, op.cit, p.35.

147. Ibid. p.36.

148. Ibid. p.38, also R.D.Choudhury, op.cit, p.143.

149. P.D.Chaudhury, op.cit, p.58

150. Ibid. p.44.

Deoghar,¹⁵¹ Sibsāgar sub-division are dated in the 10th century and therefore pre-Āhom. Quite a few images of the goddess Kālī have been discovered which cannot be dated with any degree of precision. Aisakhatithān, Alokdharrirthan in the Dhubri¹⁵² sub-division, Singimarimath¹⁵³ relics in Mangaldoi, Kalibarithān¹⁵⁴ in Sibsāgar and Kotshāguri Dol¹⁵⁵ in Golaghat reveal the worship of this form of the Devī.

Images of Durgā are met with at Mahāmāyāpīth¹⁵⁶ in the Dhubri sub-division, Bagheswari temple¹⁵⁷ in Goalpārā, Candika mandir in Gauhati, Bhoiparvat¹⁵⁸ hill image of Mahiṣamardinī Durgā at Nowgong, Parjat mandir¹⁵⁹ in Mangaldoi, Kotshāguri Dol¹⁶⁰ in the Golaghat sub-division and Sarhi Devālaya¹⁶¹ in North Lakhimpur. Śiva-Pārvatī images are found in Bhairabthan in Goalpārā and Mahādev Math of the same sub-division.¹⁶² At Sanpara Devālaya¹⁶³

151. Ibid. p.55.

152. Ibid. p.31.

153. Ibid. p.50.

154. Ibid. p.55.

155. Ibid. p.56.

156. Ibid. p.32.

157. Ibid. p.32.

158. R.M.Nath, "Antiquities of the Kapili and the Jamuna Valleys (Further discoveries)", Journal of the Assam Research Society, Vol. 8, No. 3, July 1941, p.85.

159. P.D.Chaudhury, op.cit, p.50

160. Ibid. p.56.

161. Ibid. p.56.

162. Ibid. pp. 32-33.

163. Ibid. p.50.

in the Mangaldoi sub-division is found ruins which enshrine as image of Śiva and Durgā.

The Hatimura temple dedicated to the goddess Mahiṣamardinī is assigned to the period of about 9th-10th centuries. This temple in Nowgong was probably re-built on a stone temple by an Ahom king about the 18th century after the original temple was demolished by an earthquake. A big sword has been recovered from this temple supposed to have been used for human sacrifices.¹⁶⁴ The temple No.5 at Rājbarī in Goalpārā is now presumed to be a Devī temple where the image of a goddess is identified tentatively as that of Tripurā Bhairavī.¹⁶⁵ An 11th-12th century unidentified Devī from a temple is found at Cāndor-Merghar in Kāmarūpa.¹⁶⁶ There was a temple known as the Copper temple at Lāmreśvara Mandir of the 13th century in Kuṇḍlinagar (near Śadiyā) where human sacrifices used to be made and which was an important centre of the Śāktas, mentioned in the Kālikā-Purāṇa.¹⁶⁷

Remains found at Singri in Darrang mainly consist of carved and sculptured stones, a door frame, pillars,

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164. K.L.Barua, "The Hatimura temple in Nowgong", Journal of the Assam Research Society, Vol. 2, No. 1, 1934, p.12.
165. P.C.Sarma, Architecture of Assam Dr. A.Prasad for Agam Kala Prakashan, Delhi, 1988, p.35.
166. Ibid. p.75.
167. R.D.Choudhury, op.cit, p.156.

capitals, lotus engraved slabs and heaps of chiselled stones of various sizes and dimensions, originally prepared for a stone structure, probably a temple. The ruins contain at present no epigraphic records. The object of worship of the temple has not been completely ascertained but it can be surmised that the temple was ascribed to Durgā,¹⁶⁸ since the lion which is her vāhana is sculptured on the upper door frame, where the vāhana of a god or a goddess is usually engraved. The ruins of this temple has striking similarity to that of a Śiva temple at Numalīgarh of the 9th century. This temple, therefore, may have been constructed about the 9th century A.D. In village Sagarkuchi in the Paschim Bonbhadra Mauza,¹⁶⁹ there is a Kālī temple on the western back of the Pagladia. It is uncertain as to who built this temple, although daily worship is offered. A small stone temple called Mahāmāyā (another name of the Devī) temple in the Kapili and Jamuna valleys has also been discovered.¹⁷⁰

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168. Sarbeswar Kataki, "Ancient remains at Singri in Darrang", Journal of the Assam Research Society, Vol. 4, No. 4, 1937, pp.94-95
169. A.C.Bhattacharya, "The Ancient relics of Kāmṛūp", Journal of the Assam Research Society, Vol. 3, No. 1, April, 1935, p.15.
170. R.M.Nath, "Antiquities of Kapili and the Jamuna Valleys", Journal of the Assam Research Society, Vol. 5, No. 1&2, 1937, pp. 43-47.

The most popular form of the Devī now-a-days is the ten armed Durgā, the destroyer of the buffalo demon. This Śakta goddess, also known by the name Mahiṣamardinī represents the same theme depicted in the image of the deity from various other places of India. However it has particular similarity with those of Bengal. Bhoiparvat, Gaṇeśparvat and Teteli-Pukhuri have revealed images of this manifestation of the deity.¹⁷¹

Mahiṣamardini Durgā has different names according to the number of hands. The ten-handed image found in large numbers is called Kātyāyanī and the eighteen-handed ones are called Ugracaṇḍā, according to the Matsya-Purāṇa and Agni-Purāṇa. Of the pre-Āhom Kātyāyāni images special mention should be made of image from Tinsukha in Lakhimpur district in Nowgong belonging to the 9th century. The Assam State Museum now possesses two more figures of this goddess of the same period. An eighteen-handed image of the other form i.e. Ugracaṇḍā, carved on a rock has come to light from Uzan Bazar. This is dated in the 10th century A.D. Most of the extant images are rock-cut ones although stone slab images are also found. Śirājulī, Hājo, Ulubāri

171. R.M.Nath, "Antiquities of the Kapili and the Jamuna valleys (further discoveries)", op.cit, pp. 85-87.

and Soālkuchi have revealed images of the deity, where the right leg is placed on the back of her vāhana while the left one is on the beheaded mahiṣāsura.¹⁷²

The siṃha, and mahiṣāsura are depicted facing each other in all the cases. Most of the āyudhas here are common, except for slight differences. Other sites include South-West Kām̄rūp, Śingri, Bāmuni hill, Rangmahal and Kukurmutā. The style of representation of Mahiṣāsuramardini in Assam and Bengal are similar and the formula of making images, perhaps evolved long ago, is still in vogue.¹⁷³

As in Bengal, some four-handed and three-eyed images of Durgā have also been discovered in Assam. At Pāṇḍava temple, Kāmākhyā, along with four rock-cut images of Gaṇeśa, a female figure is noticed which is identified as Durgā by K.N.Dikshit¹⁷⁴ An image of the deity is found in Vasundharī Pahar, Nowgong. Here, Siṃhavāhini Durgā is four-armed, holds in her hands a cakra, a khadga, a paśa and a gadā. Local people call it Vasundharī.¹⁷⁵ All the icons of Mahiṣāsuramardini so far discovered portray the deity with

172. R.D.Choudhury, op.cit, p.83.

173. Ibid. p.87.

174. K.N.Dikshit, "Exploration", Annual Report of Archaeological Survey of India, 1923-24, pp. 80-81.

175. R.D.Choudhury, op.cit, 89.

the vāhana. The peculiarity of the image from Kukurmutā, now in Assam State Museum, is that it is the only icon of the deity belonging to the pre-Āhom period that reveals the absence of the vāhana.¹⁷⁶

Mahiṣāmardiniī icons with four, eight, ten and eighteen hands are found in Assam in more than one case, the ten-handed ones being the most popular.¹⁷⁷ However, at Śri Sūrya pāhār near the Goalpārā ruins there is a prominent figure of the twelve-armed Durgā, cut out of a single rock in the midst of Śiva-liṅgas and rows of Viṣṇu images. This is the singular instance of a twelve-armed goddess hitherto discovered in Assam.¹⁷⁸

The popularity of this form of Devī, may be supported by the discovery of a gold locket, the adverse side of it showing an image of Mahiṣāmardiniī. Probably this gold object was used as an ornament by the ladies of some royal family.¹⁷⁹ The best image of the deity comes from

176. Ibid. p.87.

177. Ibid. p.92.

178. S.Kakati, "Antiquities and Historical Sites in Goalpārā", Journal of the Assam Research Society, Vol. 2, No. 1, 1934-35, p.11.

179. R.D.Choudhury, "Gold objects from Singamari in Garo Hills district", Journal of the Assam Research Society, Vol. 24, 1978, pp. 27-31.

Śirājūlī.¹⁸⁰ The image in concern is a splended one displaying excellent proportions in execution. This deity is in atibhanga posture, where the asura fights with the Devī with a khaḍga.

Cāmuṇḍā, one of the terrific aspects of the Devī, finds its place in the iconography of ancient Assam. Only five images of this form have come to light. All of them are carved on stone slabs and svayampradhānamūrtis (i.e. independent images).¹⁸¹ Generally Cāmuṇḍā images occur in Sapta Matrikā (seven-mothers) panels, although such association is not reported from the Brāhmaputra valley. Two figures of Cāmuṇḍā are discovered from Kāmākhyā dated about the 10th, 11th centuries, and another one from Nā-Bhāṅgā. The Nā-Bhāṅgā image is carved on a slab of stone. The seat of the squatting image is of a prostrate human body. The visible āyudha, held by the deity in one of her hands, is a śulā. It depicts her in her horrendous aspect and grim appearance. To the right of the deity, a vulture, and to the left a jackal, is noticed.

180. R.D.Choudhury, op.cit, p.83, The image is now preserved in the residence of Mr. I.Bora, Dhekiajuli.

181. R.D.Choudhury, op.cit, p.90.

This image may be dated in the 11th or the 12th century A.D.¹⁸² A four-handed stone image of the deity in the nātamaṇḍapa of the Kāmākhyā temple, and another small image of the goddess on the way to Kāmākhyā,¹⁸³ have been found. The latter is noticed along with the image of Umā-Maheśwara and a Śiva-liṅga. Another image is found, inside the nāmghar (a place reserved for chanting of the deity's name) of Kāmākhyā temple proper.¹⁸⁴ Kārbi Ānglong has also produced an image of the Devī. It is now preserved in the Bharati Museum, Nalbāri.¹⁸⁵

Mahākālī is regarded as one of manifestations of the goddess Kālī. The iconographic details of the deity is given in the Caṇḍī portion of the Mārkaṇḍeya-Purāṇa, according to which she should hold a khadga, kapāla, muṇḍa and kheṭaka. According to the specifications of some texts, she carries a pātra (vessel) instead of the muṇḍa.¹⁸⁶ An image of a goddess believed to be that of Kālī with

 182. R.M.Nath, "Ruins of Nā-Bhāṅgā" Journal of the Assam Research Society, Vol. 8, No. 2, April 1941, pp. 35-37; R.D.Choudhury, op.cit, p.91.

183. R.D.Choudhury, op.cit, p.90.

184. Ibid. p.90.

185. Ibid. p.91.

186. Ibid. p.91.

four hands, is noticed among the finds from Telisal site.¹⁸⁷ Deopānī and Ḍavāka are the two sites from where icons of Mahākālī have come to light. The icon from Deopānī is flanked by two female figures in the sthānaka attitude. A prābhavalī is arranged just behind the head of the goddess. The Ḍavāka image has only a medium sized stone icon remnant. The deity stands on a pretāsana. It's peculiarity is that the back of the prostrate human body is shown turned upwards.

Tripurā Bhairavī, as a dreaded virgin (Kumārī) goddess, though not common, was not totally absent either. A rare icon of this Śakta goddess is on display at the Assam State Museum. From Nowgong district, the goddess here is seen in padmāsana attitude on a lotus seat.¹⁸⁸

Independent images of Śaurī and Umā are not found in Assam so far.¹⁸⁹ Images of Pārvatī can be had from Gauhati and Dibrugarh temple ruins. Figures of Pārvatī are found on many temple walls. A fine sculpture in a private residence at Gauhati represents Pārvatī with a sword in her right hand and a mirror in her left.¹⁹⁰

187. P.C.Saikia, "A Note on Some Archaeological Relics in and Around Barapathār (Golaghat) Assam : An appraisal", Journal of the Assam

188. R.D.Choudhury, op.cit, p.249.

189. Ibid. p.90.

190. B.K.Barua, op.cit, p.207.

However, R.D.Choudhury raises some questions regarding its identification and says that the khadgā held by the deity here is unusual in that it is commonly held by an image of dvārapālikā.¹⁹¹ Unidentified Devī images have also been discovered e.g. the composite twin images datable to about 10th and 11th centuries.¹⁹²

Epigraphic references to Śakti worship are found only by implication. Inscriptions of Vanamāla and Indrapāla refer to temples of Kāmeśwara and Mahāgaurī. The residence of the illustrious god Kāmeśwara and the goddess Mahāgaurī is situated on the Kāmakūṭa hill.¹⁹³ The 11th century Guwākuchi copper plate grant of Indrapāla mentions a plot of land belonging to Mahāgaurī and Kāmeśvara.¹⁹⁴ The goddess Kāmākhyā and her associate Śiva also finds mention in the Parbatīyā Copper plate of Vanāmalavarmadeva of the mid 9th century. Here, Mount Kāmakūṭa is referred to as the

191. R.D.Choudhury, op.cit, p.232.

192. G.N.Bhuyan and R.D.Choudhury, "A Hoard of Metallic images from Hahara, Kamrup", Journal of the Assam Research Society, Vol. 25, 1979-80, pp. 73-74.

193. M.M.Sharma, "Tezpur Copper Plates of Vanamāla", op.cit, V. 29, ll. 11-13, p.104.

194. M.M.Sharma, "Guwākuchi Copper Plate Grant of Indrapāla", op.cit, V. 29, l. 49, p.201.

abode of the two of them.¹⁹⁵ Other references in the inscriptions in connection with the Śākta goddess are those of Pārvatī,¹⁹⁶ Gaurī,¹⁹⁷ Gaṅgā¹⁹⁸ and Girijā.¹⁹⁹

The kings of the dynasty of Sālastambha, between the 7th and the 10th centuries, were worshippers of their tutelary deities - Kāmeśwara-Mahāgaurī, mentioned in the inscription of Vanamāla. When the Sālastambha dynasty was succeeded by the dynasty of Brahmapāla, and the capital was removed to the vicinity of Gauhati, the same tutelary deities, mentioned in the inscription of Indrapāla, were continued to be worshipped by the kings.²⁰⁰

In the second copper plate grant of Indrapāla, the king is described as, "Having the head painted with the pollens of the lotuses of the feet of Hara (Śiva) and Girijā (Pārvatī)".²⁰¹

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195. M.M.Sharma, "The Parbatīyā Copper Plates of Vanamālavarmadeva" op.cit, V. 25, ll. 33-47, p.123.
196. M.M.Sharma, "The Gachtal Copper Plate Grant of Gopālarman", op.cit, V. 9, p.214.
197. M.M.Sharma, "Khanāmukh Copper Plates of Dharmapāla", op.cit, V. 20, p.233.
198. M.M.Sharma, "Gauhati Copper Plate Grant of Indrapāla", op.cit, V. 1, p.185.
199. M.M.Sharma, "Khanāmukh Copper Plates of Dharmapāla", op.cit, V. 11, p.231.
200. R.B.K.L.Barua, op.cit, p.100.
201. P.P.Bhattacharyya Vidyavinod, "Mahādeva - The Ṛṣṭadeva of the kings of Kāmarūpa", op.cit, p.5.

