PG HT S4-02(DSC)

TWO YEAR MASTER'S DEGREE COURSE

(CBCS in Accordance with NEP 2020)

Semester IV

CULTURAL HISTORY OF ASSAM

HISTORY

Surya Kumar Bhuyan School of Social Sciences

KRISHNA KANTA HANDIQUI STATE OPEN UNIVERSITY

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COURSE INTRODUCTION: Cultural History of Assam

The cultural history of Assam is a dynamic and evolving field of study that reflects the region's rich heritage, ethnic diversity, religious traditions, artistic expressions, and processes of social change. This course offers postgraduate learners a comprehensive understanding of the historical evolution of Assamese culture by examining its geographical foundations, cultural interactions, folk traditions, material culture, religious movements, performing arts, literature, fairs and festivals, and indigenous knowledge systems. It explores the contributions of diverse communities in shaping the composite culture of Assam through processes of assimilation and syncretism, while also analysing the role of institutions such as the Satras and Namghars in the socio-cultural life of the region. The course further traces the influence of Islamic and Christian traditions, indigenous sports, mobile theatre, cultural movements such as the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), and the evolution of Assamese cinema from the pioneering efforts of Jyoti Prasad Agarwala to contemporary filmmakers such as Rima Das. By integrating historical, anthropological, literary, and cultural perspectives, the course enables learners to critically appreciate Assam's unique cultural identity, its continuity and transformation over time, and its significance within the broader context of Indian cultural history.

There are 16 units in this course.

The first unit is *Assamese Culture.* This unit discusses Definition of Culture; Legacy of Assamese Culture; Interpretations and Problems.

The second Unit *Assamese Culture and Its Characteristics .*This unit discusses the Assamese Culture and its features and Assimilation and Syncretism.

The third Unit *Folk Culture of Assam and Its Features.*This unit discusses Meaning and Definition of Folk Culture; Relation to the Society; Tribal Culturevs. Elite Culture, Ethnographic description of the People of Assam.

The fourth unit *Folk Literatures of Assam: Narrative and Non Narrative Genre. T*his unit discusses Assamese Folk Literature, Bodo and Rabha Folk Literature, Karbi, Dimasa and Mising Folk Literature, Folk Songs of theTea Tribes ofAssam, Folk Songs of Barak Valley

The fifth unitis *Fairs and Festivals of Assam*. In this unit, different fairs and festivals of Assam are discussed with their socio-cultural implications.

The sixth unitis *Material Culture of Assam.*This unit discusses the Concept of Material Culture; House Building types and decorations in Assam; costumes and ornaments in Assam; Bell Metal Industry, Musical Instruments of Assam: Khol, Mridanga, Dhol, Daba, Madal, Dambaru, Pepa and others.

The seventh unit titled *ReligiousTraditions of Assam.* This unit discusses religious traditions such as Saivism, Saktism, Buddhism, Vaishnavism; Indigenous Religious Practices of the people of Assam.

The eighth unit is *The Neo Vaishnavite Movement of Assam.* This unit discusses the origin and development of the Neo-Vaishnavite Movement in Assam; Srimanta Sankardev and his contribution in the Neo-Vaishnavite Movement; Neo-Vaishnavite Movement after Sankardev.

The ninth unit is *Neo Vaishnavite Institutions: Stucture and Culture.* This unit discusses the growth of institutions under the Neo-Vaishnavite Movement; Satras; Namghars; Socio-Cultural influence of the Satras and the Namghars, Relevance in contemporary period.

The tenth unit **is** *Performing Arts of Assam.* This unit discusses history of dance and Music in Early Assam; Temple Dance: Nati, Devadasi; Ojapali dance, Satriya Dance; Borgeet; Ankiya Nat; Bhaona.

The eleventh unit is *Contributions of Islamic Culture.* This unit discusses the Making of Assamese Culture and the role of Islam, Islamic Art and Architecture: Music and Dance.

The twelvth unit titled *Christianity in Assam*. In this unit works of missionaries and their contributions to Assam are discussed in detail.

The thirteenth unit titled *Assamese Society and Sports*. In this unit different indigenous sports of Assam and their relation to the society are discussed.

The fourteenth unit is, *Emergence of Mobile Theatre.* This unit discusses the historical background of mobile theatre in Assam, infrastructure,economy and socio-cultural influence.

The fifteenth unit titled*Cultural Movement in Assam: IPTA*. The unit discusses IPTA, and the contributions of Hemango Biswas, Jyotiprasad Agarwala, Bishnuprasad Rabha and Bhupen Hazarika in detail.

Sixteenth unit is Assamese Cinema. This unit discusses the trends of Assamese Cinema: Jyotiprashad Agarwala to Rima Das and its technological development.

While going through this paper, you will notice that some boxes are put in the lefth and or right hands ide of the text. These boxes are meant to serve the purpose of in-text glossary for you . Again, you may find some boxes marked with:" LET US KNOW". These boxes will provide you with some additional interesting and relevant information. The boxes marked with" ACTIVITY" will help you in making your learning more active and efficient. And, at the end of each section, you will get "CHECK YOUR PROGRESS" questions. These have been designed to self-check your progress of study. It will be better if you solve the problems put in the seboxes immediately after you go through the section softhe units and then match your answers with "ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS" given at the end of each unit.

UNIT 1: CULTURE OF ASSAM

UNIT STRUCTURE

1.1. Learning Objectives

1.2. Introduction

1.3. Definition of Culture

1.4. Nature and Characteristics of Culture

1.5. Racial Elements

- Negrito
- Australoid
- Mongoloid elements

1.7. Let Us Sum Up

1.8. Answers to Checky our Progress

1.9. Further Reading

1.10. Model Questions

1.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After goin gthrough this unit, you will be able to-

- Define culture and its relation with society and the human species,
- explain the elements of culture and its various components,

1.2 INTRODUCTION

You must have noticed that the greeting style of people over different nations, communities differ in many ways. For example, Indians fold their hands together and say ‘namaste’ while greeting others; in western countries they shake their hands, in other nations, they display politeness and bow their heads. Each of these people, groups are following their own culture and none of them can be said to be superior to the other.

This unit dwells on this very important aspect of human life- “culture”. ingeneral and we will be discussing the relation of culture with the society and its influence in our day to day life. At the same time, we will be focussing on the Assamese culture in particular and

its formation over the years. The unit will look into the process of assimilation and syncretism in the development of the Assamese socio-cultural heritage.

1.3 DEFINITION OF CULTURE

What is “Culture”? Does the finer aspect of life like classical music, classical arts, gourmet cuisine etc. define culture? Let us know about it-The word “culture” derived from the Frenchterm “colere” means to tend to the earth and grow or cultivate and nurture. The German word “kultura” equates culture with civilization and with individual or collective moral progress. Culture is found everywhere and not just in the high arts or in western civilization.

Descriptive definition tends to see culture as a comprehensive totality making up the sum of social life and also to list the various fie ldsmaking up culture. Historically culture is seen as a heritage that is passed on over time through the generations.

Anthropologists have formulated many definitions of culture. 19th century British Anthropologist Edward Tylorde fine dculture as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, moral, law and custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (1871).

In Malinowski’s opinion (1931)-culture is a total system of life that runs its course. In his views, both social culture and physical culture are referred to as important factors of culture. According to Ruth Benedict (1934), culture is not the content of social life but it is an order and organisation of social life.

For a lay man like us, culture can be understood as everything that people have, think and do collectively as members of society. What different iates men from animal is culture. Culture includes everything inside and outside of man which does not exist independently in nature but appears due to human labour or his activities in the broadest sense.

Culture signifies the customs, traditions, attitudes, values, norms, ideas and symbols of human behaviours. The members of the society not only validate the mbut also substantiate their behaviour accordingly. They are members of the society because of the common traditions and customs which are passed down from generation to generation through the process of socialization. These common patterns are termed as culture. The

term enables us to conceive the explicit behaviour pattern of human beings in regards to their social relations.

Hence, culture is the characteristic and knowledge of a particular group of people defined by language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music and arts. The cultural ideas evolved from shared social life.

Culture can be divided into *two parts- human* or *non-material* and *material* culture. The *material* culture consists of physical or man-made objects, resources and spaces that people use to define their culture.These include homes, neighbourhoods, cities, schools, churches, synagogues, temples, mosques, plant, and tools of production and so on.All these physical aspects of culture enable us to define its members' behaviours and perceptions.

Non-material culture consists of non-physical ideas, beliefs, values, norms, morals, language, organization and institutions which are abstract andtraditional. The *non-material* culture shapes the thoughts, feelings and behaviour of its members. The most prominent aspects of this non-material culture are symbols, language, values and norms.

Culture can again be divided into *two groups- classical* and *folk*. While the classical culture follows certain rules and regulations, the folk cultures are learnt through observation and practice over generation, it is a part of life and a contribution of ethnic groups.

The cultural values are based on ideas both, fair and just, good and bad. Ithas some norms based on expectations and rules by which aculture can govern the behaviour of the members of the society in any situation. For a culture toexist, members of a culture must adhere to its norms. Hence, members must conform to and obey rules. Failure to produce any form of conformity can result in social control in the form of ostracism, fines, punishments and even imprisonment.

Culture is an evolutionary process that enables to sustain human civilization. The culture of a man canhardlyremainisolated from that of a group.

Primitive culture is simple culture marked by the absence of technology, industry, literature and commerce. Modern culture is more complex in nature and dominated by science and technology and work specialisation. 21st century is marked by cultural diversity and there is a need to protect it. Cultural diversity implies the exist enceor the inclusion of diverse populations of various cultural differences in a society, or institution.

1.4. NATURE AND CHARACTERISTICS OF CULTURE

A cultural phenomenon is not isolated but interconnected. Culture is a collective phenomenon. Human beings promote their cultural values and interest through reciprocal activities. Each culture influences and is influenced by another culture related to it. The individuals and the group in a society are structurally and functionally so related with one another, that the influence of one on the other is quite natural. We can consider a thought or an action as a culture if it is shared and believed or practised by a group of people. However, there are comple xities. Some people who share the same culture may be numerous and geographically scattered. Most modern nations today have multi cultural population resulting in the rise of sub-culture or regional culture. It refers to the variations in culture that exists with in a single country.

The characteristics of culture are as follows-

Culture is learnt or acquired by the members of the society which the individual members or the group or the society possess through their activities or functions.They learn the behaviour pattern, language, customs and tradition as they grow up in a particular culture and environment. Any person who can familiarize with the culture of others can get influenced by their personality and lifestyle. Culture is learned through social interaction with other people in the society. Through the process of enculturation, human cultural traditions are passed. Language helps in this process of transmission. Culture is learned and acquired by infants through a process referred to by the anthropologists as enculturation. Mental structures are created through common experience.

Culture can be transferred from one generation to the other. Language play saprominent role in perpetuating the cultural pattern. Transmission of aculture may be due to imitation or instruction. Culture is trans-generational continuing beyond the individual's life span. There is stability and consistency of cultural patterning through time despite the fact that cultureis continuously being reworked and recreated.

Culture is dynamic. Culture does not accumulate, it changes. The invention within a society as well as diffusion leads to changes of culture and the change differ from society to society. It is also responsive to the changing conditions of the physical world. It is flexible and allows adjustments in the wake of changing circumstances. This characteristic of culture enables the society members to deal with crisis, solve conflict

and restore or derare Ideas, behaviour, etc. change, shift are reinvented and become popular. People challenge the culture they live in and thus create new ones.

Culture is diverse. It is formed by many separate cultures. Every society has its own culture which is unique and follows certain norms, traditions and moral values.

Culture is shared as all aspects of culture are transmitted symbolically to the members of the society. An action to be considered cultural must be commonly shared by the group of individuals. As haredset of ideas, values, perceptions and standards of behaviour have a shared meaning that makes the action of human being intelligible to the others.

Hence, the members are able to predict the behaviour of their fellowmen and react accordingly. However, culture is not uniform for all the societies. The members of the same culture share enough knowledge and behave in ways that are meaningful and acceptable to others.

Culture is based on symbols– sound, gesture marks which are represented in meaningful ways. Language is another symbolic aspect of culture. Symbols tie together the people who otherwise might not be the part of a unified group.

Every society has ideas about how people ought to behave. This is called cultural patterns.

Culture is integrated and all the traits that makeup a culture are mostly consistent with one another.

Culture is adaptive as it helps in developing ideas, technologies and activities that enable them to thrive in their environment.

Culture is composed of many elements, some of which are mentioned below.The elements of culture are- beliefs, ideas, knowledge, values, and attitudes

- Culture is primarily based on patterns of behaviour as a unified whole. Socially accepted models turn into customs and are transmitted from generation to generation and individual to individual. Customs are generally accepted and consolidated by the power of the mass habits.The socio-cultural customs remain un explained nor are the members of a society aware of it. Customs includes the traditional form of labour, behaviour pattern, lifestyle and system of upbringing.
- Belief- The system of belief grows over time and man evolved the system and it constitutes the basis of life in human culture. The fear for the unknown, feelings generated towards super natural things etc are part of the belief system.

- Norms-social norms are a standard developed for the behavioural pattern expected from the members of the society attached to their specific roles and status. The norms are more or less agreed upon.

Norms are regulatory principles and do not reflect concrete phenomena. Most norms arises pontaneously through trial and order. Norms are basic parameters which allow for a certain degree of variation in behaviour as long as it doesnot violate the established boundaries. The function of norms consist in excluding the influence of subjective circumstantial motive and ensuring reliable predictable and standardised behaviour. Norms promote the establishment of ideas values and methods proven effective by science intoreal life. Norms are shared ideals about how people ought to act in certain situation. Norms make social interaction predictable and enable us to be have towards others while expect in go thers to be have in diverse situation.

- Values are beliefs about the way of life that is desirable for themselves and their society. Values affect our motivations and this influences the reason we do what we do. Values are also critical to the maintenance of culture as a whole because they represent the qualities people believe are essential to continuing their way of life. It means all individual personal relationships must have a sense of bearing on the members of the society. Social norms are based on social values.

- Signs- The signals and symbols developed by the society help in communication and thus enable social interactions among the members of the society. The fundamental aspect of culture is symbol and the capacity to create and give meaning to symbol helps people identify, sort and classify things, ideas and behaviour. The power of the shared symbols becomes clear when we meet others from our own culture in a far off country. It is the shared meaning of our symbols that enables us to interact with one another with the least amount of ambiguity and understanding.

There are confusions relating to the term culture with race and civilization. Race is a population where members share common physical traits and refers to biological non-genetic characteristics. Concepts vary even when groups share some cultural traits and racial or physical traits.

The terms are not inter changeable. Civilization as a term does not imply a more superior culture. All civilizations are cultures but all cultures may not be termed as civilizations.

LET US KNOW

Anthropologists refers to civilization as specific type of culture that first appeared around 5500 years ago in the Fertile Crescent (present day Iraq).

Culture develops continuously and the changes bring alteration in ideas and beliefs etc. The process involved in the growth of culture consists of the following–

- **Accumulation-** The process of accumulating more ideas and skills as it (culture) grows. In this process new cultural traits are adopted while the old ones are dropped out.
- **Diffusion-** Culture spreads from one society to another through the process of diffusion. It applies to all items of material and non-material culture.
- **Accommodation-** Cultural accommodation enables the various cultural traits adopted to be adjusted and accommodated in the society.
- **Cross-fertilization-** the process of mutual give and take through the conjunction of two cultures is termed fertilization.
- **Acculturation-** The process of acquiring cultural trait of another society is called acculturation.
- **Assimilation-** the process of assimilation takes place when the culture of a society gets intimate with another and in the process loses its own individuality

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answer the following questions:

Q 1: What is the French derivative for the term “culture” ?

.....

Q 2: What does cultural diversity imply?

.....

Q 3: Do you agree that culture is trans-generational ?

.....

1.5. RACIAL ELEMENTS

From the pre-historic and other remains we came to know that Assam was inhabited by various racial elements and it confirmed that the land may be considered as the great anthropological museum, containing even now some primitive people. The various elements passing through Assam from India on the one side, and South-East-Asia on the other have left their substratum in both the hills and the plains. Though the northern route did not play a prominent role in migration but the prime route that prevailed through the mountain passes between Assam and Tibet and the waterways through the Brahmaputra and the Ganges played an important role.

The classical sources mentioned the existence of these routes. Other sources have also mentioned routes passing through the mountain passes of Bhutan and Tibet. It is proved that some racial elements made their way in small numbers into Assam through the passes. Assam is a mixture of many cultures because of the migration of the prime human races since very ancient times in different periods of history. The prime human races like the Negrito, the Dravidians, the Mongoloids and the Aryans all immigrated to this land in different times. Let us know about these racial elements-

- **NEGRITOS**

B.S. Guha mentions the Negrito race in the Census of India (1931) and he considers them to have made the earliest presence in India. According to anthropologist, the Negrito race first entered India followed by the Austrics and the Mongoloids. The original home of Negroids was Africa from where they entered India via Arabia and the coastland of Iran and Baluchistan and subsequently spread to different parts of India including Assam. Their progress into the Northern and Eastern zones of India was stemmed by the Austrics who fought them successfully and thus hampered the northern move of the Negroids who had confined themselves to the Southern part of India from where they move towards east and reached Indonesian Islands where they mixed freely with the Austrics of that area. The people of mixed blood then moved westwards and entered Assam where they were confined to the hills on the eastern border of the country.

However, there are several controversies as to the presence of this race. Since

they entered at an early stage, there are very little traces of them. The existence of the Negritos race is agreed upon by scholars such as S. S. Sarkar, D. N. Majumdar, L. A. K. Iyer. Mills thinks that the hill inhabitants of Assam were Negritos who were little dark men with curly hair.

S. K. Chatterjee subscribes to this view and writes of the traces of the Negrito race found as far-east of Assam among the Nagas. P.C. Choudhury agrees to it- "both ethnography and the material culture of the tribe also point to the existence of such a strain." Besides some crude specimens of art are taken to be the survival of Negroid cult among the tribes of Assam. Others like G. Oliver have denied the Negritos characteristics among the Nagas.

The Negrito race is found among the Angami Nagas who reside in the hills. Dr. Hutton pointed out the sign of Negritos among the Angami Nagas. Many scholars have supported his view that they are the descendants of the Negrito race but later got mixed with the Mongolian tribes. The assimilation of the Negrito with the Mongolian race makes it difficult to find out the old manner, customs, beliefs and social status of the Negrito race at present. Little of the manners and customs of the Negrito race is found among the Angami Nagas.

They are assumed to have belonged to the Palaeolithic age in Assam. Two stone implements discovered in the Darrang and Kachar districts have been recognized as remnants of Stone Age in Assam. However, it is believed that the two implements belonged to the Negrito race and the use of one of the implements is found among the sayings of the Angami Nagas. Their contribution to Assamese culture is insignificant due to their assimilation with the Mongolian race. However, the society of the Negrito race was patriarchal as seen among the Angami Nagas.

● AUSTRALOIDS

The Australoids are known by different names like- Pre-Dravidian, Proto-Australoids, Veddid, Nishada. Characterised by dolichocephalic head, marked broad nose, dark brown skin colour, short stature and wavy or curly hair. They resemble the Caucasoid and thus are considered a sub division of the race giving it a name Archaic Caucasoid. This ethnic element was concentrated in South India but spread to the north and north east India as well. This revealed from the study of the skeletal remains unearthed from pre-historic times and also from the physical features of the existing population.

Living in the hill slopes and forest the Australoids were hunters and gatherers who practiced primitive agriculture. They made pottery and the stick was their main tool. Boomerangs were also used to kill birds and other small games. As for the language spoken they were associated with the Austric speech family which included two groups- Austro-Asiatic and Austronesian. The speeches belonging to the Austro-Asiatic group are current among those living in India, Burma and Indo-China. In Assam, the Khasis of Meghalaya speak the language of this group.

Sarkar believes that the concentration of the Australoid racial make-up is found among the lower caste. Minute observations reveal the existence of this racial element among the lower caste which later spread to the upper caste. The Khasis have maintained their Austric language but the physique differs. There can be two possibilities for the above- (i) One that they were Australoids and spoke the Austric language. Their assimilation with the Mongolian strain may have led to the remarkable changes in their physique,
(ii) they were Mongoloid but accepted the Austric language. Dixon was of the opinion that the Khasis shared racial affinity with the Tibeto-Burman tribes. While Chatterjee explains that they appear Mongoloid and must have adopted the language of the earlier race, the Austrics after descending from the Tibeto-Burman area. He opines that they may have changed their speech while in Burma.

The Wanchoos of Arunachal Pradesh also seem to use the Austric words in their dialect. The Proto-Australoid features are found in their physical features too. There are assumptions that certain cultural and ethnic traits were spread while the Austric speakers passed from the homeland of the present Wanchoos.

The ethnic traits of the Australoids are also found among the Bodo tribes. The Rabhas, Garos and Mikirs have dolichocephalic head implying that the Australoids contributed the dolichocephalic strain to the Mongoloid population of North East India. Flatz and others made an observation that the entire area of Assam, Northern Bengal and possibly parts of Nepal were inhabited in pre-historic times by a contingent of population of matrilineal Australoid tribes.

Thus, it appears that the Australoids came first to Assam, before the Mongoloids leaving behind certain genetic endowments. It was the Austro-Asiatics who brought the culture of terrace cultivation, erection of megaliths etc. The origin and migration of the Australoids is still a matter of controversy. Sarkar holds the view that from South India the

Australoids moved to the east and west and became widespread until they were pushed to form isolated groups.

- **MONGOLOIDS**

The tribes of North East are predominately Mongoloid. The Mongoloid populations entered into the regions through the various routes at different times. Though the population differ, in culture, language and physical features, yet they speak the Tibeto- Burman language. The features among the Mongoloids are yellow brown skin, black stretched or flat wavy head hair, scanty facial and body hair. In Assam, the Mongoloids in the early time intermixed with the Australoids and Caucasoids from whom they accept some genre and as a result acquired physical features.

The Tibeto-Burmans migrated from North West China. They settled in the hills and plains of Assam driving the speakers of Austric speech in different directions and were known as Rabha, Kachari, Bodo, Tiwa, Karbi Dimasa and other. Linguistically the Tibeto-Burman group is divided into two main branches - North Assam and Assam Burmese. The North Assam branch is formed by the various Arunachal tribes- Abors, Akas, Daflas, Miris and Mishimis. The Assam Burmese group include three groups- Bodo, Naga and Kuki Chins. People who speak Bodo language were- Garo, Rabha, Kachari, Koch, Mech, Hajong, Lalung. The Naga is a generic name for the tribes who inhabit Nagaland. The Nagas have heterogeneous elements in their physique. The Kuki Chin tribes are distributed in the southern region of Assam. The only data available are on the Thado Kuki and the Purum Kuki. The Ahom of the Tai or Shan group of the Mongoloid entered Assam and settled in Upper Assam followed by other Shan tribes- Khamtis, Khamyangs, Aitongs, Phakials and Turungs preserving their traditional socio-cultural ways of life.

The Kiratas are a group of people who finds mention in the Yajurveda where it is mentioned that it was necessary to have a kirata in the purusha medha sacrifice. From the Arthaveda it is assumed that the kiratas were cave dwellers and lived in the hills and forests. In the Mahabharata, the army of Bhagadatta's, king of Pragjyotisha, composed of the kiratas and the cinas. They are described as shining in gold in the Ramayan referring to their skin colour. The Kalika Purana refers to the kiratas as strong, ferocious, and addicted to meat and drink and yellow skinned. As for the geographical distribution, the Visnu Purana states that the kiratas lived in the eastern parts of India. The Periplus of the Erythrean Sea mentions kirrhadae as living in the hills of Assam and Burma.

It was the Kiratas who introduced the cultivation of silk of different varieties in Assam. Therefore, the hill tribes of Assam are expert weavers of silk. After establishing their settlement in Assam they took to cultivation and also carried trade with their original homeland and other parts of India. They were not only great warriors but also expert as boatmen. After the Austrics, they became the rulers of Assam.

● MIXTURES OF VARIOUS STRAINS

From the ethnographic point of view it can be assumed that the early inhabitants of Assam had an admixture of different racial strains. We cannot say when and where it took place but it could be assumed that this had happened both before and after their migration and settlement in this land.

An admixture of the Negrito, Austric, Alpine and Tibeto-Burman elements in varying proportions have been found among the Khasi-Syntengs. According to Dixon, the Khasis are racially closely related to the majority of Tibeto-Burman tribes. On the other hand, according to Hutton, most of the Naga traces are an admixture of the Negroids, Austro-Asiatics, Alpines and Tibeto-Burmans and a race of Southern origin allied to the people of Philippines, Borneo and parts of Indonesia. All these elements are found among the Ao Nagas and the Thados. The Thados has some similarities with the Mon culture and many of their customs are indicative of Khasi ho cultures of Indonesian affinity and of the Pagan Malayans and Philippines.Their customs of burial compares well with that of the people of Sumatra and Philippines.

Both the Sema and Angami Nagas have an admixture of Mongolian, Bodo elements. From the archaeological and ethnographical records, it is confirmed that the Nagas had some Dravidian strain that was also prevalent among the Aos. Some scholars also believed that the Dravidian elements are also prevalent among the Koch-Kacharis. According to Raisley, the Koches are large Dravidian tribes with an admixture of Mongolian blood. But on the whole, Dravidian characteristics predominate among them. The fusion of Naga-Bodo blood took place at an early period. Though especially Nagas had absorbed many Oceanic elements but their physical features have similarity with Tibeto-Burman tribes. For instances we can mention that Sema Nagas have an admixture of Bodo and Mongolian blood. This led to the creation of intermediate groups of tribes like Naga-Bodo. The lone affinities of the Nagas with the Annam tribes represent an approximate identical mixture

of races and culture. In fact, the tribes of Assam have close ethnic affinities with the people of Burma whether Mons or Tibeto-Burman.

Thus, the Alpine elements are found in most of the tribes of Assam who basically belonged to the Caucasic blood. These people were restricted to the confines in South-East Asia in pre-historic age and gradually came down the river valleys of Assam and Burma. Here they confined themselves into the hills and became the ancestors of the Nagas and other allied tribes. Before or in the course of their settlement in this land, some of the Tibeto-Burman tribes like the Angamis, Manipuri and Mishimis absorbed Caucasia blood.

