UNIT 12: RELIGION

UNIT STRUCTURE

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12.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- discuss the religious life of ancient Assam,
- discuss various religious sects privailed in ancient Assam,
- describe the development of Buddhism in ancient Assam.

12.2 INTRODUCTION

Religion in ancient Assam was diverse, with influences from various sources. Hinduism had a significant presence in ancient Assam. Many ancient temples and artifacts attest to the practice of Hindu rituals and beliefs in the region. The Brahmaputra Valley, in particular, was a center of Hindu culture and religious activities.

Buddhism also flourished in ancient Assam, especially during the reign of the Pala dynasty in the Kamrup region. There were numerous Buddhist monasteries (viharas) and stupas, indicating a strong Buddhist influence in the region.

Assam has a long history of Tantric traditions, which combine elements of Hinduism and Buddhism with indigenous beliefs and practices. Tantric rituals and ceremonies were prevalent in ancient Assam, and they continue to be practiced in various forms to this day.

Before the spread of Hinduism and Buddhism, the indigenous tribes of Assam practiced their own animistic and shamanistic religions. These tribal religions worshiped nature, ancestors, and spirits, and they had a profound influence on the cultural and religious landscape of ancient Assam.

Vaishnavism, a sect within Hinduism that worships the god Vishnu, gained prominence in Assam during the medieval period. In this unit we shall discuss various religious sects prevailed in ancient Assam.

12.3 RELIGION

Prior to the Aryanisation of Pragjyotisha and the religious influence of the Brahmanical cult and Vedic rituals and culture, the ancient people followed the cult of ancestor worship, fertility cult, etc. The megalithic remains bear testimony to this fact. Pragjyotisha came into contact with Vedic culture with its rulers establishing the Brahmanas in different parts of the country. It led to the rapid expansion of a new culture and conversion of the non-Aryans to Hinduism. The Vedic culture therefore, flourished with the addition of new deities to its pantheon together with the assimilation of religious myths and cults of the non Aryans. Fetishism, animism, cult of fertility, human sacrifices, ancestor worship, etc of the non-Aryan people of Assam became a part of the Brahmanical religion.

12.3.1 Brahmanical Religion

The religion propagated by the Brahmanas was called the Brahmanical religion. The kings of Assam used to issue Copper plates for granting revenue free lands to Brahmanas thus attracting the Brahmanas to come and settle in Assam. These Brahmanas belonged to different *gotras*. The Brahmanas studied various Vedas, performed rituals and worshipped diverse Pauranic deities.

Brahmanical Hinduism found a fertile ground in ancient Assam as early as the beginning of the fifth century C.E. The extent of royal patronage to Brahmans is indicated by the fact that Harjaravarman had an officer exclusively for looking after the welfare of the Brahmanas. The Brahmanas hailing from Pragjyotisha received honour like gifts from rulers of Kalinga and Malwa. The *Doobi grant* of Bhaskaravarman provides a clear idea of the nature and scope of the Brahmanical religion followed in ancient Assam.

The *vrata* (fasting), *danas* (donation) were the important aspect of the Brahmanical religion. The kings donated lands to various Brahmans, which were treated as religious deeds. Thus, the gifts were made on auspicious days. The kings made the gifts for earning religions merits not only for themselves but also for their parents. Brahmanas also performed the coronation ceremony of the rulers.

As a result of the impact of the impact of the non-Aryan culture, some important developments took place in Brahmanical religion. The worship of innumerable gods and goddesses came to occupy important position in the religious system giving rise to special cults and sectarian rites and beliefs. There soon arose various religious myths revolving round these sectarian deities. The extent of Brahmanical religion may be gauged from the extent sectarian cults like those connected with Shiva, Shakti, Vishnu and Surya were practised.

12.3.2 Saivism

The earliest Hindu religion that prevailed in ancient Kamarupa was Saivism. It was the dominant religion of the ruling dynasties. Saivism also incorporated some of characteristics of *vamacara* (left hand procedure) rites of Saktism. Bhairava Siva invariably came to be associated with his female energy. Thus, the sharp distinction between the two sects considerably narrowed down. The *Kalika Purana* mentioned sects of Saivas in Assam, viz, the Kalikas and

Pasupatas. The former used to perform gruesome rites. The *Yogini-Tantra* of 16th century tells about the other two sub sects of Saivism namely, the Kaulas and Avadhutas dual worship of Siva and Shakti. The *Yogini Tantra* and *Kalika Purana* mentioned that there two sub-sects of Saivism followed the extreme forms of left hand rituals.