Śakti is in many cases associated with Śiva in iconographic representations, the most common form being that of Umā-Maheśwara. Images of this type are noticed in a number of places in Kāmarūpa. In Bargaṅgā,²⁰² an image of Maheśwara is shown in the lalitāṣana pose which also depicts Umā, the consort, sitting gracefully on the left leg of the god. Both of them are two-handed. Dated in about the 8th or the 9th century is another icon of Śiva and Umā seated in the same way, from Devasthān.²⁰³ The front left hand of the god is poised tenderly and touches the left bosom of Umā, while the left hand holds a darpaṇa. Śiva is depicted with a jaṭā on the head, while Umā is depicted with a karandamukuta. Her right leg which is pendent, rests on a siṃha, the vāhana of the goddess, while the right leg of Śiva rests on Nandī depicted below the āṣana. Ruins of an old temple dedicated to Hara-Gaurī over which a mosque is re-build, is at Dekhōa.²⁰⁴ The Deopānī ruins reveal an image of Umā-Maheśwara,²⁰⁵ dated about the 8th century, along with images of Viṣṇu, Śiva and Durgā. This is probably the only site in the

202. R.D.Choudhury, op.cit, p.64.

203. Ibid. p.65.

204. Ibid. p.133.

205. R.M.Nath, "The Deopānī Ruins", Journal of the Assam Research Society, Vol. 8, No. 4, Oct. 1941, p.132.

whole of North-Eastern India, the sculptures of which reveal distinct local elements, resulting in a style free to a large extent from the influence of the North Indian schools. Now preserved in Assam State Museum, one of the images of Mikirāti²⁰⁶ has produced two images of Umā-Maheśvara. Śiva and Śakti, discovered from the site shows Umā seated on the left leg of Śiva. Both the god and the goddess have two hands each. Śiva and Śakti is embracing each other, and the vāhaṇas are shown below the figures of the divinities. Gauhati²⁰⁷ has produced another image which is carved from a block of granite, on which the figures of the deities are sculptured. It is dated in the 10th century. The whole piece of stone is divided into nine equal squares where other deities like Gaṇeśa and Kārttikeya are depicted along with Umā-Maheśvara. Here Śiva has four-hands and with his right front hand he touches the chin of Umā, while the left front hand rests lightly on the left side of Umā's bosom. Another icon where Śiva figures with four hands and Umā with two is found from Mahāmāyātān (Kārbi-Ānglong district).²⁰⁸ Here the divinities are made to sit in the usual way. Rājbari²⁰⁹ reveals an Umā-Maheśvara

206. R.D.Choudhury, op.cit, p.63.

207. Ibid. p.65.

208. Ibid. p.64.

209. Ibid. p.63.

icon dated in the 10th century A.D. and the two-handed Śiva here sits in the lalitāsana pose and Umā sits on the left lap of Śiva. Unlike those former representations, here she keeps her legs on the āsana stretching to the left. A figure of siṃha is depicted as vāhana of the goddess in both the images recovered from Mahāmāyāthān and Rājbārī. Two handed depiction of the deities are noticed in several places such as those found on the way to Kāmākhyā at Barālimārā - stara near Tezpur and also Devasthān and Deopānī mentioned earlier. Mikirāti brings to light two images of Umā-Maheśwara. The first one, dated in the 10th century A.D., is in the Assam State Museum and the other is belongs to the 11th century A.D. The manner of presentation of both these images are similar. Other sites of such images are noticed at Visvanāthghāt, Budā-Māyāng hill, Kāsoṣilā pāhār (Māyāng, and Gaṇeśpāhār near Chanakā (Māyāng). The image from Visvanāthghāt shows the figure of Umā-Maheśwara in their usual posture. The upper part of this sculpture is broken. The other images from the three places are all rock-out.²¹⁰

210. Ibid. p.65.

The Śiva-Śakti worship prevalent in ancient Assam was a phase of Śaivism and appears to be quite distinct from the later Tantrism. It is neither Śaivism where Śiva appears as the only supreme deity nor Śāktism where Śiva's spouse Umā is deemed as the supreme power ordaining the creation and movement of the world. The idea of Śakti or a power of Śambhu is brought out in the epigraphs. The first verse of the inscription of Balavarman III of the 9th century unwillingly throws in this idea of Śakti.²¹¹ It states ".....Lord Rudra, capable of dispelling the darkness of the world (i.e. of the period of birth and re-birth)....."

The Copper Plate Grant of Ratnapāla,²¹² clearly enunciates all the qualities of the "Lord Śaṅkara... who like the supreme self assumes plurality while remaining essentially one". With endless qualities he holds forth the will to multiplicity manifested as the Śakti of Śaṅkara. A distinct evolution towards monistic worship is noticed in the later inscriptions. The duality acquired a unity and both were coalesced into one.²¹³ The amalgamation

211. D. Sarma, 'Kāmarūpa Śāsanāvali' op.cit, p.152.

212. M.M.Sharma, "The Bargāon Copper Plate Grant of Ratnapāla", op.cit, V. 1, p.160

213. M.M.Sharma, "The Khanāmukh Copper Plates of Dharmapāla", op.cit, p.230. "Subhāṅkarapāṭaka rates of Dharmapāla", op.cit, V. 1, p.249.

of Śaivism and Śaktism in Assam during the later period (about 12th century) show the simultaneous popularity of both the faiths. Both in the Subhaṅkarapāṭaka and Khanāmukh Grants of King Dharmapāla, Śiva is conceived in this half male half female form i.e. Ardhāyuvatīśvara.²¹⁴

A study of the available material indicates that rulers of Kāmarūpa down to Dharmapāla (12th century) patronised Śaktism although Śiva may have been their tutelary deity. Kāmarūpa is the favourite place of the Devī. In other places the Devī is rare, but in Kāmarūpa, she is believed to dwell in every house.²¹⁵ Every woman in Kāmarūpa is said to be a miniature incarnation of the goddess. She dwells in her real self in three places : Kāmāgiri (Kāmākhyā hill), Jalandhara and Purnagiri. In spite of iconographic representations of the Devī in Assam though not in very large numbers, strangely enough, in the inscriptions there is no trace of Śakti worship except the veiled references in the inscriptions of Vanamāla and Indrapāla to the temples of Kāmeśwara-Mahāgaurī and Mahāgaurī-Kāmeśwara. The silence may however be explained by the fact that Śaktism represents a particular aspect of

214. Ibid.

215. B.K.Kakati, op.cit, p.46.

Purāṇic Hinduism which is in the main personal and esoteric. Consequently, it had little connection with any public religious order or establishment.²¹⁶

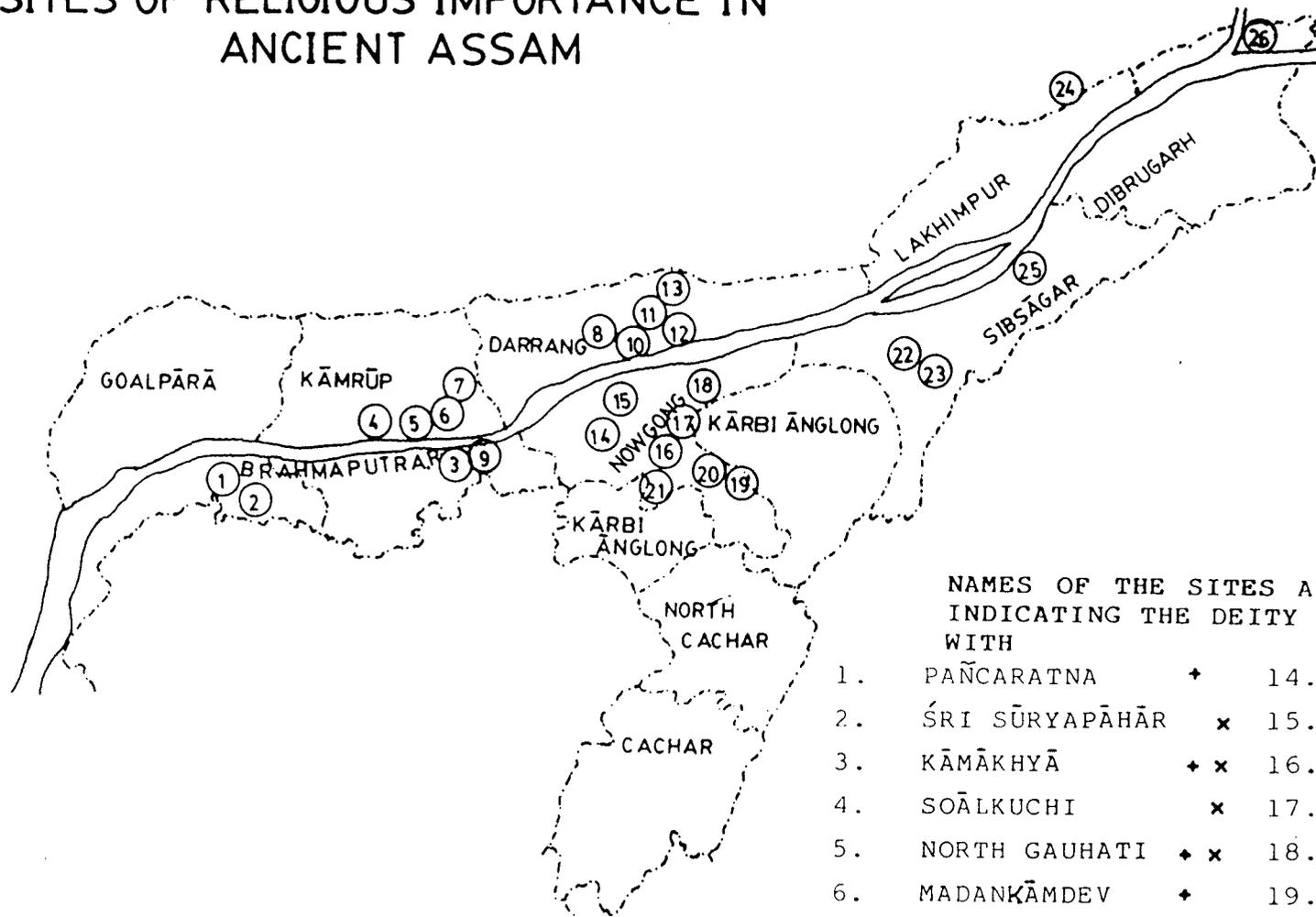
The Śakti worship seems to have gained greater predominance over Śaivism by the time of Indrapāla i.e. the 11th century A.D. The mention of Mahāgaurī before Kāmeśwara here, as different from Kāmeśwara-Mahāgaurī in Vanamāla's epigraph of about the mid-9th century, is perhaps significant. But the fact that no other discrimination between Śiva and Śakti was maintained may be gathered from the twenty-fourth name of Indrapāla.²¹⁷ Archaeological data of the pre 9th-10th centuries, pertaining to the goddess are very scarce. However, the available material definitely indicates the prevalence of the Śakti cult in ancient Kāmarūpa. The famous Śakta pīṭha at Kāmākhyā, the several images of Mahiṣamardinī (both Durgā and Simhavāhinī Durgā), Cāmuṇḍa and the joint images of Umā-Maheśwara conclusively prove the prevalence of Devī cult in the period under review.

216. B.K.Barua, op.cit, p.167.

217. M.M.Sharma, "The Guwākuchi Copper Plate Grant of Indrapāla", op.cit, V. 25, l. 71, p.206.

The twenty-fourth name of Indrapāla is Haragirijācaranapaṅkajaraj-
orañjitottamāṅga i.e. one whose head is decorated with the dust
of the feet of god Śiva and goddess Durgā.

SITES OF RELIGIOUS IMPORTANCE IN ANCIENT ASSAM



NAMES OF THE SITES AND SYMBOLS INDICATING THE DEITY ASSOCIATED WITH

1.	PAÑCARATNA	+	14.	MAHĀDEOSĀL	+
2.	ŚRĪ SŪRYAPĀHĀR	x	15.	MATHARBORI	+ x
3.	KĀMĀKHYĀ	+ x	16.	GACHTAL	+ x
4.	SOĀLKUCHI	x	17.	MIKIRĀTI	+ x
5.	NORTH GAUHATI	+ x	18.	ĀKĀŚIGĀŅĀ	+
6.	MADANKĀMDEV	+	19.	DEVASTHĀN	+
7.	PIŅGALEŚVARA	+	20.	BARGĀŅĀ	+
8.	SINGRI	+	21.	RĀJBĀRI	+
9.	GAUHATI	+	22.	DEOPARVAT	+
10.	ŚĪRĀJULI	x	23.	DEOPĀNĪ	+
11.	DĀH-PARBATIYĀ	+	24.	MĀLINATHĀN	+
12.	TEZPUR	+ x	25.	SIBSĀGAR	+
13.	CHĀRDUĀR	x	26.	SADIYĀ	x

SIVA +
SAKTI x

0 32 64 96 KMS.

CHAPTER III

VAIṢṆAVISM

Vaiṣṇavism signifies that particular theistic religion of which Viṣṇu is the chief deity of worship. Prāggyotiṣapura is one of the chief Vaiṣṇava religious centres in Eastern India. The association of Vaiṣṇavism with this place is well attested by the traditional account in which the ruling house of Prāggyotiṣa and Kāmarūpa is said to have descended from Viṣṇu in his Boar incarnation by the Earth Goddess. The son of Viṣṇu and the Earth Goddess was Narakāsura and Bhagadatta was Naraka's son.¹ The Mahābhārata mentions that Viṣṇu is called Prāggyotiṣa Jyestha.²

The worship of Viṣṇu was evidently prevalent in Kāmarūpa from very early times, as it has already been noted that the kings of Kāmarūpa traced their lineage to Viṣṇu through Naraka.³ Our knowledge of the worship of this deity is contributed by the two principle texts, Kālikā-Purāna and Yoginī-Tantra. The Kālikā-Purāna refers to five places in

1. Pranabananda Jash, History and Evolution of Vaisnavism in Eastern India, Roy and Choudhury, Calcutta, 1982, p.61.
2. Mahābhārata Santiparva, Chapter 348, cited in B.K. Barua, op.cit., p.149.
3. M.M. Sharma, "Nidhanpur Copper Plates of Bhāskaravarman", op.cit., p.50.

Kāmarūpa sacred to Viṣṇu.⁴ The Yoginī-Tantra,⁵ a work composed in Kāmarūpa in the sixteenth century A.D., includes a Viṣṇupīṭha in the list of nine pīṭhas or sacred regions of Kāmarūpa.

There are extensive archaeological remains of temples dedicated to Viṣṇu and his incarnations, and icons of the deity throughout Assam. Inscriptional data also prove the prevalence of the cult in the pre-Āhom period. The earliest of all the inscriptional records issued by the kings of ancient Assam is the Umāchal Rock inscription of Surendravarmaṇ dated 5th century A.D. The record refers to the construction of a cave-temple of the illustrious Lord Balabhadra by this king.⁶ Although the name Balabhadra might be of a person living in that area, yet it is most likely that it was the Vaiṣṇavite deity who was worshipped here. If this record is to be taken seriously, then we can say that Vaiṣṇavism seems to have gained patronage by as early as the 5th century A.D. Of a slightly later period

4. B.K.Kakati, op.cit, p.10.

5. Yoginī Tantra, I-II, 24-f. Cited in Maheswar Neog, Saṅkaradeva and His Times, op.cit, p.87.

6. M.M.Sharma, "Umāchal Rock Inscription of Surendravarmaṇ", op.cit, p.2 ; D.C.Sircar & P.D.Choudhury, "Umāchal Rock Inscription of Surendravarmaṇ", Epigraphia Indica, Vol.31, No.10, pp.68-69.

i.e. 554 A.D. is another recorded reference to the worship of Viṣṇu in Kāmarūpa. By this time it is certain that King Bhūti-varman showed reverence to Viṣṇu. It hails the king as 'Parama-daivata Paramabhaṭṭāraka'.⁷

Widespread archaeological remains prove that Vaiṣṇavism was fairly popular in Assam and that it was not far behind Śaivism in its popularity. Monumental remains of pre-Āhom Assam being scattered, the reconstruction for this aspect of the religious history of Assam has to be supplemented by a study of the icons, sculptures etc.

Monumental remains associated with Viṣṇu are not many. The period of construction of some of them are known. They include Viṣṇu Janārdan temple in the Gauhati sub-division dated in the 9th century. Here, rock-cut images of Viṣṇu are found among other images such as that of Śiva, Sūrya, Devī etc.⁸ At Gosāinguri, Nowgong is found the ruins of an old Viṣṇu temple dated in the 10th century.