● **DRAVIDIANS:**

After the Austrics a wave of Dravidian force penetrated in Assam from the West. The Baniya's and Kaivarata's belonged to these Dravidian groups. At the initial stages, this Dravidian group was mixed up with the early Indo-Chinese people that inevitably led to a fusion between both the races. This inter-fusion led to the creation of a new group called the Mongol-Dravidian group. It was said that some rituals and customs prevalent among the Assamese society i.e., the use of turmeric in wedding culture originated from the Dravidian culture.

● **ARYANAS**

The Aryans were the last racial group who migrated to Assam towards the Brahmaputra valley in the later Vedic period. As a result of the impact of Hindu culture, the Mongol-Dravidian of the Brahmaputra valley were largely Aryanised and entered into the Hindu fold. From the beginning of the 6th century A.D., there was a large scale agraharas settlement for the Brahmana and other high class Aryans due to the emergence of an organised socio-political order. Patronage of Aryan Culture by ancient rulers of Assam encouraged the scholars to preach the Aryan culture in distant places like Burma and South-East Asia. According to Chinese pilgrimage Hieun-Chang, as a result of the spread of Aryan culture, Kamarupa became the centre of Brahmanical learning. At the influence of Alpine culture many rulers contributed to the Aryanisation of the valley and became responsible for some tribes. At the impact of Aryan culture some of the Tibeto-Burman rulers adopted the Hindu Culture and became Kshatriyas .The impact of the Brahmanical culture of Assam is not only felt in the neighbouring places of India, it was also felt in the distant places like Burma and South-East-Asia under the patronage of the rulers.

Assam has a rich cultural heritage that dates back to the days of the Epics. Though she received a large variety of racial elements, basically it contained the Tibeto-Burman of Indo-Chinese stock in majority. Both the Austrics and Tibeto-Burman elements have made enormous contribution to the growth and development of Assamese language and culture. Entire racial groups i.e. the Aryans, the non-Aryans and Hindus and non -Hindus have mingled peacefully and contributed to the building up of the complex culture of Assam.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answer the following questions:

Q 4:Name the earliest race that made its first appearance in India ?

.....

Q 5: Who first pointed out the signs of Negritos among the Angami Nagas ?

Q 6: Who brought the culture of terrace cultivation, erection of megaliths to Assam ?

.....

Q 7: In the Mahabharata, the kiratas formed the army of which king ?

1.7 LET US SUM UP

After going through this unit, you have learnt that-

- Culture, as an integral part of human life, includes everything inside and outside a man,
- Culture is progressive, shared, diverse, adaptive and at the same time it consists of elements like values, norms, belief, etc..
- The Assamese culture is formed by the assimilation and syncretism of various racial elements and tribal and non-tribal cultural traits.

1.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: Colere means to tend to the earth and grow or cultivate and nurture.

Ans to Q No 2: Cultural diversity implies the existence or the inclusion of diverse population of various cultural differences in a society, or institution.

Ans to Q No 3: Yes, because it continues even after the life span of an individual.

Ans to Q No 4: Negrito

Ans to Q No 5: Dr. Hutton

Ans to Q No 6: The Austro-Asiatics

Ans to Q No 7: Bhagadatta

1.9. FURTHER READING

1) Barpujari, H.K. (2004). The Comprehensive History of Assam, Vol. I, Guwahati, Publication Board

2) Datta, Birendranath (2012). Cultural Contours of North East India, New Delhi, Oxford University Press

3) Deka, Dr. Namita (edited) (2007). Assam Darpan, Guwahati, Bani Mandir

4) Mibang, Tamo and Chaudhuri, Sarit K. (2004). Folk Culture and Oral Literature from North East India, New Delhi, Mittal Publication

5) Neog, Hariprasad and Gogoi, Lila (2003). Asomiya Sanskriti (4th edition), Guwahati, Banlata

1.10.MODEL QUESTIONS

A) VERY SHORT QUESTIONS (Answer each question within 50 words)

Q 1: Name the author who composed “Chandravali Kavya?

Q 2: The Mughal style of dressing was followed during whose rule?

Q 3: How many khels do the buranjis record for the preparation of cloths and under whom?

B) SHORT QUESTIONS (Answer each question within 150 words) Write short notes on-

Q 1: The Kiratas

Q 2: Bamboo as a part of Assamese culture

Q 3: Dravidians

C) LONG QUESTIONS (Answer each question in between 300-500 words)

Q 1: Analyse the process of assimilation in the making of the Assamese culture, with special reference to the contribution of the Aryans.

Q 2: Explain the integration of the various racial elements in Assam.

Q 3: Critically evaluate the concept of culture and relate it with the case of Assam.

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UNIT 2 : ASSAMESE CULTURE AND ITS CHARACTERISTICS

UNIT STRUCTURE

2.1. Learning Objectives

2.2. Introduction

2.3. Syncretism and Assimilation in Assamese Culture

2.4. Let Us Sum Up

2.5. Answers to Check your Progress

2.6. Further Reading

2.7. Model Questions

2.1.LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to-

- Describe the process of syncretism and assimilation in the making of Assamese culture

2.2. INTRODUCTION

Dear learners, you have already learnt about Assamese culture in your last unit. The unit will look into the process of assimilation and syncretism in the development of the Assamese socio-cultural heritage.

2.3. CULTURAL SYNCRETISM AND ASSIMILATION

The basis of Indian culture is unity in diversity. Indian culture is an amalgamation of cultural integration, acceptance, unification, refinement, elevation, synthesization etc of various social and cultural processes that belonged to the Mongoloids, the Negritos, the Australoids and the Nordics. Assamese culture too is an integrated one consisting of four main ethnic cultures- namely the Australoid, Mongoloid, the Dravidian and the Aryan culture. In simple words, Assamese culture and civilization is the mini version of the greater Indian culture and civilization.

The traditional Assamese culture is a product of the ongoing interaction between

the tribals and the Indo-Aryans. The Assamese culture marks the cultural assimilation of different ethno-cultural groups over the different period in the history of this region. The migration of the different racial elements along with mixed northern Indians has enriched the aboriginal culture and at the same time, sanskritization and hinduisation have intensified and made the culture more prominent.

A sizeable section of the Koch or Rajbangshi is made up by the descendants of tribes. In fact, tribes like the Rabhas, the Tiwa (Lalung) and the Sonowals are no more different than the Hindus. Today the Assamese social fabric comprises a mixture of both the jana (tribal group) and jati (Aryan hindu society). The process of assimilation and syncretism is not yet over and is still on the move.

It is believed that the Assamese culture evolved in the pre-Ahom period and took a definite shape with the arrival of the Tai-Shans. The Neo-Vaishnava movement under Srimanta Sankardeva added another dimension to the Assamese culture. It had a huge impact on the lives of the people, affecting the language, literature, fine arts and so on. The cultural pattern was often common and at times different according to places while being infused with local characteristics.

The unity and integration of Assamese culture is seen in the population composition, Assamese language, religious belief, social customs, festivals, songs and dances, musical instruments, food, dress etc.

- **Language**

The Assamese language reveals a mixture of Sanskrit and source is derived from other linguistic communities. Languages differ according to areas and ethnic groups. Most of the ethnic groups have given up their language and speak their own version of Assamese language. Nagamese is an example of the harmonious blend of naga dialect and Assamese.

Assamese is being used as a link along with the native tribal dialect for communication.

The Tai script of the deodhais and bailungs were replaced by the newly developed lingua franca, Assamese that borrowed its vocabulary from multiple sources including Sanskrit, Persian, Arabic and local dialects.

Originally the Assamese language sprung from Magadha prakrit in the east which resulted in the rise to apabhramsa dialect. The Assamese language has gone through a

long process of integration. Later, Sanskrit, prakrit, non-aryan, tribal and the Arabic-Persian vocabularies did become a part of the language. These words have influenced the phonology, morphology, lexicology and semantics of the Assamese language. The reference to Asamiya language is found in the records of Hiuen Tsang who visited Kamarupa during the time of Bhaskara Varman.

According to Golak Chandra Goswami, the Assamese language has developed to such a form with so many influences that now it is not only difficult but it has become impossible to identify the various elements of the language. As a result, though Assamese is originally an Aryan language yet the non-aryan characteristics are more prominent in it, Siro Senehi Mor Bhasa Jononi has acquired an original form with various unique and unusual qualities which cannot be found in Aryan language.

Let us take the example of the word Asom (Axom). Some scholar's hold the view that it is a Tai Ahom word, but others negate it by declaring the word Asom as being derived from the Boro words "Ha-sam". Likewise according to the scholars Kamrup orginates from Austric language and the origins of Pragjyotish is a set of a few Aryan words (Pagar-mountain, Jyo/ Ju-Tall, Tik/Tis- Long). Besides the pronounciation of many Assamese words have tribal influence. Some kinship terms such as -Enai, Puyhao, Momai, Aapa, Nicha etc have come from Tai-Ahom language. With the Muslims, many Arabic and Persian words have found a place in the Assamese language. Apart from this, the British Raj has enriched the Assamese vocabulary with many English words.

Dialectical variations are found in the use of Assamese language in different regions which can be broadly divided into Eastern, Central and Western Asamiya.

LET US KNOW

The Assamese language originally belongs to the Indo-European language family. The Charyapadas written in ca 9th to 10th century were the oldest example of Assamese language.

- **Literature**

The Assamese literature too has developed through the process of integration and assimilation. Literature in published form was non-existent in ancient Assam and it was only a small body of folk or oral genres. Assamese translation of the sacred texts like

the Ramayana, Mahabharata, Puranas along with the buranjis and the devotional texts during the neo-Vaishnavite movement constituted the ancient Assamese literature. Among the Puranas the VishnuPurana, the Bhagawata Purana and the Harivamsa contributed the most.

Some of the Assamese songs, pada (kind of Assamese metre of 2 lines rhyming at the end), verse drama, religious books were either transcription or literal translation of these Puranas. With regard to style and form, the Assamese language is totally western. Western elements were first published in the Jonaki. Later these elements took various forms and entered into the Assamese literature. In between the folk literature of Assam evolved with the help of indigenous thoughts and ideas. It flourished as the local flavour. Aai- naam, Opesora-sobahor naam, Lakhimi sobahar naam, biya-naam, malita, juna, riddles, maxims, proverbs etc are nourished by various familiar thoughts, ideas and customs. But Bihu geet and Husori geet are contributions of the non-aryans for sure. Haidang geet of the Sonowal tribe, Bishahari geet associated with the Mare gaan of the Pati Rabha community and the Bahurongi geet have enriched Assamese folk literature.

Likewise folk tales related to animals is a contribution of the Bodo-Kacharis and the Rabhas.

Jikir and Jari songs are created in the line of deh bisaror geet. Ojha utha geet (Aai tuli), kabeera geet or badshahi geet are excellent examples of the cultural synthesization in Assam.

The Buranjis or chronological records of the Ahoms are the noteworthy example of rare treasures of Assamese written tradition. Buranji literature and Sakta literature are considered as pleasing ancient literature. The types of literature along with drama and other practical books were written under the patronage of the Ahom rulers. Swargadeo Rudra Simha wrote ShivaPurana and kings like Jayadhvaj Simha and Siva Simha were lyricists. Sukumar Barkath composed “Hastirvidyanama” during this time. With Muslim invasion Islamic culture entered Assam. Following the tradition of Sufi, Islamic verses of the time, Pashupati Dvij wrote “Chandravali Kavya” and Ram Dvij wrote “Mrigawati Charit” The mid-nineteenth century Assamese literary period was marked by the emergence of the Assamese journal “Orunodoi” first edited by Rev. Oliver T Cutter. Other works published in Assamese were a grammar text by Rev. Nathan Brown and the first Assamese dictionary by Rev. Mile Bronson. The Christian influence in the Assamese literature did help in

modernizing the language as well as liberalizing the Assamese culture. Towards the later phase in the 20th century, Assamese literature flourished and touched new heights with the works of luminaries like Lakshminath Bezbarua, Chandrakumar Agarwala, Ambikagiri Raichoudhuri, Jyotiprasad Agarwala, Nalinibala Devi to name a few.

- **Religion**

The religious history of Assam is also a history of integration. The religious aspect of Assamese culture is intermingled with the tribal cultural elements. Especially the concepts and ideas of Shiva Mahadev Burha Gohain carry the tribal elements and their impact is far reaching.

Shiva is basically a Dravidian god and Rudra is a Vedic god. The fusion and integration of Shiva and Rudra creates the Shiva of the Puranas. The tribal ethnic groups have assimilated Hindu gods and goddesses in their religious system.

Almost all of the tribal communities of Assam such as the Bodos, Kacharis, Rabhas, Dimasas, Lalungs, Sonowals, Deuris, Chutiyas, Karbis worship Shiva. To sum up, the tradition of worshipping Shiva in Assam is a mixture of the pre-Aryan, Aryan, tribal and aesthetical elements.

In the same manner, the genesis and development of goddesses like Durga and Parvati too can be traced in the culture of the pre-Aryan, Aryans and the tribal communities. Likewise, the snake goddess manasa-bishahari is a product of the synthesis of the non-Aryan, Aryan and Dravidian cultures. Similarly, the concepts and ideas of worship of various village deities and evil spirits carry the influence of the tribal culture. Scholars say that Kamakhya too is basically a tribal goddess. Worshipping of goddess Manasa as a saviour is a custom prevalent among the animistic tribal men and plain people of Assam. Kamakhya is the premier temple of Manasa worship and shamanistic dance festival. Shamanistic dance is locally called deodhani or deodha nach.

The foundation of the Sakta Tantric cult of Ancient Assam with emphasis on the yoni worship was laid down by the phallic worshipping primitive tribes. There is a contribution of the tribal element in the religion of the Assamese Hindus. Bohag bihu had an origin in the fertility cult as evident from the song and dances. Magh bihu can be traced to the primitive harvesting festival. Ceremonies and rituals revolving around marriages also have origins in the popular belief in sorcery and witchcraft. Khoba-Khobuni ceremony, for example, is performed by the newly-weds who make an offering to the two demons

Khoba and Khobuni. However, the entry of the Brahmanic cult was heralded with the coming of the Aryans as mentioned in Aitareya Brahmana, Satapatha Brahmana, etc. The syncretism of religion in Assam is clearly evident from the records which refer to Bhaskaravarman as being a worshipper of Siva, while respecting the sramanas. The Pala rulers of Kamarupa were Saivists but they paid homage to Devi. King Indrapala who followed the tantric cult, was devoted to Visnu as borne by the Guakuchi plates. The spirit of toleration as marked in the Kalika Purana recommends worshipping of other deities despite being a Sakta Purana. The Ahoms too assimilated well with the local culture and in matters of religion they had a secular attitude. Similarly, the neo-Vaishnavite movement contained some democratic elements which attracted a large number of followers from all classes. Similarly, the tribesmen began to come under the Aryan influence and this is evident from the sanskritized names of the tribal names of places and rivers. The influence of Hinduism and neo-Vaishnavism is seen among the tribes. The Bodo-Kacharis identify their chief deity Bathou with Siva and the female deity Mainao with Parvati. The Chutiyas too began worshipping Gira and Girasi as Siva and Parvati. The Hajongs too worship a lot of Hindu deities.

- **Festivals, Rituals and social customs**

National festivals and other customs of Assam are also examples of cultural integration. Bihu, the national festival of Assam, is basically an integrated festival. The word Meji related to Magh Bihu is derived from the Sanskrit word Medhya. Similarly, another word 'Bhelaghor' related to Magh Bihu originated from the Sanskrit word Mesh Griha. The tradition of preparing Chunga pitha and organising buffalo fights are a contribution of the Mongolian and the Dravidian cultures. Bihu is based on the fertile belief of the agrarian society. This festival resembles many other Indian festivals celebrated in other parts of the country. Many traditions and rituals of Bihu are similar to Pongal of Tamil Nadu, Poush Sankranti of Odisha, Bishu of Kerela, Baishakhi of Punjab, Chat Puja of North India etc. Goru Bihu or worshipping domestic animals especially the cow is a tradition originally followed in the Vedic age. But bathing them with pulses, turmeric, egg plant, thekera (a sour plant) bottle gourd is a tradition carried forward by the Aryan communities.

In Assam, there are many festivals worshipping Bamboo which is a contribution of the Mongoloids. Therefore, almost all Bamboo festivals- the Bhatheli, the Deul, the

Pauratola, the Sunweeri, the Suree the Dahar Phuroa etc have Mongoloid elements in them. Similarly the Mohoho festival celebrated in Lower Assam resembles the Macha hana (tiger hunting) festival of the Bodo Kacharis.

Marriage ceremonies are also a mixture of many cultures. There are eight types of marriage and the one conducted before the sacred fire (Hom) with the chanting of the mantras is considered the most auspicious. But some other rituals related to marriage such as- Joron, Gathiyon. Suaguri Tola, tekeli diya, Khoba khubi, offering fish to the bride's family during Joron and such others are indigenous Assamese beliefs. The traditional way of treating any ailment (Bejali) or preparing medicine also carry the elements of tribal beliefs and ways of healing.

- **Music, Dance and Song**

Music is an integral part of the culture and a product of human society. Assam, with its beautiful valleys and hills, is the home of many ethnic tribes. The music prevalent in Assam carries the tone of all the tribal and non tribal elements. The process of cultural integration is visible in Assamese dances and songs too. Even the musical instruments used in Assam is a mixed contribution of various cultures. The singing of Bihu song and the Bihu dance resemble the tribal way of singing and dancing. The Baisagu dance of the Bodos is quite similar to the Bihu dance. Likewise, the Oinitam of the Mising tribe also bears similarities with the Bihu song. Assamese Biya goa Ojapali songs are similar to the Fakir Ali Geet of the Muslim community. Noted writer Syed Abdul Malik opined that the tune of Jikir was much influenced by the Assamese Ojapali, Deh Bisaror geet and Borgeet. Shamanistic dance is an indigenous phenomenon. Folk traditions of supestitions and belief in occurance of diseases and their treatment are rampant among the tribals and non-tribals of Assam.

- **Food**

Among the most visible form of cultural manifestation is food. The food habit of a community reveals a lot about their values and mode of life. In case of Assamese foods, the chief characteristic features are the use of spice (limited) and the use of common herbs. The process of preparing the food is simple and involves boiling. It appears to be greatly influenced by the varied cultures. The use of vegetable oil and mustard oil has

been the result of the growing contact with people from outside the region.

The non-vegetarian nature of the food of the upper class (Brahmins, religious gurus) is due to the non-Aryan influence on the Assamese culture. Sankardeva was himself known to be fond of food items prepared from fish. The Varna Hindus of Assam learned to catch fish from their tribal brothers and to use fishing nets, Jakoi, Juluki, etc. Various food items prepared from fish (Massor Jhul, Patot dia Maas, Maasor Khar) all have the essence of tribal cooking. Cooking of various wild leafy vegetables and eating of Poita Bhaat (boiled rice soaked in water overnight) are tribal in nature. The use and preparation of various pitha (rice cakes) are a mixture of tribal and non tribal culture. The symbol of unique Assamese culture "Tamul Paan" (Taamul paan) is a contribution of the Austrics. Similarly, potato, tomato, papaya which arrived much later, have become an integral part of the Assamese food culture which was due to the interaction of the local tribes with the neighbouring areas. Even bamboo soot which has become a part of the Assamese cuisine is of tribal origin.

- **Dress**

References to the traditional dress and ornaments of Assam are found in the buranjis and the folk songs of Assam. The buranjis record that four khels were established by the Ahom king under the Bhuyans for the preparation of clothes. These khels were- kopaah katoni, paat katoni, jola katoni and mejang katoni.

Jewelleries were worn by men and women, rich and poor alike. The difference could be noticed in the metals used for preparing the jewellery items. It was a common practice to wear jewelleries on auspicious occasions like marriage, festivals and rituals. The designs and motifs on the jewelleries have changed with time.

The dresses and traditional jewelleries worn by the Assamese people symbolises the integration of the various tribal and Islamic culture. The loom used by the Assamese women is a contribution of the tribal culture. In other parts of India, the Varna Hindu women do not weave in the loom, but it is a tradition kept alive over generations in Assam irrespective of caste and community.

The process of assimilation is evident in the pattern of donning the traditional attire. The Assamese women wear their mekhela slightly above their chest (methoni maara). Besides, the cloths that cover the upper body of the women, and wearing bindis are contribution from the tribal communities. The way men dress in Assam too is influenced

by the tribal culture. During the reign of Rudra Singha, Assamese dress started to borrow styles from the Mughal tradition. It is noteworthy that the Islamic style of dressing style entered into the Satra culture of Assam, Later, it was used during the Sutradhari dance, Ojapali dance and Natua dance forms. Similarly weaving flower patterns on riha mekhela is also influenced by the Islamic tradition.

Dr. Lila Gogoi mentioned the fascination for dresses during the Ahom rule. The Assamese clothing line assimilated the designs from other ethnic tribes and communities. The custom of wearing the six yard long saree was not prevalent by the Assamese women. For ornaments there was the goldsmith's khel. Ornaments were made from gold, silver and bronze. The ornaments were prepared by the goldsmith khel, the members who came from the west but their designs reflected the regional taste and favour. The jewelleries are worn during the Satriya nritya, the bhaona and such other occasions. The most important ornaments worn during the bhaona performance are- nupur and ghugura for the feet, bangles, armlets, neckpieces, kiriti for the head and paag. The kings and queens wore chandrahara (ornament for the waist). The ornaments worn by traditional Assamese women are- thuriya, keru, korno bala, lokaparo, long keru, jangfai (earring), golpota,dhulbiri, junbiri, dhoriyabiri, parosokuwa, maduli, dugdugi. Gejera, bena, pans sori, sat sori, sipatmoni, silisa moni (neckpieces), gaamkhaaru, konkon, bala, (bangles), siripota, senepota, paro *sokuwa (finger rings) and others. The teeth and nails of the animals were also used as materials for making ornaments.*

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answer the following questions:

Q 1:The Haidang geet is associated with which tribe?

.....

Q 2:Name the earliest example of Assamese language?

.....

Q 3:Name the chief deity of the Bodo-Kacharis?

.....

2.4. LET US SUM UP

After going through this unit you have learnt.

- Cultural syncretism and assimilation of Assamese culture through different phases

2.5 FURTHER READING

1) Barpujari, H.K. (2004). The Comprehensive History of Assam, Vol. I, Guwahati, Publication Board

2) Datta, Birendranath (2012). Cultural Contours of North East India, New Delhi, Oxford University Press

3) Deka, Dr. Namita (edited) (2007). Assam Darpan, Guwahati, Bani Mandir

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2.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: Sonowal

Ans to Q No 2: The Caryapadas

Ans to Q No 3: Bathou

2.7 MODEL QUESTIONS

A) VERY SHORT QUESTIONS (Answer each question within 50 words)

Q 1: The Shiva Purana was authored by which Ahom ruler?

Q 2: The Baniya's and Kaivarata's belonged to which racial group?

B) SHORT QUESTIONS (Answer each question within 150 words) Write short notes on-

Q 1: Nature and elements of culture

Q 2: Food culture of Assam

C) LONG QUESTIONS (Answer each question in between 300-500 words)

Q 1: Describe the influence of the tribal elements in the religious practices of the people of Assam

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UNIT 3 : FOLK CULTURE OF ASSAM: MEANING AND IMPORTANCE

UNIT STRUCTURE

3.1. Learning Objectives

3.2. Introduction

3.3. Defining “Folk Culture” and its various aspects

3.4. Oral Literature

3.5. Material Culture

3.6. Folk Custom

3.7. Folk Performing Arts

3.8. Let us Sum Up

3.9. Further Reading

3.10. Answers to Check Your Progress

3.11. Model Questions

3.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this Unit, you will be able to-

- Define Folk culture,
- Describe the different aspects of Folk culture,
- Discuss the various forms of Oral Literature of Assam,
- Discuss the customs and tradition attached to Folk culture of Assam,
- Describe the Folk performing arts of Assam.

3.2. INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit, we have deliberated on the topic of Culture, its nature and Assamese culture in particular. We also analysed the cultural assimilation process in the making of Assamese culture. In this unit, we will discuss folk culture and its various kinds, like Oral literature, customs and traditions and performing arts in Assam.

3.3. DEFINING FOLK CULTURE

The term culture has been derived from the Latin word “cultus”, meaning to “care. Scholars differ in opinions regarding the proper definition of culture. Etymologically, the word Folk means ‘of or pertaining to the inhabitants of land, their culture, tradition or history’, or to go to its Assamese synonyms, it would mean people or *Lok*. Therefore, the connotation of the term folk culture refers to the culture of the people of an area in general and it includes mental, social and physical means of the people, which makes life run its course’.

Folk culture is as old as human civilization and the collection of folk literature and and folk culture dates back to 5th -6th century C.E. However, scientific discussion on folk culture began only in the 16th century C.E.

The forerunners of the study of folk culture in Assam and rest of India were the Civil Servants of the British Government and the Christian missionaries. However, even before them, in the creations of medieval poets and writers of Assam, there are a large number of sources of folk culture. In the writings of Sankaradev, Madhabdev, Madhab Kandali, Harihar Bipra, Ananta Kandali, we find the sources of folk culture of Assam but these sources or the works lack scientific explanations. Therefore, it can be said that the scientific study of folklore and folk culture began during the colonial rule.

Technically, study of folk culture includes its various dimensions such as *Oral literature, Material Culture of the Society, Social Folk Custom, Folk Performing Art etc*. Assam is a land of numerous tribes and is often regarded as the melting pot of the multi-cultural ethnic society. It is said that Assam is a miniature replica of the subcontinent. Its geography has the characteristics that enabled many of the trans-regional elements to adapt themselves to the ecological condition of Assam.

Consequently, the history of Assam is one of the continuous reflections of large scale population movements, where each cultural strain while maintaining its exclusiveness, has co-existed with others.

3.4. ORAL LITERATURE

Oral literature forms a major source for our knowledge abut any society. It not only helps us to understand the society but also is an important source in reconstructing the

history of any period or of any place. Assam, is a land of multi ethnic culture. The various ethnic groups display a vast array of oral literature that reveals the various aspects of Assamese life such as the socio-economic and political condition of the people of Assam. Oral literature of Assam can be broadly categorized into five categories.