Siva was also worshipped in various forms which were mentioned in scriptures. He was a very popular deity amongst both the aborigines and Aryanised people. Epigraphs also mentioned the creation of Siva temples by the rulers. King Vanamalavarman repaired the lofty temple of Hetuka Sulin (Saiva). In the *Gachtal* inscription, king Indrapala is mentioned as constructing a series of white washed temples dedicated to Shiva. During his visit Hiuen-Tsang noticed hundreds of Deva temples.

Besides the notable temples there were many other minor Siva temples and religions than of Siva. The tradition of Devadasis was one of the special features of Saiva cult that prevailed in ancient Assam.

12.3.3 Saktism

Saktism is the cult of worshipping female goddess as the supreme deity. This deity is variously called. Devi Durga, Kali, Kalika, Kamakhya, Tara etc. Different names imply diverse manifestations of the same goddess. Thus, Sakti may take to the common name for all the various forms of his female deity. The goddess has been conceived as the Sakti or energy Siva, the supreme godhead. The Saktas or the worshippers of this deity claimed that the goddess is superior to even the supreme godhead.

The Goddess is worshipped in various iconic representations or in the form of a Yoni symbolizing the creative principle. The Tantras describe the procedure of worshipping the Goddess. It mentioned broadly two procedures *Vamacara* and *Samyacara*. The Tantras played a great part in the Sakti worship. Tantricism soon became almost a synonym for Saktism. Ancient Assam was a very important

seat of Saktism. Traditionally Kamarupa has been recognized as the principle centre of the Sakta cult with its chief temple at Kamakhya. Kamakhya is distinctly the residence of the goddess. Kamakhya was probably a tribal mother goddess who was assimilated into the Brahmanical fold as Siva's consort.

The *Kalika Purana* refers to many other seats of Devi worship and among them the most important was the temple of Tamreswari at Sadiya, where the goddess in her Kesaikhaiti (eater of raw flesh) form was propitiated with human and animal sacrifice. This goddess is known as Dikkarvasini in the Tantras and Puranas.

Kameshwara Maha Gauri was the tutelary deity of the Pala Kings of Kamarupa. The Salastambhas constructed the second Kamakhya temple on the Kamakuta hill near Silghat. The extensive ruins of Devi temples and numerous icons of the goddess in her various forms proved the wide spread prevalence of Saktism. The God Siva is also invariably named along with the Goddess. There is hardly any reference to the Sakta cult in the later epigraph of ancient Assam. During the period, the cult of Vishnu largely regained popularity and royal patronage.

The worship of Surya or the Sun God was also prevalent in ancient Assam. This is referred in the *Markandeya Purana* where the king Rajyavardhana retired to the forest due to old age and the Brahmanas of the kingdom offered prayers to the sun god to restore his youth. Among the other Brahmanical deities worship of Surya occupied a very prominent position. Taranatha's account also gives evidence of sun worship.

The *Kalika Purana* gives evidences of the worship of the Sun God as it refers to the Raviksetra on the Tattva hill which is now identified as Sri Surya Pahar and Citrasala called Prakparvata latter identified as the Navagraha. Though the present temple was constructed by Ahom King Rajeswar Singha in (1752) but *Kalika Purana* mentions that tradition of the Navagraha worship may be traced back to the 9th or 10th.

Pragjyotisha was the centre of sun worship as is mentioned in the Griha Sutras. According to Taranath, before the introduction of Buddhism, the people of Kamarupa were sun worshippers. The icons of this deity are found throughout the state.

12.3.4 Vaishnavism

Vaishnavism is the cult of worshipping Vishnu as the Supreme deity any one of his several forms. It existed in Assam from very early times. Many of the rulers of Kamarupa trace their lineage to Vishnu. Pragjyotisha had long been associated with Vishnu worship. Naraka is said to have traced his descent from the Boar incarnation of Vishnu. The Barganga epigraphs mentioned king Bhutivarman as Parama-Daivata-Paramabhagavata. All the records of the period refer to the Boar incarnation of Vishnu and mentioned some of his popular names. In Hayagriva Madhava temple at Hajo the god Vishnu is still worshipped. Archaeological remain and icons of the deity indicate that Vaishnavism prospered fairly well from the 5th century onwards. The Kalika Purana mentioned about the procedure of the worship of Vishnu.