Another temple at Matharbāri⁹ situated in the same sub-division also belongs to the same period. A fine image of the deity with Lakṣmī and Saraswatī was found in the

7. M.M.Sharma, "Bargaṅgā Rock Inscription of the time of Bhūti-varman", op.cit, pp. 5-7.

8. P.D.Chaudhury, op.cit, p.35.

9. Ibid. p.42.

Ḍavāka monument ruins.¹⁰ A stone image of Viṣṇu has been discovered at Chari-Duar in Tezpur. This is assigned to the 11th and 12th centuries A.D.¹¹ Some more sites connected with Viṣṇu have been unearthed. However, they could not be assigned even approximate dates. These include the Madhab Gosai¹² ruins where an image of a four-armed Viṣṇu enshrined in a modern temple has been discovered. Basudevbari Devālaya has a stone image of Vāsudeva installed, whereas Vāman Gosaithān, as the name suggests, possesses a Viṣṇu icon in his Vāman incarnation.¹³

All the images of Viṣṇu found in Assam have more or less the same style and characteristic features. There are two varieties of Viṣṇumūrtī : 1] Sthānaka (standing), 2] Āsana (sitting). The former type outnumbers the latter variety.¹⁴

In Kāmarūpa, this deity is found in a number of iconographical representations and is also mentioned in the epigraphs, either invoking in the praśāstis or as qualifications of kings likened to the characteristics of the deity. Sculptural representations are also not totally

10. Ibid. p.43.

11. Ibid. p.47.

12. Ibid. p.45.

13. Ibid. p.41.

14. R.D.Choudhury, op.cit, p.25.

absent. In the pre-Āhom period, except the twentyfour forms, other types of Viṣṇu images were not popular. However, icons of all the ten major avatāras of Viṣṇu have been found in the state.¹⁵ Vaiṣṇava images have been recovered from as many as twentysix sites whereas in the avatāra form it is found in at least thirteen sites throughout the region. Regarding composite images, a single variety of Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa image has recently been discovered in Assam. Not a single image of Trailokyamohana, Vaikuṇṭha, Garuḍa Nārāyaṇa and Viśvarūpa have been found in Assam in the period under review. Sculptural representations of Viṣṇu find stylistic affinity to some traits of the Pala school in the finds from Narakāsur hoards.¹⁶

Although many of epigraphic records invoke Śiva, yet we do have a few Copper Plates where Viṣṇu is invoked in the opening verses. Dharmapāla (1200 A.D.) begins his praśasti in the Puṣpabhadrā Grant with an adoration of Viṣṇu.¹⁷ The record itself refers to the donee, a Brāhmaṇa, who was "from the birth a worshipper of the lotus-like feet of Mādhava".¹⁸ The king at the time of issuing the

15. Ibid. p.38.

16. B.N.Mukherjee, op.cit, p.26.

17. M.M.Sharma, "Puṣpabhadrā Copper Plate Grant of Dharmapāla", op.cit, V. 1, p.262.

18. M.M.Sharma, "Puṣpabhadrā Copper Plate Grant of Dharmapāla", op.cit, V. 18, pp. 264-265.

grant must have embraced Vaiṣṇava faith. Lord Vāsudeva¹⁹ is offered salutation in both the opening lines of the Kamauli Grant of Vaidyadeva (c 1142 A.D.) and the Assam Plates of Vallabhadeva (1185 A.D.). The Kamauli Grant further brings out the qualities of Lord Hari in Boar form in the opening verse.²⁰ Perhaps the most interesting reference to Viṣṇu is seen in the Grant of Indrapāla where there is a rare attempt at identification of this deity with Śiva.²¹ The Copper Plate Grant thus states : 'Victorious is the Lord Mahāvarāha of worshippable and most glorious form, who is Paśupati and the Lord of the whole mankind'.

The Deopānī-Viṣṇu image inscription (8th or 9th centuries A.D.) clearly gives importance to Lord Nārāyaṇa besides the other deities. Herein the goddess Bhagavati is identified with Viṣṇu (Guhya).²² The Assam State Museum possesses two images of Hari-Hara recovered from Deopānī site. Both of them contain few lines of inscriptions. The Śaṅkara-Nārāyaṇa inscription brings to light some references to nāma-saṅkīrtana form of worship which was later

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19. M.M.Sharma, "Kamauli Copper Plate Grant of Vaidyadeva", op.cit, l. 1, p.282; "Assam Plates of Vallabhadeva", op.cit, l. 1, p.296.
 20. M.M.Sharma, "Kamauli Copper Plate Grant of Vaidyadeva", op.cit, pp. 282-283.
 21. M.M.Sharma, "Gauhati Copper Plate Grant of Indrapāla", op.cit, V. 2, p.185.
 22. M.M.Sharma, "Deopānī Viṣṇu image inscription", op.cit, p.309.

popularised by Śaṅkaradeva, the Neo-Vaiṣṇava apostle in the early Āhom period. Its states: ādaṁ nāma Śaṅkara-Nārāyaṇakīrtan²³ the word 'ādaṁ' gives the impression that some chanting of prayers to Śaṅkara and Nārāyaṇa was performed before the consecration of the idol in the temple concerned. If this is believed, the probability of the cult becoming prevalent in Assam as early as the 8th century A.D. may be deduced from the reference. Likewise, the Hari-Hara Stone image inscription of the 8th century acquires great significance in the recording of the tradition of nāmakīrtana which came to assume a very significant role in the religious life of Assam in the medieval period.²⁴

The adoption of Viṣṇu's name as personal name became common during this time. Vanamāla is referred to as devoted to the faith of Bhava (Śiva) but his name was an epithet of Viṣṇu and may indicate his devotion to that god. The Brāhmaṇas in particular have taken such personal names as Saṅkarṣṇa, Mādhava, Govardhana, Gopāla, Sudarśana,

23. M.M.Sharma, "Śaṅkara-Nārāyaṇa Stone image inscription", op.cit, p.310.

24. M.M.Sharma, "Harihara Stone image inscription", op.cit, p.312.

Keśava, Janārdana etc.²⁵ If personal names are any guide to the wide prevalence of a deity, we can infer the popularity of Viṣṇu in ancient Assam. Moreover, of the numerous names of Viṣṇu some at least came to be much in common use. They are Acyūta²⁶ (unfallen, imperishable), Nārāyaṇa²⁷ (one who moves in the water), Puruṣottama²⁸ (the highest of men, the supreme spirit), Hari,²⁹ Upendra,³⁰ Vāsudeva, Kṛṣṇa.³¹ That some of the pre-Āhom kings were devoted to Viṣṇu is shown by the epithet Varāha attached to their names such as Dharmapāla in the Puṣpabhadra Copper Plate Grant of the same king (V. 8, ll. 16-18) and Harṣapāla in the Khanāmukh Copper Plates of Dharmapāla (V. 15, ll. 26-32.). The Kamauli Copper Plate Grant of Vaidyadeva records that King Vaidyadeva was a devout Vaiṣṇava, who always meditated on the feet of

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25. M.M.Sharma, "Nidhanpur Copper Plates of Bhāskaravarman", op.cit, pp.76-81.
 26. M.M.Sharma, "The Guwākuchi Copper Plates Grant of Indrapāla", op.cit, V. 24, ll. 61-62, p.203.
 27. M.M.Sharma, "The Nidhanpur Copper Plates of Bhāskaravarman", op.cit, V. 13, p.51.
 28. M.M.Sharma, "The Guwākuchi Copper Plate Grant of Indrapāla", op.cit, V. 22, p.200.
 29. M.M.Sharma, "The Guwākuchi Copper Plate Grant of Indrapāla", op.cit, V. 24, p.200.
 30. M.M.Sharma, "The Uttarbarbil Copper Plates of Ballavarman III", op.cit, V. 3, p.133.
 31. M.M.Sharma, "Tezpur Copper Plates of Vanamāla", op.cit, V. 4, p.101.

Viṣṇu. The Grant opens with an invocation to Viṣṇu in his Varāha form.³² Bhāskara is said to have been created by the holy lotus, issuing from the navel of Viṣṇu.³³ Bhagadatta was particularly devoted to Kṛṣṇa which is confirmed by the Tezpur Grant.³⁴ Further, the king Ratnapāla is compared to Rāma and Kṛṣṇa.³⁵

The avatāra theory of Viṣṇu worship was popular in ancient Assam. This form of worship, a notable feature of Vaiṣṇavism,³⁶ is proved by both archaeological and inscriptional evidence. Epigraphs mention Jāmadagnya Rāma³⁷ 'who washed his blood stained axe in the water of Lauhitya,' Narasiṃha and Rāma 'who crossing the ocean killed Rāvaṇa.'³⁸ By far,

32. M.M.Sharma, "The Kamauli Copper Plate Grant of Vaidyadeva", op.cit, V. 1, p.283.

33. M.M.Sharma, "The Nidhanpur Copper Plates of Bhāskarvarman", op.cit, V. 25, ll. 34-54, p.52.

34. M.M.Sharma, "The Tezpur Copper Plates of Vanamāla", op.cit, V. 45, p.101.

35. M.M.Sharma, "The Gauhati Copper Plate Grant of Indrapāla", op.cit, V. 9, p.186.

36. H.C.Raychaudhury, Materials for the Study of the Early History of Vaiṣṇava sect, Oriental Books Reprint Corporation, New Delhi, 1975, p.104.

37. M.M.Sharma, "The Gauhati Copper Plate Grant of Indrapāla", op.cit, V. 3, p.185.

38. M.M.Sharma, "The Kamauli Copper Plate Grant of Vaidyadeva", op.cit, V. 4, p.283.

the most commonly mentioned avatāras is the Boar incarnation of Viṣṇu. The inscriptional records of Vanamāla, Balavarman, Ratnapāla, Indrapāla and Dharmapāla refer to this form of Viṣṇu in which he 'lifted up the earth from the depths of the lower region.' The Kamauli Grant begins with an invocation of Hari in the form of Varāha.³⁹ The Guwākuchī Grant mentions the avatāra Kṛṣṇa⁴⁰ recounting in detail how he was born of Devakī, his sportive childhood as Gopāla, how he was brought up by Yasodā and was the delight of the gopīs during his playful childhood as Gopāla.⁴¹ Kṛṣṇa assumed the most important position among all the other avatāras in Vaiṣṇava cult of a later period. At Hājo is the Hayagrīva-Mādhava temple.⁴² Hayagrīva (Viṣṇu with horsehead) is another incarnation of this deity,

39. M.M.Sharma, "The Kamauli Copper Plate Grant of Vaidyadeva", op.cit, V. 1, p.282.

40. M.M.Sharma, "The Guwākuchī Copper Plate Grant of Indrapāla", op.cit, V. 24, p.200.

41. M.M.Sharma, "The Tezpur Copper Plates of Vanamāla", op.cit, V. 13, p.102.

42. J.H.Marshall, "Conservation", Annual Report of Archaeological Survey of India, Bengal Circle, 1903, p.22.

The antiquity of this temple is assumed from its reference in the Kālikā Purāna, Chapter 76ff; B.K.Barua, op.cit, p.171.

under which name he is especially worshipped in Assam even today.⁴³ The worship of Viṣṇu in this form is originally believed to have been associated with Agni and was prevalent in this region at least in the temple of Hājo at Manikuta and probably at Kāmākhyā.⁴⁴

As noted earlier, images of all ten major incarnations are found in Central Assam.⁴⁵ However, there are not complete set of images, because most of them are broken pieces of the original panels. Such panels of avatāras are noticed particularly at Tezpur, Mornoi, Hājo and Urvaśi, apart from other areas. Independent images of Viṣṇu's avatāras might also have been worshipped. The panels must have been at one time or the other parts of the temple-edifice.

Viṣṇu is believed otherwise to have twentyfour incarnations each having different attributes.⁴⁶ The specimens from Assam include most of these forms.⁴⁷

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43. J.C.Ghosh, "Hayagrīva worship in Assam", Journal of the Assam Research Society, Vol. 5, No. 3, 1937, pp.79-85.
44. Pranabananda Jash, op.cit, p.61.
45. R.D.Choudhury, op.cit, p.38, the ten avatāras of Viṣṇu are those of Matsya, Kūrma, Varāha, Narasiṃha, Vāmana, Parasurāma, Rāma, Balarāma, Buddha and Kalki.
46. P.P.Vidyavinod, "Varieties of Viṣṇu image", Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India, (ASM), Government Printing, Calcutta, No. 2, 1920, p.24; B.K.Barua, op.cit, p.210.
47. P.C.Choudhury, op.cit, p.485.

Symbolically, Viṣṇu stands for ākaśagarbha or the sun at midday and midnight, reposing on the coils of the eternal serpent. He is often represented as a warrior with his usual weapons and the vāhana Garuḍa. His active principle is Lakṣmī or Uṣā. His usual four hands symbolise the rays of the sun. His sthānaka variety symbolises the pillar of the universe or the holy mount Meru. His śāṅkhā indicates pride, destroying ignorance, cakra is the wheel of life and destroyer of all enemies, gadā stands for intelligence and destroys adharma and his blue lotus stands for viśvapadma.⁴⁸

Of pre-Āhom Assam, only three images of Viṣṇu in the Matsya-avatāra form have been noticed so far.⁴⁹ Some icons of Narasiṃha form are found at the Old Water Supply, Gauhati and Bāmuni Hill, all of which are stylistically placed between 9th and 10th centuries.⁵⁰ Vāmana,⁵¹ the fifth avatāra falls under two categories : 1] dwarf (vāmana) 2] the huge colossus (virāṭarūpa) about to take three steps (trivikrama). Only three images of Vāmana belonging to the pre-Āhom period have been noticed so far. Parasurāma⁵²

48. Ibid. p.485.

49. R.D.Choudhury, op.cit, p.41.

50. Ibid. p.42.

51. Ibid. p.44.

52. Ibid. pp.44-45.

images here are found in panels. Rāma, the seventh avatāra of Viṣṇu and Balarāma the eighth, occur also in panel representations.⁵³ The Buddha⁵⁴ is taken by some authorities to be the ninth avatāra of Viṣṇu. The first image of this avatāra is carved along with that of Balarāma and Kalki in a panel representation.⁵⁵ The last avatāra of the deity is Kalki. Only three of such images have been discovered so far, out of which one is found along with the images of Buddha and Balarāma in a panel. Some of the avatāra images are found both independently as well as in panels. The panels include those of Varāha, Narasiṃha and Vāmana. Deopānī has produced a Kevala-Narasiṃha image.⁵⁶ At Urvaśi⁵⁷ is found the only example of a rock-cut panel of Viṣṇu avatāra-mūrtīs of the period under study.

Viṣṇu seems to be the most popular God of the Hindu Triad.⁵⁸ Not only in temples especially dedicated to him, he also finds an important place in Śakta and Śiva shrines. Images of Viṣṇu were worshipped everywhere in the plains of Assam. In Āmbārī, out of the discovered images, five

53. Ibid. pp.45-46.

54. Ibid. p.46.

55. Ibid. p.47.

56. Ibid. p.47.

57. Ibid. p.47.

58. B.K.Barua, op.cit, p.210.

represent Viṣṇu. One image bears a few letters which read as Mādhava. Another one reads as Vāmana. The inscribed letters bear the style of 13th-14th century.⁵⁹ Buḍā-Gosaithān,⁶⁰ a holy site brought to light three small figures of the diety. There is a dvāra-sākhā which carries these three images along with the figures of their consorts. Bāmuni Hill (Tezpur)⁶¹ is a significant site which has produced a number of icons related to the deity. Here, a Varāhavatāra icon is seen in a panel of some Viṣṇu-avatāras. A Narasiṃha image dated in the 10th century is also noticed at the same site. It is made to stand on the right leg while the left leg is kept horizontally to the pīṭha. The look of the deity is terrific. This is a rare type of the Narasiṃha image where he stands on his leg. A Parasurāma image on a slab of granite is seen along with other three avatāras of Viṣṇu. The vāhana of the deity is absent. Rāma also finds its place here. The first image of Balarāma is recovered from the same region. That the biggest of the Bāmuni-pāhār temples was dedicated to Viṣṇu could be easily understood from the

59. R.D.Choudhury, op.cit, p.239.

60. Ibid. p.34.

61. Ibid. pp.41-46.

existence of a Viṣṇu image in sthānaka posture at the lalatabimba of the massive lintel. Probably the large image of the Narasiṃha lying in the ruins, also points to Viṣṇu temple. The building complex at the top terrace, thus, formed a pañcāyatana temple with Viṣṇu as its presiding deity.⁶²

To a slightly later period i.e. 12th century belongs a Trivikrama variety of Viṣṇu.⁶³ In sarapadasthānaka attitude, it has four hands, Garuḍa is depicted with his consorts, Lakṣmī and Saraswatī. This image is similar to the one found in the bed Tihu river,⁶⁴ except that the former is round-cut with care and the latter is in relief. Bargaṅgā produced an icon, the remains of which show that probably it was Lord Viṣṇu with his consorts and attendants Jayā and Vijayā.⁶⁵ There are figures of Matsya-avatāra and other avatāra varieties of the god at Chārduār.⁶⁶ Images of Kṛṣṇa⁶⁷ are noticed from the temple ruins at Chārduār, playing on his flute as Muralīdhara or Venugopāla with

62. P.C. Sarma, op.cit, p.53.

63. R.D.Choudhury, op.cit, p.31.

64. Ibid. pp.27-28.

65. Ibid. p.34.

66. Ibid. p.39.

67. Capt. G.C.Westmacott "Description of Ancient Temples and Ruins at Chārduār in Assam", Journal of Asiatic Society, Vol. 40, 1835, cited in N.D.Choudhury, op.cit, p.234.

with the figures of attendants on both sides.