From Cultural point of view, folk culture can be classified into different categories and this classification is known as *ethnic genre* or *ethnic classification*. This classification can also be called *native classification* since both *ethnic* and *native classification* refers to the same aspect of folk culture. The classification made considering the academic side as well as international norms of classification of oral literature is known as *analytical classification*. Within this category fall the following aspects

- Folk poem or oral song or verbal Songs/poems
- Prose Narratives
- Proverbs, sayings, maxims
- Riddles
- Folk speech etc.
- From the point of views of various themes of the folk literature it can be further sub-divided into the following sub-categories :
- Love songs /love poems
- Spiritual songs
- Philosophical
- Satirical
- Comedy
- Socio-economic
- Encouraging
- Historical-political etc.
- Many of the folk songs are sung during some special occasions or festivals. Considering the context of its performance, folk literatures can also be divided in a category. This is called *contextual classification.*

Many of the aspects of art and of Folk literature pertain to some social functions. For this reason it is also called functional folklore. For example, the lullaby sung for making the children sleep can be classified as lullaby considering its functional aspects.

Depending on the regional and linguistic characteristics, Assamese oral literature can be divided into many categories such as-

- Kamrupi (songs of Kamrup)
- Songs of Nalbari
- Darangi (songs of Darrang)
- Sonitpuri (songs of Sonitpur)
- Lakhimpuri (Songs of Lakhimpur)
- Dibrugarh (Songs of Dibrugarh)
- Songs of Sivsagar
- Songs of Jorhat
- Songs of Nagaon
- Songs of Marigaon
- Goalparia (Songs of Goalpara)
- Songs of Dhuburi etc.

Assamese oral literature can also be divided into many other categories depending on its contents.

Among then the religious sons are worth mentioning as they have occupied an important place in the oral or folk literature. Songs sung during or at the time of prayer or worship are called the religious songs. These songs mainly contain the origin of gods and goddesses, spread of their worship in the Earth, rituals of prayer and worships etc. Religious songs can be divided in some sub categories such as :

- ***Songs related to Various Gods and Goddesses:*** These songs are related to goddess Durga, Manasa, God Shiva and Jagannath etc
- ***Aai naam or songs of Goddess Sitala:*** These songs are sung for the cure of pox. If the goddess is satisfied by the song then the disease is cured, according to popular belief.
- ***Apeswari or Apechari Naam:*** These songs are sung, mainly by the women, to satisfy the fairies so that they do not harm the people, mostly the children.
- ***Sonarai Pujra Geet:*** These songs are mainly sung in the Goalpara areas of Assam. There songs are sung by the cattle rearer at the time of Sonarai Puja and are known as Sonarai Pujar Geet.

- ***Kati Pujar Geet:*** These songs are sung by the women not having a child to satisfy God Kartik so that they can have child. These songs are also sung in the Goalpara area.
- ***Bas Pujar Geet:*** There are two kinds of Bas Puja- (i) Mada-kaam and (ii) Bahgawati Baas. Songs sung during this puja is called Baas pujar geet.
- ***Tukuriya Pujar Geet:*** These songs are sung by the people of Pati Rabhas at the time of the Tukriya Puja.
- ***Barmani Pujar Geet:*** These songs are also sung by the Pati Rabhas.
- ***Deh Bisarar Geet:*** These songs are sung by the bhakats or the monks who used to travel from one place to another singing songs related to human life and daily happenings. These songs reflect the pains and joys of human lives.
- ***Jikir:*** These songs are mainly sung by the Muslim people of Assam. Like the Deh Bisarrar geet these songs also represent human life, its joy, pain etc.
- ***Jaree Geet:*** These songs are also sung mainly by the Muslims giving a description of the tragedy of the Karabala. Besides the lives of Hazarat Mohammad, Bibi Fatema, Hasan-Hussain etc. are also represented in these songs.
- ***Kamrupi Loka Geet:*** These songs were mainly sung in the Kamarup areas. The bhakti or the spiritual feelings of these songs attract the people. Lord Krishna, Siv-Parvati etc. are the main deities who are prayed through these songs.

LET US KNOW

Tragedy of the Karabala: This is related to the battle of Karabala which took place in 680 AD. The Battle was between a small group of supporters and relatives of of Muhammad's grandson Hussain Ali and a much larger military detachment from the forces of Yazid I. Hussain and all his supporters were killed including his six month old

- **Songs related to festivities**

Assam is a land of rich cultural heritage. Many festivals are celebrated throughout the State. Among the festivals the most prominent ones are the *Bihu, Bhatheli, Moho -Ho, Ambubachi, Suweri* etc. In all these festivals many song are sung and these are a major source of oral literature of Assam. However, these types of songs can broadly be divided

in two categories -

(i). Songs related to Bohag Bihu and (ii). Reformative songs or songs related to various stages of life.

- **Songs related to Bohag Bihu**

The bihu songs are mainly sung during the time of Bohag or Rongali Bihu. However, there are a few songs related to both Kati and Magh Bihu. The bihu songs are known as *Bihu Geet* or *Husari geet*. Perhaps Bihu Songs or the *Bihu Naam* also referred to as *Bihu Geet* are the most popular specimen of oral literature in Assam regardless of caste, creed and religion. The time of the origin of the Bihu Songs cannot be said with confirmation. These songs are mainly sung during the time of the Bihu festivals of Assam and are transmitted orally from one generation to another. Many of these songs have been documented by many researchers. But there are still many Bihu songs which are prevalent among the people of Assam in its oral form. These songs are rich with contents that deal with nature and various aspects of the Assamese society. Beside Assam's traditions, festivals, art and architecture, ornaments, cosmetics, foods and wine etc are several numerous topics that are reflected in the Bihu songs. In addition to the Bihu songs there are numerous other songs which are sung in many festivals celebrated by the various communities of Assam.

- **Reformative songs or Songs related to various stages of life**

These songs are mainly related to various stages of human lives like Annaprasan, Sulakaran, Upanayan, Tolani Biya, biya naam etc. Among these biya naam are most common during marriages. These kinds of songs reflect various aspects of the society. Mainly, the economic and social conditions are reflected well in many of the biya naam. In these songs, in many occasions Krishna-Rukmini or Hara-Gauri are represented as the main characters but the descriptions are related to the reality.

LET US KNOW

Annaparsan: It literally means 'Eating of Food.' In this ceremony a child is ritually given food in mouth according to Hindu rites

Upanayan: In Hinduism, Upanayana is the initiation ritual for a Hindu Brahmin boy who is given the sacred thread, to symbolize his initiation into spiritual knowledge.

Tolani Biya: This is the ceremony celebrated when a girl gets her puberty.

● **Love songs /love poems**

Generally songs related to love, affections, etc. are categorised as love songs. These folk love songs are sung during various festivals and situations. Many of the Bihu songs or Bihu naam fall in this category. These songs contain numerous elements of love (for bihu songs see 4.2). Besides the Bihu songs, love songs, are further subdivided into some cataegories like *Bhabaiya- Chatka*, *Musali or Mahut Geet, lewatan, Garakhiya Geet* etc.

LET US KNOW

❖ Bhabaiya and Chatka songs are sung in the Goalpara area. Unlike other folk songs these are not sung in religious festivals. Both Hindus and Muslims sing this song which contains the message of love.

❖ Musali or Mahut Geets are songs sung by the caretakers of buffaloes and elephants They address their beloved through these songs.

❖ Lewatan songs are sung by the Hojong Community which too sketches the picture of love.

● **Children Song:**

Songs related to children are found in all parts of the world. In Assamese language these songs include lullabies, nursery poems and children game songs.

❖ Lullabies: These songs are sung by parents, grandfather or grandmother and other senior members to make the children sleep. The language of these songs is very simple and easy to understand by the children.

❖ Nursery rhymes: To mollify the offended children or to feed them parents or other family members sing these songs known as Nisukani Geet in Assamese.

● **Work Songs**

Songs related to various activities or work can be termed as work song. Since most of the folk or people are always somehow related to various activities, there are many songs which they sing during their works as means of relaxation. Songs of the ploughman or haluoi geet, songs sung during the time of producing gur or Kuhiar Pera Geet, Songs sung during the time of riding boat or Nao baote Goa Geet, songs at during

the time of fishing, of catching elephant in the jungle etc. are some notable examples of work song.

- **Songs related to Independence:**

The Indian freedom struggle touched the people of every caste community and religion, from the elite to the common people in India. Many songs were composed in Assamese songs to spread the message of freedom struggle. In many of these songs the hanging of Kushal Konwar, Maniram Dewan was a recurrent theme.

- **Ballads:**

Ballads are the songs that describe various stories connected with myths, legends, history, magic etc. Assamese ballads include several topics like myths of the birth of *Dheki, Dhol,* sugarcane etc., historical figure like Gandhi, peasant struggles of *Rangia, Patharughat, Phulaguri* etc., and legends like *Beula Lakhindar* etc.

- **Charms:**

Oral literature also includes the charms or mantras. The charms are considered as a major source of oral literature of Assam. Charms, however, can be divided into such categories as magical charms, prayer charms, threatening charms etc.

- **Prose Narratives**

Like folk songs, prose narratives are also a major source of oral literature. It includes myths, legends and tales. Just as the songs are related to myths, the prose narratives also deal with myths that are related to the origin of animals and birds, geographical features, miracles, activities of gods and goddesses etc. Tales are also very important source of oral literature. Tales can be divided into animal tales, supernatural tales, Etiological tales, Jokes, Anecdote, etc. Tales on fox, crow, monkey etc., are very common in Assam. Some of the interesting tales of Assam have already been collected by several scholars and they are published in the form of books. Collections of tales by Laxminath Bezbarua, Prafulla Dutta Goswami are some examples.

- **Proverbs and Riddles :**

This is also an important form of oral literature in Assam as in many other parts of the world. Most of the proverbs are related to a story or tale which gives a moral. Assamese *Dakar bachan* is an important example of such proverb. Riddles or *Fakora Jojana* are intended to provide wisdom and questions.

Thus, it is seen that Assamese oral literature consists of songs and tales. All the tribes of Assam have their own folk tales and folk songs which give a picture of the society

of certain periods. Oral sources provided a valuables key to the study of the ethnic or tribal groups in Assam.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answer the following questions-

Q 1: Name any two books of Laxminath Bezbarua on folk tales ?

.....

Q 2: In which area of Assam, are Sonari Pujar geet mostly popular ?

.....

Q 3: Which community of Assam sings the Barmani Pujar geet ?

.....

3.5. MATERIAL CULTURE

Material Culture is the visible form of folk culture. Material culture includes all the material items used by men such as house, household commodities, and different kinds of apparatus, instruments, weapons, pots, and means of conveyance. Material culture can be divided into five broad categories

- Folk art
- Folk Crafts
- Folk Architecture
- Folk Costume and
- Folk cookery etc.

In the process of making resources for living and in making foods the tradition of a place finds expression in the folk arts and crafts. Assam exhibits a rich cultural heritage in the form of its arts and crafts.

- **Folk art, craft and architecture**

Assam exhibits a very rich tradition of various folk crafts for centuries. Among the major crafts of Assam, cane and bamboo craft, bell metal and brass craft, silk and cotton weaving, toy and mask making, pottery and terracotta work, wood craft, jewellery making, musical instruments making, etc. are very prominent. Besides these, Assamese

craftsmanship has also touched some other fields like making of boats, traditional guns and canons, traditional building materials, utilities from daily life ranging from weaving accessories, furniture, musical instruments etc.

● **Metal Crafts**

This is one of the oldest cottage industries in Assam. Bell-metal and brass have been the most commonly used metals for the Assamese artisan. Almost every household in Assam posseses some utilities and symbolic articles made from bell metal and brass. The *Xorai* and *bota* have been in use for centuries to offer gifts to respected persons. These two are the most respected items of gift in Assam.

Some of the important centres for the production of this metal crafts are Hajo and Sarthebari. The people of these villages have used their innovation skills to design modern day articles to keep pace with the changing times. Besides gold, silver and copper etc. are also an important form of traditional metal craft in Assam. Gold and silver, however, are mostly used as ornaments.

● **Assamese Masks and Toys**

Assamese Masks are also known as *mukhas*. They are regarded as the base of the Assamese culture and tradition. Masks are worn mostly during theatres and *bhaonas*. They revolve around the Assamese tribal myths and folktales. These masks have been the centre of each and every cultural event in the state for a long time.

Likewise, toys speak a lot about the culture and tradition of a place. They depict the lifestyle and the way of living of the people residing there. So much can be known about the heritage and customs of a given place through toys that mentioning them becomes inevitable when one speaks about the art and craft of a particular region.

● **Cane and Bamboo Works**

Bamboo and cane contribute a lot to the economy and lifestyle of the north-eastern state of Assam. It is an inseparable part of life in Assam. These are found in abundance in every part of Assam. A large variety of articles made from bamboo and cane are found in every household of Assam. Items in daily life, ranging from household implements to construction of dwelling houses, to furniture, to weaving accessories, to musical instruments etc are made from cane and bamboo.

● **Woodcraft**

A reference to the traditional art and craft of Assam, without mentioning the exquisite woodwork found there, would be as good as incomplete. Assam is a forest covered land.

A large variety of wood and timber are easily available in the forest of Assam which have formed a part of the people's culture and economy.

It is said that an Assamese can identify the timber by touching it even in darkness, and can produce a series of items from it. Decorative panels in the royal Ahom palaces of the past and the 600-year old satras or Vaishnative monasteries, birds and animals figuring in mythology made from wood etc. are the best examples of the excellence of craftsmanship of the Assamese artisan the known as *Khanikar*.

● **Assamese Jewellery**

Assam has a rich collection of unique and exclusive traditional jewellery. Ornaments mainly from gold and silver are used by the Assamese women. These jewelleries hold a special place in the heart of the Assamese women and are worn by them during the cultural and religious events. All the tribes of Assam have their own unique form of jewellery.

● **Folk Costumes**

Costumes or dress is one of the basic necessities of human being. It depends on the geographical location, religion, and social customs of the people. Assamese costumes represent the folk culture of Assam. Assamese craftsmen also excel in handloom production especially in weaving. Assam is the home of several types of silk such as Muga, Eri etc.

Sualkuchi is the main centre of silk production of Assam. However, in almost every part of Assam, especially in rural areas, weaving is a common and daily activity of the female members of the household. Moreover, various tribes of Assam make different types of cotton garments with unique embroidery designs and wonderful colour combinations.

● **Folk Cookery:**

Earlier the people of Assam used to eat various fruits and vegetables which were easily available in nature. Traditional Assamese food is not spicy. Rice (Bhaat) is the staple food of the people of Assam. It is eaten with curry of various items ranging from vegetables and herbs to meat and fish which are easily available in Assam.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answer the following questions-

Q 4: Name two villages of Assam which produce metal crafts?

.....

Q 5: Why is Sualkuchi famous for?

.....

Q 6: Name the staple food of the people of Assam.

.....

3.6. FOLK CUSTOMS

Folk Customs get reflected in folk literature and material culture. It is the bridge between oral literature and material culture. Tradition and custom related to agriculture, birth, marriage and death etc. can be included in the folk customs. Folk customs mainly include four different aspects such as Folk Festivals, Folk games, Folk medicine, Folk religion etc.

- The principal folk festival of Assam as known to all is Bihu. However, every tribe of Assam celebrate their own tribal festivals most of which are mainly related to agriculture. Besides Bihu, Boishagu and Kehrai puja by the Bodo, Ali-Ai-Ligang by the Missings, Me-Dum-Me-Phi by the Ahoms are celebrated in large scale. Holi, Durga Puja, Laxmi Puja, Idd, Muharram etc are also celebrated by the people of Assam.
- Assamese people also enjoy a wide range of folk games like Koni Juj or egg tapping, Kori Khel, Moh Juj or Buffalo fight, Bulbuli Soraair Juj or Nightingale fight, kukura juj or Cock Fight, Nao kehl or Boat Race etc. Most of these games are played during festival time.
- The custom of folk medicine of Assam like other custom is very rich. People used to believe in folk medicine for their cure from various diseases. Medicinal plants found in Assam's forests are widely used for treating diseases.
- Customs related to folk religion are mainly displayed in the time of practicing or following the religious rituals. Customs related to birth, marriage and death are mainly related to religious beliefs of the people which vary among the different group of people or tribes.

3.7. FOLK PERFORMING ARTS

It is one of the main categories of folk culture. Folk Performing Art can be

categorized as folk drama, folk music, and folk dance etc. However, all these components are closely related to each other.

Folk drama is an integral part of folk literature. Like other branches of folk literature, the folk drama has no date of its creation and no author. These are transmitted orally from generation to generation. The author of the folk drama is the folk society and its performers are also from the folk society. Some examples of Folk performing art of Assam are Ojapali, Dhulia Bhaona, Gayan- Bayan ,Putala Naash, Bhawariya etc.

- Ojapali is one of the oldest forms of folk performing arts of Assam. This was more popular in Kamrup and Darrang districts and later it spread throughout Assam. Ojapali can be divided into three categories i.e. (i) Suknarayani Gowa Ojapali, (ii) Byas Gowa Ojapali and (iii) Ramayan Gowa Ojapali. Byas and Ramayan gowa Ojapali are related to Baishnavism whereas Suknarayani gowa Ojapali is related to Manasa Puja.
- Dhulia Bhaona, like Ojapali was mainly popular in Kamrup and Darrang districts and is performed in group. The main motive of the performers is to entertain the audience with jokes and humour in their performances.
- Gayan-Bayan is another important form of folk performing art of Assam. It is the traditional performance of the Vaishnava Sattriya tradition. The singer is called 'gayan' and the instrument players are called 'bayan'. Putala Nas is, like many other parts of India are very common in Assam. Many moral stories and jokes are related through the puppet dance.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answer the following questions-

Q 7: Mention the name of two traditional games of Assam related to bird?

.....

Q 8: Which form of Ojapali is related to Manasa Puja?

.....

Q 9: Name the two folk festivals of the Bodos.

.....

3.8. LET US SUM UP

After going through the unit, you have learnt about that–

- 'Folk culture' refers to the culture of the people of an area in general and it includes "mental, social and physical means of the people".
- Oral literature helps us to understand the society but it is also an important source in reconstructing the history of any period or of any place.
- Assamese oral literature consists of religious songs, reformative songs; songs related to various stages of life, children etc.
- Folk culture is visible in various forms of artifacts and material items as house, household commodities, and different kinds of apparatus, instruments, weapons, pots, and means of conveyance.
- Folk customs and traditions also form a part of folk culture and it includes four different aspects such as folk festivals, folk games, folk medicine, folk religion etc.

3.9. ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: Burhi Aai Sadhu and Junuka

Ans to Q No 2: Goalpara

Ans to Q No 3: Pati Rabha

Ans to Q No 4: Hajo and Sarthebari

Ans to Q No 5: Silk

Ans to Q No 6: Rice

Ans to Q No 7: Moh Juj (Buffalo fight) and Kukura Juj (Cock fight)

Ans to Q No 8: Suknarayani gowa Ojapali

Ans to Q No 9: Boishagu and Kehrai puja

3.10. FURTHER READING

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3.11. MODEL QUESTIONS

A) **VERY SHORT QUESTIONS** (Answer each question within 50 words)

Q 1: Who authored the book 'A Sketch of Assam with Some Accounts of the Hill Tribes'?

Q 2: Who is the author of the book 'Ballades and Tales of Assam'?

Q 3: What is the main purpose of the Apeswari or Apechari Naam?

Q 4: In which area of Assam, Kati Pujar Geet is sung?

Q 5: Who are the Khanikars?

Q 6: Me-Dum-Me-Phi is celebrated by which community of Assam?

Q 7: In which area of Assam, is Ojapali commonly performed?

B) SHORT QUESTIONS (Answer each question within 150 words)

Q 1: What do you understand by folk culture?

Q 2: What are the ranges of four stages of historiography of the study of folk culture in Assam?

Q 3: What are the main divisions of Folk culture?

Q 4: What are the main divisions of the songs related to various festivals of Assam?

Q 5: Mention the different types of Ojapali?

C) LONG QUESTIONS (Answer each question in between 300-500 words)

Q 1: Discuss the contribution of the British Civil Servants in the study of folk culture of Assam?

Q 2: Make an assessment of the contribution of the Assamese Scholars in the study of folk culture of Assam in the Third and Fourth Stage?

Q 3: What are the main divisions of oral literature based on its contents?

Discuss

Q 4: Discuss the various aspects of Material Culture of Assam.?

****

UNIT : 4 FOLK LITERATURE OF ASSAM: NARRATIVE AND NON-NARRATIVE GENRE

UNIT STRUCTURE

4.1. Learning Objectives

4.2. Introduction

4.3. Assamese Folk Literature

4.4. Bodo Folk Literature

- 4.4.1. Rabha Folk Literature
- 4.4.2. Karbi Folk Literature
- 4.4.3. Dimasa Folk Literature
- 4.4.4. Mishing Folk Literature

4.5. Folk Songs of the Tea Tribes of Assam

4.6. Folk Songs of the Barak Valley

4.7. Let Us Sum Up

4.8. Further Reading

4.9. Answers to Check Your Progress

4.10. Model Questions

4.1. LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you will be able to -

- Define folk literature
- Describe about the Assamese folk literature
- Know about the folk literature of the tribal communities of Assam like the Bodo, Rabha, Karbi,Dimasa and Mishing
- Have an idea about the folk songs of the Tea Tribes of Assam
- Know about the folk songs of the Barak Valley of Assam

4.2. INTRODUCTION

Since time immemorial people used to voice their experiences in the form of oral traditions like myths, legends, epics, fables, folktales, folksongs etc that through light on the various aspects of human life. These oral traditions are termed as folk literature. The emotions and sentiments of the common people are embedded in the folk literature which is transmitted from one generation to the next through the words of mouth. Usually the authors of the folk literature are unknown or unidentifiable and itdoes not traditionally exist in written form and are handed down orally from one generation to the next. Folk literature is like a mirror of any society that helps in knowing the social, religious, culture, etc aspects of that society.

In the previous unit we have already studied about folk culture. Folk literature is a part of folk culture that not only enriches a particular society or ethical group but also helps in knowing the beliefs, customs, traditions etc of that society. In this unit we will study about the Assamese folk literature, folk literatures of the different tribes of Assam like the Bodo, Rabha, Karbi, Dimasa, Mishing etc. Along with this, the present unit will also deal with the folk songs of the Tea tribe and the Barak Valley of Assam.

4.3. ASSAMSESE FOLK LITERATURE

Assam has a rich and varied folk literature in the form of folksongs, ballads, myths, legends, folktales, proverbs, riddles etc that are a part and parcel of the Assamese society covering its multifaceted dimensions. Assam is a land of multi ethnic groups and their folk literature further enhances the arena of the folk literature of the province.

The Assamese folk literature can be divided into various categories depending upon its linguistic and regional characteristics, themes etc. A considerable amount of Assamese folk literature has been recorded at a much later period. It is one of the important means of studying the basic culture of the Assamese people. Folk literature is associated in many instances with rites and festivals which lie close to day to day life of the people.

LET US KNOW

Depending upon the linguistic and regional characteristics the Assamese folk literature can be divided into various categories such as *Kamrupi* (folk

literature of Kamrup), *Darangi* (folk literatureof Darang), *Sonitpuri* (folk literature of Sonitpur), *Goalparia* (folk literature of Goalpara), etc. Likewise depending on the theme the Assamese folk literature can be classified as satirical, comedy, romantic, historical, mythological, religious, economic, legendary etc.

On the basis of the form and methods of narration the Assamese folk literature can be further divided into two broad genres as verse narrative tradition and prose narrative tradition. Verse narrative traditionis either sung or recited and it includes folk songs, ballad, etc that contains a story. Prose narrative tradition is narrated and it includes myth, legend, folktale, etc. In addition to this the Assamese folk literature also includes some non-narrative genres like the proverbs, riddles, hymns, etc.

● **Folksongs** occupied an important place in the folk literature of Assam. Depending upon its contents Assamese folk songs can be divided into various categories like religious songs, love songs, work songs, children's song, songs related to various rituals, ceremonies and festivals, etc. These folk songs beautifully portraits the rich cultural heritage of the Assamese society.

➢ Songs sung during religious occasions are known as religious songs. The origin of various gods and goddesses, the beginning and spread of their worship in earth, the rituals connected to their worship are the main subject matter of the religious songs.

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There are different types of religious songs in Assam, like the *Aai Naam* (sung for the cure of pox, known as Goddess *Sitala* in Assamese language), songs sung during the worship of goddess *Durga, Saraswati, Lakhsmi, Kali, Manasha, Jagatdhatri, Lord Shiva, Lord Ganesha* etc. Apart from these songs there are some devotional and spiritual songs such as *Deh Bicharar Geet*, *Jikir* and *Jaree* etc. that enrich the folk literature of Assam. *Deh Bicharar Geets* are spiritual songs and the principal motif of these songs speaks in general terms of the futility of man's life and the presence of higher impulse that guides man's destiny. *Jikir* and *Jarees* are devotional songs of Assam.

➢ Love songs are another genre of folk songs that are related to love, affections, etc. *Bhabaiya-Chatka* (folk songs sung in the Goalpara area that carry the message of love), *Musali* or *Mahut Geet* (sung by the caretakers of buffalo and elephants to address their beloved ones), *Lewatan* songs (love songs sung by the Hojong community) etc can be placed under this category.

➢ Songs sung in connection of various activities or works are known as work songs. These songs are sung while performing various works as means of relaxation. *Haluoi Geet* (songs of ploughman), *Kharikatiya Geet* (songs of woodcutter), *Mashmariya Geet* (songs of fisherman), *Kuhiar Pera Geet* (sung at the time of producing gur), etc are some examples of Assamese work songs.

➢ Children's songs like **lullabies, nursery poems, children game songs** constitute an important part of the Assamese folk literature. Lullabies (*nichukani* geet) are sung to make the children sleep or to make them stop crying. The language of these songs is very simple and easy to understand by the children. Nursery rhymes and children's game songs are sung while the children used to play. These songs related to children are mainly imaginative that can attract their tender minds.