12.3.5 Buddhism

Buddhism was prevalent in ancient Assam before the visit of Hiuen Tsang to the land. According to Taranath it was Dhitika who propagated Buddhism in Kamrupa. Asvabhava spread the Mahayana cult in this land. The tradition that was in prevalence in Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan and Assam mentioned that Buddha died in Kamrupa near Hayagriva Madhava temple at Hajo, which in still visited by pilgrims from Bhutan and Tibet. This proves that by the first century A.D, Buddhism entered into Kamrupa.

In the *Rajtarangini,* Kalhana mentioned that the Kamarupa queen of Meghavahana of Kashmir brought with her a Tibetan Buddhist monk residing in her father's court, which proved the

prevalence of the faith about this time. Bhaskaravarman though a Saivite was interested in the faith. He assured Hiuen Tsang to build one hundred monasteries in case the latter agreed to stay in his Kingdom. It indicates Bhaskaravarman's leaning towards Buddhism. Kamarupa is also associated with number of Buddhist scholars and Siddhas.

Besides these major cults, there were other minor religions such as the worship of Ganesha, Kartikeya, Indra, Agni, Kubera and Manasa. We have no definite knowledge of these cults. Perhaps their adherents were very few, although sculptures and icons of these deities have been discovered.

During this period, there was no evidence of major conflicts between the civil authority and adherents of various cults in Ancient Assam. The rulers patronised the Vedic religion and culture. There was no possibility on internecine strife between these sects. There was no warring sect in Ancient Assam. The evidence indicates that there was peaceful co-existence of various cults in Ancient Assam. The rulers patronized all the sects equally. A case in the point is Sri Surya Pahar in Goalpara district where Buddhist Stupas, Jain and Brahmanical Hindu deities still stand today.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.1: Which cult was followed by the people of ancient Assam?

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Q.2: Name two important aspects of the Brahmanical religion.

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Q.3: Name the ruler of ancient Assam who repaired the temple of Hetuka Sulin?

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Q.4: Kesaikhaiti refers to which cult of religious worship?

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Q.5: Match the following:

a.	Kalhana	1.	Kashmir
b.	Meghavahana	2.	Chinese Pilgrim
c.	Hiuen Tsang	3.	Rajtarangini



12.4 LET US SUM UP

After going through this unit you have learnt about-

- In the field of religion, the primitive religion came under the influence of Hinduism and henceforth the Brahmanas were responsible for bringing a new trend in religion. Shiva, Vishnu, Shakti was worshipped. There are evidences of the sun god being worshipped.
- There are doubts as regard the spread of Buddhism in ancient Kamarupa, but the prevalence of Buddhism in ancient Assam is provided by the literary sources. The Aryanisation process in ancient Assam had its impact on the fabric of the society, be it economy or religion.



12.5 FURTHER READING

1) Barpujari, H.K. (2003): *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, Volume- 1, Publication Board, Assam, Guwahati

2) Barua, S.L.(1996): *A Comprehensive History of Assam*, Munshiram Manuharlal Pvt. Ltd, New Delhi

3) Sarma S.N, (1991) : Neo-Vaishnavite Movement and the Satra Institution of Assam, Gauhati University Press.



12.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: The Cult of ancestor worship and fertility cult was followed

by the people of ancient Assam.

Ans to Q No 2: Dana or charity and vrata or fasting.

Ans to Q No 3: Vanamalavarman.

Ans to Q No 4: Saktism.

Ans to Q No 5: (a) 3, b) 1, c) 2



12.7 MODEL QUESTIONS

A) Very Short Questions (Answer each question in an about 50 words)

Q 1: What in Brahmonical religion ?

Q 2: Why Hayagine Madhava temple in famous for ?

Q 3: Who was Kaneswari Maha Gauri?

B) Short Questions (Answer each questions in an about 150 words)

Q 1: Write a short note on 'Devdasis'.

Q 2: Worship of Sun God in ancient Assam.

C) Long Questions (Answer each question in between 300-500 words)

Q 1: Define religion. What was teh different religions prevailed in ancient Assam/

Q 2: 'The earliest Hindu religion prevailed in ancient Assam was Jainism'. Discuss in your own language.

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