Another important site of archaeological remains is Deopānī. Here a number of iconographic representations of the deity is available, in its various forms. Dated in the 9th century is a Vāmana⁶⁸ form in the sthānaka attitude. Three other icons of similar stylistic features have been found here. However, mention may be made of the Govinda form⁶⁹ now preserved in Assam State Museum. All of them are four-handed. The image of Narasiṃha found here is quite uncommon. At present, it is preserved in the modern Mukhamaṇḍapa of the Deopānī temple. Dated in the 8th-9th century, the deity has two hands, representing the face of a lion and the body of a man. This rare icon is called Kevala-Narasiṃhamūrti,⁷⁰ as the deity is singly carved. An inscribed image of Nārāyaṇa, now in the Museum, stands on a pedestal. Palaeographically datable to about the 9th century, it refers to the icon as an image of Nārāyaṇa.⁷¹

68. Ibid. p.25.

69. Ibid. p.26.

70. Ibid. p.43.

71. R.M.Nath, "The Deopānī Ruins", Journal of the Assam Research Society, Vol. 8, No. 4, Oct. 1941, p.131.

Davāka⁷² reveals an image of Viṣṇu of the 9th century A.D. Here, the Vaijayanti, the prominent alaṅkāra of Viṣṇu, is absent. The sculptor did not arrange a round prabhā behind the head of the image. Possibly it is a local variation. The image is identified as either Śrīdhara or Hṛṣikeśa. Choudhury-Para in Mornoi, Cole Park in Tezpur, Changchauki and Chandmari are other important sites where avatāra-mūrtis of Viṣṇu are found. A controversial bronze figure of the deity is obtained from Dibrugarh.⁷³ K.N.Dikshit assigns it the date of the 11th or the 12th century A.D. Here the vāhana of the deity is not shown. The absence of any āyudha in his hands makes it difficult to identify the deity with Viṣṇu with full confidence. R.D.Choudhury believes that this icon belongs to a much later date and places it in 16th century A.D. Three images of Viṣṇu were found in Dulal Mādhav, Gopāl Mādhav and Saubhāgya.⁷⁴ The Dighalpāni images⁷⁵ are of three sets, raised in three panels. Lakṣmī and Saraswatī flank the

72. R.D.Choudhury, op.cit, pp.26-27

73. K.N.Dikshit, "Exploration", Annual Report of Archaeological Survey of India, 1923-24, p.80; also R.D.Choudhury, op.cit, p.33.

74. R.D.Choudhury, op.cit, p.38.

75. Ibid. p.34.

central figure. Gauhati is indeed one of the few ancient sites in Kāmarūpa which possesses great collection of archaeological remains. An icon of the deity in yogāsana attitude dated in the 10th-11th century A.D. is now preserved in Assam State Museum. The same site has revealed three images of the Narasimha form.⁷⁶ A Balarāma image⁷⁷ is carved on a broken slab of basalt containing the image of Buddha and Kalki avatāras also. An image of the deity with āyudha puruṣa form from Khārāmadhi-pārā, Dudhnoi, has been recovered. The vāhana is not shown. This is the only image of Viṣṇu showing āyudha puruṣa⁷⁸ discovered in Assam so far. It is dated the about the 6th-7th centuries A.D. The Anantaśāyin Viṣṇu⁷⁹ in the Asvakranta temple, North Gauhati, is a reclining statue. Gosāinjuri in Nowgong district,⁸⁰ Hojāi⁸¹ and Hājo⁸² produced icons of Viṣṇu, the icon from Hājo being that of Buddha.

76. Ibid. pp.42-43.

77. Ibid. p.46.

78. Ibid. p.244.

79. P.R.T.Gurdon, "Asvakranta near Gauhati", Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, Vol. 32, pp.25-27.

80. R.D.Choudhury, op.cit, p.33.

81. Ibid. p.30.

82. Ibid. p.80.

The first image of Kṛṣṇa⁸³ has been found sculptured on the western gate of Kāmākhyā. Dated in the 10th century A.D., it is a small image sculptured on a block of granite. The deity plays a flute. The second image of Kṛṣṇa is found on a huge rock behind the western gate of the temple. Here the sthānaka deity is in the tribhaṅga posture. Gopīs are seen on both sides of the deity. Images of Kṛṣṇa are also are also noticed from the temple ruins at Chārduār. At Kāwaimāri⁸⁴ there is an icon of Viṣṇu in the sthānaka posture. Another image of the 12th century is a splendid āsanamūrti. Garūḍa is also seen below in the pratalata in usual posture. These objects are found among the ruins of a big temple in the centre and small ones in four corners.

Kūrmāvatāra images⁸⁵ sculptured in three panels, is discovered from Mornoi. Each of them has four hands holding cakra, gadā, śaṅkha and padma. Two female attendants are seen on either side of each deity. These are similar to the one preserved in Assam State Museum, Gauhati and Tezpur. The Numalīgarh stone pillar⁸⁶ carries an image of Viṣṇu in mahārājalita attitude on padmāsana. Another image is seen on the side of a cubical part of a stambha at

83. Ibid. p.48.

84. Ibid. pp.34-35.

85. Ibid. p.40.

86. Ibid. p.36, 38.

the site. A hoard of metal icons conches, bells etc. were discovered in a hole in Narakāsūr hill (Kāhilipārā).⁸⁷ Four of the twentyto icons are of the 9th century and identified as Śrīdhara, the ninth form of the deity or Hṛṣikesa the tenth form. The third image is of the 8th century and quite similar to one from Deopānī now preserved in the State Museum, Gauhati. The fourth image is a mutilated one.

Trivikrama, an embodiment of Viṣṇu, finds its place in Netaidhubunighāt, Hājo and Rengbeng near Nowgong.⁸⁸ The Rengbeng image of 12th century A.D. finds other similar ones in Kāwaimāri, Hātisung-Gedāvāri village and in the house of Sri N. Sharma Bhagavati Gojpuria village. An image of Narasiṃha slightly small in size is found at Hājo standing on leg and holding the body of Hiranya horizontally.

Two varieties of Viṣṇu images have been found in Sukreśvar. Measuring 217 cms X 186 cms, this first image in the biggest of all images found in Assam. This figure

87. R.D.Choudhury & D.Chutia, A Note on the Archaeological Finds at Narakāsūr Hill, op.cit, p.23.

88. Ibid. p.28-29.

has been identified as Nārāyaṇa⁸⁹ by R.D.Choudhury. However, B.K.Barua opines that this large image is of Viṣṇu Janārdana.⁹⁰ Another image of the deity, is of Govinda and is recovered from the same site. This is an āsana variety, fitted on the western bhitti of the Sukreśvar temple, Gauhati. Seated crosslegged, the deity sits on a coiling serpent identified with Ādiseṣa. This type of image sitting on Ādiseṣa is rather rare. Some scholars take it to be of the pre-Āhom period while other believe to a later date. At Śri Sūryapāhār,⁹¹ a row of five rock cut sculptures of Viṣṇu are found. They, however, do not possess four hands as usual. Preserved in Assam State Museum, the Varāhāvatāra⁹² from Sibsāgar is the only svyampradhnāmūrtī of Varāhāvatāra in Assam. Tarābaśā in Kārbi Ānglong and Viṣṇupara, Mangaldoi, have also produced Viṣṇu icons. At Viṣṇupara there are two of them, one is Rāmāvatāra and the other in Varāhāvatāra form, now preserved in Assam State Museum. Urvaśi has brought to light a number of images of the deity. A rock cut image in sthānaka attitude holding the usual āyudhas is noticed.

89. Ibid. p.36.

90. B.K.Barua, op.cit, p.212.

91. S.Kakati, "Antiquities and Historical sites in Goalpārā", Journal of the Assam Research Society, Vol. 2, No. 1, 1934-35, p.11.

92. R.D.Choudhury, op.cit, p.41.

Another icon found here is that of Kūrmāvatāra.⁹³

This is a rock cut one, represented in a hybrid form.

A miniature rock-cut image of Vāmana⁹⁴ form of Viṣṇu avatāra panel is found at the same site. Two-handed, the deity has no attendant figures. The Viṣṇu-paṭṭa preserved in the Assam State Museum, also depicts a dwarf figure of Vāmana holding a chattra with one of its two hands.

To the right of this sculpture, in a separate knatṭaka, there is a miniature figure of Trivikrama raising its left leg upwards.

In Bāmuni hill a two handed image of Parasurāma⁹⁵ in sthānaka attitude is seen. The Assam State Museum also possesses two figures of the deity. The first one is depicted in a dvārasākhā from Choudhurypārā, Mornoi, wherein the deity is made to stand holding paraśu in his left hand. The other image is noticed in the Viṣṇupatta. Yet another image of avatāra found in the site is of Rāma⁹⁶ having two hands. This image is dated in the 8th or 9th century A.D. A Balarāma⁹⁷ image in sampada-sthānaka form is also noticed. No attendant

93. Ibid. p.40.

94. Ibid. p.44.

95. Ibid. p.45.

96. Ibid. p.45.

97. Ibid. p.46.

figures are seen. The vāhana of the deity has been depicted. It is a small image of the deity of the Viṣṇuavatāra in the rock-cut panel at the place. Urvaśi has also revealed a Buddha⁹⁸ and a Kalki⁹⁹ member of the ten incarnations. Uzan Bazar revealed the last image of Narasiṃha.¹⁰⁰ Dated the 9th or the 10th century, the image is seen in the residence of Sri Rajendra Nath Choudhury. The deity is shown with four hands in the usual posture. The Assam State Museum possesses some icons of Viṣṇu of which the original place from where they were recovered is not known. Two miniature stone images of the 10th-11th century A.D., both in samapāda-sthānaka attitude are being preserved here.

The knowledge of the prevalence of Vāsudevism in Kāmarūpa prior to the spread of Neo-Vaiṣṇavism is mainly confined to the Kālikā-Purāṇas. A sacred place under the name of Vāsudevathān¹⁰¹ came to be associated with the worship of Vāsudeva. This place lies between the rivers Kadha and Cārikariyā in the Northern Lakhimpur sub-division. Out of the numerous icons also the most

98. Ibid. p.46.

99. Ibid. p.47.

100. R.D.Choudhury, op.cit, p.43.

101. M.Neog, "Religions of the North East", op.cit, p.23.

common is the Vāsudeva variety.¹⁰² Vāsudeva sits upon the serpent Ādiseṣa. The deity is made to stand under a canopy of eight serpent hoods. Both the legs of the deity are folded and made to rest on the coiled body of the serpent. The back hands hold gadā and padma and the front hands cakra and śaṅkha.¹⁰³ In Davāka, the image of this variety of Viṣṇu is shown with his consorts Lakṣmī and Saraswatī.¹⁰⁴ The image from Ākāśigaṅgā ruins is shown seated, with Lakṣmī and Saraswatī standing on either side.¹⁰⁵ A block of stone from Mikirāti shows a portion of the deity with flying Vidyādharas at the top with folded hands.¹⁰⁶ A door piece from Mahādeosal shows a carved figure of Vāsudeva.¹⁰⁷ Sets of Vāsudeva images are also found from Phulani and Dighalpāni. The central figure is that of a Viṣṇu-Vāsudeva with his attendants. In between the Vāsudeva panels, there are small panels with the figure of Vāsudeva seated on a padmāsana.¹⁰⁸

102. P.C.Choudhury, op.cit, p.457.

103. B.K.Barua, op.cit, p.189.

104. R.M.Nath, "Antiquities of the Kapīli and Jamuna Valleys", op.cit, p.14f.

105. P.C.Choudhury, op.cit, p.487.

106. Ibid.

107. R.M.Nath, op.cit, p.14f.

108. P.C.Choudhury, op.cit, p.487.

Of the goddesses associated with the Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa cult, Lakṣmī and Saraswatī are the most important ones. Śakti worship was common to both the Śaivas and the Vaiṣṇavas.¹⁰⁹ However, it is a very strange phenomenon in the Brahmaputra valley, that the goddesses with Vaiṣṇava affiliation are very rarely noticed. Though Viṣṇu images are plenty in the region, the actual instances of the occurrence of Lakṣmī and Saraswatī are very rare.¹¹⁰

The perpetual abode of Lakṣmī is Nārāyaṇa.¹¹¹ Lakṣmī came out from samudramanthana (churning of the sea) and then became the consort of Viṣṇu. Of the eight different forms of Lakṣmi known as Aṣṭa Mahālakṣmī, the Gaja-Lakṣmī form is the popular motif in Assam. The earliest representation of the Devī known locally as Kamala-Kāminī is discovered in the niche of a stone slab from Tezpur, in which two elephants pour water over the head of the goddess from vases held in their trunk.¹¹² Though some images of Gaja-Lakṣmī are found,

109. Dimbeswar Sarma, "Trends of religion on ancient Kāmarūpa", Journal of the Assam Research Society, Vol. 16, 1962, p.21.

110. R.D.Choudhury, op.cit, p.48.

111. M.M.Sharma, "Nidhanpur Copper Plates of Bhāskarvarman", op.cit, V. 19, p.51-52.

112. R.D.Banerji, "Exploration", Pre-Āhom Art and Architecture", Annual Report of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1924, p.97.

all of them are not independent images. Devasthān contains ten temples in two rows of five each with figures of divine images. It's upper register contains five sitting deities, the one at the centre is Gaja-Lakṣmī.¹¹³ Sibsāgar, Mahādeosal and Maudāṅga also produced images of Gaja-Lakṣmī. In Maudāṅga¹¹⁴ two images are recovered from a ruined dvāra of a temple. Icons of Lakṣmī are found in at least three sites. At Cole Park is a figure dated in the 10th century.¹¹⁵ An image of a female deity¹¹⁶ is seen in Assam State Museum, Gauhati. To the left of the deity, a female figure is seen in the sthānaka attitude and in anjali-pose. The figure may be of a devotee or an attendant of the deity. Like the deity, the attendant also stands on a padma-pīṭha sculpture, artistically not of a very high order. The Lakṣmī image from Mahāmāyāthān¹¹⁷ of the 8th-9th century A.D. is found in Sirapatti, lying in a state of disorder. It has the usual alaṅkāras and vastras, most of which have become indistinct. A rare icon of Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa¹¹⁸ is found in Kāchumārī village

113. P.C. Sarma, op.cit, p.66.

114. R.D. Choudhury, op.cit, p.49.

115. Ibid. p.50.

116. Ibid. p.48.

117. Ibid. p.49.

118. Ibid. p.244.

near Morān. A miniature bronze image of Lakṣmī in the lalitāsana posture on a lotus seat, is seen sitting on the left thigh of Viṣṇu. Below the feet of the god is Garuḍa. Dated in the 9th-10th century, this piece of metal art is the only icon of Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa noticed in Assam so far.

The other images of female goddesses are those of Saraswatī and Vārāhī. Vārāhī¹¹⁹ is the 6th member of sapta-mātrikās. In Assam, only one image of the deity has been noticed so far which is seen in the Assam State Museum, Guwahati. The deity is made to sit in the lalitāsana, endowed with two hands. It belongs to the 9th century A.D. Her vāhana is an elephant which is not depicted.

Saraswatī is depicted independently at times and otherwise as a consort of Viṣṇu. At Chārduār¹²⁰ an image of the deity is noticed. A figure of Vīṇāhastā Saraswatī as described in the Agni-Purāṇa is seen in a niche of a stone slab found at Tezpur.¹²¹ Another figure of the

119. Ibid. pp.50-51

120. Ibid. p.50.

121. R.D.Banerji, "Exploration" 'Pre-Āhom Art and Architecture' op.cit, p.97.

goddess in tribhaṅga attitude was recovered from Sibsāgar.¹²² She wears a ratna, kuṇḍala, hara, girdles and anklets. On a slab of granite in Cole Park¹²³ is a 9th or 10th century icon of Saraswatī which is made to sit in the lalitāsana. Both her hands hold her vīna in the usual way. At Buḍa-Gosainthān are discovered sets of standing Viṣṇu, Lakṣmī and Saraswatī.¹²⁴ It has been noticed that Lakṣmi and Saraswatī occur as side figures many Viṣṇu icons throughout the region.

The joint images of Viṣṇu and another deity whether male or female are not altogether absent in Assam, although they are rare. The Hari-Haramūrtī representing Viṣṇu and Śiva, emphasise the reconciliation between the two major cults of Vaiṣṇavism and Śaivism. The Brahmaputra valley has yielded only a few icons of Hari-Hara. The first image was discovered in North Gauhati.¹²⁵ This sculpture has two attendants, one on each side. The right part of the deity has the emblem of Śiva, namely the triśūla and the damaru. The left side represents Viṣṇu with his karanda-mukuṭa and holding the gadā and

122. R.D.Choudhury, p.50.

123. Ibid. p.50.

124. R.M.Nath, "Antiquities of Kapili and Jamuna Valleys", op.cit, p.14f.

125. B.K.Barua, op.cit, p.205.

cakra in his two hands. Now preserved in the Assam State Museum is an image of this Hari-Hara combination from Deopānī where clearly it is divided into two equal halves by a line of demarcation between Hari and Hara. The right half of the image represents Hara, while the other half depicts Hari. The consorts of both the deities are absent but the respective vāhanas of the gods are present. To the deity's right, Śiva's vāhana Nandī and to its left Viṣṇu's carrier, Garuḍa are clearly depicted. According to the iconometric texts, Hari or Nārāyaṇa should be shown in the left side and Śiva or Śaṅkara on the right. They are to be represented with their symbols in the respective halves.¹²⁶

By far the earliest reference to Viṣṇu worship is recorded from Umāchal.¹²⁷ This 5th century inscription in the north-eastern slope of the Kāmākhyā hill is significant in that it tells us of the establishment of the first temple ever built in the Brahmaputra valley. It informs us of a cave temple said to be constructed by one Mahārāja Śri Surendravarman. The site as it looks at present, does not contain any temple save two big

126. M.M.Sharma, op.cit, p.310ff.

127. P.C.Sarma, op.cit, p.13.

rocks standing parallel with a common passage in between them in the east-west direction. The use of the two words 'Bhāgayata' and Balabhadrasvāmin in the Umāchal rock inscription have some significance. Apart from their religious importance, they also bear chronological interest. The Balabhadra cult¹²⁸ as an independent sect remained dominant upto the second century A.D. in North and West India and is supposed to have faded with the rise of the Guptas. Its existence in Kāmarūpa in the 5th century indicates that it was in existence here since the pre-Gupta period. P.C.Sarma opines that it is likely that the followers of this cult being driven away by the other growing Brahmanical sects under the rising Guptas took refuge in the remote hilly enclave of the Brahmaputra valley.