➢ Assam being a land of rich cultural heritage, various festivals like *Bihu, Holi, Suweri, Moho-ho*, etc are celebrated throughout the province. During these festivals songs are sung that are inseparable part of the Assamese society. *Bihu Geet* or *Bihu Naam, Husari Geet* are the most popular festival songs of Assam irrespective of any caste, creed and religion. In addition to this,some songs are sung while performing the various rituals and ceremonies connected with the Assamese society. *Biya naam, Joranaam, Khicha Geet* (all these are sung during marriage ceremony) are some common ceremonial songs of Assam.

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The *Bihu Geet* or *Bihu Naam, Husari Geet* are sung during the *Bohag* or *Rongali Bihu* festival of Assam. The *Bihu* festival coincides with the advent of spring and is celebrated from the last day of *Chait* month (mid-April) till the sixth day of *Baisakh* month. But in reality is festival is celebrated for a longer period now a day. Many of the *Bihu* songs deal with nature and the various other aspects

of the Assamese society. *Huchari* songs are also associated with the *Bihu* festival and are mainly perform by the male folk. Many of the *Bihu* songs fall in the category of love songs.

● **Ballads** are another important form of Assamese folk literature. A ballad is primarily a tale in the verse form originally said to have been sung to the accompaniment of dance. In the other words it can be said that ballads are like long songs that describe various stories in connection with myths, legends, history etc. In Assamese language ballads are known as *malita*.

Assamese ballads can be divided into various categories depending upon its theme like the historical, mythological, imaginative etc. *Borphukanar Geet*, *Maniram Dewanar Geet*, *Gaurinath Sinhar Geet*, *Haradatta* and *Virudattar Geet*, *Jana-Gabharur Geet*, *Phulkonwarar Geet*, *Kamalakunwarir Geet, Manikowarar Geet, Dubala Santir Geet, Padmakumarir Geet, Pagala-Parvatir Geet,* etc are some ballads of Assam. In addition to this the Assamese ballads include several topics like myths of the birth of *dheki, dhol, bhumikampa,* etc.

● **Myths** and legends are an important part of the Assamese folk literature. Myths are traditional narratives which explain the natural phenomenon through symbolism.A myth is a traditional story, which may describe the origins of the world or of a people. It is an attempt at explaining mysteries, supernatural events, and cultural traditions. Sometimes sacred in nature, a myth can involve gods, goddesses or other creatures. **Legends** are stories based on both real or supposedly real individuals and their marvelous deeds. Most of the legends are associated with the divine and miraculous activities that are believed to be true and focuses on religious belief, natural and cultural surroundings, such as hills, valleys, forests, wetlands, lakes, rivers, fields, stones, old trees, graveyards, chapels, churches and other objects.

● **Folktales** are an integral part of the folk literature of Assam. Folktales are traditional fictional stories told by old men and women to children and are often related to heroic incidents, the supernatural, the rogue, the beast, etc. Folktales are lucid, entertaining, engaging, easily intelligible and memorable. In Assamese language folktales are known as *sadhu-katha*. Assamese folktales can be divided into various categories such as animal tales, supernatural tales, cumulative tales, etc. A large number of Assamese folktales are

either about tricksters or about animals.The trickster tales of Assam either represent a Tenton or a fox.*Ban Devata*, *Champa Wati, Panesoi, Tejimola, Teja aaru Tula,Tatun Tamuli, Tikhar* etc. are some widely popular folktales of Assam.

● **Proverb** is an important genre of the Assamese folk literature. A proverb is a simple, concrete, traditional saying or phase that gives advice and expresses a perceived truth based on common sense or experience. In the Assamese language the proverb is called *phakara jojana*. Assamese folk literature is rich in proverbs and the *Dakkar Bachan* is an important example of Assamese proverb.

● A **riddle** has tended to emphasize questions of origins,diffusion, and form. Riddles are questions that are frame with the purposeof confusing or testing the wits of those who do not know the answer.In the Assamese language the riddle is called *sathar*.

● **Hymns occupy an important place in the Assamese folk literature.** Hymn is a kind of religious song or poem of praise to god or a god. A large number of hymns mainly related to specific festivals, rites, rituals, religious ceremonies and worship are used in the Assamese society.

4.4. BODO FOLK LITERATURE

The Bodo tribe is very rich in folk literature which consists of oral traditions like folk songs, ballads, myths, legends, folk tales, proverbs, riddles, hymns, etc.

● **Folk songs** are an important genre of Bodo folk literature. Most of the Bodo folk songs are related to the day-to-day life of the Bodo community. These songs portray the socio-cultural and economic life of the Bodo people. The Bodo folk songs can be classified into some categories depending upon its theme like the *Haba Metai* (marriage songs), *Bwisagu Metai* (sung during the Bwisagu festival), *Goto Burkainai Metai* (lullaby), *Kamani Maonaiyao Konnai Metai* (work songs), *Abad Maonai* (songs related to cultivation), *Hadan Sipainai* (sung during cleaning of forest), *Dongpang Dannai* (sung by woodcutters), *Na Gurnai* (sung by fishermen), etc.

LET US KNOW

Bwisagu is one of the most popular festivals of the Bodo community celebrated during spring season like the *Bihu* festival of the Assamese community. The

Bwisagu songs are sung during this festival that highlights the various aspects of the Bodo society. Some of the *Bwisagu* songs can be considered as love songs.

● **Ballads** are an integral part of the Bodo folk literature.Ballads of *Ada Bachiram*, *DaoharamJauhaulao*, *Daimalu*, *Cheobar*, *Soumdoun*, *Tularam Sednapati*, *Jaoliya Dewan,Bachiram, Gambari Sikhla,Birgahri Sikhla* etc. provide lots of information about the heroic achievements of the Bodo tribe.

● Bodo folk literature is very rich with numerous **myths** mainly related to its religion, culture, music, literature, etc. Most of the Bodo myths are centered round the creation of the universe, gods and goddesses, human beings, ghosts, spirits, natural objects, birds and animals, etc. The myths of the origin of *Kherai* worship is a popular myth of the Bodo tribe**.**

● **Legends** are another important part of the Bodo folk literature. Most of the Bodo legends consist of the heroic actions of the Bodo heroes and heroines who contributed towards the cause of their tribe such as *Ada Basiram* and his lieutenant *Daoharam, Seubar, Soumdoun, Tularam Senapati,Dwimalu Jwhwlao, Sikhna Jwhwlao, Gambari Sikhla*,*Birgosri Sikhla,* etc.

● **Folktale** is another genre of the Bodo folk literature. Thecreation tale of earth,sky, birth of *Ha fisa howa* bird, *Kathiya Patula* and *Chadramali*, *Lakhishree*, the tale of *Jaulia Dabdan, Bigroshree Chekla*are very popular among Bodo tribe. The folktales provide valuable information about the various aspects of the Bodo community.

● In the Bodo language **proverb** is called *bathra-phao*. Lots of proverbs are used in the Bodo according to the time, space and situations. On the basis of their use, the Bodo proverbs can be categorized as positive equivalence, negative equivalence, positive causational, negative causational,proverbs relating to women,proverbs relating to agriculture,proverbs having moral lesson, etc.

● Like the other ethnic tribes, the Bodo tribe also used many **Riddles** that occupy an important part of the Bodo folk literature. Bodo riddles can be categories as descriptive, reverse, wisdom, natural, rhyming, puzzle, catch, mathematical, indigenous, riddles of insects and reptiles, riddles of instrument or agent, etc. that are intended to provide wisdom in the light of questions.

● The Bodo tribe uses various *Aroj Metai* **(hymn**s) related to specific festivals, rites, rituals, religious ceremonies and worship.*Bathou* is the root religion of the Bodo society. Through many prayers and hymns *Bathou* is worshiped by the Bodo people in order to be away from all sorts of miseries and misfortunes.

4.4.1 RABHA FOLK LITERATURE

Like any other tribal community of Assam, the Rabha tribe also has their distinct literature which is express in the form of folk songs,ballads, myths, folk tales,proverbs, riddles, hymns, etc. It is very rich and is verbally transmitted fromgenerations to generations.

● The Rabha **folk songs** are related to various themes like worship, fair, festivals, rites of passage, love and yearning, merriment, agriculture, work etc. These folk songs provide detail information about the socio-religious, economic and cultural aspects of the Rabha society. The Rabha folk songs like *huimaru, baikhu, sathar, tukuria* etc are related to Rabha religious festivals, *tekamni tsay* are sung during the marriage ceremony, *pharkanti* is sung when someone die, *bogejari* songs are *bahurangi*songs sung in various festivals, *baikho-trokkay* geet are related to love and yearning, *hamdzar Tankai Tsay* is associated with agriculture. In addition to this the Rabha folk songs included some work songs like*na bokai* (fishing song), *maran mathan tsai* (songs related to haunting), etc. which are mainly associated with the various economic aspects of the Rabha society.

● **Ballads** are another essential part of the Rabha folk literature.

Ballads of *Dodan, Duimukshi, Kumbaichung, Marukhetri-Kurukhetri, Naluwa-Chaluwa, Jogen Bantho, Tansen Dorai,* etc are very informative in nature and are very useful in reconstructing the history of the Rabha tribe.

● **Legends** occupy an important place in the Rabha folk literature.

The legends of *Dodan-Marukhetri, Naluwa-Chaluwa, Rondona-Chondona, Kumbaichung, Hasong Takkai Khircha, Dodan-Duimukshi, Tore-Torse, Naniden-Phanindar, Sisu-Ginal, Pangba bai, Rontuk, Jakuwadeo, Moirabai, Jaglang, Memang, Khisambai*, etc used to provide lots of informantion about the Rabha tribe, their beliefs and customs etc.

● The Rabha tribe has a rich and old tradition of **folktales**. Rabha folk tales are very long. Among the various folktales mention may be made of the tales of *TshatiDuimukshi, Kumbaichung, Dzaglan meman, Naluwa-Chaluwa, Gandhitshiri, Thope Netshe, Mayra-Mayri, Rondona-Chondona,* etc, The subject matter of the Rabha folktales is based on the socio-cultural attributes of the community and have distinctive characteristics.

● In the Rabha language **proverb**is called 'suluk'. Depending upon the subject matter and mode of expression, the Rabha proverbs can be classified as social, agricultural, moral, religious proverbs etc. Through these suluks or proverbs the experienced and older members of the society used to provide knowledge and advice to the inexperienced and younger members of the society.

● **Riddles** are another important part of the Rabha folk literature like other ethnic tribes. Rabha riddles can be categories as descriptive, natural, rhyming, mathematical, indigenous etc that are intended to provide wisdom in the light of questions.

● **Hymns** or mantras are also included in the folk literature. The Rabha tribe use various hymns related to specific festivals, rites, rituals, religious ceremonies and worship.

4.4.2 KARBI FOLK LITERATURE

The Karbi folk literature is very rich and varied and it is available in the forms of is available in the forms of folksongs, ballads, myths, folktales, proverbs, riddles, hymns etc. The Karbi folk literature is deeply rooted in their folk life and it provides detail information about the various aspects of the Karbi society. Various phenomena of nature, its flora and fauna, *jhum* cultivation, rivers, trees, etc. together constitute the basis of the Karbi folk literature.

● **Folk songs** are the most notable genre of the Karbi folk literature. In the Karbi society there are a large number of folk songs which are sung in their different socio-cultural occasions such as birth, purification, death, marriage, work, play, old age, worship etc. The Karbis used the term 'Alun' to suggest a folk song. The Karbi folk songs on the basis of theme can be categorized such as songs of

creation (*Keplang* or *Keplank*), wailing songs (*Kecharhe Alun*), marriage songs (*Thelu a-lun or Adam-asarAlun*), songs of social formation and administration, songs of feasts and festivals, seasons and agriculture, songs of rites and rituals, songs associated with children (*Acho Kebai Alun,Oso Kebei Alun*), songs of love (*Lumpharo Alun*), songs of nature, songs of the aged (*Sar Alun*), work songs, etc. *Hacha-Alun, Domahi Kikan Alun, Kurmi-Alun, An-Kimi-Kic Alun, Sar Kebat Alun*, *Retkinong Alun*, etc are some Karbi folksongs associated their various festivals, rites, rituals, worship and work culture. Two Karbi folk epics *Sabin Alun* (oral Karbi Ramayana) and *Ha-i-mu* further enriches the Karbi folk literature.

LET US KNOW

- *Hacha Kekan* is the harvest festival of the Karbi community and the folk songs associated with this festival are known as *Hacha-Alun*.
- *Domahi* is the spring festival of the Karbis of the plains and the songs associated with this festivalare known as *Domahi Kikan Alun.*
- *Kurmi* festival is the Karbi festival associated with the worship of rain deity. The songs sung in the festival are called *Kurmi-Alun*.
- *Na-khowa Utsava* is the festival of eating new rice in the month of *Aghon*(November-December) celebrated popularly among the Karbis of the plain. The songs associated with the festival are known as *An-Kimi-Kic Alun*.
- The coronation ceremony of the village head (*Sar Kebat*) in a Karbi village is called *Sar Kebat* ceremony. The songs sung in this ceremony are known as *Sar Kebat Alun*.
- The *jhum* cultivation is one of the main agricultural activities of the Karbi people. The Karbis called the *jhum* cultivationas *Retkinnong* and thes ongs associated with it are known as *Retkinong Alun.*

● **Ballads** are an important part of the Karbi folk literature. The various aspects of the Karbi society are beautifully portrayed in the Karbi ballads. On the basis of theme the Karbi ballads can be categorized as mythical, legendary or *Keplang*, *Bong Keplang,*historical, love ballads etc. Ballad of *Hai-I*, *Romir*, *Hemphu Keplang*, *Karbi*

Keplang, Lunse Keplang, *Sok Keplang*, *Thap Phelo Keplang, Birik Keplang, Nok Keplang, Lo Keplang, Nihu Keplang, Ingti Keplang, Rong Kekim alun orRukachen alun, Sar Kebat alun, Jambili alun, Jirsong alun, Reng Bangham, Romi alun, Hanri alun, Larta alun, Kaching alun, Changlin alun, Cherdihun alun, Didi alun* etc. are popular among the Karbi community.

● Karbi folk literature also includes some myths and legends. There are various Karbi **myths** regarding the creation of earth, the origin of Karbis and different objects of nature, etc. The Karbi myths of *Rangsina Sarpo*, *Thireng- Wareng*, etc. are very popular among the community.The Karbi **legends** refer to the tales of *Thong-Nokbe, Rongpherpi Rongbe, Larta, Didi and Disumai, Sat Recho, Rukasen, Harbamon*, etc.

● **Folk tale** is an important genre of the Karbi folk literature. Various elements of nature, demon, love, animals, birds, etc are the main themes of the Karbi folktales. There are lots of creation tales (*Keplang*) amongst the Karbis which narrates regarding the origin of the tribe, the clans, the world, paddy, ginger, chilies and many other things. Some of the creation tales widely popular among the Karbis are *Pirthe Keplang* (Origin of the earth),*Karbi Keplang* (Origin of the Karbi Tribe),*Hemphu Keplang* (Origin of the incarnation of god Hemphu),*Kur Keplang* (Origin of Karbi clans),*Lakhi Keplang* (Origin of Paddy),*Birik Keplang* (Origin of chilies),*Hanso Keplang* (Origin of ginger), etc. These folktales provide valuable information about the Karbi folk life, their belief, rituals, etc.

● The Karbis use various **proverbs** in their day-to-day life with different objectives and meaning. Moral judgment and socio religious belief of the community, human nature, women status, interrelation of the Karbi society with nature, etc are beautifully reflected in the Karbi proverbs.

● **Riddles**are another important part of the Karbi folk literature. On the basis of nature of question and answer, the Karbi riddles can be classified as true riddle, wisdom riddle, puzzle riddle, etc.

● Various types of **hymns** or mantras are use by the Karbi tribe to please their deities. In addition to this there are other Karbi hymns related to specific festivals, rites, rituals, religious ceremonies and worship.The long verses of *Mosera Kihir* are recited during *chomangkan*.

4.4.3 DIMASA FOLK LITERATURE

The Dimasa folk literature is highly colourful and varied and it reveals the socio-cultural, religious and other aspects of the Dimasa community.

Folk songs are a significant branch of the Dimasa folk literature.

The *Bishu* songs are an integral part of the Dimasa society like the *Bihu* songs for the Assamese people. The *Bishu* is a harvesting festival of the Dimasa community and this is celebrated at the leisure time after the hard works at the agricultural field by all the Dimasa people irrespective of any caste, creed, sex, age, etc. The *Bishu* songs are sung at the *Bishu* festival and they throw light on the socio-cultural and economic life of the community. In addition to the *Bishu* songs, there are different types of folk songs in the Dimasa community such as *Majangdini* (love songs*), Garasimang*(sad song sung when a person is dead), *Badathijaobani* (song of sorrow sung by sister who lost her brother), marriage songs, *Jinija Raji*(songs proving information about the past glories of the Dimasa community), lullabies, etc.

● **Ballads** are a significant element of the Dimasa folk literature.
The ballads of *Dishru, Maibangma-Ha-gar-Bani, Jiniba Raji, Snemduri, Amalu Dimalu, Jahaya, Harifa, Perobala* and *ganggela, Khalaching* and *chakradaingdai*, etc. very famous and unique. They are helpful in reflecting the socio-political and cultural phenomenon of the Dimasa community.

● **Folktales** occupy an important place in the Dimasa folk literature. Folktales related to heroic activities, animals, birds, supernatural elements, etc. are very popular among the Dimasa people. Several*puranic* tales are also included in the Dimasa folktales with some local modifications.

● The Dimasa folk literature is rich in **proverbs**. The term use by Dimasa people to indicate proverb is *Graugra*. A large number of proverbs are use by the Dimasa people on various purposes that gives an insight of the community's beliefs, morals, traditions, etc.
In addition to the above genres, the Dimasa folk literature also includes some legends, myths etc. that further enriches it.

4.4.4 MISHING FOLK LITERATURE

Folk songs, folktales, proverbs and riddles are the most significant genres of the Mishing folk literature. The Mishing folk literature beautifully depicts the rich and varied cultural heritage of the Mishing community.

● The **folk songs** are the most frequently performed and widely recognized genre of the Mishing folk literature. The Mishing tribe sung various types of folk songs in different situations. On the basis of theme the Mishing folk songs can be categorized as seasonal songs (*Birdug Nitom*), songs of love and yearning (*Oi-Ni:tom*), lamenting songs (*Kaban Nitom*), wedding songs(*Midang-Ni:tom*), lullaby (*Ko-ni:nam*), nursery rhymes (*Moman Nitom*), etc.

LET US KNOW

Ali-aye-ligang is a Mishing festival of sowing first paddy seed into the soil. It is mainly celebrated in the month of *Phagun* (mid February-March). The songs sung in this festival are known as *Ligang ni:tom*.

● **Folktale** is an important genre of the Mishing folk literature. Folktales are called *Do:ying* in Mishing language.The folktales provide valuable information about the beliefs, customs, rituals, etc. of the Mishing community. Mishing folktales are of different types such as cumulative tales, trickster tales, animal tales, etiological tales, romantic tales, tales of supernatural powers, etc. Some of the popular Mishing folktales are *Porpoise and crocodile, Abu Tunturung, The old couple and the pack of foxes, Lightning and Thunder, Tani and Taro, The legends of Tusik and kobang, Tato Ampolung, Batum and Bali, Clever Jackel, Guala Bird, Mitir Bhanga, Ukoh and owl, Dol Pusok,* etc.

● Proverbs and riddles are other important genres of the Mishing folk literature. In the Mishing language proverb is called *Luse-Iukor*and riddle is called *Chalak*. Most of the Mishing proverbs and riddles centered on human character and behaviour. They also used to provide valuable insight about the Mishing society.

● The Mishing devotional songs (*A:bangs*) can be considered as hymns. These are performed only by the *Mibus*, the priest of the community. The *A:bangs* are recited to please the various gods and goddesses of the Mishing tribe.

4.5. FOLK SONGS OF THE TEA TRIBES OF ASSAM

After the establishment of the tea gardens in Assam during the colonial rule in the 19th century AD, the Tea tribes from various parts of India such as Telengana, Jharkhanda, Bihar, Orissa, etc. came to Assam to work in the newly established tea gardens of the province. With the passage of time these Tea tribes have permanently settled down in Assam. From time to time new people were migrated to Assam to work in the tea gardens and some of these tea garden labourers were forcefully migrated into Assam. The Tea tribes of Assam have a rich and varied tradition of folk literature.

Among the various genres of folk literature of the Tea tribes, the folk songs are one of the noteworthy elements. There are various types of folk songs prevail amongst the Tea tribes such as *Karam Pujageet*, *Jahli geet*, *Tuchugeet*,*Jhumur* songs, *Sadi geet*, *Domkoch geet, Manashageet*,*Faguwa geet*, etc. Some of the folk songs of the Tea tribes clearly reflect the grief and pain of the tea garden labourers who were forcefully migrated into Assam.

● The *Karam Puja* is one of the major festivals of the Tea tribes of Assam. This festival is related to agriculture and is usually celebrated on the night of *Bhado Ekadasi* (mid August). It is celebrated to worship the 'Mother of Earth', the goddess of creation. The festival is accompanied by dance and songs. The folk songs sung in the Karam Puja are known as *Karam Puja geet*.

● The *Sahrai Puja* is another festival of the Tea tribes which is generally celebrated in the November month before the harvesting period in the dark moon night (*Amaboishya Rati*). In the*Sahrai Puja* the cow is worship which they called as *Go Puja* or *Gouwa Bonga*. The songs sung in the *Sahrai Puja* are known as *Jahli geet*.

● *Tuchu Puja* is a religious festival of the Tea tribes of Assam, celebrated in the month of *Magh* (January) and is associated with the women folk of the society. The idol of *Tushu Devi* is worship in this festival. The songs sung in this festival are known as *Tuchu Puja geet.*

● *Jhumur* is the prominent folk dance of the Tea tribe and this dance isperformed along with *Jhumurgeets*. *Jhumurgeets* are mainly sung in the *Karam Puja* festival. These songs provide lots of information about the socio-cultural life of the Tea tribes.

● The songs sung in the marriage ceremony are known as *Sadi geet*. There are different types of *Sadi geet* associated with the various rituals of marriage. These songs are mainly sung by the female members of the Tea community.

● *Domkoch geets* are like *Jhumur geet*, but it is not performed in the *Karam Puja* festival. It is generally sung in marriage ceremony. These songs explain the contemporary social system and situations in a humorous way.

● *Manasha geets* are devotional songs sung in praise of theGoddess of Snake, *Maa Manasha*.

● *Faguwa Parav* is another major festival of the Tea tribes, which is a festival of colour (*aabir*) and celebrated in the month of *Fagun* (mid March-April). In this festival the tribe members perform a special dance called *Kathi*. During this *Kathi* dance folk songs are sung depicting Radha and Krishna. The songs sung in the *Faguwa Parav* are known as *Faguwa songs.* In addition to the above mentioned folk songs, the Tea tribes have different types of folk songs associated with the various ceremonies of day to day life like birth, death, etc. The folk songs of the Tea tribes used to provide lots of valuable information about the various aspects of the Tea community.

4.6 FOLK SONGS OF THE BARAK VALLEY

The Barak Valley of Assam mainly consists of three districts of Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi. The folk literature of the Barak Valley of Assam is very rich and varied. People belonging to different religion and communities used to stay in the Barak Valley and hence the folk literature of multi-coloured.The folk songs are one of the most significant genres of the folk literature of the Barak Valley amongst the other genres. The folk songs are full of variety. Some of the folksongs of the Barak Valley are as follows:

● *Ai gan*: It is a kind of bard-song sung by the cowboys. *Rakhal Seva* is an agricultural festival performed in the Barak Valley with a view to worship the cow and to pray for the well-being of the farmers. The *Ai gan* or songs are directly and indirectly connected with this festival. Most of the *Ai gan* deal with the themes of *Vrindavan, Lord Krishna, Radha,*

Lilita, Vishakha, flute, etc. The *Rakhalia gan* are another type of folk song sung by the cowboys at the time of leisure in the shade of a tree. This song is sung by one singer and the themes of these songs are varied depending upon the mood of the singer.

● *Dol songs*: *Dolyatra* or *Holi* is a festival of colour (*aabir*). The songs sung in this festival are known as *Dol* songs. These songs are one of the popular folk songs of the Barak Valley like the other parts of Assam. *Lord Krishna, Radha*, happiness of life, etc are the main themes of the *Dol songs.*

● *Meyeli geet*: These kinds of songs are absolutely confined among the women folk. *Meyeli geets* are sung on various occasions such as birth, marriage, worship, and many other socio-religious events. Only women are the composers and singers of the *Meyeli geets.* These songs are sung by women all in sitting position and without any musical instruments. Only clapping of hands in rhythmical manner is sufficient and occasionally cymbals are played at the time of singing.

● *Kirtan, Samkirtan, Nagarkirtan, Udayasta Kirtan, Prabhati Kirtan, Hari Kirtan, Sandhya Kirtan,* etc.are some other devotional songs of the Barak Valley mainly sung for the common good of all the people in the society. These songs are sung to the accompaniment of different musical instruments.

● *Dhamail* songs are one of the most popular folk song of the Barak Valley. *Dhamail* songs combined with dances are performed during various cultural functions and marriage ceremonies by both Hindus and Muslims. Normally a group mostly of women participate in the *Dhamail* who sing and dance in a circular way and clap their hands in rhythmical manner.

● *That* song: It is a song sung in a tone which is raised gradually to a very high pitch. It is sung by a number of men who form themselves in to a ring and dance while singing.

● *Baul* or *Baoul* songs: These kinds of songs can be considered as like the Assamese folk song *Deh Bicharar Geet.* These songs are highly spiritual and the lyrics have a deep sense of mysticism and a longing for oneness with the divine.

● *Sarigan*: These types of folk songs are sung by the sailors and boatmen. The *Sarigans* are rhythmical group songs mainly sung by the male members. *Sarigans* are chiefly connected with boat-race. The *Bhaitiali* songs are another type of folk songs sung by boatmen and their helpers. It is basically a kind of recreational song that talks about the

joy and sorrow, hopes and aspirations, failures and frustrations, gain and loss, love and separation, etc aspects of the life of the common people.*Ghatu* songs are also connected with river and are sung on the bank of the river where the boats are kept (*ghat*). *Radha, Lord Krishna* and different aspects of the contemporary people are the main themes of the *Ghatu* songs.

● *Patua* songs:Pictures related to different issues related to religion, mythology, devotion, social, political and economic problems, etc. are drawn on the canvas of *pat* (a kind of silk) and are explained through songs. These types of songs are known as*Patua* songs and are popular in the Barak Valley.

● *Arigan*: This type of folk song of the Barak Valley is not sung in the daytime. It is sung after midnight and continues till dawn.

● *Jarigan, Murshidi* song, *Gazi* song are some of the folk songs of the Barak Valley chiefly popular among the Muslim community of the area.The sad story of *Karbala* is the chief theme of *Jarigan*.*Murshidi* songs are a kind of spiritual song that laid emphasis on the importance of *Guru* and pay full devotion towards the *Murshid*. *Gazi* songs are sung by the Muslim community in praise of *Gazi Peer* (saint).

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answer the following questions :

Q.1 What do you mean by '*Chomangkan*' ?

Q. 2 What is *Bwisagu* ?

Q. 3 What is called 'suluk' ?

Q. 4 What is 'Alun' ?

Q. 5 What is called *Do:ying* ?

Q. 6 What do you mean by *Murshid* ?

4.7. LET US SUM UP

After going through the unit, you have learnt that—

● Folk literature is one of the important means of understanding the various aspects of any particular society.

● Assamese folk literature, consists of folk songs, ballads, myths, legends, folktales, proverbs, riddles, hymns, etc is very rich.

● The various tribal communities of Assam like the Rabha, Karbi, Dimasa, Mishing, etc have their distinctive folk literature in the form of folk songs, ballads, myths, legends, folktales, proverbs, riddles, hymns, etc. These altogether together enriches the folk literature of Assam.

● The folk songs of the Tea Tribe and the Barak Valley of Assam provide valuable information about the respective societiesand their cultural values.

4.8. FURTHER READING

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4.9. ANSWER TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No. 1 : *Chomangkan* is a ritual performed by the Karbis after the death of a person.

Ans to Q No. 2 : *Bwisagu* is one of the most popular festivals of the Bodo community celebrated during spring season like the *Bihu* festival of the Assamese community.

Ans to Q No. 3 : In the Rabha language proverbis called 'suluk'.

Ans to Q No. 4 : 'Alun' is the term used by the Karbis to suggest a folk song.

Ans to Q No. 5 : Folktales are called *Do:ying* in Mishing language.

Ans to Q No. 6 : *Murshid* is the person that gives 'Irshad' or direction. In other words *Murshid* is the spiritual *Guru*.

4.10. MODEL QUESTIONS

(A) Very short questions (Answer each question within 50 words)

a) What is a ballad?

b) What is a proverb?

c) What do you mean by *Sar Kebat*?

d) What is *Garasimang*?

e) What is *Kaban Nitom*?

(B) Short questions (Answer each question withing 150 words)

a) What do you mean by folk literature?

b) Name any two Bodo legends.

c) Name any two Dimasa ballads.

d) Name the different types of folk songs of the Mishing community.

e) Name any two festival of the Tea Tribe of Assam.

(C) Long questions (Answer each question within 300-500 words)

a) Describe about the Assamese folk literature?

b) Write a note on the Bodo folk literature.

c) Write in brief about the Rabha folk literature.

d) Make an assessment of the different forms of the Karbi folk literature.

e) Discuss in brief about the folk songs of the Barak Valley.

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UNIT 5: FAIRS AND FESTIVALS OF ASSAM

UNIT STRUCTURE

5.1. Learning Objectives
5.2. Introduction
5.3. Junbeel Mela
5.4. Ambubachi Mela
5.5. Bihu
5.6. Rash
5.7. Dol Jatra
5.8. Ali Aye Ligang
5.9. Bathou Puja
5.10. Karam Puja
5.11. Me dam Me Phi
5.12. Mohoho
5.13. Suwari
5.14. Bhatheli
5.15. Na- Khowa
5.16. Let Us Sum Up
5.17. Answers to Check Your Progress
5.18. Further Reading
5.19. Model Questions

5.1. LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Dear learner, after going through this unit, you will be able to:

1. Describe the major festivals and fairs of Assam and explain their historical and cultural significance.
2. Identify the customs, rituals, and traditions associated with important Assamese festivals celebrated by different communities.
3. Explain the relationship between festivals, agriculture, religious beliefs, and the socio-cultural life of the people of Assam.

5.2. INTRODUCTION

Assam is a land of rich cultural diversity, where festivals and fairs form an integral part of the social and religious life of its people. Celebrated by different ethnic communities throughout the year, these festivals reflect the state's agrarian traditions, religious beliefs, indigenous customs, and artistic heritage. They promote social harmony, strengthen community bonds, and preserve the unique cultural identity of Assam. This unit introduces the major festivals and fairs of Assam, highlighting their historical background, rituals, customs, and cultural significance, while providing an understanding of the state's vibrant and diverse traditions.

5.3. THE JON BEEL MELA

The Jon Beel Mela (Fair) is a historic annual fair held near Jagiroad in Morigaon district, Assam, during January. Its most distinctive feature is the traditional barter system, where goods are exchanged directly without the use of money. Despite the prevalence of modern cashless transactions, the mela continues to preserve this ancient practice, making it one of the few living examples of barter trade. Although it begins on the Friday of the third week of January, its exact starting time is traditionally determined by custom. The Tiwas believe the mela originated when the Gobha chief established his chieftainship. Spread over 18 bighas of land and water, the fair begins with prayers and sacrifices at the Deosal shrine. Earlier, human and animal sacrifices were offered, but human sacrifice was abolished after the British arrested Raja Chatra Singha in 1834.

The Jonbeel Mela is closely associated with traditional legends and customs. According to one tradition, three Tiwa brothers ruled the neighbouring regions of Joyota, Khairam, and Marjong. While searching for a suitable place to build a shrine for Lord Mahadeo, the youngest brother settled between the Kiling and Kapili rivers and established the new chieftainship of Gobha (Gova). After seeing the reflection of the full moon in a large beel (marsh), he organised a grand feast on its banks, and was believed that a fair would be held at the same location each year which eventually came to be known as Jonbeel mela. Another legend traces the Tiwas to Lehi, daughter of Lungla and Jayanti. It narrates the love story of the Joyota princess and Langbar, a poor young man. After accepting their marriage, the chief celebrated with a grand community feast on the banks of Jonbeel, giving rise to the annual fair.

Along with his council, he oversees important traditional events such as the Jon Beel Mela, Gosain Uliuwa Mela, and Than Pujas. The mela is celebrated for three days on the occasion of the Gobha King's Magh Bihu, which is observed on the first Sunday after Makar Sankranti, usually in the third week of January. The fair begins on Thursday and concludes on Saturday, the eve of the King's Uruka, on the banks of the Jon Beel. The opening day is marked by a royal feast in which fish caught from the marsh form an essential part of the meal.

Participants from the neighbouring hills of West Karbi Anglong and Meghalaya, including Hill Tiwas, Karbis, Khasis, Garos, and Boros, travel to the fair carrying their products in bamboo baskets, traditionally on foot and now increasingly by vehicles. They erect temporary bamboo and straw shelters during their stay, with the Hill Tiwas forming the largest group.

The principal attraction, the barter market, takes place from dawn on Friday. Hill communities exchange products such as ginger, turmeric, potatoes, roots, corms, and chillies for plains products including raw and dried fish, sandah (fried rice powder), and rice cakes. Barter follows customary procedures involving negotiation over quantity and quality, with goods measured in small curry bowls, bunches, leaf packets, or handfuls. Alongside barter, community fishing in the Jon Beel and cockfighting are important features of the fair. Some hill people also present tribute to the Gobha king. Alongside the barter fair, a commercial market operates where goods are purchased with money. Vendors sell sweets, ornaments, clothing, fruits, fish, pork, cottage industry products, furniture, and other commodities, attracting thousands of visitors. On Saturday, the Gobha king, dressed in royal attire, visits the mela with his council after performing rituals at his residence in Nakhola. His officials collect taxes from commercial vendors. The fair concludes that evening with the Uruka feast at the king's residence, followed by the lighting of Mejis on Sunday morning to celebrate Magh Bihu.

Beyond its economic significance, the Jon Beel Mela serves as a symbol of unity, brotherhood, and harmonious relations between hill and plain communities, as well as tribal and non-tribal groups.

5.4. AMBUBACHI MELA

The Ambubachi Mela is the most significant annual festival of the Kamakhya Temple

on Nilachal Hill, Guwahati, Assam, and is celebrated during the Ahaar month (June–July) of the Assamese calendar. The temple is one of 51 Shaktipeeths or seat of Shakti followers, each representing a body part of the Sati, Lord Shiva's companion. It is one of the most important religious festivals of Assam and a major centre of Shakta and Tantric worship. Unlike most Hindu temples, the Kamakhya Temple does not contain an idol of the goddess. Instead, Goddess Kamakhya is worshipped in the form of a yoni-shaped stone over which a natural spring continuously flows, symbolising the creative and reproductive power of the Divine Mother.

The origin of the temple is rooted in the legend of Sati described in the Kalika Purana. According to the myth, Sati immolated herself during the yajna organised by her father Daksha after he insulted her husband, Lord Shiva. Overwhelmed with grief, Shiva carried Sati's body and performed the Tandava, the cosmic dance of destruction. To restore order, Lord Vishnu cut Sati's body into pieces with his Sudarshana Chakra, and her yoni (female genital organ) fell at the site where the Kamakhya Temple now stands. Consequently, Kamakhya is revered as one of the 51 Shakti Peethas and one of the holiest centres of goddess worship in India.

The Ambubachi Mela celebrates the annual menstruation of Goddess Kamakhya, which symbolises fertility, creation, regeneration, and the creative power of Mother Earth. Rather than worshipping an idol, devotees honour the natural biological process of menstruation as a sacred manifestation of feminine energy. It is believed that during the monsoon season, the creative and nurturing power of the Earth becomes especially potent, making the festival closely associated with fertility, agricultural renewal, and the cycle of nature. Consequently, ploughing, sowing, and other agricultural activities are suspended during this period as a mark of respect for the Earth Goddess.

The festival lasts for four days. During the first three days, the temple remains completely closed because the goddess is believed to be undergoing her menstrual period. Following traditional customs associated with menstrual seclusion, no worship is performed inside the sanctum during this period. Many devotees also refrain from conducting religious rituals and certain daily activities. On the fourth day, after elaborate purification and ceremonial bathing rituals, the temple doors are reopened, marking the end of the goddess's period and the resumption of normal worship.

One of the most sacred aspects of the festival is the distribution of Angodak and Angabastra to devotees. Angodak is the holy water from the natural spring beneath the

sanctum, while Angabastra is a piece of red cloth believed to have absorbed the symbolic menstrual power of the goddess during the temple's closure. Devotees preserve these sacred objects in their homes as protective amulets and symbols of divine blessing, prosperity, and fertility.

The Ambubachi Mela attracts thousands of pilgrims, sadhus, sanyasis, ascetics, Aghoris, and Tantric practitioners from different parts of India and abroad. Owing to the prominence of Tantric rituals during the festival, it is widely known as the "Mahakumbh of Tantrics." Kamakhya is regarded as one of the foremost centres of Tantric worship, and numerous spiritual practices, rituals, discourses, and acts of penance are performed during the mela. The event serves as a major gathering for practitioners of Shaktism and Tantra, reflecting the temple's unique religious significance.

The Ambubachi Mela remains one of the largest religious gatherings in eastern India and continues to attract lakhs of devotees every year. It is not only a major pilgrimage but also an important expression of Assam's religious traditions, Tantric heritage, cultural identity, and the worship of the Divine Feminine.

5.5. BIHU

Bihu is the most important and representative festival of Assam, celebrated throughout the state with great enthusiasm and cultural fervour. It comprises three seasonal festivals—Bohag Bihu (Rongali Bihu), Magh Bihu (Bhogali Bihu), and Kati Bihu (Kongali Bihu)—each observed at a different stage of the agricultural cycle and possessing its own customs and significance.

Bohag Bihu, also known as Rongali Bihu, is celebrated in the Assamese month of Bohag (mid-April). It marks the Assamese New Year, the arrival of spring, and the beginning of the sowing season. The festival begins with Goru Bihu, when cows and bulls are bathed with turmeric, fed gourds and brinjals, and provided with new ropes as a mark of gratitude for their contribution to agriculture. The following day, known as Manuh Bihu, is the first day of the Assamese New Year. On this occasion, people wear new clothes, prepare special festive dishes, and enjoy varieties of pitha (rice cakes). Families and friends exchange visits, share food and gifts, and present the traditional hand-woven gamucha as a token of honour, affection, and respect. The festival is characterised by joy, social gatherings, and celebration.

Magh Bihu, also called Bhogali Bihu, is celebrated in the month of Magh (mid-January) and marks the end of the harvesting season. It is essentially a festival of feasting and abundance. The eve of the festival, known as Uruka, is the most festive night of the year, when families and communities gather for grand feasts around a bonfire. On the following morning, people take a ritual bath and burn the ceremonial Meji, a structure made of bamboo and wood, while offering Maah Khorai, pithas, and prayers to the sacred fire. The traditional Jalpaan breakfast is an important feature of the festival and includes chira (flattened rice), akhoi (puffed rice), bora saul, kumol saul (indigenous glutinous rice varieties), fresh cream or curd, jaggery, and a variety of rice cakes (pithas). The sharing of these traditional foods with family and friends symbolises prosperity, gratitude, and community bonding.

Kati Bihu, also known as Kongali Bihu, is observed in the month of Kati (mid-October). Unlike the other two Bihu festivals, it is a solemn and austere observance, reflecting a period when food reserves are limited and crops are still growing in the fields. Rituals focus on prayers for the protection of crops and the well-being of the family. An earthen lamp is lit at the Tulsi Bheti (the sacred basil altar), and prayers are offered for prosperity and a successful harvest. Farmers also place Akash Banti (Sky Lamps) on tall bamboo poles in the paddy fields. These lamps are believed to attract insects and pests away from the crops while symbolically safeguarding the fields and ensuring healthy agricultural growth.

The three Bihu festivals are closely linked with the agricultural calendar of Assam. Bohag Bihu marks the beginning of the agricultural year and the sowing season; Kati Bihu signifies the period after the sowing and transplantation of paddy, when prayers are offered for the successful growth of crops; and Magh Bihu celebrates the completion of harvesting and the abundance of agricultural produce. Together, the three Bihus reflect the intimate relationship between Assamese society, agriculture, nature, and cultural traditions, making Bihu the most enduring expression of Assam's agrarian heritage and cultural identity.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1. The Jonbeel Mela is famous for its traditional _____ system.

Q 2. The sacred red cloth distributed during the Ambubachi Mela is known as _____.

Q 3. The ceremonial structure made of bamboo and wood that is burnt during Magh Bihu is called the _____.

Q 4. During Kati Bihu, farmers light _____ in the paddy fields to protect the crops.

5.6. RASH

The Raas Festival is one of the most important Vaishnavite festivals of Assam, celebrating the Raas Leela of Lord Krishna through devotional drama, music, dance, and cultural performances. Majuli, the world's largest inhabited river island, is the most renowned centre of the festival and is considered the only place in Assam where the Raas Leela has been traditionally enacted by devotees for centuries. During the festival, the people of Majuli express their devotion to Lord Krishna by staging episodes from his life, transforming the island into a major pilgrimage centre visited by thousands of devotees and tourists.

The festival generally continues for four days and is distinguished by a rich combination of religious rituals and cultural traditions. One of its most remarkable features is the use of locally crafted masks, which represent various mythological characters and creatures appearing in the performances. Alongside the dramatic presentations, the festival showcases Assam's traditional arts and crafts through mask-making, pottery, boat-making, exhibitions of handicrafts, and the songs and dances of different communities. A food festival is also organized, offering a wide variety of traditional Assamese, tribal, and indigenous delicacies. These exhibitions and cultural programmes reflect the rich artistic and cultural heritage of Assam.

The origin of the Raas Festival is closely associated with the Neo-Vaishnavite movement initiated by Srimanta Sankardev during the 15th–16th centuries. His Bhakti movement gradually gained popularity against the prevailing traditions of Shaivism, patronised by the early Ahom rulers, and Shaktism, which had been influential in Assam from around the eighth century onwards. The Koch king Naranarayana extended royal patronage to Vaishnavism, enabling Sankardev's teachings to spread widely. By the seventeenth century, Vaishnavism had become one of the dominant religious traditions in

Assam. The Raas Festival was first celebrated in Majuli by the Vaishnavites and has since become one of the state's most important annual religious and cultural festivals. Today, it is celebrated with great enthusiasm in Majuli, Nalbari, Lakhimpur, Barpeta, and several other places.

Although idol worship is not traditionally practised in all Satras, different Vaishnavite sects have incorporated idol worship into the Raas Festival since 1840 CE. The festival commemorates the life and divine exploits of Lord Krishna through Bhawna (devotional plays), devotional songs, dances, and artistic displays. Traditional musical instruments such as the khol (drum), bhortaal (large brass cymbals), doba (temple drums), and nagara (folk drums) accompany the performances, creating a deeply devotional atmosphere.
In Nalbari, the Raas Festival has developed into one of the most significant cultural events of the district. It was initially celebrated in an open field between 1933 and 1945 before being shifted to the premises of the Nalbari Hari Mandir. The establishment and growth of the festival in Nalbari are largely credited to Shri Amar Kundu, an overseer in the Public Works Department (PWD) originally from the Barak Valley, and Sri Naren Bose, a medical assistant at the Nalbari Veterinary Hospital, who played leading roles in introducing the festival. Since then, the Raas Festival has been celebrated annually on a grand scale.

5.7. Dol Jatra (Doul Utsav) of Assam

Dol Jatra, popularly known as Doul Utsav in Assam, is one of the most important Vaishnavite festivals of the state. It is celebrated on the full moon day (Purnima) of the month of Phalguna (February–March) and coincides with Holi, the festival of colours. Introduced and popularised by the Neo-Vaishnavite movement founded by Srimanta Sankardeva and further developed by Madhavdeva, Dol Jatra occupies a significant place in the religious and cultural life of Assam. The festival commemorates the divine love of Lord Krishna and Radha, as well as Krishna's playful celebration of spring with the gopis of Vrindavan.

Dol Jatra is celebrated with great enthusiasm in the Satras (Vaishnavite monasteries) and Namghars (community prayer halls) across Assam. Among the most famous celebrations are those held at Barpeta Satra, Majuli's Satras, Bordowa, and other important Vaishnavite centres. The festival usually lasts for two to five days, depending on local customs and traditions.

The central feature of the festival is the ceremonial procession of the idol of Lord Krishna, known locally as Dol Govinda. The idol is beautifully decorated with flowers, colourful garments, and ornaments, and is placed on a richly decorated dol (swing or palanquin). Devotees carry the idol in a grand procession around the Satra or village while singing Borgeets (devotional songs), Naam-Kirtan, and devotional hymns composed by Srimanta Sankardeva and Madhavdeva. The atmosphere is filled with music from traditional instruments such as the khol, taal (cymbals), and nagara, creating a spiritually uplifting environment.

At Barpeta Satra, Dol Jatra is celebrated with exceptional grandeur and follows a series of traditional rituals. One of the major attractions is Gondh, during which devotees joyfully apply abir (coloured powder) to one another as a symbol of love, equality, and harmony. Another important event is the Kalbihanga, a ceremonial ritual representing the victory of good over evil through symbolic enactments. Thousands of devotees from different parts of Assam and neighbouring states gather at Barpeta during the festival.
Besides religious rituals, Dol Jatra is also marked by cultural programmes, devotional music, dance performances, and dramatic presentations based on the life of Lord Krishna. In many Satras, Ankiya Naat, the one-act plays composed by Srimanta Sankardeva, are staged to convey moral and religious teachings. The recitation of sacred texts such as the Bhagavata Purana, continuous chanting of the names of God (Naam-Prasanga), and community prayers form an integral part of the celebrations.

The festival reflects the ideals of Neo-Vaishnavism, which emphasise devotion (bhakti), equality, compassion, and communal harmony. People from different castes, communities, and social backgrounds participate together in the festivities, demonstrating the inclusive character of Assamese society. The celebration strengthens social bonds through collective worship, cultural performances, and the sharing of prasada among devotees.

5.8. ALI AYE LIGANG

Ali Aye Ligang is the most important spring and agricultural festival of the Mising community of Assam. More than a seasonal celebration, it represents the community's close relationship with agriculture, nature, and cultural identity. The festival is observed on the first Wednesday of the Assamese month of Phagun (February–March), marking

the ceremonial beginning of the sowing season. In 1956, the Bane Kebang (formerly Nane Kebang), the apex socio-cultural organization of the Misings, officially fixed the first Wednesday of Phagun as the festival day, considering Wednesday (Lakshmi Bar) an auspicious day associated with prosperity.

The name Ali Aye Ligang has deep agricultural significance. In the Mising language, Ali means root, tuber, or seed, A:ye means fruit or grain, and Ligang means sowing or planting. Together, the term signifies the ritual sowing of seeds into the womb of Mother Earth, symbolising hope, prosperity, and faith in nature's bounty. The festival reflects the agrarian lifestyle of the Mising people and their dependence on the natural environment. The central ritual of the festival is the ceremonial sowing of seeds. On the morning of Ligang, the eldest member of each family prepares a small square plot in the eastern corner of the field or garden. Megela (Pi:r) plants are planted at the four corners as symbols of strength and vitality. A leaf vessel called Konkuk, containing Por Apong (traditional rice beer), is placed in the centre, while cotton is inserted into the Megela plants and worn by the elder to signify peace and purity. Seeds of Ahu paddy, sweet potato, colocasia, ginger, turmeric, and other crops are then sown after offering prayers to Chedi-Mel (the primeval creator), Ane D:ni (the Sun God), and Abu P:I (the Moon God), expressing gratitude to the natural and cosmic forces that sustain life.

Food occupies a central place in the celebrations. Preparations begin weeks in advance, especially by the women of the household. The principal festive dishes include Purang Apin, steamed glutinous rice wrapped in taro leaves, and Apong, the traditional rice beer. Other delicacies such as dry fish chutney, pork, chicken, and traditional dishes are also served. The communal feast is marked by equality, as rich and poor dine together, reinforcing the values of brotherhood, social harmony, and community solidarity. Traditional attire further enriches the occasion, with men wearing Mibu Galuk, Gonro Ugon, and Dumour, and women dressing in beautifully woven garments such as Ribi-Gacheng, Ege, and Chegreg, reflecting the outstanding weaving tradition of the Mising community. A distinctive feature of the festival is the Gumrag Dance, also known as Pakch-Manam, performed by young men and women. Dancing from house to house in rhythmic circles, they symbolically portray various agricultural activities such as digging the soil, sowing seeds, harvesting, and threshing paddy. The circular formation represents the continuous cycle of life and seasons. The performances are accompanied by traditional musical

instruments including the drum, cymbals, pepa, Lenong (gong), and Marbang, while Ligang-Nitham songs celebrate themes of love, nature, and rural life. According to traditional belief, sincere performance of the dance and songs ensures a good harvest, making the celebration itself an act of worship.

Another important aspect of Ali Aye Ligang is the observance of Gena or Madnam, a period of ritual restrictions lasting about five days. During this time, activities such as digging the soil, ploughing, cutting trees, hunting, excessive fishing, and even eating roasted food are prohibited. These restrictions reflect the belief that Mother Earth requires rest after receiving the newly sown seeds, thereby demonstrating the community's traditional ecological wisdom and commitment to environmental conservation. The restrictions conclude with the ritual known as Li:lenkunam, after which normal activities resume.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5. The term "Ligang" in the Mising language means:a.

a) Harvesting

b. Worshipc.

c) Sowing or plantingd.

d) Celebration

Q 6. The colourful powder applied during Dol Jatra at Barpeta Satra is known as-

a) Abir

b) Rang

c) Chandan

d) Heuj

Q 7. The origin of the Raas Festival is closely associated with the:

a) Shakta Movementb.

b) Neo-Vaishnavite Movementc.

c) Brahmo Movementd.

d) Arya Samaj Movement

5.9. BATHOU PUJA

Bathou Puja is the principal religious festival of the Bodo community of Assam and is dedicated to Bathoubwrai (Bwrai Bathou), the supreme deity of the traditional Bathou religion. The festival reflects the Bodos' deep reverence for nature, the five elements of the universe, and the harmonious relationship between human beings and the natural world. The word "Bathou" is derived from the Bodo words "Ba" (five) and "Thou" (deep philosophical thought), symbolising the five fundamental elements—air, earth, fire, sky, and the sun/water—that sustain life.

The central object of worship is the Sijou plant (Euphorbia), regarded as the living symbol of Bathoubwrai. The plant is enclosed within a bamboo fence, which represents the philosophy and moral principles of Bathouism. Rituals are conducted by the Douri (priest) and Doudini (priestess), who offer prayers, flowers, incense, betel nuts, rice beer (zou), fruits, and, in some places, animal sacrifices according to traditional customs. Devotees pray for peace, prosperity, good harvests, protection from evil, and the welfare of the community.

The festival is also marked by traditional music, dance, community feasts, and the Deodhani ritual, in which a priestess enters a sacred trance and performs ritual dances believed to convey divine messages. Bathou Puja honours several associated deities, including Aileng, Agrang, Khouila, Kazi, and Abla Khungur, who are regarded as guardians of nature and cosmic order.

Bathou Puja is more than a religious observance, it is an important expression of Bodo cultural identity, preserving indigenous traditions, ecological values, and the enduring bond between humanity, nature, and the divine. The festival continues to strengthen community solidarity while safeguarding the spiritual heritage of the Bodo people.

5.10. KARAM PUJA

Karam Puja is one of the most important festivals of Assam's Tea Tribe (Adivasi) community. It is an agricultural and fertility festival that reflects the community's close relationship with nature, farming, and the agricultural cycle. The festival is dedicated to the Karam tree, which is regarded as sacred and symbolizes fertility, prosperity, growth, and abundance. Through the worship of Karam Devta, the Tea Tribe community offers

prayers for good harvests, prosperity, and the well-being of the people.