Bhakti form of worship in pre-Āhom Assam was not totally absent. The prevalence of such worship as early as the 9th century A.D. is proved by the Deopānī Viṣṇu image inscription. The clear mention of the bhaktas¹²⁹ show that the show that the cult of Bhakti was already gaining some ground in the religious life of ancient Assam.

128. Ibid. p.86, 28f.

129. M.M.Sharma, "Deopānī Viṣṇu Image Inscription",
op.cit, p.309.

Tantricism with its use of spells, gestures diagrams and various magical of sacramental rites had its share of influence over Vaiṣṇavism. Reference to Tantric Vaiṣṇavism in archaeological data is found in the Mādhava temple.¹³⁰ The present temple was built in 1583 over the ruins of an earlier shrine.

A detailed study of the archaeological material and inscriptions available at hand brings us to the conclusion that Viṣṇu was worshipped in iconographic form throughout Kāmarūpa. The dasāvatāra varieties were popular in this region. Other forms of the deity are also found. Viṣṇumūrtī is found both in the sthānaka and the āsana form in pre-Āhom period, the sthānaka outnumbering the āsana varieties.¹³¹ All the images found in Assam have more or less the same style and same characteristic features. The sayana variety is represented only by the image of the deity from Asvaklānta and this too belongs to the Āhom period.¹³² Syncretic images of Viṣṇu with Lakṣmī, Śiva etc. appear rarely.

130. Maheswar Neog, "Śaṅkaradeva and His Times, early history of Vaiṣṇava faith and Movement in Assam", op.cit, p.86.

131. R.D.Choudhury, op.cit, p.25.

132. Ibid. p.33.

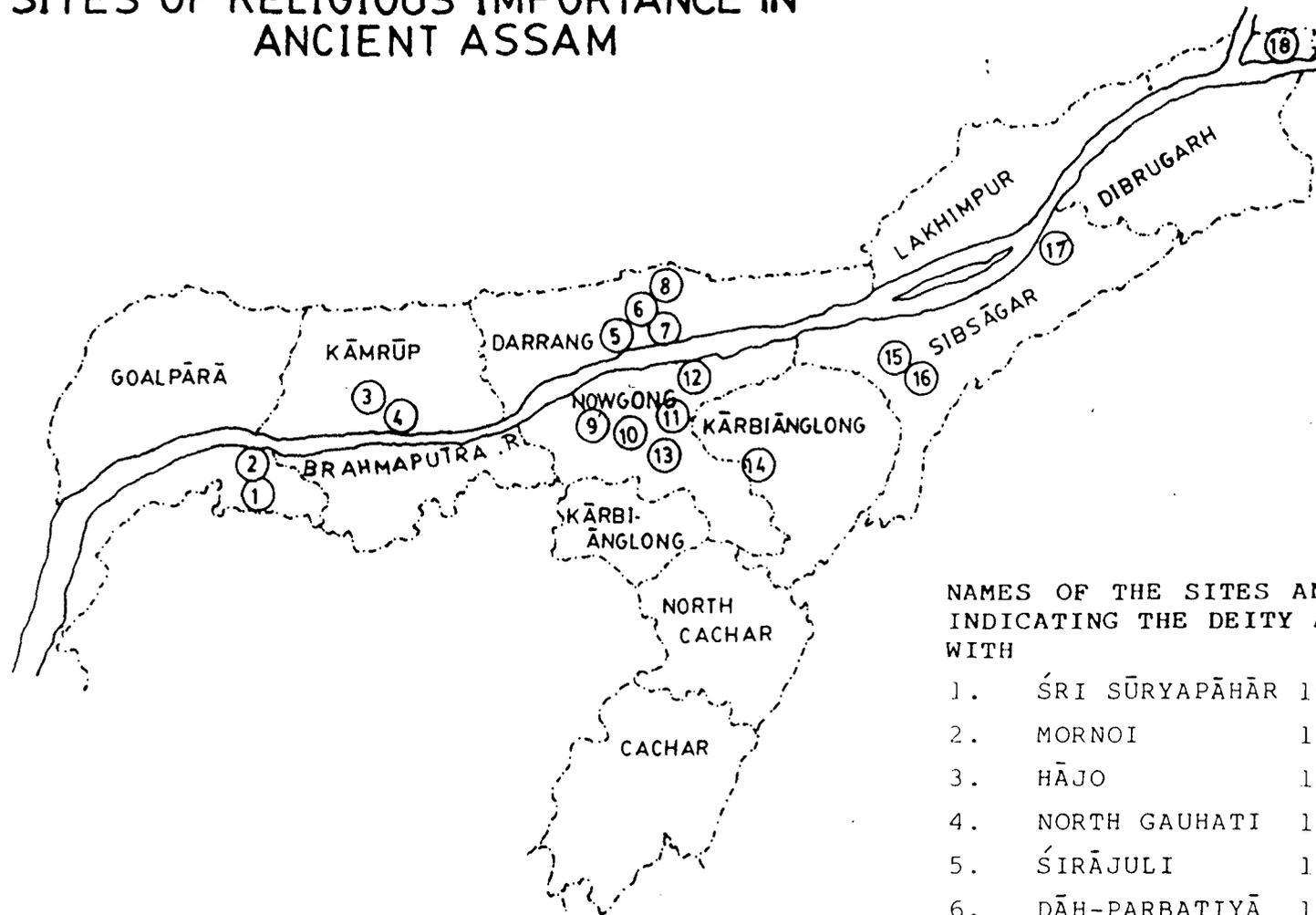
That Vaiṣṇavism prospered fairly well from the 7th century onwards can be deduced not merely from inscriptional evidence but also from the numerous sculptural representations. Kṛṣṇa seem to occupy an important place in later Vaiṣṇavism. The Kṛṣṇa legend seems to have formed an essential element of this cult in Kāmarūpa as early as at least the 7th century A.D. Kṛṣṇa's account became the main theme of early Assamese literature.¹³³

It is difficult to define the nature of early Vaiṣṇavism in Assam, the reason being lack of sufficient material for its study. However, we may say that it corresponded closely to the Bhāgvatism of the Gupta period, which was a syncretism of various cults of Viṣṇu, namely, Viṣṇu of Vedic Brahmanism, Nārāyaṇa of the Pañcaratras, Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva of the Sātvats and Gopāla of the Ābhīra tribe of the shepherds.¹³⁴

133. B.K.Barua, op.cit, pp.170-71.

134. Ibid. p.170.

SITES OF RELIGIOUS IMPORTANCE IN ANCIENT ASSAM



RELIGIOUS SITES - VIṢṆU

NAMES OF THE SITES AND SYMBOLS INDICATING THE DEITY ASSOCIATED WITH

- | | |
|-------------------|---------------|
| 1. ŚRI SŪRYAPĀHĀR | 10. KĀWAIMARI |
| 2. MORNOI | 11. MIKIRĀTI |
| 3. HĀJO | 12. ĀKAŚIGĀṄĀ |
| 4. NORTH GAUHATI | 13. BARGAṄĀ |
| 5. ŚIRĀJULI | 14. MAUDGAṄĀ |
| 6. DĀH-PARBATIYĀ | 15. DEOPARVAT |
| 7. TEZPUR | 16. DEOPĀNĪ |
| 8. CHĀRDUĀR | 17. SIBSĀGAR |
| 9. MAHĀDEOSĀL | 18. SADIYĀ |

0 32 64 96 KMS.

CHAPTER IV

MISCELLANEOUS CULTS

The existence of a variety of gods and goddesses in ancient Assam is a marked feature in the religious history of this region. Apart from Śiva, Śakti and Viṣṇu which were the major deities worshipped by the people, there prevailed many other deities which might have occupied a subordinate position as compared to them. These miscellaneous cults included both Brahmanical as well as non-Brahmanical deities. Although they did not rise to the position of independent major cults, yet their images and sculptures are found in a number of places showing that each of them had a place in the history of religion here. The minor deities in concern include Sūrya, Indra, Gaṇeśa, Kārttikeya, Agni, Kuvera and Brahmā. Manasā cult was not totally absent in this period. Buddhism alongwith Jainism, although never particularly popular in Assam, attracted a portion of the population. The archaeological remains reveal that these minor deities occurred mostly as consorts and associates of the main gods and goddesses. Independent representations of some of them are not

altogether lacking in Assam, but they occur rarely. The study of these miscellaneous cults, for the sake of convenience are grouped under two sections : A] Sūrya B] Other minor deities. It may be noted that Sūrya has been given a separate section since a study of the materials show that this cult came only next to Śiva, Śakti and Viṣṇu in its importance among the various worshippers in ancient Assam.

A] SŪRYA

The antiquity of the cult of Sūrya is indicated by the very name Prāggyotiṣa, by which name this country was known in ancient times. Prāggyotiṣa means 'light of the East or Eastern astronomy'. As the 'centre of Sun worship' it finds mention in the Gṛyhasūtra texts. The land of Sun-rise (Udayācala) is mentioned in the Mārkaṇḍeya-Purāṇa. Udayācala was another name of Prāggyotiṣa-Kāmarūpa, where according to the same Purāṇa stood a temple of the Sun.¹ Epigraphic records do not indicate the prevalence of Sūrya cult in the region. However, that special reverence was shown to Sūrya is revealed in some cases. There is no

1. P.C.Choudhury, op.cit, p.434.

invocation to this god in the epigraphs available till date. The term āditya-bhattāraka² which appears in the Gauhati Grant of Indrapāla is of importance and the term has been understood to have affiliation with the Sun-god.³

A good number of Sūrya images have been discovered in Assam. They are broadly divided into two types:⁴

- 1] STHĀNAKA VARIETY: a] Sūrya images with ratha (chariot)
- b] Sūrya images without ratha.

2] ĀSANA VARIETY

In Assam, the sthānakamūrtīs outnumber the āsanamūrtīs. However, the sthānaka images of Sūrya without ratha, found in Assam, are not many. The earliest representation of Sun worship in Assam is found at Tezpur.⁵ Now preserved in Cole Park, the image is dated in the 8th century. This temple structure contained a panel representation of a number of gods which included those of Brahmā, Śiva and Sūrya. We cannot rule out the possibility of the existence here of a big temple dedicated to the

2. M.M.Sharma, "The Gauhati Copper Plate Grant of Indrapāla", op.cit, V. 24, l. 51.
3. B.K.Barua, op.cit, p.174.
4. R.D.Choudhury, op.cit, p.51.
5. Maheswar Neog, "Religions of the North-East", op.cit, p.464.

Sun-god. At Dāh-Parbatīyā,⁶ in a temple ruin perhaps dedicated to Śiva, a medallion containing a beautiful image of the Sun-god has been found. The god is shown seated cross-legged and holding lotus flowers on both hands. He has two attendants on either side. The place was a great centre of Hinduism, specially of Śaivism in Assam, though the Sun-god was also highly revered.⁷ Another important place of Sun-worship was Nigritting,⁸ where we find a shrine dedicated to him. In spite of his occupying a subordinate position a separate shrine was built for him, which was not very common in Assam. A temple dedicated to all the nine Grahas is found at the vicinity of Gauhati.⁹ The central pillar here is supposed to represent Sūrya, the Sun and around it there are other eight planets. A Sun image¹⁰ has also been found from around this site. The god is shown seated on a chariot which has one wheel and is drawn by seven horses. He has a lotus in each hand and is shown wearing an armour and holding a shield over his

6. R.D.Banerji, "Exploration : Pre-Āhom Art and Architecture", op.cit, pp. 98-99.
7. L.P.Pandey, "Sun worship in ancient India", Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1971, p.226.
8. K.N.Dikshit, "Assam" "Annual Report of Archaeological Survey of India, 1929-30, p.45.
9. S.Kakati, "Antiquities of Assam", Indian Historical Quarterly, Vol. 6, 1930, p.367.
10. Ibid. p.367.

breast. He has beautiful straight hair on his head and is surrounded by a halo of light. The kind of representation seen here reveals that in Assam the Sun-god was worshipped both symbolically as well as anthropomorphically.¹¹ Śrisūryapāhār, as the name suggests, was the perpetual abode of the Sun-god.¹²

The number of icons that have come to light in this province indicates that, once, the Sūrya cult must have prevailed here. The study conducted by Arun Bhattacharjee¹³ categorises the icons into five groups. This method is being followed in the present study since it also takes into care the classification of R.D.Choudhury.

In the first group includes those icons which have attendants like Uṣā, Pratyusā and Mahāśvetā in addition to Daṇḍa, Piṅgala, Rajānī and Nikṣubā. Only one image from Davāka falls in this group.¹⁴ Now preserved in the Assam State Museum, the image is of the 10th century. It is in samapada-sthānaka posture on a pūrnavikaśita-padma and is placed on a ratha. Those with four attendants - two males and two females form the second group. One such image is in the private possession of one Mr. N.Deka in Paltan Bazar¹⁵

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11. L.P.Pandey, op.cit, p.226.
 12. N.D.Choudhury, op.cit, p.118.
 13. Arun Bhattacharjee, op.cit, p.36.
 14. R.D.Choudhury, op.cit, p.52.
 15. A.Bhattacharjee, op.cit, p.36.

and is dated in the 11th-12th century. Those with only two male attendants i.e. Daṇḍa and Piṅgala belong to the third group and four images in this category have been discovered. An image, dated in the 10th century, is seen on the wall of Siddheśwarī temple at Soālkuchi.¹⁶ Here the deity stands on a padma in samabhaṅga attitude. This belongs to the sthānaka with ratha variety. The consorts Uṣā and Pratyūṣā do not feature in this image. Below the figure of Aruna, seven horses and the ekachakra-ratha are well depicted. From Āmbāri,¹⁷ two images of the same iconographic convention of the 12th-13th centuries have been recovered. Other pre-Āhom icons of such type are found in the Narakāsur Hill.¹⁸ The next group of Sūrya images are those with two female attendants - Nikṣubā and Rajanī. Such images are found at two places.¹⁹ The first one is seen at Soālkuchi in front of the Siddheśwarī temple. This icon, dated in the 10th century, depicts the Sun-god holding āyudhas. Nikṣubā and Rajanī are made to stand on either side of the deity. Figures of Daṇḍa and Piṅgala are omitted. Horses of the ratha are seen. The peculiarity of this figure is that both the hands of the deity are kept on the heads of the consorts while holding the āyudhas. The other image is also seen in a temple, that of the Sukreśvar, and

16. R.D.Choudhury, op.cit, p.53.

17. Ibid. p.239.

18. A.Bhattacharjee, op.cit, p.36.

19. R.D.Choudhury, op.cit, p.54.

is assigned to the 13th century. Sūrya without the ratha forms the last group. There are three images of this type. Two of them are from Kāmākhyā temple,²⁰ one of the 9th-10th centuries and the other of the 10th-12th centuries. The third is recovered from the Narakāsura ruins²¹ of 9th century. Belonging to the sthānaka variety, the deity holds two padmas. No attendants are shown. Neither Piṅgala nor Daṇḍa are depicted with the Sun-god.

Some more sites in Assam have brought to light icons of Sūrya. A slightly mutilated one is discovered from Bhogbāri, Mangaldoi²² and is now preserved in the Assam State Museum. This icon of the 9th century depicts a ratha and seven horses symbolically. Gahpur²³ has revealed an image of Sūrya where below the deity seven horses and a wheel are sculptured Aruna is also depicted below. To the right is Daṇḍa and to the left is Piṅgala, flanked by Chāyā and Rajanī. Uṣā and Pratyūṣā are also shown. The Assam State Museum²⁴ houses two mutilated images of this deity assigned to approximately the 11th century. Only the nicely carved seven horses and the wheel of the ratha are seen in both the cases.