Karam Puja is celebrated three times a year, each marking a different stage of the agricultural calendar. These are Jitiya Karam, observed on Shukla Ekadashi in the month of Bhadra (August–September) and regarded as the grandest celebration; Budhi Karam, celebrated on Vijaya Dashami in Ahin (October) after the autumn harvest; and Ras Jhumur, observed on the full moon of Aghon (December) to mark the completion of the agricultural year.

Women, particularly young unmarried girls known as Karamati, play the central role in the festival. Several days before the puja, they prepare bamboo baskets filled with sand and sow seeds such as rice, peas, wheat, groundnuts, soybeans, and beans in a ritual called Jawadhara (Jhawadhara). During this period, they observe strict religious rules, including fasting and following ritual restrictions, to ensure a healthy and abundant crop.

On the main day of the festival, a branch of the sacred Karam tree is installed on a beautifully decorated altar. The priest narrates the traditional story of Karma and Dharma, while the Karamatis perform aarti, circle the altar seven times, offer prayers, and distribute prasada. The celebration then continues with the lively Jhumur dance (Jhumur Nach) and Jhumur songs (Jhumur Geet), which express the history, emotions, love, struggles, and cultural traditions of the Tea Tribe community.

The concluding ritual takes place the following morning, when the sacred Karam branch is immersed in a river or pond, symbolizing the return of the offering to nature and completing the cycle of growth and renewal. In the evening, the women light lamps and cover the immersion site with earth, creating a sacred place known as Ghara Bhata.

5.11. MEDAM ME PHI

Me-Dam-Me-Phi is the most important socio-religious festival of the Tai-Ahom community of Assam. Celebrated annually on 31 January, the festival is dedicated to the worship of ancestors and reflects the Ahom belief that, after death, ancestors become “Phi” (divine spirits) who continue to guide, protect, and bless their descendants. The name Me-Dam-Me-Phi literally means “offerings (Me) to the ancestors (Dam) who have become gods or divine spirits (Phi).” Originally observed in the Tai month of Duin-Ha (March–April), the festival is now celebrated on 31 January throughout Assam.

The festival has its origins in the traditional Tai-Ahom religion and is believed to have been introduced by Chaolung Sukaphaa, the founder of the Ahom kingdom in Assam. It is closely associated with the Ahom tradition of ancestor worship, which has been preserved for centuries. During the festival, prayers and offerings are made to ancestors and deities by Deodhai and Bailung priests, who chant prayers in the Tai-Ahom language according to ancient religious manuscripts. Traditional offerings include homemade rice beer, rice, eggs, meat, fish, fruits, and other ritual items, seeking the blessings of ancestors for peace, prosperity, protection, and the well-being of the family and society.

The celebrations are held both within individual households and at community gatherings, particularly at historic Ahom centres such as Charaideo. The festival also honours several traditional Ahom deities, including Lengdon, Khao-Kham, Ai-Lengdin, Janshaihung, Mutkum-Taikum, and the collective ancestral spirits. Besides its religious importance, Me-Dam-Me-Phi serves as a symbol of Tai-Ahom cultural identity, strengthening unity, brotherhood, and respect for ancestral heritage. Today, it is recognised as one of Assam's major traditional festivals and is observed as a state holiday.

5.12. MOHOHO

Mohoho is an ancient folk and agricultural festival celebrated mainly in Lower Assam, particularly in the districts of Kamrup, Goalpara, Nalbari, Barpeta, Darrang, and Baksa. The festival is observed on the full moon night of the Assamese month of Aghon (November–December), when paddy crops are nearing maturity. It reflects the close relationship between agriculture, nature, and community life and is traditionally performed to protect crops and households from mosquitoes and harmful insects before the harvest. The name Mohoho is derived from "Moh" (mosquito or harmful insect) and "Ho" (to drive away), literally meaning "to drive away mosquitoes."

The festival is celebrated by groups of young boys, cowherds, and village youths, who go from house to house carrying bamboo torches, sticks, or bundles of dried leaves. They sing traditional Mohoho songs in a call-and-response style, accompanied by rhythmic movements and the striking of sticks on the ground. After performing at each household, they offer blessings for health, prosperity, family welfare, and a good harvest. In some places, bamboo effigies of mosquitoes are symbolically burnt to represent the removal of pests and evil influences.

Although Mohoho originated as an agricultural pest-control ritual, it has evolved into an important community festival that promotes cooperation, social harmony, and cultural continuity. While it is most closely associated with the Kalita community, it is celebrated by many other communities under different local names, such as Euri or Ori Maga in Goalpara, Mahou-Hou in Kamrup, Bhal Diya (Bhaul Diya) in Nalbari and Barpeta, Bambolpita among the Rabhas, Bhaluk Nachuwa among the Saraniya Kacharis, Machmao Kheda among the Hajongs, and Magan Geet among some Muslim communities. Today, Mohoho remains an important symbol of Assam's rural heritage, ecological awareness, and communal unity, preserving one of the oldest folk traditions of Lower Assam.

5.13. SUWORI

The Suwori (Suwari) Festival is a century-old spring and harvest festival celebrated annually at Boko in Kamrup district, Assam, on the seventh day of Rongali Bihu. It is one of the most distinctive folk festivals of Lower Assam and serves as a vibrant meeting point of diverse indigenous communities, particularly the Rabha, Bodo, and Garo, along with the Koch-Rajbongshi, Gorkha, and other Assamese communities. The festival celebrates the Assamese New Year, agricultural prosperity, and promotes unity, harmony, and cultural integration among the people of the region.

The most distinctive attraction of the festival is the Hana Ghora Dance, in which performers dance with a decorated horse made of bamboo and cloth. The dance is associated with local mythology relating to Lord Shiva's journey and the visit of Goddess Kali on horseback. Other important highlights include traditional elephant races, horse races, foot races, folk music, mass Bihu dance, and cultural performances, reflecting the rich cultural heritage of the participating communities.

Besides preserving indigenous traditions, the Suwori Festival has become an important symbol of social harmony, communal unity, and Assam's multicultural heritage. It attracts large numbers of visitors every year and showcases the shared cultural traditions of the Assam–Meghalaya border region, making it one of the significant folk festivals of Lower Assam.

5.14. BHATHELI

Bhatheli is an ancient folk and agricultural festival celebrated mainly in the districts

of Kamrup, Nalbari, and Baksa in Lower Assam during the Assamese month of Bohag (mid-April). It coincides with Rongali Bihu and the Assamese New Year, marking the beginning of the agricultural season. Deeply rooted in the agrarian life of the people, the festival expresses gratitude to nature and seeks timely rainfall, favourable weather, protection from natural calamities, and a bountiful harvest.

The name “Bhatheli” literally means “going downstream,” reflecting the traditional belief that prayers are offered to the deities so that they pass peacefully downstream without causing harm to the village. The central ritual involves the erection of a decorated bamboo pole, adorned with flowers, leaves, flags, and colourful cloth, symbolising fertility, strength, resilience, prosperity, and the hopes of farmers for a successful harvest. The scholar Banikanta Kakati observed similarities between Bhatheli and the ancient Indradhwaja (Sakrotthana) festival described in the Kalika Purana, both of which revolve around the ceremonial raising of a decorated pole.

The festival is marked by folk songs, traditional dances, games, competitions, communal feasts, and prayers to agricultural deities, bringing together people of all age groups. These activities strengthen community unity, cooperation, and social harmony, while reinforcing the close relationship between people, agriculture, and nature.

5.15. NA-KHOWA

Na-Khowa (No Khuwa) is a traditional agrarian harvest festival of Assam, celebrated after the paddy harvest in the Assamese month of Aghon (November–December). The term “Na” means new and “Khowa” means to eat, signifying the ceremonial tasting of the newly harvested rice. The festival symbolizes agricultural prosperity, gratitude for a successful harvest, and communal harmony. The festival is observed mainly in rural Assamese communities, where families invite relatives, neighbours, and friends to share a feast prepared from the newly harvested rice along with traditional dishes, including fish, duck meat, and other local delicacies. In many villages, people gather at the Namghar (community prayer hall), where newly harvested rice and other food items are cooked collectively and shared as a community meal. According to popular belief, one should not consume the new rice before celebrating Na-Khowa, making the festival an important agricultural and cultural tradition. Although the exact origin of the festival is unknown, it is believed to have evolved from Assam’s agrarian way of life, where farmers cooperated in cultivation and harvesting.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 8. Name the principal religious festival of the Bodo community of Assam.

Q 9. At which place in Assam is the Suwori festival celebrated annually.

Q 10. Name a traditional Agrarian Harvest Festival of Assam.

5.16. LET US SUM UP

After going through this unit, you have learnt-

- Assam celebrates a wide variety of festivals such as Bihu, Ambubachi Mela, Jonbeel Mela, Raas Mahotsav, Ali Aye Ligang, Bathou Puja, Karam Puja, Me-Dam-Me-Phi, Dol Jatra, Mohoho, Bhatheli, Suwori Festival, and Na-Khowa, each reflecting the traditions of different communities.
- Most festivals are closely linked to agriculture, nature, and seasonal changes, marking important stages of the farming cycle such as sowing, harvesting, and thanksgiving.
- Religious and cultural traditions play a vital role in these celebrations, with festivals promoting devotion, ancestor worship, community rituals, folk performances, and indigenous beliefs.
- Traditional arts, music, dance, crafts, fairs, and community feasts are integral components of Assamese festivals, helping preserve the state's rich cultural heritage and indigenous knowledge.
- The festivals and fairs of Assam promote social harmony, communal unity, cultural identity, and tourism, while strengthening the bond between people, nature, and their shared cultural traditions

5.17. ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q 1. Barter

Ans to Q 2. Angabastra

Ans to Q 3. Meji

Ans to Q 4. Akash Banti

Ans to Q 5. c. Sowing or Planting

Ans to Q 6. a. Abir

Ans to Q 7. b. Neo-Vaishnavite Movement

Ans to Q 8. Bathou Puja

Ans to Q 9. Boko, Kamrup

Ans to Q 10. Na- Khowa

5.18. FURTHER READING

1) Datta, Birendranath. (2012) Cultural Contours of North-East India, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

2) Engti, Dhaneswar. (2012) Socio-Cultural and Spiritual Traditions of Assam, Heritage Foundation, Assam.

3) Goswami, Prafulladatta. (2015) Festivals of Assam, Anundoram Borooah Institute of Learning, Art and Culture, Assam.

5.19. MODEL QUESTIONS

A) VERY SHORT QUESTIONS (Answer each question within 50 words)

Q 1. Where is the Jonbeel Mela held? What is its most distinctive feature?

Q 2. What does the term Bhatheli mean?

Q 3. Name one folk festival of Lower Assam. What is its relevance?

B) SHORT QUESTIONS (Answer each question within 150 words)

Q 1. Discuss the Historical Background of Jonbeel Mela.

Q 2. Discuss the cultural significance of Karam Puja and Bathou Puja.

Q 3. Explain the customs and rituals associated with Ali Aye Ligang and discuss its importance in Mising society.

Q 4. Describe the celebration and significance of Dol Jatra in Assam.

C) LONG QUESTIONS (Answer each question within 300-500 words)

Q 1. Describe the three Bihu festivals of Assam, highlighting their rituals, customs, agricultural significance, and cultural importance.

Q 2. Discuss the origin and development of the Raas Festival in Assam. Examine its association with Neo-Vaishnavism.

Q 3. Explain the significance of the Ambubachi Mela and describe its major rituals and observances.

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UNIT 6 : MATERRIAL CULTURE OF ASSAM

UNIT STRUCTURE

6.1 Learning Objectives

6.2 Introduction

6.3 Concept of Material Culture

6.3 House Building Types and Decorations in Assam

6.4 Costumes and Ornaments in Assam

6.4.1 Costumes

6.4.2 Ornaments

6.5 Bell Metal Industry

6.6 Musical Instruments of Assam

6.7 Let Us Sum Up

6.8 Further Reading

6.9 Answers to Check Your Progress

6.10 Model Questions

6.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you will be able to

- Have an idea about the material culture,
- Explain about the different types of houses in Assam,
- Know about the various costumes and ornaments used by different communities in Assam,
- Discuss about the bell metal industry of Assam,
- Know about various musical instruments of Assam.

6.2 INTRODUCTION

In the previous discussion we have already studied about the meaning of culture and the various features of the Assamese culture. Culture in general defines the customs, beliefs, traditions, values, norms etc of human behaviour.We have also studied about the meaning of folk culture. Folk culture means the culture of a particular area. Culture can be divided into two parts, non-material and material culture. Folk culture is

not only the identity of a particular ethnic group but it enriches that particular society and carries on the same from one generation to the other. The Assamese culture is very rich in various aspects and it is the assimilation of the various tribal and non-tribal communities. This racial assimilation added a strong colourful flavor to the Assamese culture.

In this unit we will discuss about the meaning of material culture along with the different house building types in Assam. As well as in this chapter we will study about the different costumes, ornaments, musical instruments of Assam. In addition to this we will also study about the bell metal industry of Assam.

6.3 CONCEPT OF MATERIAL CULTURE

Material culture often refers to the visible part of folk life of any community. Material culture consists of man-made or physical objects, resources etc that define the culture of a particular community. How people belonging to different tradition-oriented societies build houses, make cloths, ornaments, foods, tools, instruments, furniture, art and craft etc are all included in the material culture of that particular community. The material culture of any community is one of its basic identities and thereby maintains its uniqueness. Assam exhibits a very rich material culture in the form of art, craft, architecture, costume, ornaments etc which is a blending of the various tribal and non-tribal communities of Assam.

6.4 HOUSE BUILDING TYPES AND DECORATIONS IN ASSAM

A special kind of earthquake resistance house is constructed in Assam as it is an earthquake prone area. These houses are popularly known as Assam-Type house.Generally these houses are single storied but sometimes two or more storied houses are also constructed. Earlier Assam-Type houses were made with bamboo, wood, thatches, cow dung, reed, cane etc which were locally available. But now a day there is a scarcity of these materials and hence other materials like iron, cement, brick, stone etc are also used to build houses in Assam. But in the village areas the traditional bamboo, mud made houses are still made with some innovations.

A weed called Ikora is used extensively to build the walls as well as roof in the traditional Assam-Type houses. An earth plastering is also made in order to make the walls strong and more protective. Sometimes walls are made of bamboo strips plastered

with mud. The doors and windows are made out of bamboo as well as wood. Wooden plank flooring is used in these houses with stilts. In the rural areas mud plastered floors are seen. Local grass and thatches are used along with bamboo and wooden frames to build the roof which is slanting in shape. In an Assam-type house there are different types of rooms such as Pak-Ghor (kitchen), Chora-Ghor (living room), Suwani Kotha (bedroom) etc. Other than these Assam-Type houses, the tribal communities of Assam have different type of houses having its own distinctive identity.

- The main house of the Bodo community is called Nomano which consists of three rooms known as Ishing (kitchen), Okhong (dining room) and Khopra (bed room). Mainly bamboo and timber are used to construct these houses.
- The traditional houses ofthe Deori communityare constructed with a long passage having a considerable number of roomsonone side and the front portion of the house is kept open on three sides. The floor of the house is made of flattened bamboos and it is raised from the ground on wooden posts.
- The traditional houses of the Dimasa community are called Noh-Dima and are built in two facing rows. The superstructure of the house is made with timber, walls are made of bamboo with mud-plasterer and the roof is made with thatches. The entire house is divided into different rooms for different purposes.
- The traditional dwelling house of the Karbi community is called Chang- *Ghor, which is made up of wood, bamboo and thatches. Naujok (wooden posts) are used to raise a bamboo floor or platform called Klong a few feet above the ground. The house rests on the Klong. A ladder called Dondon made of wood and bamboo is used to have access to the house. A partition called Noksek-Arpong divides the main building into two parts known as Kam (bedroom) and Kut (storeroom from keeping important and sacred household possessions). Some of the other important parts of the house are Pang, Hong-Kup, Pang-Hongkup, Hong-Plang, Hong-Pharla, Voi-Roi etc.*
- The Mishing community builds their traditional houses on stilts popularly known as Chang-Ghor. A ladder called Ko-Bang is used to go to the house. The floor of the house is made with the mat of thick bamboo splits. Bamboo, wood, thatches are used to construct the house. Normally the entire house is divided into two

rooms and the fire place (Meram) at the middle of the house is an importantcharacteristic of a traditional Mishing house.

- The traditional houses of the Rabha community are lengthierin size. Generally it is a single house approximately fifty feet in length. Bamboo, wood, thatches, cow-dung etc are used in the construction of the traditional Rabha houses. The main rooms of a traditional Rabha house consisted of the Nok Chung Kai (bed room), Nansra (living room), Mazara (guest room), Nok Sara (kitchen) etc.
- The traditional houses of the Sonowal Kacharicommunity are made of light materials like thatches, bamboo, mud, cane, wood etc. Generally the main door of the house is in the east direction. Normally the house consists of three to four rooms along with a fireplace.

6.5 COSTUMES AND ORNAMENTS IN ASSAM

The costumes and ornaments worn by people belonging to different communitiessymbolize the identity of the particular community which is completely distinct from each other. Assam being a land of people belonging to different communities, witness the existence of different folk costumes and ornaments, which indirectly enriches the Assamese culture. In this section we will have some basic ideas about the different costumes and ornaments worn by the different communities of Assam.

6.5.1 COSTUMES

- Weaving is a common household activity in Assam since time unknown. In compared to the textiles produced by the hills and the plain tribal communities, the textiles produced by the Assamese non-tribal plains are less colourful. But these are of fine texture, unique design and harmony in colour. Some of the traditional dresses of the Assamese non-tribal plains areMekhela (item of female dress for lower part of the body from waist down to the ankles),Riha (an important part of female's dress used on the top of the Mekhela covering the breasts and the upper portion of the body), Chadar/ Upreni (Women's wrapper to wrap over Mekhela and Riha), Anakata Kapor(ceremonial and sacred cloth worn on specific socio-ritual occasions), Dhoti (men's dress to cover the lower part of the body),Chola (men's cloth covering the upper part

of the body), Cheleng Kapor (a piece of cloth used as wrapper and shoulder cloth), Gamocha (a towel type of cloth which is an indispensable part of Assamese life and culture), etc.

- Weaving is a common practice amongst the Bodo community.Some of the traditional dresses of the Bodo community are Dakhana (main traditional dress of the Bodo women), Jomgra (used by Bodo women to cover the upper portion of the body), Gangrachi, Gamsa (main traditional dress of the Bodo men),Arnai (small scarf wrap around the neck by men) etc.
- The textiles produced by the Deoris are simple and less colourful in compared to the other plains tribe of Assam. But they are very unique and beautiful. Some of the traditional dresses of the Deori community are Igu (female garment for the lower part of the body), Jakachiba (women's waist cloth), Khania or Cheleng (used as wrapper by the elderly women, turban by men, shoulder cloth by elderly men), Barkapor and Khania Barkapor (wrapper, also as shawl in winter), Iku (men's dhoti), Icha (shawl), Boche, Gatigee, Baiga (a towel type cloth used by women to cover the head, breast etc)
- Dimasa women are expert weavers. Dimasa cloths are known for high artistic designs. Some of the traditional dresses of the Dimasa community are Rijamphain (women's white colour cloth worn from chest to knee), Rijamphain Beren (women's chest wrapper), Rigu (women's wrapper or lower garment), Rikhaosa (a muffler worn by both male and female), Bathormai (women's garment), Sgaoha (men's turban), Rigdo (short muffler used by men), Risha (men's short dhoti), Gainthao (long muffler used by both male and female), Rithap (Shawl used by men) etc.
- Spinning and weaving is an age-old tradition in the Karbi society and almost everyKarbi woman is an expert weaver. For weaving they used their indigenous loom known as loin loom. The Karbi costumes are well known for their texture, design and noticeable colours. Some of the traditional dresses of the Karbi community are Pini (women's unstitched wrap / round skirt), Pekok (women's upper body cover), Pe-Cheleng (women's wrapper as well as men's dhoti), Wamkok (women's girdle), Piba (Baby carrying cloth), Rikong (men's loin cloth), Choy (men's sleeveless jacket), Poho (men's turban cloth), etc.

- The Mishing community has a very rich and colourful textile tradition. Some of the traditional dresses of the Mishing community are Ege (female garment for the lower part of the body), Ribi-Gacheng (used as a covering cloth by unmarried women), Gero (used as a covering by married women), Riha (the breast cloth), Galuk or Mibu-Galuk (sleeveless jacket), Ugon (men's dhoti), Yamboo (wrapper), Jinrek or Tongali (girdle) etc.
- Weaving is considered as a traditional craft of all sections of the Rabha community. The Rabha costumes are famous for their unique texture, colour and design. Some of the traditional dresses of the Rabha community are Lemphata or Riphan (The major item of Rabha women's dress wrap around at breast level down to the ankles), Riphan Chakkay (chief dress of the married Rabha women), Kambung (women's dress that is tied around the body at armpit level by the married women), Khodabang or Khochne (female turban cloth), Angcha (men's turban cloth), Pajal (men's dhoti), Alan or Anay and Pachra (shawl) etc.
- The Sonowal Kachariwomen are good weavers. They adopted the dresses of the other contemporary Assamese people. Some of the traditional dresses of the Sonowal Kachari community are Mekhela (women's lower garment), Ekathia *(wear above the blouse and twisting on the waist to just below the knee), Takaya (traditional towel which they wear on their head), Dhuti (men's lower garment), Kamij (men's upper garment) etc.*

6.5.2 ORNAMENTS

The traditional ornaments of Assam are highly inspired to a great extent by nature containing the designs of the flora and fauna and some musical instruments of the province. The traditional jewellery of Assam is handmade and is crafted by highly skilled artisans. Most of these ornaments are worn by women and are made of gold and silver. Some of the traditional ornaments of Assam are:

Lokaparois an ornament embellished with identical twin birds (Pigeon).

Jonbiriis a crescent moon shaped pendant worn by the Assamese women. In Assamese 'Jon' means moon and 'biri' means the surrounding designs of the ornament.

Dholbiri is an ornament which is dhol (a traditional musical instrument of Assam) shaped and very popular amongst the people.

Golpota is necklace that stuck round the neck and contains different floral designs.

Japi is an ornament which is shaped like a 'japi' the traditional conical hat of Assam.

Pepa is an ornament designed like a 'pepa' the traditional musical instrument of Assam.

Kerumoni is a round crescent shaped ornament with the two ends join together and make a hollow in the middle.

Dugdugiis a heart-shaped pendent worn by the Assamese women in the neck.

Gam Kharu is a bulky bracelet or bangle with clasps and floral designs inscribe on it. The bracelet can be opened with a knot attached to it. While performing the Bihu dance it is mandatory for the females to wear GamKharu.

Muthi Kharu is a bracelet. This bracelet is look like the shape of the fingers clenched while making a fist.

Thuriyais an earring worn largely by elderly Assamese women. The front side of this earring looks like a flower and the middle is thin so that it can stay in ears and the bottom part is wider than the middle portion so that the earring does not come out from the ear.

Most of these traditional ornaments of Assam are now-a-days available in a combine set that includes the earrings, necklace, ring etc. In addition to these ornaments, the various tribes of Assam have their own traditional ornaments which are used by the particular tribes along with the above mentioned ornaments.

- The Bodo women wear different types of necklace such as Chandra Har, Bisa Har, Thanka Siri, Jibou Zinziri etc. They wear special kinds of earrings called Phulkhuli, Japkhring, Dul, Boula and Phuti. In the nose they wear Nakhaphul, Nolot as well as Buluki. In the hand they wear bangles called Ashan Shangkha and Ashan Suri.

● The Deori women wear ornaments like Igawa (necklace), Uchoon (bangles), Gema (ring) etc. Apart from these, they wear traditional ornaments such as Lee, Kotu, Madoli, Jonbiri, Dugdugi etc while performing Bihu.

● The ornaments of the Dimasa community are made of precious and semi-precious stone like coral, metals like silver and coins. The Dimasa women wear different types of traditional necklaces such as Rmailik (made of colourful micro beads), Jongsama, Phowal (made from coral and real silver beads), Rangbersha (made of silver coins and beads), Chandrawal (made of flower shaped silver chain consisting of either one or three or sometimes three rows) etc; bracelet or bangle such as Khadu (made with pure silver), earrings such as Khmaothai (it is a bullet like structure made of pure silver). In addition to this the Dimasa females wear a headgear of colour stripes called Shukhep.

● The Karbi women wear different types of necklace such as Lek Sabai, Ser Alek Punjang, Lekdhon, Lek Pongting, Lek Ruve, Lek Pila, Lek Paikam, Lek Bongnai, Lek Changti, Lek siki etc; earrings such as Nathengpi, Nathengpi Akoron, Nathengpi Chawah, Nalangpong, Nathengpi Plirplar etc; rings such as Arnan Ke et, Arnan Kelol, Ser Banda, Rup Banda etc. In addition to this, they also wear three different types of wrist band called Roi Tahu, Roi Setung, Roi Pengkhara.

● The Mishing women wear bangles such as Kongge, Ain Kongge, Ga: Mkaru, Onsarmora etc; neck ornaments such as Tadog, Dogne, Takti, Ain a: Be, Murkong a: Be, Chandoronghaar, Baltag Doksori(a chain made of silver coins), Lingkar etc; earrings such as Pisiring, Kentu, Turi, Takpor etc. In addition to these the Mishing women wear Lakpun during dancing. Lakpun is worn at the waist.

● The Rabha women wear different types of traditional necklaces such as Chandra-Haar, Siki-Suki, Hancha or Hacha etc; earrings such as Nambri, Bala-Nimbri etc; bangles such as Chan, Har Gulai, Mal-Kharu, Mayar-Ching Chap, Banti, Hat Baju or Kanta Baju etc. In addition to these ornaments the Rabha women used to wear Naka Pati and Bali in the nose, Chasi-tam (ring worn in the ring finger of the left hand), Rubak or Rubuk (a girdle made of ivory with

seven strings worn around the waist) and Khuchmakrang (used in the knot of hair tied on the top of head, usually its length is nine to ten feet and made of silver).

The Sonowal Kachari community used to wear the traditional ornaments of Assam such as Gamkharu, Keru, Thuriya, Dugdugi, Jonbiri etc.