20. A.Bhattacharjee, op.cit, p.36.

21. R.D.Choudhury, op.cit, p.56.

22. Ibid. p.54.

23. S.C.Goswami, "Antiquarian Notes", Journal of the Assam Research Society, Vol. 10, Nos. 1 & 2, 1943, p.38.

24. R.D.Choudhury, op.cit, p.55.

From Kāhīlipārā,²⁵ an image, supposed to be that of Sūrya, is recovered. Now preserved in the Museum, this deity is dated in the 9th-10th centuries. On the right stands Piṅgala and on the left stands Daṇḍa. Seated in the sthānaka attitude on the ratha, the deity holds two padmas. Mālinathān²⁶ now in Arunachal Pradesh bordering Assam, was an important religious centre. A Sūrya image carved beautifully on a block of stone is found here. Another site where an icon of the god is found is Mornoi²⁷ in the Goalpārā district. The icon is preserved in a nāmghar (prayer house) along with that of Nandī. It features Aruna, the ekachakra-ratha and the seven horses. Like the Davāka image, this also has a figure of Pṛthvī just behind that of Aruna. An icon recovered from Sadiyā²⁸ shows Sūrya sitting in padmāsana in the ratha. As usual Aruna and the reins of seven horses in galloping position can be seen. The icon is believed to be of the pre-Āhom period, although no definite date has been assigned to it. At Ulubāri²⁹ there is an image of the Sun-god, standing on a one-wheeled ratha, drawn by seven horses, and driven by Aruna. Piṅgala and Daṇḍa are present while Uṣā and Pratyūṣā are omitted. Two male attendants are shown on both extreme sides i.e. to

 25. Ibid. pp.54-55.

26. Ibid. p.225.

27. Ibid. p.53.

28. Ibid. p.57.

29. Ibid. p.53.

right of Piṅgala and to the left of Daṇḍa. Urvaśi³⁰ produced three icons of the Sun-god. The photograph of yet another image of the Sun is reproduced in the book of B.K.Barua.³¹ Stylistically dated in the 9th century, it resembles the Sūrya image found in a field near Sundia in West Bengal.

Sūrya images in Assam have been found along with those of other gods of the Hindu pantheon. Sculptured in a stone slab, in samapada-sthānaka attitude, dated in the 10th century, is an icon of Sūrya discovered from Bāmuni Hill.³² Three miniature images are depicted here, each separate from the other. To the right of the figure of the deity is Brahmā in the slab of stone. This type, with figures of Brahmā and other identified divinities, are rare. At Mahāmāyāthān³³ there is an icon dated in the 9th-10th centuries. The same block of rock which contains the image of Sūrya also carries those of Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva. Paṇḍu³⁴ has revealed an image of the 9th century where Sūrya is seen next to Indra. The rock-out image of Sūrya found at Sukreśvar,³⁵ belonging to the 10th-11th centuries, features Sūrya along with Śiva, Mahiṣamardini,

30. Ibid. p.56.

31. B.K.Barua, op.cit, p.186, Illustration No. 53.

32. R.D.Choudhury, op.cit, p.56.

33. Ibid. p.58.

34. Ibid. p.54.

35. Ibid. p.52.

Viṣṇu and Gaṇeśa.

An interesting piece of stone with geometrical and floral designs was recovered from Barpathar, Rājbari Dubarani³⁶ site. The Tengani forest reserve³⁷ produced an image which resembles the Sun-god. The image which is believed by some to be that of Lord Viṣṇu was found along with a model of a stone conch-shell. The most important characteristic features of the deity are a chariot drawn by a group of seven horses, Gaṇeśa and Kārttikeya inscribed on the front and left hand sides respectively of the deity and four female attendants at its four corners. It is to be mentioned that these images are engraved on a single piece of stone.

A place of singular importance for the study of the Sun-god is Śri Sūryapāhār. As mentioned above, this place is the perpetual abode of the god. This site may be called a picture gallery of archaeological remains artistically arranged. On a circular slate of stone measuring nearly four and a half feet in circumference, there are engraved figures of Sūrya. The hill has been given the name

Śri Sūryapāhār after the deity.³⁸

36. P.C.Saikia, "A Note on Some Archaeological Relics in and Around Barpathar (Golaghat) Assam : An Appraisal", op.cit, p.37.
37. Ibid. p.36.
38. S.Kakati, "Antiquities and Historical Sites in Goalpārā", op.cit, p.11,

Syncretic images of Sūrya are not common in Assam. However, a recent study by D.Chutia of Kāmarūpa Anusandhāna Samiti has brought to light an inscribed Sun image of the pre-Āhom period. Now preserved in Assam State Museum, this two-armed bronze Sun image forms a part of the hoard of relics found at the Narakāsur Hill, Kāhilipārā.³⁹ This image is interesting in that flames are shown behind the deity's head, perhaps reminiscent of the Mārtaṇḍa aspect of the Sun-god.⁴⁰ In front of the principle deity is shown the figure of the charioteer. However, as against the normal practice of depicting the charioteer who is normally Aruna (the uterine brother of Garuḍa), as legless, here he is shown, sitting astride like a rider. Another interesting feature with respect to the figure of the charioteer is that he has a pair of wings behind his arms.

There is a short epigraph behind the head of the central deity, on the back-side of the sun-disc or the nimbus. The epigraph records the image as that of Āditya-Nārāyaṇa, made during the reign of King Harjara Deva of the 9th century A.D. The name suggests a composite image showing syncretic Śaura and Vaiṣṇavite iconographic features. In this case Aruna's legs being fully visible, the identity of the human figure, having two wings and riding astride on a running

 39. Dharmeswar Chutia, "A Note on an Inscribed Sun Image Preserved in the Assam State Museum", Journal of the Assam Research Society, Vol. 30. No. 1, 1988, p.50.

40. Ibid. p.51.

horse has posed a problem. Mythologically, Garuḍa is the co-uterine brother of Aruna. In the Vedas, Garuḍa is the called divya-suparna, and due to his constant association with Viṣṇu, as the latter's vāhana, came to represent Viṣṇu himself. Considering all these aspects, Dharmeswar Chutia suggests that the rider of the present image should perhaps be taken as that of Garuḍa and not of Aruna. The sarpa-kunḍala worn by the figure for his ear ornaments, perhaps supports such an identification. Explained in this way, here the divine personage appearing as born of or issuing forth from the golden fiery egg-shaped disc and served by the most divine of birds i.e. Garuḍa in his stride over the universe, may well claim the composite name of Āditya-Nārāyaṇa.⁴¹

Ādityas are a class of minor gods, mentioned in the Vedic mythology who belong to the circle of Varuṇa (Varuṇa-~~Rta~~). Ādityas are so called because they are the sons of Aditi and generally counted as twelve in number. The word Āditya later, mentioned in the singular number, came to be reckoned as synonymous with Sūrya, the Sun-god. Sūrya and Viṣṇu are also included in the traditional list of twelve Ādityas.⁴² At the foot of ŚriSūryapāhār⁴³ some

41. Ibid. p.54.

42. Ibid. p.55, 4ff.

43. R.D.Choudhury, op.cit, p.58.

rock-cut sculptures are seen. At this site a round stone carrying the twelve Ādityas has been found. It is also called Āditya-cakra. The whole piece of sculpture represents the twelve Ādityas in the border with their father Kāśyapa, the husband of Aditi, in the centre.⁴⁴ On stylistic grounds, this sculpture of Ādityas can be placed in the 10th century. Such a representation is very rare in Assam and this is the only piece of its kind.

The materials brought to light show that Sūrya was widely worshipped in Assam in this period although it could not compare with the popularity of the two major sects. There is no reference to royal patronage to this god in this province.

B] OTHER MINOR DEITIES

Kāmarūpa witnessed the worship of a number of other gods and goddesses either as consorts or associates of the main deities. The people of Assam paid reverence to deities such as Gaṇeśa or Gaṇapati, Kārttikeya, Indra, Agni, Kuvera, Brahmā, Manasā, etc.

A good number of images of Gaṇeśa have been found which can be assigned to a period between the 6th to the

44. T.A.G. Rao, op.cit, p.309.

12th centuries A.D. Besides icons, references found in epigraphs of a slightly later period definitely indicate the popularity of the cult under the patronage of some of the Kāmarūpa rulers.⁴⁵ The opening verses of two Copper plates of 1392 A.D. and 1401 A.D. open with an invocation to Gaṇeśa, R.D.Choudhury states that 'no other God is so popular in Assam as Gaṇeśa' and almost all the temples of Assam have Gaṇeśa images, particularly on the door lintel.⁴⁶ Majority of the images depict the deity in the āsana pose. Few of them are seen in the dancing pose as well. Images in the sthānaka posture have not been noticed so far. The extant images occur in three ways.⁴⁷ a] on the dvāra-sirapatti (lintel), b] on the bhittis (walls) of temples found only of the Ahom period, c] independently, either on rocks or on stone slabs. Hence, Gaṇeśa icons of the pre-Āhom period can be grouped chronologically into two categories : one placed in the 9th-10th centuries and the other between the 10th-12th centuries.

In most cases, Gaṇeśa images are usually sculptured as four-handed, holding in his hands a lotus, his own tusk, a battle axe and a ball of ricecake. He has three eyes.

45. S.Barua, "Some Ancient Relics Found in North Lakhimpur", Journal of the Assam Research Society, Vol. 3, Nos. 2-4, 1935-36, pp.43-44
46. R.D.Choudhury, op.cit, pp.72-73.
47. Ibid. p.73.

Gaṇeśa images in this period is classified by A. Bhattacharjee on the basis of seated and standing and dancing poses.⁴⁸ The dancing Gaṇeśa is a fairly popular theme in the eastern Indian school of architecture. In Assam, all the standing images are of the dancing type. The figure of the four-armed god on the wall of the Kāmākhyā temple, dancing on his vāhana - the rat, which looks up to the god, is a well known and popular representation of the deity.⁴⁹ A rare icon of Gaṇeśa is the four-handed Nṛtya-Gaṇapati type only one of which has been recovered from Kāmākhyā.⁵⁰ Dancing upon his vāhana, this image is dated in the 10th century. Both legs of the deity are in nṛtya pose i.e. bent outwards. The trunk of the deity seems to touch the āyudha of the left front hand. There is no attendant accompanying him. Gauhati has produced a number of Gaṇeśa images. Nṛtya-Gaṇapati is seen stuck on a concrete dvāra-sākhā of the main entrance of the Asvāklanta temple, North Gauhati.⁵¹ Barpukhurīpār, near Tezpur⁵² has produced another Nṛtya-Gaṇapati image dancing on a pūrṇavikaśita-padma, having eight hands. With the usual alaṅkāras, two attendants on either side of the deity play musical

48. Arun Bhattacharjee, op.cit, p.41.

49. B.K.Barua, op.cit, p.205.

50. R.D.Choudhury, op.cit, p.76

51. Ibid. p.76.

52. Ibid. p.76.

instruments. The vāhana is absent in this case.

Terracotta figurines are regarded as the poor man's sculpture and have a great value as a source of social and religious history. A rare terracotta figure of Gaṇeśa of great iconographical interest is obtained from Āmbāri.⁵³ The biggest (three metres) image of the god is found at Bahapāhār (Māyāng).⁵⁴ A svayampradhāna icon of the deity is seen on a block of stone in Deulgovinda.⁵⁵ Gachtal⁵⁶ reveals the ruins of two Śiva temples where Gaṇeśa appears in the dvāra-sirapattis. At Gaṇeśāghāt,⁵⁷ a rock-cut figure is discovered which is assigned to the 9th century. A Gaṇeśa temple⁵⁸ from Goalpārā district exhibits certain unique features. The door jambs are standing on either side of the sill but not in their original position. The sculptured face consists of five figures of which Gaṇeśa is one. The temple must have been constructed in the 10th century. Gaṇeśpāhār⁵⁹ also brought to light another image. At Gauhati, the State Museum possesses two images in the āsana attitude. Out of these, one hails

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53. Sipra Sen and T.C.Sarma, "A Note on Terracotta Objects from Āmbāri", Journal of the Assam Research Society, Vol. 19, 1970, p.47.
54. R.D.Choudhury, op.cit, p.75.
55. Ibid. p.74.
56. Ibid. p.150.
57. Ibid. p.73.
58. P.C.Sarma, op.cit, p.35.
59. R.D.Choudhury, op.cit, p.75.

from Bhaitbari⁶⁰ and the other from Yogijān.⁶¹ Jarasindhutola⁶² produced two icons of Gaṇeśa dated in the 10th century. The image of the deity from Vasundhāri⁶³ sits in mahārājalita pose. The muṣika is depicted beneath his legs. Images of this type are also found at Basistha, Urvaśi and Umananda. At the Narakāsūr Hill⁶⁴ has been found a four-handed miniature image of the deity. Temple ruins of Singri and the remains at Mahāmāyāthān offer a few more images. Teteliā-Bargāon⁶⁵ produced a four-handed icon of Gaṇeśa. Above the usual alaṅkāras, he wears a vanamālā. This iconic representation reveals some Vaiṣṇava characteristics. Dated in the 12th century, this image may perhaps be associated with the King Dharmapāla who ruled the kingdom during this period. He is supposed to have accepted Vaiṣṇavism during the later part of his life. The other sites where the images of Gaṇeśa are found include Paṇḍu,⁶⁶ the ruins of Mahāmāyā temple,⁶⁷ the Śiva

60. G.N.Bhuyan, op.cit, p.9.

61. R.D.Choudhury, op.cit, p.74.

62. Ibid. pp.74-75.

63. Ibid. p.74.

64. R.D.Choudhury and D.Chutia, op.cit, p.27.

65. R.D.Choudhury, op.cit, p.7.

66. S.C.Goswami, "Antiquarian Notes", op.cit, p.38.

67. R.M.Nath, op.cit, pp.43-47.

temple at Ākāśigaṅgā,⁶⁸ Teteli Pukhuri temple,⁶⁹ and the Kāwaimāri temple.⁷⁰ Judging by the number of Gaṇeśa icons found in this province, this deity must have been a minor deity whose popularity was nevertheless widespread in Assam.

Epigraphic references to the Gaṇapati cult or Gaṇeśa are not significantly noticed in pre-Āhom Assam. He is mentioned in the Dubi Plates of Bhāskaravarman.⁷¹ The Kamauli Grant⁷² bears the seal of Gaṇapati and the Assam Plates of Vallabhadrva⁷³ invokes him as Lambodāra. However, a Copper Plate of a later period (1392 A.D.) opens its praśasti with an adoration of Gaṇapati.⁷⁴

Elephants have always occupied an important place in the art of Assam. The royal insignia in this period was the elephant. Yet, these are not in any way supportive of the possibility that all kings in Kāmarūpa were associated with the elephant-headed god. Though a son of

68. Ibid. pp.38-40.

69. R.M.Nath, "Antiquities of Kapili and Jamuna Valleys (further discoveries), op.cit, p.27.

70. R.M.Nath, "Antiquities of Kapili and Jamuna Valleys", op.cit, p.28.

71. M.M.Sharma, "Dubi Copper Plates of Bhāskaravarman", op.cit, p.22.

72. M.M.Sharma, "Kamauli Copper Plate Grant of Vaidyadeva", op.cit, p.258.

73. M.M.Sharma, "Assam Plates of Vaidyadeva", op.cit, V. 1, p.300.

74. S.S.Barua, "Some Ancient Relics found in North Lakhimpur", op.cit, p.43.

Śiva, and a member of the Śaiva group of deities, Gaṇeśa has become almost non-sectarian and all sects agree in doing him honour as the bestower of success and remover of all obstacles. This is one of the reasons why his figure stand over the house doors and on niches and entrances of temples.

Kārttikeya, the brother of Gaṇeśa, was not as much popular. He is usually seen on his vāhana, the peacock, holding in his hands a staff and bow. Bhaibari⁷⁵ has revealed an icon of the deity in mahārājalīlāsana pose flanked by two figures standing in tribhaṅga attitude. The earliest image is found at Dāh-Parbatiyā.⁷⁶ Another image seated in lalitāsana pose is recovered from Durgovinda⁷⁷ and is dated in the 9th-10th centuries. At Gauhati,⁷⁸ the same slab which carries the image of Gaṇeśa also contains an image of Kārttikeya. Similar representation of Gaṇeśa and Kārttikeya are met with at Urvaśi.⁷⁹ Images of the deity are also recovered from Piṅgaleśwar and Devasthān. There are no significant mention in epigraphs except that his qualities were compared to those of the kings of Kāmarūpa.

75. G. N. Bhuyan, "Notes on Terracottas of Bhaibari (Garo Hills)" op.cit, p.9.

76. R.D.Choudhury, op.cit, p.78.

77. Ibid. p.77.

78. Ibid. p.78.

79. Ibid. p.78.

Indra is regarded as the guardian of the eastern quarter. He is considered as one of the aṣṭadikapālas (presiding deity of the eight sides). A unique image of Indra now preserved in Assam State Musuem was recovered from a slit trench at Gauhati.⁸⁰ The peculiarity of the image is that just above the head of the deity (below the kirttimukha) there is a five-headed snake in the form of canopy. Generally this is seen in the images of Balarama. However, this makes it to be a rare icon of Indra. Mālinathān⁸¹ has produced a beautiful image of Indra. At the Narakāsur Hill⁸² an image of the deity dated in the 9th century is found along with that of Viṣṇu, Sūrya Gaṇeśa, Manasā etc. There must have existed a temple dedicated to Indra here. A ghaṇṭā found here was donated by King Harjaravarman (9th century) for the worship of Indra. R.D.Choudhury believes that Indra was installed as the chief deity of worship here and the other deities must have occupied a subordinate position. But the find of Tārā image of the Buddhist affiliation has raised some doubts regarding all the deities who were worshipped here. The big Copper bell contains letters in two lines inscribed on it. It talks of Śrī Kumāra who was like Indra, or became

80. Ibid. pp.94-95.

81. Ibid.p.96.

82. R.D.Choudhury and D.Chutia, "A Note on the Archaeological Finds at Narakasur Hill", op.cit, p.24.

the protector of Indra. As Indra worship is especially mentioned here, it is evident that the other deities were centered round this prime deity, as in the Vedas. The writing is undated and does not contain the name of the donee, if any. The doner was evidently Śrī Kumāra who must have flourished in the 8th century. It is probable that he introduced the worship of the deities centering around Indra and built a temple dedicated to it.⁸³ Kings were likened to Indra in the pre-Āhom period. They are Vajradatta,⁸⁴ Harjaravarman⁸⁵ and Ratnapāla.⁸⁶ Indra is also said to have defeated Naraka in at least seven of the epigraphic records.

Of the miscellaneous deities frequently depicted on temple walls etc., though not as generally worshipped, prominent were the Dikpālas, the lords of the quarters. Among the Dikpālas, Indra, Agni and Kuvera adorn the walls and niches of the temples. Very few images of Agni have been found in pre-Āhom Assam. The sculpture of Agni in

83. P.C.Choudhury, "Archaeological Finds in Narakāsur Hills", Journal of the Assam Research Society, Vol. 16, 1962, p.59.

84. M.M.Sharma, "Dubi Copper Plates of Bhāskarvarman", op.cit, VV. 5-6, p.20.

85. M.M.Sharma, "Hāyūñthal Copper Plates of Harjaravarman, op.cit, VV. 13-14, p.89.

86. M.M.Sharma, "The Gāchtal Copper Plate Grant of Gopālavarman", op.cit, V. 19, p.215.

Assam Provincial Museum⁸⁷ is seen having a long beard, standing in an erect pose. He has a long sacred thread and wears a kaupina, the symbol of a Brāhmaṇa. The other images of Agni are found at SQālkuchi dated in the 11th-12th centuries and at the Northern wall of Kāmākhyā temple dated in the 10th-12th centuries.⁸⁸ Kuvera is the lord of the Northern quarter. In Assam, there is only one image recovered from Kārbi-Ānglong which is now in the Assam State Museum.

In Assam, no independent religious cult evolved out of Brahmā, an important member of the Hindu Trinity, and no temple was set up exclusively for his worship. Nevertheless, images of Brahmā adorn the walls, ceilings and niches of many Śaivite and Vaiṣṇavite temples. The image preserved in the Assam Provincial Museum is seen having eight hands.⁸⁹ Here he sits on a padmāsana in a yogic posture. The panel from the Sun temple at Tezpur⁹⁰ also has an image of Brahmā with an attendant on either side. Another one dated in the 8th-10th centuries, now in the Assam Provincial Museum, shows Brahmā standing on a pedestal with two female figures

87. B.K.Barua, op.cit, p.216.

88. -A.Bhattacharjee, op.cit, pp.47-48.

89. B.K.Barua, op.cit, p.208.

90. R.D.Banerji, "Exploration: Pre-Āhom Art and Architecture", op.cit, p.96.

on both sides.⁹¹

Kāmadeva, the god of love finds rare iconographic representations in Kāmarūpa. The only one of this period is recovered from Sibsāgar and presently kept in the Assam State Museum. The image is assigned to the 11th-12th centuries and its peculiarity lies in that it is depicted without his consort Rati.⁹²

Gaṅgā and Yamunā, the two river goddesses were derived from the akshis (tree spirits). They flank the dvāras of temples here. The first of its kind is seen at Dāh-Parbatiyā door frame in Tezpur.⁹³ On the right dvāra-sākhā is Gaṅgā and on the left occurs Yamunā, both the figures are contained at the bottom. The residence of Late Prabodh Chandra Baruah houses the dvāra of ruined temple from Mājgāon⁹⁴ where figures of these two goddesses are depicted. N.D.Choudhury noticed an image of Yamunā in the ruins of Sankhādevi near Rājbari.⁹⁵ The figure of Yamunā from Sankhādevi, however, is quite different from the one recovered from Dāh-Parbatiyā and Mājgāon. Āmbāri⁹⁶ has also revealed some depiction of the goddesses.

91. S.Kakati, "The Discovery of Three Stone Images at Gauhati", Journal of the Assam Research Society, Vol. 9, Nos. 3&4, 1942, p.89.

92. Arun Bhattacharjee, op.cit, p.50.

93. R.D.Choudhury, op.cit, p.97.

94. Ibid. p.99.

95. Ibid. p.100.

96. Ibid. p.239.

It is interesting that among a row of sculptures representing Viṣṇu, Śiva and Hari-Hara from Śri Sūryapāhār a figure of a Ṛṣi⁹⁷ is thinly visible in the centre. It is difficult to identify the figure although it should not go unmentioned, as it has found a place among such important deities of the Hindu pantheon.

Heavenly beings or demigods such as Vidyādhara, Kiṅṅara, Apsarā and Dvārapāla are depicted as attendants of their main deities.⁹⁸ When they are wrought in any sculpture, their number is always two and rarely one. Almost all the images of Brahmā, Indra, Viṣṇu, Umā-Maheśvara and others belonging to a period ranging from the 9th-13th centuries, now preserved in Assam State Museum have each a pair of Vidyādharas in flying attitude on the upper part of their silapattas. So far not one figure of Kiṅṅara has been noticed. Dvārapālas and Dvārapālikās are generally found on either śāṅkhā of the dvāra of temples.

The images of Manasā are probably found nowhere else in India except in Assam and Bengal. The Brahmaputra valley yields a few images of the goddess. The first one

97. Ibid. p.107.

98. Ibid. p.103-104.

comes from Gauhati.⁹⁹ Stylistically it is dated in the 10th century. One sarpa is seen coiling round her right hand and another one around the left. There is a chatra (like a serpent's head) over her head. The second image is from the Narakāsūr Hill.¹⁰⁰ Here also a seven-headed sarpa forms a canopy over her head. This piece is now kept in the Assam State Museum. A very fine specimen of Manasā image in stone is at Barangabari.¹⁰¹ Installed in the Kalyanidevālaya temple, a seven-headed serpent forms a canopy over her head. Images of Manasā belonging to the 10th-11th centuries are also recovered from Viṣṇuthān and Lakshmithān.¹⁰² Another one from Phulbāri Devālaya¹⁰³ is of the same style as that of Barangabari. At Silghat,¹⁰⁴ a different depiction of Manasā images is seen. Here the usual places of Vidhyādharas is occupied by two serpents, which are depicted in hybrid forms i.e. the upper part is sculptured in human form and the lower part in the snake form. Just above the head of the diety a five-headed sarpa is seen canoping her. This unique image is assigned a period of about the 12th century.¹⁰⁵

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99. Ibid. p.101.

100. R.D.Choudhury and D.Chutia, 'A Note on the Archaeological Finds at Narakāsūr Hill', op.cit, p.27.

101. R.D.Choudhury, op.cit, p.101.

102. Ibid. p.102.

103. Ibid. p.102.

104. Ibid. p.102.

105. G.N.Bhuyan, "Notes on the Terracottas of Bhaitbari(Garo Hills)", op.cit, pp.9-10.

A miniature bronze image of the goddess was presented by the Kāmarūpa Anusandhāna Samiti. Dated in 12th-13th centuries, it was initially mistaken to be that of Yasoda with baby Kṛṣṇa. R.D.Choudhury has identified it to be Manasā.¹⁰⁶ The goddess Manasā occupies a somewhat uncertain position in the study of the gods and goddesses in pre-Āhom religion. It can be surmised after a study of the extant images etc. that this goddess was accommodated into the Brahmanical fold, which came to be worshipped along with the other Brahmanical deities. The worship of Manasā is very popular in Assam especially in the present districts of Kāmrūp, Goalpārā and Darrang.¹⁰⁷ Its worship in Kāmarūpa is accompanied with that of Gaṇeśa, Viṣṇu, Śiva, Durgā, Śitala, Lakṣmī, Suvacanī and the four sages.¹⁰⁸ The goddess is popularly called Marai in Assam.¹⁰⁹

Despite the overwhelming predominance of the Brahmanical gods and goddesses in the Brahmaputra valley, traces of Buddhist worship was not altogether absent. The Buddhist images found in the province are of a portable

106. P.D.Choudhury, "A Miniature Bronze Image", Journal of the Assam Research Society, Vol. 8, No. 1, 1941, pp.13-16.

107. S.N.Goswami, "Snake worship : Goddess Manasā Cult in Assam", Journal of the Assam Research Society, Vol. 25, 1979-80, p.28.

108. Maheswar Neog, Religions of the North-East, op.cit, p.39.

109. Ibid. p.39.

type and we can, therefore, infer that they were probably imported from the neighbouring regions of Bengal where Buddhism was an important religion.¹¹⁰ However, there are rock-cut relics as well. At Gauhati¹¹¹ two images of the Buddha have been found. The first one is assigned to the 10th or the 11th century and the second one to the 11th century. The images bear resemblance to those of Tibet, Bihar and Bengal, thus pointing to their possible place of origin.¹¹² S.Kakati noticed in Pañcaratna Hill¹¹³ two crude images resembling the Buddha in bhūmisparśa-mudrā. He further states that he could see some cakra which could be a dharma-cakra. In a daśavatāra panel at Urvaśi, in the Assam State Museum and on the way to Kāmākhyā some more representations of Buddha are noticed.¹¹⁴ R.D.Banerji discovered a torso of a terracotta figurine perhaps representing Buddha, from Dāh-Parbatiyā¹¹⁵ ruined temple site. This is dated in the 6th century.

110. R.D.Choudhury, op.cit, p.107.

111. Ibid. p.108.

112. Ibid. p.108.

113. S.Kakati, "Antiquities and Historical Sites in Goalpārā", op.cit, p.10.

114. R.D.Choudhury, op.cit, p.109.

115. R.D.Banerji, "Epigraphy" Annual Report of Archaeological Survey of India, 1925-26, p.110.

Tārā, the Buddhist female deity also finds a place in the religious history of Assam. The first image of Tārā is recovered from the Narakāsūr Hill¹¹⁶ and is shown seated on a padma in lalitāsana pose. The same site has yielded another icon where Tārā is shown in dvibhaṅga-sthānaka posture on a lotus. A head of a single snake is depicted as a canopy behind her head. Relics of this image is not known to be found anywhere else. It is identified as Jāṅguli Tārā.¹¹⁷ Yet another image of Tārā is found at Buḍa Madhab Devālaya,¹¹⁸ sitting on a lotus in lalitāsana pose.

Only three images of Bodhisattas have been noticed in Assam so far. The first one identified as Avalokiteśvara, is noticed among the group of finds at the Narakāsūr Hill, now kept in the Assam State Museum.¹¹⁹

Epigraphs are not very expressive in providing evidences to the prevalence of Buddhism in Assam. The expressions dharma and taṅgata which occur respectively in the Grants of Bhāskaravarman¹²⁰ and Indrapāla¹²¹ have

116. R.D.Choudhury and D.Chutia, "A Note on the Archaeological Finds at Narakāsūr Hill", op.cit, p.28.

117. R.D.Choudhury, op.cit, p.110.

118. Ibid. p.110.

119. B.N.Mukherji, op.cit, p.26.

120. M.M.Sharma, "Nidhanpur Copper Plates of Bhāskaravarman", op.cit, V.3, p.50

121. M.M.Sharma, "The Gauhati Copper Plate Grant of Indrapāla" op.cit, V. 24, l. 51, p.179.

led some scholars to believe that Buddhism did exist in Assam in the ancient period. Various interpretations have been put forward by different scholars in their effort to prove the existence of Buddhism in Assam.¹²² The Puṣpabhadra Grant¹²³ referring to King Dharmapāla's declaration of the glory of dharma has been interpreted by some as an indication of the influence of Vajrayana on Dharmapāla. The reference to the death of Vanamāla by "religious suicide" in Uttarbarbil Plates of Balavarman III¹²⁴ and the abdication of Jayamāla in favour of his son, as he considered 'the world to be vain and human life as a water drop', may be taken to indicate that they had come under the influence of later Buddhism. The kings of the dynasty of Śālastambha (7th-10th centuries) were perhaps more orthodox in their religious beliefs than their predecessors, the descendants of Puṣyavarman. In the inscriptions of these kings, we do not find the slightest reference to the Buddhist faith. Literary sources such as Si-kia-fang-che, Si-yu-ki etc give accounts related to

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122. Regarding the existence of Buddhism in ancient Assam, see R.B.K.L.Barua, op.cit, pp.142ff., also, S.C.Goswami, "Hidden Traces of Buddhism", 'Indian Historical Quarterly, Vol. 3, December 1927, pp. 747-757.
123. M.M.Sharma, "Puṣpabhadra Copper Plate Grant of Balavarman IIF" op.cit, V. 7, p.263.
124. M.M.Sharma, "The Uttarbarbil Copper Plates of Balavarman III", op.cit, W. 17, 22-23, p.134.

the existence of Buddhism in Assam from earlier times. But the authentication of them is a difficult task.

The temple at Hājo¹²⁵ has been strongly believed by the adherents of Buddhism as a great religious centre where the relic of Buddha is kept. A section of the Buddhists hold the view that Buddha attained nirvāna on this hill itself. The western part of Assam, the present Goálpārā and Kāmrūp districts, is known as Dhekor country, considered to be a great centre of Buddhism. A Copper Plate Grant of the 12th century and all Ahom chronicles refer to it as Dhekkar, which means the same place. Therefore, it can be assumed that Buddhism did prevail in ancient Kāmarūpa, although we have very little material at hand to assess the extent of its influence.

The belief in the Jain faith was limited to extremely small pockets in this region. Only two rock-cut sculptures¹²⁶ stand to prove its existence here. One sculpture shows a Rṣabha and the other has a dharmacakra below the pīṭha. These images, recovered from Śri Sūryapāhār, represent

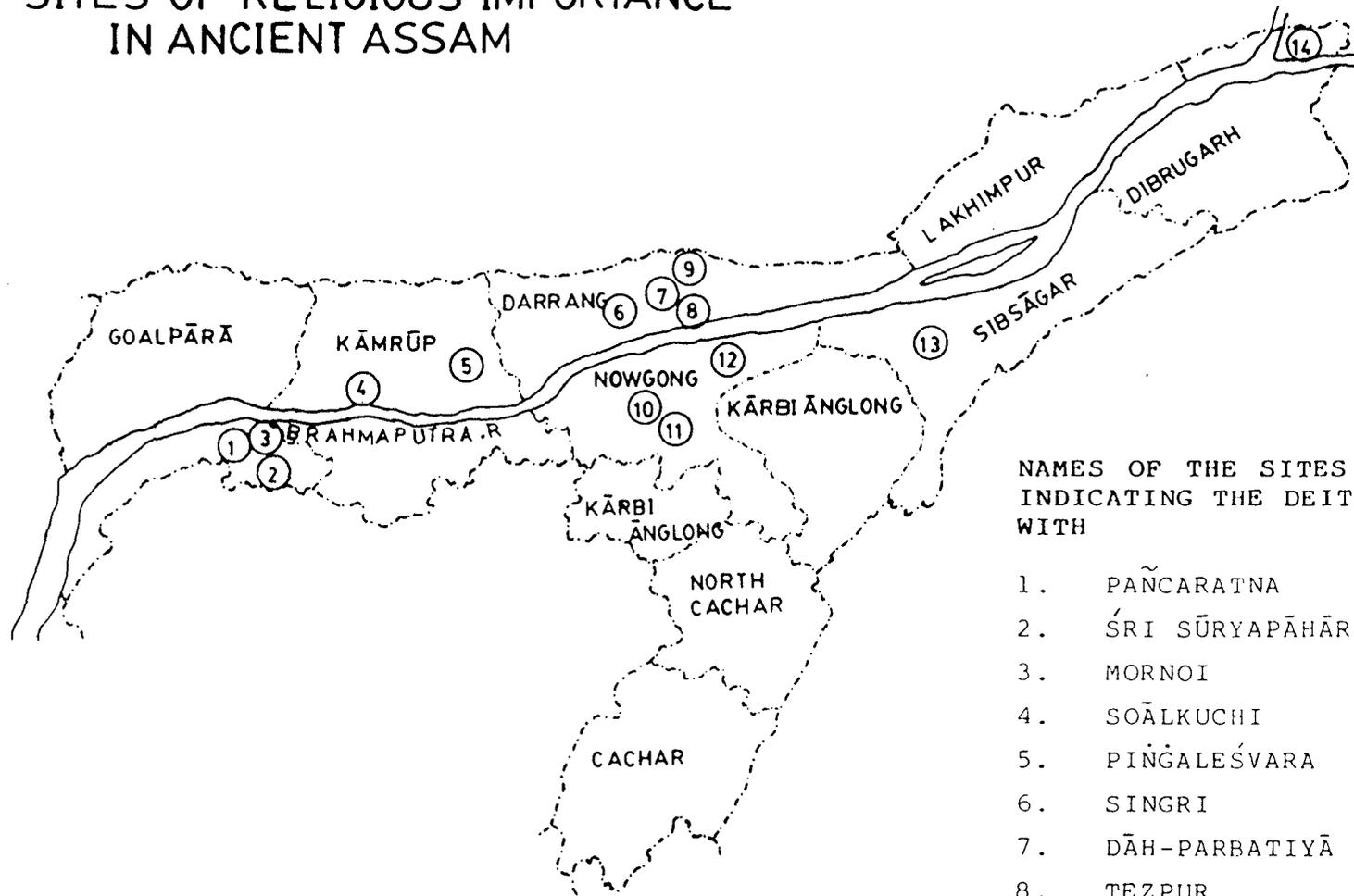
125. R.M.Nath, Background of Assamese Culture, op.cit, p.30.