6.6 BELL METAL INDUSTRY

The Bell Metal industry is an indigenous industry of Assam and its products have an esteem position in the Assamese society. The bell metal is locally called kanh and the industry is known as kanh udyog. The bell metal artisans are known as kanhars.By using the traditional method of hammering they produce a large number of products which represents the rich material culture of Assam. Earlier, bell metal industry was there in different places of Assam like Sarthebari, Sapatgram, Bilasipara, Raha, Titabar, Lakhipur and some areas of Cachar. However, in due course of time this industry declined and perished away from its traditional centres other than Sarthebari.Today Sarthebari (situated in the Barpeta district) is the only existing bell metal industrial centre of Assam. Other than that, one can find bell metal industry in some other places of Assam which are mostly off-shoots of the kanhars of Sarthebari who have moved to those places to expand their business.

LET US KNOW

Bell Metal is a form of bronze. It is an alloy of copper and tin. The two metals are mixed together at the proportion of 80:20 i.e.80% copper and 20% tin to Prepare the bell metal. Due to the local scarcity of copper and tin and to avoid the labour involved in making the bell metal locally, now a day the *kanhars* started using the scrap metal (old bell metal products) form a king the new products. The bell metal products have a higher resale value.

Bell metal products are manufactured in a co-operative basis in a garshal. The head of a garshal is the ojha kanhar who is the master craftsman. He is assisted by the co-artisans called the palis. The tools used in the process of manufacturing the bell metal products are all locally made. Some of them are Niyeri (an anvil), *Haturi(a hammer),*

Sarah(a plus or pincers), Kati(a pair of scissors used to cut the thin feat outer layer of the utensils to give them proper shape), Aake(one side pointed anvil), Reti(a rasp), Chak Bhor(a gimlet), Mohi (crucible) etc.

Various products are made of bell metal which occupies a prestigious place in the Assamese society and are used in different aspects of life in the Assamese society. Some bell metal products are used in day to day household activities, some are used in different socio-religious as well as cultural activities. The bell metal products used in day to day household activities are Kahi (dish), Bati(bowl), Ban Bati (bowl with a stand), Lota (a kind of water pot), Bota(a kind of tray with a stand) etc.The bell metal products used in differentsocio-religious as well as cultural activities of the Assamese society are Tal (cymbal), Barkah (a gong), Kanh (a bell), Dobakah(a big kettle drum), Ghanta(a bell), Chaki(a lamp), Bigraha(an image of a deity) etc.

6.7 MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS OF ASSAM

Various musical instruments are used in Assam for music and other cultural activities. These instruments enrich the Assamese cultural heritage. At the same time some musical instruments testifies the unique cultural identify of Assam. Some of these musical instruments are Khol, Mridanga, Dhol, Doba, Madol, Dambaru, Pepa etc.

The *Khol* is a musical instrument mainly associated with the satriya culture, specifically while performing bhaona (dance drama) and singing borgeet (devotional song). The Khol is a barrel shaped asymmetrical drum made out of mud and played with fingers. Generally the length of the Khol of Assam is about 75 cm. The two faces of the Kholare of different sizes and are covered with two layers of cow leather, one face completely covered and the other on the outer periphery of the faces. The right face of the Khol is normally three to five inches in diameter and has a pitch and produces a metallic sound. While the left face is six to eight inches in diameter, produces a lower bass sound. The two faces of the Khol are connected with thin leather strips equally distributed into thirty two spaces. The Mridanga is a kind of Khol, but shorter in size. Generally it is made of wood. In Assam, the diameter of the middle portion of the body of Mridanga is slightly bigger than the Khol. The history of the Mridanga in Assam is traced back to the pre-Sankari period and it is considered as one of the ancient drums of India.

The *Dhol* is a kind of wooden cylindrical drum which is played while performing different songs and dances in Assam. It is played with a stick on one side and with a hand on the other side. It is normally almost 3 feet in length and cylindrical in shape. A Dholis made by hollowing the inner portion of a wooden log and covering the both sides with animal skin, either cow or goat.The right hand face of the Dhol is played with a stick of bamboo, while the left hand face is played by hand. The leather rope of the Dholhelps in hanging it round the neck of the player. There are different types of Dhol in Assam on the basis of the occasion it is played, like the Bihu Dhol, Oja Dhol, Jay Dhol, Bar Dhol, Dhepa Dhol etc. The dhol is an unavoidable part of the cultural life of Assam.

The *Doba* is a bowl shaped skin covered drum. It is normally kept in a namghar (prayer hall).Generally the height of the Doba is about one meter and the diameter of the mouth is about 1 meter 20 cm. The gorgeous sound of the Doba is produced by beating it with two sticks on cover hide. It is placed in slight inclining position for the convenience of beating it.This instrument occupies a very prestigious position in the Assamese society as well as culture.

The *Madal* is a Mridanga type barrel shaped hand drum mostly used in folk music. Earlier it was made with the burnt clay but now a day it is made of wood. The body of the Madal is cylinder shaped leaving hollow at both the ends. One end of the stricter is smaller than the other and is covered with animal skin. Lather ropes are attached connecting both the ends around the body. Madal has a significant place in the folk music of Assam. The Dambaru is wooden instrument look like an hour glass. The length of the Dambaru varies from 15 to 25 cm. The waist or middle portion of the instrument is narrow and there are two strings with knots (balls of metal or cork) at their ends. The two heads of the Dambaruare covered. The Dambaruis held at the hand and rolled from side to side and because of this shake the end of the strings having metal balls strikes the centre of both the heads alternatively and as a result produces sound with rhythmical strokes. The Dambaru is represented as an attribute of Lord Siva as Nataraja. It is said that Lord Siva played the Dambaruduring the cosmic dance. The instrument occupied a very holy place in the society.

The *Pepa* is a hornpipe instrument mainly associated with the Bihu culture of Assam. It is made with the horn of a buffalo, with a small bamboo pipe attached to it. There are two types of Pepa, single and double (Juria Pepa). The single horn Pepa has

five to six holes and the dual horn Pepa has four holes. A metal ring is attached to the opening of the horn that functions both as a mechanical reinforcement as well as an embellishment. Usually a Pepais less than two ft. in length, but the size may vary. It occupies a very prestigious place in the Assamese culture.

In addition to musical instruments there are various other instruments such as Tal, Khunjuri, Gogona, Sutuli etc that are inseparable part of the Assamese culture and society. Along with these the various tribal communities of the province have their own traditional musical instruments. Thus the co-existence of a multi diversified material culture in Assam enriches the Assamese culture.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answer the following questions :

Q.1 What is called Nomano ?

Q.2 What is Ikora ?

Q.3 What is called Ko-Bang ?

Q.4. What is called Shukhep ?

Q.5. What is Igu ?

Q.6. What is agarshal ?

6.8 LET US SUM UP

After going through the unit, you have learnt that—

- Material culture is the visible part of folk life of any community. How people belonging to different tradition-oriented societies build houses, make cloths, ornaments, foods, tools, instruments, furniture, art and craft etc are all included in the material culture of that particular community.
- Assam exhibits a very rich material culture in the form of art, craft, architecture, costume, ornaments etc which is a blending of the various tribal and non-tribal communities of Assam.
- Assam being a land of people belonging to different communities, witness the existence of different folk art, craft, costumes and ornaments, which indirectly enriches the Assamese culture.

- Assam being an earthquake prone area a special kind of earthquake resistance house is constructed in Assam popularly known as Assam-Type house. Light materials like bamboo, wood, thatches etc are use to construct Assam-type houses. In addition to this, other tribal communities construct their traditional types of houses, mostly made of bamboo and wood.
- The Bell Metal industry is an indigenous industry of Assam and its products have an esteem position in the Assamese society and are used in household as well as different socio-cultural and religious occasions.
- Various musical instruments are used in Assam for music and other cultural activities which enrich the Assamese cultural heritage.

6.9 FURTHER READING

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4) Endle, Sidney, (1975), The Kacharis, Cosmo Publications, New Delhi.

5) Bordoloi, B. N.; Thakur, G. C. Sharma; Saikia, M. C., (1987), Tribes of Assam, Part -I, Tribal Research Institute, Guwahati, Assam.

6) Sarma, Mrinmoy K, (2008), Traditional Crafts of Assam, Anshah Publishing House, New Delhi.

7) Baishya, Dinesh, (2009), Traditional Science & Material Culture of Early Assam, Eastern Book House, Guwahati.

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6.10 ANSWER TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No. 1: The main house of the Bodo community is called Nomano.

Ans to Q No. 2: Ikora is a weed used extensively to build the walls as well as roof in the traditional Assam-Type houses.

Ans to Q No. 3: Ko-Bang is a ladder used in a traditional Mishing house to go to the house.

Ans to Q No. 4: Shukhep is a headgear of colour strips worn by the Dimasa females.

Ans to Q No. 5: Iguis the traditional Deori female garment for the lower part of the body.

Ans to Q No. 6: A garshal is a bell metal processing unit.

6.11 MODEL QUESTIONS

1.Very short questions (Answer each question withing 50 words)

a) What is called Klong?
b) Name any two traditional costume of the Bodo community.
c) Name any two traditional costume of the Mishing community.
d) What do you mean by Riha?
e) Name the tools used in the process of manufacturing the bell metal products.

2.Short questions (Answer each question within 150 words)

a) Name any two traditional ornaments of the Karbi community.
b) What are the traditional ornaments of the Rabha community?
c) What is called Noksek-Arpong?
d) Name the different types of Tal (cymbal) made of bell metal.
e) How bell metal is prepared?

3. Long questions (Answer each question within 300-500 words)

a) What do you mean by material culture? What are the things that are included in the material culture?
b) Write a note on the Assam-type house.
c) Name the different traditional ornaments worn by the Assamese women.

d) Write a note on the bellmetal industry of Assam.

e) Name any two musical instruments of Assam. Write how are they manufactured?

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UNIT 7: RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS OF ASSAM

UNIT STRUCTURE

7.1 Learning Objectives

7.2 Introduction

7.3 Religious Traditions of Assam

7.4 Saivism in Assam

- Saiva centres in Assam
- Saiva literature of Assam

7.5 Saktism in Assam

- Centres of Sakti worship in Assam
- Sakti literature of Assam

7.6 Buddhism in Assam

- Buddhist centres in Assam
- Buddhist literature of Assam

7.7 Vaisnavism in Assam

- Vaisnava centres in Assam
- Vaisnava literature of Assam

7.8 Let Us Sum Up

7.9 Answer To Check Your Progress

7.10 Further Reading

7.11 Model Questions

7.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to-

- Know about the religious traditions in Assam and its historical past,
- Discuss Saivism and its influence in Assam,
- Discuss Saktism as a faith practised in Assam,
- Describe the spread and impact on Buddhism on the general life of the people,

7.2 INTRODUCTION

Religion has a close relation with human life and man's life-style. From the early period of human history, natural phenomena have always aroused our fear, curiosity, questions and a sense of enquiry among people.

In the previous discussion we have deliberated on the rich folk culture of Assam and its various aspects that have enriched the region. We have discussed the oral traditions, oral literature and the customs that have contributed to the Assamese culture and society.

In this unit, we shall now discuss the religious traditions of Assam. In Assam also many religious beliefs emerged at different times depending on some folk beliefs. Some religious beliefs were, however, brought to the region by the followers of different religious sects. four main religious traditions of Assam are being discussed in the present Unit. These are mainly - Saivism, Saktism, Buddhism and Vaisnavism.

7.3 RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS OF ASSAM

Ancient Assam was a vast region, quite bigger in size than the present Indian state of Assam. It was a land of a few tribes who followed animism. Those tribes believed in fertility cult, head hunting, ancestor worship, magic and worship of heavenly bodies or objects such as the sun, the moon, the rain and the thunder.

LET US KNOW

Animism is the belief that says that the non-human entities (birds, animals and inanimate objects) have a spiritual essence. Animism worships non-human Entities such as birds and animals and inanimate things such as stone.

The Aryans entered Assam a few centuries before the beginning of the Common Era (i.e., before the birth of Jesus Christ). The Brahmanical rites and rituals entered Assam with the coming of the Aryans. Then onwards, the antique non-Aryan beliefs and practices began to exist in Assam simultaneously with the Brahmanical rites and rituals. Therefore, a mixture of non-Aryan and Aryan religious beliefs can still be observed in Assam.

A few other religions entered Assam in the later times. Several religious centers, such as temples, satras, naamghars, mosques and churches and others existing in abundance in Assam prove that Assam is a meeting ground of several religious beliefs. The co-existence of the different religious traditions, without resorting to any conflicts, is unique to this region. Every religious belief has its own literature relating to their religion. We shall now discuss the five major religious traditions of Assam.

7.4 SAIVISM

The religious sect that worships Lord Siva as the Supreme deity is known as Saivism. Scholars have the opinion that Siva was originally a non-Aryan tribal god. He was later incorporated into the religion now known as Hinduism.

Saivism, in its early form, is considered to have existed in the Indus Valley civilization (2500 BC-1500 BC). Proofs of the cult of fertility or the worship of the Phallus or the Linga are there in the remains of that civilization. The Phallus or the Linga was later personified as Lord Siva. The deity had other manifestations in that civilization. This is evidenced by an image of the Pasupati Siva ("The Lord of the Cattle") found in the remains of the civilization.

The Vedic civilization had a deity named Rudra. The Yajurveda and the Atharvaveda give references to Lord Rudra. This Aryan deity was considered to be the god of destruction. He was the Lord of wild people. In contrast, the non-Aryan deity Siva was believed to be benevolent and accepted as the symbol of creation.

The Vedic deity Rudra and the non-Vedic deity Siva merged into one. However, the difference in the nature of the merged god resulted in the development of two forms of Saivism. One of these forms believes in Siva as the destroyer, while the other form has the belief that Siva is a benevolent god.

The epics Ramayana and Mahabharata consider Siva as a god of the religion now known as Hinduism. The religion called Hinduism has 18 puranas. Among these Puranas, the Siva-purana, occupies the sixth position. Parvati is known to be Siva's wife. Ganesa, the god who can remove all obstacles and Kartika or Kartikeya, the god of wars, are their sons. They are believed to have their abode in Kailasa in the Upper Himalayas.

LET US KNOW

Pasupati Siva is a seated figure on a seal found at Mahenjo-daro. The figure is considered to be a Prototype of Siva. It is surrounded by animals. Therefore, it is called Pasupati Sivaor “Lord of the Cattle”.

● Saivism in Assam:

Saivism is one of the earliest religious beliefs practiced in Assam. Siva as a tribal god was widely worshipped in Assam by the non-Aryan Austric aboriginals of Assam known as the Kiratas. Saivism later got connected with Tantricism, which uses magic and mantras to achieve Power. Therefore, worship of Sakti, the Primal Energy identified as female, is closely associated with the worship of Siva. Like Saivism of ancient Assam, Saktism of ancient Assam was also of Austric origin.

Saivism and Saktism are related to the worship of fertility, symbolized by human sex organs. Saivism worships the Linga, i.e., the male sex organ. In Saktism, the female reproductive organ Yoni is worshipped.

A few myths connect the worship of Siva in ancient Assam to King Jalpeswar. The king is believed to have his capital in the present Jalpaiguri town in northern West Bengal.

Some other myths relate Saivism to Naraka, Lord Visnu’s son who is believed to have brought the Aryan civilization from Mithila (in present Bihar) to Assam. It is believed that Saivism enjoyed a stronghold in Assam prior to the advent of Naraka. This is suggested by the strong Saiva belief as maintained by the contemporary non-Aryan king of Sonitpur named Bana. Bana was then defeated in battle by Lord Krisna, an incarnation of Lord Visnu. The defeat stands for the subsequent degeneration of Saivism in Assam owing to the spread of the Aryan religion, symbolized by Lord Krisna, in the region. History gives evidence of the existence of Saivism in ancient Assam. Several land-grants of ancient Assam eulogize Lord Siva. Banamala Varman’s Tezpur land-grant, Harjara Varman’s Hayungthal copper plate, Bala Varman’s Nagaon grant and Indrapala’s Gauhati copper plate were dedicated to Lord Siva. This proves the adherence of these kings to Saivism.

● Saiva Centres of Assam

From the ancient period, Assam is renowned for Saiva centers. The rulers of ancient Assam built several Saiva temples throughout Assam. In the medieval period also the Ahom rulers built Saiva temples.

The Mahabhairab temple at Tezpur in the Sonitpur district is one of the oldest Siva temples of Assam. Bana's daughter Usha is believed to have worshipped Siva in this temple.

The sculptural remains of Da-Parvatiya in Tezpur hint about the existence of a Siva temple there. The sculpture of the temple has similarity with the Gupta sculpture. Therefore, the ruins of that temple may be of that period in which the Guptas were ruling in mainland India. This means that the temple may be as old as nearly one and a half thousand years.

King Bhaskar Varman of ancient Assam (the seventh century AD) was a follower of Saivism. Hiuen Tsang, a Chinese traveller who came to Assam during Bhaskar Varman's time, mentioned in his travel-account Si-u-ki that Assam was then famous for the Deva temples. The Deva temples referred probably to temples of Siva.

LET US KNOW

Xuanzang, commonly spelled as Hiuen Tsang (c. 602- 664), travelled India in the first half of the seventh century AD. His overland journey to India spanned long seventeen years. He came to ancient Assam and his travel-account Si-u-ki contains valuable records on the political, social and religious life in ancient Assam.

Medieval rulers of Assam also followed and patronized the Saiva cult. Viswa Singha, the founder of the Koch kingdom, claimed himself to be a descendant of Siva. He made Saivism the official religion of his kingdom and issued coins bearing the name Siva. A few of the Ahom kings also followed and spread Saivism by constructing temples of Siva. The Umananda temple in Guwahati in the Kamrup district was constructed by the Ahom king Gadadhar Singha in the seventeenth century. Pramatta Singha constructed the Sukreswar temple in Guwahati in 1744. The Siva temple at Basisthasram in Guwahati was constructed by Rajeswar Singha in the eighteenth century.

The Siva temples at Kamakhya and Madan-Kamdev in the Kamrup district, the Siva temple of Negheriting in the Golaghat district, the Sambheswar temple in the Sri Surya Pahar area in the Goalpara district, the Nagsankar temple at Nagsankar and the Viswanath temple at Biswanathghat in the Sonitpur district, the Sivadoul at Sivasagar in the Sivasagar district and the Bilveswar temple at Belsar and the Jaipal temple at Dingdingi

in the Nalbari district are a few other important Saiva temples of Assam. A few of these temples, such as the temples at Kamakhya, Madan-Kamdev and Negheriting were constructed in the pre-Ahom, i.e., in the ancient period. Others, such as the Sivadoul at Sivasagar, the Bilveswar temple and the Jaipal temple were constructed by different Ahom kings in the medieval period.

Siva is worshipped in Assam both in full form and in the Linga or the phallic form. There is a huge linga in the Kamakhya temple. The linga is known as 'jyotirlinga' ("linga of light"). Such worships of the Linga in Assam indicate the close connection of Saivism with Saktism.

Worship of Siva in antique tribal forms also exists among the ethnic inhabitants of Assam. Bathou, worshipped by the Bodos, is a tribal god who has similarities with Siva. The worship of Siva in Assam involves the use of flowers, tulsi, bel leaves, and milk and so on. Sivaratri is the name of the festival of the worship of Siva. The festival is observed throughout Assam, especially at Kamakhya.

- **Saiva Literature of Assam**

The Saiva Literature of Assam is of two types: oral and written. Oral Saiva literature of Assam is available in the forms of folk poetry, folk song, naam, and so on. Some other oral literatures related to these forms are ojapali, tokari geet, biyanaam, Sadasivar naam and others. These oral literatures represent the folk form of Siva instead of representing the Vedic form of the deity. Assamese folk poems, songs and naams imagine Siva as a Jatia Gosain ("a god with curly hair"), burha dora ("aged groom"), bhangua ("intoxicated by bhang") and so on. The dominating agricultural lifestyle of the Assamese folk people has contributed to the imagination of Siva even as a peasant or beggar. The folk depiction of Siva highlights the benevolent nature and the amusing lifestyle of the deity.

Among the written Saiva literature of Assam are the Kalika Purana and the Yogini Tantra. The Kalika Purana, a text written in Sanskrit in about the tenth century AD, mentions two sub-sects of Saivism- the Kapalikas and the Pasupatas. According to the text, the Kapalikas are more terrible than the Pasupatas. The Kalika Purana has references to Saktism also.

LET US KNOW

Traditionally attributed to Vyasa, the Puranas are actually Sanskrit compositions

of various poets over a long period of time. They eulogize various Hindu deities, But are store houses of ancient philosophy. They date between 1500 BCto1000CE.

The Yogini Tantra, written in Sanskrit in about the sixteenth century AD, also has references to Saktism. The text mentions two other sub-sects of Saivism- the Kaulas and the Avadhutas. These two sub-sects are said to have worshiped both Siva and Sakti. The Yogini Tantra prescribes the ways of worshipping Siva secretly. Among such ways are the rituals like the Panchamakara, which is the extreme form of left hand rituals. The Hara-Gauri Sambada, a Sanskrit text of the thirteenth century AD has discussed the relationship between Siva and Sakti in detail.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answer the following questions by filling in the blanks:

1) Who were the original worshippers of Siva in ancient Assam ?

.....

2) Which land-grant refers to Saivism ?

.....

3) Who made Saivism the official religion ?

.....

4) Which text discusses the relationship between Siva and Sakti in detail ?

.....

7.5 SAKTISM

Sakti is the Primal Energy identified as female. The worship of Sakti is one of the oldest religious faiths in India. Folk beliefs about the power of the female and uses the of magic and mantras were at the root of the growth of Saktism.

The worship of power in the form of female existed in the Indus Valley civilization. This is proved by the discovery of some images from that civilization. The Vedic literature also gives evidence of the practice of female worship. Durga, Kali and Uma are a few goddesses mentioned in the Vedic literature. The Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the Puranas, especially the Markandeya-purana also mention about the worship of Sakti.

Sakti is often worshipped as Mother Goddess. The Mother Goddess has various forms like Parvati, Durga, Kali, Chamundi, Padma, and so on. She is motherly but ferocious at times. The Mother Goddess is often worshiped as the consort of Siva. The consort of Siva has the names Sati, Parvati, Durga, Kali and so on. Sometimes she is described as Siva's daughter. Padma is believed to be Siva's daughter. The cult of Sapta-Matrika ("Seven Divine Mothers") is an important part of Saktism.

Animal sacrifice is an important aspect of this religious sect.

● **Saktism in Assam**

The Kalika Purana, the Devi Purana and the Yogini Tantra testify that ancient Assam was a stronghold of Saktism. There were and and still are many Sakti centres in Assam. Saktism in Assam is, however, centred round the Kamakhya temple in Guwahati. The Kamakhya shrine is one of the most important Sakti shrines of India.

Several iconographical and archaeological remains discovered in different sites of Assam also prove the existence of Saktism in ancient Assam. The Kamakhya shrine and various other Sakti shrines provide some evidence of such existence.

The land-grants of Banamala Varmana and Indrapala also inform about Sakti worship in ancient Assam.

Medieval Assam had many rulers who believed in Sakti and helped Saktism spread in the region. Naranarayan of the Koch dynasty and Rudra Singha, Siva Singha, Queen Phuleswari, Pramatta Singha and Rajeswar Singha of the Ahom dynasty were a few such rulers.

In Assam, Saktism is closely associated with Tantricism. Goddess Kamakhya and many other goddesses manifesting Sakti are worshiped by following the Tantric mode, i.e., by practicing magic and witchcraft and sacrifice of animals, such as goats and buffaloes. The Yogini Tantra bears the evidence that the Tantric way of worshipping Sakti has an early origin.

Sakti is also worshipped in Assam in her folk forms, such as Manasa, Sitala, Subachani, and others.

● **Sakti Centres of Assam:**

The Kamakhya shrine in Guwahati, famous in India, has a Kamakhya temple and around that temple are some other Sakti temples like those of the Dasamahavidyas (who

are Tantric forms of the Mother Goddess, ten in number) with names like Bhubaneswari, Kali, Tara, Bagala, Dhumavati, Chinnamasta and Bhairabi.

The Kamakhya shrine is believed to have come into existence when the reproductive organ of Sati's corpse fell on the Nilachala hill. Naraka started worshipping Kamakhya at the advice of his father Lord Visnu and thus the shrine got importance among the followers of Saktism.

Dr. Banikanta Kakati, however, thinks that the shrine was built up by the Aryans on and around the shrine of an ancient Austric deity named Ka-mei-kha. Naraka perhaps brought this indigenous goddess into the Aryan pantheon. Dr. Nirmal prabha Bordoloi also believes that the shrine of Kamakhya might have its origin among the Austric and Mongoloid tribes of Assam.

A few other important Sakti centres of Assam are the Ugratara temple in Guwahati, the Dirgheswari temple in North Guwahati, the Tamreswari Temple in the Sadiya region, the Bhairabi temple at Tezpur and the Balilesa temple in the Nalbari district. Besides these, numerous small Sakti centres are scattered all over Assam.

● **Sakti Literature of Assam:**

Oral and written literatures on Saktism are found in Assam. We found both written and oral literature relating to Saktism.

Ojapali compositions, various songs, naams, and poems like Sitalapada are among the Assamese folk literatures relating to Saktism. The folk imagination recorded in these folk literatures depicts Sakti mostly as women who occasionally resorts to ferocious mood.

The Kalika Purana, the Yogini Tantra and the Hara-Gauri Sambada and the Padma Purana give the evidence that Saktism was practiced in ancient Assam. They connect Saktism with Saivism. The Pachalis (descriptive poetry on Manasa, written in the medieval period) like the Manasa-Kavya of Narayanadeva are the most important among the Sakti literatures of Assam written in the medieval period.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answer the following questions:

Q 5. Name the most important shrine for Sakti worship in Assam?

.....

Q 6. Who is Manasa?

.....

Q 7. Write the name of Ahom queen who patronized Saktism.

.....

Q 8. What do you understand by Dasamahavidya ?

.....

7.6 BUDDHISM

Buddhism was founded by Gautama Buddha in the sixth century BC. The religion came away from the Brahmanical religion in order to avoid the ritualistic practices of the latter. It sought alternative ways of mitigating the miseries of life.