126. R.D.Choudhury, op.cit, pp.113-114.

Adināth or R̥sabhanāth. Apart from these rare finds there is no clue to the prevalence of this faith in ancient Assam. Inscriptional records are silent about Jainism and there are no architectural remains to support it.

A study of archaeological remains associated with minor deities reveal that Sūrya, Gaṇeśa and Indra were paid much reverence by the people of ancient Assam, although Śiva, Śakti and Viṣṇu were the main deities worshipped in this region. Brahmanical deities existed in harmony with the non-Brahmanical deities. Buddhism must have entered Kāmarūpa from the neighbouring regions, but could not obtain royal support. The evidence of the prevalence of Jainism is negligible.

SITES OF RELIGIOUS IMPORTANCE IN ANCIENT ASSAM



NAMES OF THE SITES AND SYMBOLS
INDICATING THE DEITY ASSOCIATED
WITH

- | | | |
|-----|----------------|-------|
| 1. | PAÑCARATNA | x |
| 2. | ŚRI SŪRYAPĀHĀR | + x ⊕ |
| 3. | MORNOI | + |
| 4. | SOĀLKUCHI | + |
| 5. | PIŅGALEŚVARA | x |
| 6. | SINGRI | + x |
| 7. | DĀH-PARBATIYĀ | + ⊗ x |
| 8. | TEZPUR | + ⊗ x |
| 9. | CHĀRDUĀR | ⊗ |
| 10. | KĀWAIMARI | ⊗ |
| 11. | GACHTAL | ⊗ |
| 12. | ĀKĀŚIGĀŅĀ | ⊗ |
| 13. | DEOPARVAT | ⊗ |
| 14. | SADIYĀ | + |

SŪRYA	+
GANEŚA	⊗
BUDDHA	x
JAINA	⊕

0 32 64 96 KMS.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The religious aspect of the history of Assam of the pre-Āhom period has not received adequate attention so far. The preceding pages of this essay is an attempt to present a systematic account of the religious developments of early Assam on the basis of available archeological data. In this chapter, we will review the matter that has already been discussed which will help us to form an overall picture of the subject.

That Assam has a long history is known from its references in the two epics, the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyana, and also from the accounts of the Chinese pilgrim Yuan Chwang. Situated as it is, it inevitably formed a link, religious and otherwise, between India and South-East Asia, a factor of some importance in understanding its historical developments. Hinduism, with its various cults and sub-cults, was the dominant faith of the people of ancient Assam.

The role of the Brāhmanas in the spread of Hinduism in Kāmarūpa cannot go unnoticed. The Brahmanas came to settle in

this region as early as the 7th century as referred to in the Nidhanpur Copper Plates of Bhāskarvarman.¹ However, the influence of the Brahmaṇas is known from an earlier record i.e. the 6th century Bargaṅgā Rock Inscription of Bhutivarman.² The Aśvamedha sacrifice mentioned here could be performed only with the Brahmaṇas had a significant role to play in the religious life of the people of ancient Assam. The system of creating "agrahārās" by the kings of Assam led to increased settlement, resulting in the widespread absorption of the various Hindu deities by the indigenous people. As already mentioned, these Brahmaṇas who migrated to Kāmarūpa belonged mainly to Madhyadeśa and Mithilā.

There are references to the performance of yajñas (sacrifices) in the epigraphs. The spread of Brahmanical religion is revealed by a number of such sacrificial rituals performed by the rulers, with the help of the priests. Mahendra performed many yajñas³ and 'was the repository of all

1. M.M.Sharma, 'Nidhanpur Copper Plates of Bhāskaravarman', op.cit, V. 25, ll. 34-54, pp.52-53.
2. M.M.Sharma, 'Bargaṅgā Rock Inscription of the time of Bhutivarman', op.cit, p.5.
3. M.M.Sharma, 'Dubi Copper Plates of Bhāskaravarman', op.cit, V.24, p.22.

sacrifices.⁴ Indrapāla also performed many yajñas and were foremost among all who performed religious ceremonies.⁵

Epigraphs also prove that the rulers performed other orthodox sacrifices such as ásvamedha mentioned earlier.⁶ There were instances of utterances of prayers and hymns in the temples.⁷

The Purānic Triad of Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva made their place in the religious history of Assam. Śaivism perhaps took deep roots in the minds of the people. The main reason for the popularisation of Śaivism could be the royal patronage given to it by the Kāmarūpa kings. As far as the archeological remains indicate, Viṣṇu was not very far behind in popular acceptance. Iconographic representations of Viṣṇu outnumber those of Śiva. This is due to the form of worship of Śiva which occurs mostly in phallic symbols. Yet there are anthropomorphic forms of this deity found in some parts of Assam. Of the Brahmanical cults prevalent at that time, Śaivism and Vaiṣṇavism were the most prominent. But, it is difficult to infer which of the two preceded the other. In the inscriptional references at least,

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4. M.M. Sharma, 'Nidhanpur Copper Plates of Bhāskaravarman', op.cit., V.24, p.22.
5. M.M. Sharma, 'Khanāmukh Copper Plates of Dharmapāla', op.cit., V.7, p.231.
6. M.M. Sharma, 'The Nowgong Copper Plate Grant of Balavarman III', op.cit., V.26., p.147.
7. M.M. Sharma, 'Tezpur Copper Plates of Vanamāla', op.cit., V.28, p.103.

Vaiṣṇavism appears earlier than Śaivism. The Umāchal Inscription of Surendravarman which is assigned to the 5th century, mentions Lord Balabhadra.⁸ On the other hand, the earliest recorded reference of Śaivism occurs in the Dubi Plates of Bhāskaravarman of the 7th century.⁹ Iconographic representations however push back the date to the 6th century. The Gaṇeśa depicted on the Dāh-Parvatiyā dvāra is of this period. In the texts frequent mention is made of the Kāmarūpa kings tracing their lineage to Viṣṇu through Naraka. That almost all the kings of this period patronised Śaivism is evident from the inscriptions. In all the epigraphs of the rulers, excepting the Bargāṅgā inscription of King Bhūti-varman, prior to Dharmapāla (12th century), invocations were made to Śiva. Both records and remains reveal that Vaiṣṇavism became increasingly popular during the 10th-11th centuries, although it was introduced to the land at least by the 6th century. Śaivism continued to exist alongside Vaiṣṇavism, Brahmā, as shown by the data collected, did not attain the status of the presiding deity as compared to the other two of the Triad. No king patronised this deity in the way they patronised Śiva and Viṣṇu. He was only one of the miscellaneous cult gods worshiped here.

8. M.M. Sharma, 'Umāchal Rock Inscription of Surendravarman,' op.cit., p.2.

9. M.M. Sharma, 'Dubī Copper Plates of Bhāskaravarman,' op.cit., V.1, p.20.

Apart from the Triad, Kāmarūpa witnessed the reverence shown to other varied deities such as Gaṇeśa, Kārttikeya, Indra, Agni, Kuvera, Manasā, Lakṣmī, Saraswatī etc. However, they are mostly found as consorts of the main deities and rarely occur independently. A study of these sub-cults reveal that Sūrya and Gaṇeśa were particularly popular. In terms of the overwhelming number of their images discovered in all the corners of the Brahmaputra Valley, Gaṇeśa and Sūrya seem to have had an edge over the other minor deities. Sculptures of Gaṇeśa are met with in almost all temples. In spite of these instances, there is no sufficient evidence to prove the prevalence of the Gaṇapatya cult in Assam.

The trend seen in the study of the religious aspect of Assam history is one of affirmation of the Hindu faith as a whole. A temple may not be particularly dedicated to one deity alone. It may contain the image of Viṣṇu along with the images of such other diverse deities as that of Śiva, Sūrya etc. Cole Park, Tezpur and Mahāmāyāthān, for example produced icons of Sūrya, Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva.¹⁰ The serpent goddess, Manasā is worshipped along with Gaṇeśa, Viṣṇu, Śiva, Durgā, Lakṣmī,

 10. R.D. Choudhury, op.cit., p.217.

Suvacanī and four sages apart from others.¹¹ A picture gallery of archeological remains representing the three Hindu cults of Vaiṣṇavism, Śaivism and Śaktism is shown at Śrisūryapāhār.¹² Here, we find Śiva-liṅgas, Viṣṇu images and a prominent figure of a twelve-armed goddess among the ruins. Mikirāti and Bargāṅgā has produced Śiva-liṅgas and Viṣṇu icons from the same shrine.¹³ The Narakāsūr Hill¹⁴ remains also supports this point in that the finds show a mixture of images of Indra, Viṣṇu, Sūrya, Gaṇeśa, Manasā, Tārā and a mukha-liṅga.

In Assam, no sharp distinction was drawn between temples dedicated to Viṣṇu, Śiva, Devī or other deities. The nature of remains recovered so far show that there prevailed a harmonious and tolerant atmosphere, thus indicating no conflict among the various sections of population, worshipping the deity of their choice. That the pre-Āhom kings were tolerant in their approach towards religion is proved beyond

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11. Maheswar Neog, 'Religions of the North East', op.cit., p.39.
 12. S. Kakati, 'Antiquities and Historical sites in Goalpārā', op.cit., pp.9-17.
 13. R.M. Nath, 'Antiquities of Kapili and Jamuna Valleys', op.cit., pp.37, 41-42,
 14. R.D. Choudhury and D. Chutia, 'A Note on the Archaeological finds at Narakāsūr Hill, op.cit., pp.24-31.

doubt. A particular king may support and patronise one god while eulogising another. Even though the origin of the mythical hero Naraka is associated with the legend of Viṣṇu's incarnation, he is also associated with the Devī in that he is supposed to have introduced Devī worship in Kāmākhyā.¹⁵ Bhagadatta, who was devoted to Kṛṣṇa, worshipped Śiva with penance.¹⁶ Bhāskaravarman, a devotee of Śiva, claimed to have descended from Viṣṇu and was of a Vaiṣṇava family.¹⁷ Though Vanamāla was devoted to Śiva,¹⁸ it is not impossible that like Jayamāla, he came under the influence of later Buddhism.¹⁹ In fact, all the Pala rulers, though they had faith in Śiva, patronised Viṣṇu and Devī worship. Indrapāla invokes Śiva, who is also claimed to be Viṣṇu. The Gauhati Copper Plate of Indrapāla interestingly reads: "Victorious is the Lord Mahāvarāha (i.e. the Great Boar) of worshippingable and most glorious form, who is Paśupati and the Lord of the whole mankind."²⁰

15. B.K. Kakati, op.cit., pp.35f.

16. M.M. Sharma, 'Tezpur Copper Plates of Vanamāla', op.cit., V.5, p.101.

17. M.M. Sharma, 'Dubi Copper Plates of Bhāskaravarman', op.cit., V.59, pp.25-26.

18. M.M. Sharma, 'The Uttarbarbil Copper Plates of Balavarman III', op.cit., V.12, p.134.

19. M.M. Sharma, 'The Uttarbarbil Copper Plates of Balavarman III', op.cit., V.12, 22, p.134.

20. M.M. Sharma, 'The Gauhati Copper Plate Grant of Indrapāla', op.cit., V.1-2, p.185.

In the Guwākuchi Grant, though Indrapāla invokes Śiva, the plate bears the Vaiṣṇavite symbols. Dharmapāla showed his devotion not only to Śiva and Devī or Ardhāyuvatiśvara²¹ but also to Viṣṇu²² and Dharma²³ under the influence of Tantric Buddhism. Vaidyadeva was a devotee of both Śiva and Viṣṇu.²⁴ The tolerant mind of Vallabhadeva is illustrated by his invocation to Vāsudeva and Lambodara.²⁵

Śaktism, with its famous shrine at Kāmākhya with which Assam is frequently associated, sowed its seeds in this region during the early period of Assam's history. Although we cannot declare with certainty that it originated in Assam, yet it is clear that it had occupied a very important place in religious history. The kings did not sufficiently patronise Śaktism and this perhaps explains the reason why Śaktism never came to the forefront in the manner Śaivism or Vaiṣṇavism did. This cult acquired wide popularity only in the medieval period and still later by the 18th century, we find king Rudra Singha

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21. M.M. Sharma, 'Khanāmukh Copper Plates of Dharmapāla', op.cit., V.I, p.230.
22. M.M. Sharma, 'Puṣpabhadra Copper Plate Grant of Dharmapāla', op.cit., V.I, p.262.
23. M.M. Sharma, 'Puṣpabhadra Copper Plate Grant of Dharmapāla', op.cit., V.7., p.263
24. M.M. Sharma, 'Kamauli Copper Plate Grant of Vaidyadeva', op.cit., VV.I, 28, 11. 47-50, pp.282-286.
25. M.M. Sharma, 'Assam Plates of Vallabhadeva', op.cit., V.I, p.296.

embracing Śaktism. But this is not to say that it did not find a place in the history of religion here. The goddess pervaded every household and its worship was in the main personal and esoteric. Śaktism influenced both Śaivism and Vaiṣṇavism alike.

Strange as it may seem, this place, renowned as a Śakta pīṭha, does not reveal particular reverence to the female deities. Except the images of Mahiṣamardini and Cāmuṇḍā, images of other goddesses are rare in Assam. Lakṣmī and Saraswatī occur mainly as consorts of the main deities. They are otherwise found in composite forms such as Umā-Maheśwara and Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa.

Tantricism, influenced various religious sects in Assam, especially Buddhism, Śaivism and Śaktism. That Tantricism had a base in ancient Assam is accepted by many scholars. A sword believed to have been used for human sacrifices have been recovered from Hatimura Temple at Nowgong.²⁶ This temple is assigned to about the 9th-10th centuries A.D. Tantric tenets are against the two major principles of Brāhmanical religion: viz., the infallibility of the Vedas and the social structure

26. K.L. Barua, 'The Hatimura Temple at Nowgong', Journal of the Assam Research Society, Vol.2, No.I, 1934, p.12.

sustained by the varnāśramadharmā. Therefore, when Brahmanical religion began to establish itself in this region, it had to combat the already existing Tantric influence. Brahmanical religion came to be institutionalised eventually taking a firm root . But Tantricism must have continued to exist as a lively undercurrent so that gradually Kāmākhyā became a renowned centre of Tantric sacrifices, mysticism and sorcery.

Buddhism attracted at least some section of the Assam population. The type of images discovered of the Buddha, Bodhisattas and Tārā are of the portable type. This suggests that they must have been imported from the neighbouring regions like Tibet, Nepal, Burma as also Bihar and Bengal where Buddhism had its stronghold. In spite of the icons recovered from this region, we can say with certainty that both the kings and subjects did not pay much attention to Buddhism. The epigraphic references to dharmā and tathagata are not enough evidence to prove the wide prevalence of this belief here. That Kāmākhyā temple was originally a Buddhist stūpa and that Buddha died at Hājo makes interesting reading, but are not convincing.²⁷ Jainism finds mention in the study only due to the two

27. R.D. Choudhury, op.cit., p.19.

rock-cut image at ŚrīSūryapāhār. Jainism did not receive royal patronage nor was it accepted by the people.

The religion of Assam like any other area , has a number of myths associated with it. Texts like the Kālikā-Purāna, Yoginī-Tantra and the local works are full of them. However, the present study is one where facts are made to speak for themselves. It is tempting to introduce these myths which are elaborate and offer much scope for interpretation, but our work is limited to the study of the archaeological data and the result is the reconstruction of the religious history in its concrete form.

The picture that emerges after a detailed study of the materials at hand is the following: Assam in its formative period witnessed the prevalence of a number of religions such as Vaiṣṇavism, Śaktism, Śaivism, as also Buddhism. Besides these there simultaneously existed other minor deities of which Sūrya and Gaṇeśa are particularly prominent. The emergence of Śaktism in ancient Assam was accompanied by an undercurrent conflict among the Śaivites and Vaiṣṇavites. However, this is revealed by the myths associated with ancient Assam history.²⁸

28. B.K. Kakati, op.cit., p.132.

Archaeological sources do not indicate any such conflict. That Hinduism was the principle religion of pre-Āhom Assam is proved beyond doubt. The various deities existed side by side in this period with no visible sign of sectarian jealousy among them. The spirit of tolerance shown by the Kāmarūpa rulers is a marked feature of the history of religion in the pre-Āhom Assam.

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