The Hinayana, the earliest form of Buddhism, existed firmly almost till the beginning of the Common Era. It mostly avoided image-worship. The Mahayana, the second form of Buddhism, dominated the next five hundred years, i.e., from the first to the fifth centuries AD. Mahayana believed in image-worship. The period between the sixth and the tenth centuries AD was dominated by Tantric Buddhism, the third and the last form of Buddhism. Tantric Buddhism used magic, witchcraft and mantras as it came to be associated with Tantricism. Buddhism faced decadence after the tenth century AD. The three Pitakas, namely, the Sutta Pitaka, the Vinaya Pitaka and the Abhidhamma Pitaka are the most important texts on Buddhist thought and philosophy.

● **Buddhism in Assam**

Buddhism entered Assam in the ancient period itself. The religion had a strong hold in Bengal, Bihar and Orissa of that time. Assam being a contiguous land of Bengal got affected by the Buddhist faith.

Many scholars give the opinion that Buddhism did not exist in Assam prior to the time of King Bhaskara Varmana. However, several literary works and archaeological and architectural remains indicate that Buddhism existed in Assam centuries before Bhaskara Varmana's times.

There are evidence of the existence of Hinayana, Mahayana and Tantric Buddhism in ancient Assam. Archaeological remains found in the Sri Surya Pahar area in the Goalpara district bear evidence of this. Archaeological remains found at the Nilachala hill in Guwahati and at Hayagriva Madhava at Hajo in the Kamrup district, Indrapala's copper plate grant

and Gauhati Grant and the iconographical remains found at Narakasura in the Kamrup district indicate the existence of Buddhism in ancient Assam. It is believed that Tantric Buddhism, especially its popular form known as Vajrayana, developed in ancient Assam. The cult of Saktism and Tantricism had a profound impact on Buddhism leading to the emergence of Vajrayana form of Buddhism in Assam. Therefore, many Brahmanical and Buddhist deities and practices do not have sharp distinctions.

The Tai-Ahoms, who came to Assam in the thirteenth century, were probably influenced by the Sahajayana, a form of Tantric Buddhism. References to Buddhism are found in Sankaradeva (1449-1568), a medieval Vaisnavite saint of Assam.

A few Tai tribes, such as the Tai-Khamtis, Tai-Turungs, Tai-Khamyangs, Tai-Phake and Tai-Aitons entered Assam in the eighteenth century. They brought beliefs and practices of the Buddhism of Burma with them. This was the second wave of Buddhism in Assam after the first in the ancient period.

Buddhist beliefs and practices have influenced many social and cultural aspects of the Assamese people. The “rati-khowa” tradition followed differently by many groups of people in Assam bears the influence of Buddhism.

- **Buddhist Centres of Assam**

The most important centre of Buddhism in Assam is the Sri Surya Pahar area in the Goalpara district. A good number of Stupa and terracotta plaque of the ancient period have been found there. Pancharatna, Jogighopa, Paglatek and Barbhita in the Goalpara district, the Kamakhya shrine and the Narakasura Hills in Guwahati, the Hayagriva-Madhava temple at Hajo and Bhaitbari in present Meghalaya are other important Buddhist centres of ancient Assam.

The Tai Buddhist people of Assam live in places like Jorhat, Golaghat, Sivasagar, Narayanpur, Ledu, Naharkatiya and Margherita. These are important centres of Buddhism being practiced even now.

- **Buddhist Literature of Assam:**

Buddhism has a great influence on Assamese literature. The compositions of the Buddhist Siddhas like Saraha, Nagarjuna, and Luipa and others are considered the oldest examples of Assamese literature. The language of these Charyapadas or Buddhist dohas may be considered the proto-type of the Assamese language.

The Charyapadas influenced the pre-Sankaradeva and neo-Vaisnavite writers of Assam. Madhava Kandali, a pre-Sankaradeva poet, and Ananta Kandali, a neo-Vaisnavite poet of Sankaradeva's time, have references to Buddhism.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answer the following questions:

Q 9. Which form of Buddhism avoided image worship?

.....

Q 10. What are the main compositions of the Buddhists Siddhas?

.....

Q 11. What is Sahajayana?

.....

Q 12. Name an important centre of Buddhism in Meghalaya.

.....

7.9 VAISNAVISM

Vaisnavism is that sect of Hinduism in which veneration is offered to Lord Vishnu or Krishna or the Dasavataras ("the ten incarnations") of Lord Visnu, namely, Matchya, Kurma, Baraha, Narasingha, Bamana, Parasurama, Halirama, Rama, Buddha and Kalki. Vaisnavism is also known as the Sanatana dharma ("the eternal religion").

The Vedas have references to Visnu but do not consider him to be a major deity. The development of Visnu as the Supreme Hindu god was a phenomenon that took place after the Vedic period. The epic period had Visnu as the Supreme deity. Lord Visnu is generally imagined as having four hands with Sankha, Chakra, Gada and Padma in them. The devotee of Visnu is known as Vaisnava. The Vaisnava followers worship Lord Rama and Lord Krishna for the most part.

Vaisnavism has the concept of Bhakti Yoga or Bhakti Marga. The concept developed with the Upanisadas. The Bhagavat-Gita, the Padma- Purana, the Visnu-Purana and the Bhagavata-Purana are other important Vaisnava texts.

● Vaisnavism in Assam

Mythology has it that Assam has been in touch with Vaisnavism right from the ancient times. The legend of Visnu's son Naraka and Bana, who was defeated in battle by

Lord Krisna, bears testimony to this.

The first epigraphical reference to worship of Vishnu is found in the Badganga inscription of Bhutivarman. This inscription described Bhutivarman in Vaisnava terms as early as the fifth century AD.

The Umachal rock inscription of Surendra Varman, the Bargaon inscription of Ratnapala and the Doobi and the Nidhanpur plates of Bhaskar Varman and the Hayungthal plates of Harjara- all of the ancient period- have references either to Visnu, or to Balarama, or to Visnu's consort Laksmi. Janmastami, the festival on the birth anniversary of Lord Krishna and the Doul-jatra (Holi), the festival of colours, are two Vaisnava festivals celebrated enthusiastically.

In the Assamese society, Vishnu is worshiped also as Satya-Narayana, a benevolent God. Visnu is also worshipped in the form of the Salagrama, which is a special kind of stone.

● **Vaisnava Centres of Assam**

Temples of Vishnu in Assam are not found in plenty. The Hayagriva-Madhava temple at Hajo and the Aswakranta temple at North Guwahati are two important Visnu temples of Assam. In the Kamakhya Temple complex also there is Visnu temple. The deity in the temple is known as Kambalakhya. Visnu and Siva are worshiped jointly in the temple. There are a few modern Visnu temples in Assam. The Harimandir at Nalbari is such a temple. This temple was constructed in the early part of the twentieth century.

● **Vaisnava Literature of Assam**

The Vaisnava literatures of Assam do not constitute a voluminous body. The oral songs such as those sung in the worship of Satyanarayan are the major oral literature of the Vaisnava faith in Assam.

Many pre-Sankaradeva poets of Assam composed descriptive poetry using episodes from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Madhava Kandali of the fourteenth century translated the Ramayana into Assamese. It is not known whether these poets were inspired by Vaisnavism. However, their works may be accepted as Vaisnava literature as Visnu or forms of Visnu like Rama and Krishna are their major characters.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answer the following questions by filling up the blanks:

Q 13. What is the other term used for Vaishnavism ?

.....

Q 14. Which inscription provides the earliest reference to the worship of Vishnu?

.....

Q 15. Name an important Vishnu temple at Hajo ?

.....

Q 16. Name the texts that do not consider Vishnu as a major deity ?

.....

7.10 LET US SUM UP

After going through this unit, you have learnt about–

- The different religious faiths that have been practised in Assam.
- The archaeological remains belonging to different faiths.
- The religious texts and literary works of Saivism, Saktism, Buddhism, Vaishnavism .
- The invaluable contribution of the religious faith in the culture, society and literature of Assam.

7.11 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: Kiratas.

Ans to Q No 2: Banamala Varman's Tezpur land-grant

Ans to Q No 3: Biswa Singha

Ans to Q No 4: Hara-Gauri Sambada

Ans to Q No 5: Kamakhya

Ans to Q No 6: A folk form of Sakti.

Ans to Q No 7: Queen Phuleswari

Ans to Q No 8: It is the tantric forms of the Mother Goddess, which is ten in number

Ans to Q No 9: Hinayana

Ans to Q No 10: Saraha, Nagarjuna, and Luipa

Ans to Q No 11: Another form of Tantric Buddhism

Ans to Q No 12: Bhaitbari

Ans to Q No 13: Sanatana dharma

Ans to Q No 14: The Badganga inscription

Ans to Q No 15: Hayagriva-Madhava

Ans to Q No 16: Vedas

7.12 FURTHER READING

1) Barpujari, H.K. (2003). The Comprehensive History of Assam, Vol. 1, Publication Board Assam, Guwahati
2) Choudhury, P.C. (1987). The History of the Civilization of the People of Assam to the Twelfth Century AD, 3rd edition, Delhi
3) Neog, Maheswar (1984) Religions of the North-East, New Delhi

7.13 MODEL QUESTIONS

A) VERY SHORT QUESTIONS (Answer each question within 50 words)

Q 1: Name the most important centre of Buddhism in ancient Assam?

Q 2: The “Rati-Khowa” tradition is associated with which religion?

Q 3: Mention the two sub-sects of Saivism that worships both Siva and Sakti.

Q 4: Name the Ahom ruler who constructed the Sukreswar temple in Guwahati.

Q 5: Name the oldest Siva temple of Assam.

B) SHORT QUESTIONS (Answer each question within 150 words) Write Short notes on-

a) Naamghar

b Kapalikas

c) Panchamakara

d) Siva as a folk deity

C) LONG QUESTIONS (Answer each question in between 300-500 words) Trace the development of Saivism in Assam.

Q 1) Write a note on Saktism in Assam.

Q 2) Explain the spread of Tantric cult in Assam.

Q 3) Discuss the origin and development of Buddhism in ancient Assam.

Q 4) Discuss the origin and development of Buddhism in ancient Assam.

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UNIT 8 : THE NEO-VAISHNAVITE MOVEMENT OF ASSAM

UNIT STRUCTURE

8.1 Learning Objectives

8.2 Introduction

8.3 Origin and Development of Neo-Vaishnavite Movement in Assam

8.4 Sankaradeva and the Neo-Vaishnavite Movement

8.5 Neo-Vaishnavite Movement after Sankaradeva in Assam

8.6 Let Us Sum Up

8.7 Answers To Check Your Progress

8.8 Further Reading

8.9 Model Questions

8.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to learn

- Discuss the origin and development of Neo-Vaishnavite Movement,
- Discuss the contributions of Sankaradeva towards Neo-Vaishnavite Movement,
- Describe the development of Neo-Vaishnavite Movement after Sankaradeva.

8.2 INTRODUCTION

The Bhakti Movement (800-1700) started in South India in the sixth and the seventh centuries AD. The movement then gradually spread into the whole of India in the following centuries.

The Bhakti Movement took different shape in different places. Still the basic character and motive of the movement remained the same. The movement opposed Brahmanical dominance, religious fanaticism, ritualism and casteism. It advocated for reaching God through love and devotion.

The saints of the Bhakti Movement communicated to people through their devotional songs and dances. Tukaram in Maharastra, Mirabai in Rajasthan, the Sufi's in Punjab, Kabira in Uttar Pradesh and Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva in Assam were a few of the major saints of the Bhakti Movement. According to their belief, God is one and he may be

reached through love and devotion to Him.

8.3 ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE NEO-VAISHNAVA MOVEMENT IN ASSAM

The Bhakti Movement in Assam was initiated by Srimanta Sankardeva (1449–1568) towards the end of the fifteenth century. Sankardeva was a multifaceted personality—a saint, philosopher, poet, dramatist, musician, social reformer, and cultural visionary—whose contributions transformed the religious, social, and cultural landscape of Assam. Inspired by the pan-Indian Bhakti tradition, he propagated a form of Vaishnavism that emphasized devotion to a single supreme deity, Lord Krishna, while rejecting rigid ritualism, caste discrimination, and religious exclusivity. His mission was carried forward by his foremost disciple, Sri Sri Madhavadeva (1489–1596), who consolidated and expanded the movement throughout Assam.

The religious philosophy propagated by Sankardeva is popularly known as Neo-Vaishnavism. Unlike earlier forms of Vaishnavism, Sankardeva's doctrine was firmly rooted in the Bhagavata Purana, particularly its emphasis on pure devotion (*bhakti*) to Lord Krishna. Since the *Bhagavata Purana* served as its principal scriptural foundation, the faith also came to be known as Bhagavati Dharma. Sankardeva translated and interpreted the teachings of the *Bhagavata* into the Assamese language, making religious knowledge accessible to ordinary people. Through his literary works, devotional songs, and public performances, he transformed complex theological ideas into a simple and practical religious philosophy.

The central principle of Neo-Vaishnavism is Ekasarana Dharma, meaning "taking refuge in one God." According to this doctrine, Lord Krishna is the sole object of worship and devotion. Salvation is attained not through elaborate rituals, sacrifices, or priestly mediation, but through unwavering faith, moral conduct, and complete surrender to Krishna. This monotheistic doctrine distinguished Sankardeva's movement from the ritualistic and polytheistic practices prevalent in medieval Assam.

Another significant feature of Sankardeva's philosophy is the practice of Naama Dharma, or devotion through the chanting and recitation of God's name. Congregational singing of the divine name (*Naam-Kirtan*) became the principal mode of worship. Since the religion combines exclusive devotion to one God with the chanting of His name, it is

widely known as Ekasarana Naama Dharma. Sankardeva believed that sincere remembrance and glorification of God were sufficient to attain spiritual liberation, making religion simple, accessible, and egalitarian.

The faith is also referred to as Mahapurushiya Dharma because Sankardeva came to be revered as a Mahapurusha, or "Great Person," whose spiritual wisdom and humanitarian ideals inspired generations of followers. Although he never claimed divine status, his disciples regarded him as an enlightened teacher whose life exemplified the highest ideals of devotion, morality, and social service.

Beyond its religious significance, Sankardeva's movement brought about profound social reforms. Medieval Assamese society was deeply divided by caste hierarchy, sectarian conflicts, and various social inequalities. Sankardeva challenged these divisions by preaching the essential equality of all human beings before God. His movement welcomed followers irrespective of caste, tribe, occupation, or social status. Members of different ethnic communities—including tribal groups and marginalized sections—were encouraged to participate in congregational worship. While the movement did not completely abolish caste distinctions in society, it significantly weakened social barriers and promoted the ideals of fraternity, compassion, and communal harmony.

The Neo-Vaishnavite Movement also became the foundation of Assamese cultural identity. Sankardeva established two important religious and cultural institutions: the Satra and the Naamghar. The Satra emerged as a monastic institution devoted to religious education, preservation of scriptures, training of monks, manuscript writing, performing arts, and community welfare. Over time, Satras became centres of learning, literature, music, painting, dance, and social organization throughout Assam. The Naamghar, literally meaning "house of prayer," functioned as the village community hall where people assembled for devotional singing, discussions, dispute resolution, and cultural activities. Even today, the Naamghar remains one of the most important institutions of rural Assamese society.

Sankardeva also made lasting contributions to Assamese literature and performing arts. He composed devotional songs known as Borgeets, which are regarded as masterpieces of Assamese classical music. He introduced Ankiya Naat, a unique form of one-act devotional drama that presented episodes from the life of Lord Krishna through music, dialogue, dance, and narration. These plays were performed as Bhaona, a theatrical tradition that continues to flourish in Assam. Furthermore, the dance traditions associated

with the Satras gradually evolved into Sattriya Dance, which was officially recognized as one of the eight classical dance forms of India in 2000. Through these artistic innovations, Sankardeva integrated religion, education, and entertainment into a unified cultural tradition. Following Sankardeva's death in 1568, the Bhakti Movement continued to flourish in Assam for nearly two centuries. Under the leadership of prominent Vaishnavite saints such as Damodardeva, Harideva, Madhavadeva, and several other disciples, the movement expanded into different parts of the Brahmaputra Valley. During this period, various Satras were established, scriptures were copied and preserved, devotional literature was composed, and the institutional structure of Neo-Vaishnavism became firmly rooted. Different sub-sects evolved within the broader Vaishnavite tradition, each developing its own monastic discipline and administrative practices while remaining faithful to Sankardeva's fundamental teachings.

The influence of Neo-Vaishnavism did not end with the conclusion of the Bhakti Movement. Instead, it evolved into a living religious and cultural tradition that continues to shape Assamese society. Today, hundreds of Satras and thousands of Naamghars across Assam preserve Sankardeva's spiritual heritage. Festivals, devotional music, Bhaona performances, and Sattriya dance continue to transmit his ideals to new generations. His emphasis on equality, ethical living, devotion, cultural creativity, and social harmony remains highly relevant in contemporary society. Neo-Vaishnavism has therefore become much more than a religious movement; it is the foundation of Assamese cultural identity and one of the most enduring legacies of medieval India.

8.4 SANKARADEVA AND NEOVAISHNAVITE MOVEMENT

The worship of Lord Vishnu had been prevalent in the Brahmaputra Valley since ancient times. Archaeological remains, inscriptions, and literary sources indicate that Vaishnavism coexisted with Shaivism, Shaktism, and various indigenous tribal religious traditions. Temples dedicated to Vishnu and his incarnations were established by different ruling dynasties, including the Varmans, the Palas, and later the Kacharis.

However, the earlier form of Vaishnavism differed significantly from the religion propagated by Sankardeva. Traditional Vaishnavism largely revolved around:

- Idol worship in temples.

- Elaborate rituals and ceremonies performed by Brahmin priests.
- Sanskrit scriptures that were inaccessible to the common people.
- Caste-based religious privileges.
- Costly religious sacrifices and offerings.

Religion remained largely confined to the upper sections of society, while the majority of the population had limited participation in religious life.

Socio-Political Background

The emergence of the Neo-Vaishnavite Movement must be understood in the context of the socio-political conditions of fifteenth-century Assam. The Brahmaputra Valley was politically fragmented into several kingdoms and chiefdoms, including those ruled by the Ahoms, Koches, Chutiyas, Kacharis, and numerous Bhuyan chiefs. Frequent warfare and political rivalries prevented the growth of social unity. Society itself was highly heterogeneous. Different ethnic groups such as the Bodos, Mishings, Karbis, Rabhas, Tiwas, Koches, and other indigenous communities followed their own religious beliefs and customs. The gradual expansion of Brahmanical Hinduism introduced a rigid caste hierarchy, which created new forms of social inequality and discrimination. Lower castes and tribal communities often found themselves excluded from mainstream religious practices.

The religious atmosphere was equally complex. Shaivism and Shaktism had become associated with elaborate rituals, sacrifices, Tantric practices, and expensive ceremonies that required priestly mediation. Animal sacrifice formed an important feature of many religious observances. Ordinary people found these practices financially burdensome and spiritually inaccessible. This social and religious environment created favourable conditions for the emergence of a reform movement that emphasized simplicity, equality, and devotion.

Sankardeva was born in 1449 CE at Bardowa (Bordowa) in present-day Nagaon district of Assam. He belonged to the Bhuyan aristocracy, and his father, Kusumbar Bhuyan, was a powerful local chief. After the early death of his parents, Sankardeva was brought up under the care of his grandmother.

From an early age, Sankardeva displayed extraordinary intellectual ability. He studied

Sanskrit grammar, literature, philosophy, the Vedas, Puranas, and other Hindu scriptures under the renowned scholar Mahendra Kandali. Besides religious learning, he excelled in poetry, music, painting, physical education, and administration.

A turning point in his life came after the death of his first wife, when he undertook an extensive pilgrimage across India. This journey lasted for nearly twelve years. During his travels, he visited important pilgrimage centres such as Puri, Mathura, Vrindavan, Gaya, Prayag, Haridwar, Rameswaram, Badrinath, and Dwarka. He came into contact with various Bhakti saints and observed different schools of Vaishnavism flourishing in different regions of India. The pilgrimage profoundly influenced his religious outlook. He became convinced that true religion should be based not on ritualism but on sincere devotion to God and moral conduct. Returning to Assam, he began preaching a new interpretation of Vaishnavism suited to the needs of Assamese society.

Philosophy of Neo-Vaishnavism

The religion propagated by Sankardeva came to be known as Neo-Vaishnavism or Ekasarana Nama Dharma. It was based primarily on the Bhagavata Purana, especially its teachings on devotion to Lord Krishna.

The central principles of the faith include:

1. Ekasarana (Taking Refuge in One God)

Sankardeva preached exclusive devotion to Lord Krishna, regarded as the supreme manifestation of Vishnu. Worship of multiple deities was discouraged, and believers were advised to surrender completely to one Supreme Being.

2. Bhakti as the Path to Salvation

Unlike ritualistic religion, Neo-Vaishnavism emphasized bhakti (devotion) as the easiest and most effective means of attaining salvation. According to Sankardeva, sincere love and faith in God were more important than ritual sacrifices, fasting, or elaborate ceremonies.

3. Importance of Sravana and Kirtana

Drawing upon the nine forms of devotion (Navadha Bhakti) described in the Bhagavata Purana, Sankardeva particularly emphasized:

- Sravana (listening to the stories and teachings of Krishna)
- Kirtana (singing and chanting the name and glory of God)

These practices were open to everyone regardless of caste, gender, wealth, or education.

4. Nama-Kirtana

Congregational chanting of God's name became the principal form of worship. The repetition of the divine name was believed to purify the mind and bring spiritual liberation without requiring expensive rituals.

5. Equality of Human Beings

One of the most revolutionary aspects of Sankardeva's teaching was his insistence that all human beings are equal before God. Although the movement functioned within the broader Hindu framework, it admitted people from different castes and tribal communities into the fold of devotion.

6. Opposition to Animal Sacrifice

Sankardeva strongly condemned animal sacrifice and violence committed in the name of religion. He preached compassion, non-violence, kindness, and ethical living.

7. Moral and Ethical Life

The movement emphasized honesty, humility, truthfulness, self-discipline, and service to society as essential components of religious life.

Social Reform

The Neo-Vaishnavite Movement was not merely a religious movement; it also functioned as an important social reform movement. Sankardeva sought to remove many social evils that had become deeply rooted in Assamese society. He criticized:

- Caste discrimination,
- Untouchability,
- Priestly domination,
- Expensive religious ceremonies,
- Superstitions,
- Animal sacrifice,
- Social exclusion.

Through his teachings, people from different castes, occupations, and ethnic communities began participating together in devotional gatherings. This promoted social harmony and reduced barriers between various sections of society.

Although caste distinctions did not disappear entirely, the movement considerably

weakened their social importance and promoted the ideal of human equality.

Institutional Contributions (In the unit 9, we shall discuss in detail)

To spread his religious ideas effectively, Sankardeva established two unique institutions:- Satra and Namghar

The Satra became a monastic institution responsible for religious instruction, preservation of manuscripts, cultural education, and social service. Satras later emerged as important centres of literature, education, music, painting, dance, and manuscript preservation.

The Naamghar became the village prayer hall where people assembled for congregational worship, recitation of scriptures, singing devotional songs, community discussions, and cultural activities. It also functioned as a democratic institution for resolving village disputes and strengthening social unity.

Cultural Contributions

The Neo-Vaishnavite Movement produced a remarkable cultural renaissance in Assam. Sankardeva enriched Assamese literature by composing devotional works such as the *Kirtana Ghosa*, translating portions of the *Bhagavata Purana*, and writing several devotional poems. He introduced Ankiya Naat, a unique one-act dramatic form based on episodes from the life of Krishna. These plays continue to be performed as Bhaona, one of Assam's most distinctive theatrical traditions. He also composed Borgeets, devotional songs that represent one of the earliest and finest traditions of Assamese classical music. The dance traditions developed within the Satras gradually evolved into Sattriya Dance, which is today recognized as one of the eight classical dance forms of India.

8.5 NEO-VAISHNAVITE MOVEMENT AFTER SANKARADEVA

The immediate effect of the death of Sankardeva was visible on the neo-vaishnavite movement that the movement got split due to ideological differences of Madhavadeva and Damodardeva. Both Madhabdeva and Damodardeva were well known disciples of Sankardeva. Division became visible when the headship of the movement was entrusted by Sankardeva upon Madhabdeva. Damodardeva, who was a Brahmin disciple of Sankardeva could not accept Madhabdeva as the head of the order and seceded from it and established his own order by modifying the religious teachings and practices of the parent-cult by making a compromise between the path of devotion and the Brahmonical

practices, which was against the teachings of the founder of the sect. Thus with Damodardeva, a new order of the neo-vaishnavite movement Brahma Samhati developed with more popularity among the Brahmin disciples of the movement. This division was soon followed by another division developed by Purushottam Thakur grandson of the saint himself, known as the Purusha Sanghati, this division too rejected Madhavadeva's headship, and claimed Sankaradeva as the Guru, and did not give much stress on ritualism. The third division came when Gopaldeva alias Gopal Ata, a disciple of Madhavadeva, founded his sect with all forms of liberality in the practice of religion as allowed originally by Sankaradeva known as the Kala Sanghati. MathuradasBurha Ata, another disciple of Madhabdeva founded another order Nika Sanghati to retain the original teachings of the neo-vaishnavite movement. The process of the historic sectarian divisions of Sankardeva's Vaishnavism took place in Lower Assam, and was complete by the close of the 16th century. Despite differences in certain aspects due to differences of personalities and contexts of developments, they share in common most of the basic elements of Vaishnavism, initiated by Sankardeva.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answer the Following questions:

Q.1: Name the chief disciple of Sankaradeva.

……

Q.2:.....founded NikaSanghati. (fill in the blank)

Q.3: Damodardeva developed…….....Sanghati.(fill in the blank)

Q.4: Who was the father of Sankaradeva?

8.6 LET US SUM UP

After going through this unit you have learnt-

- The Neo-Vaishnavite Movement, founded by Srimanta Sankardeva, marked a turning point in the religious, social, and cultural history of Assam. Building upon the Bhakti tradition, Sankardeva introduced Ekasarana Nama Dharma, which emphasized exclusive devotion to Lord Krishna, equality among human beings,

congregational worship, and the rejection of elaborate rituals, caste discrimination, and animal sacrifice. Through institutions such as the Satra and Naamghar, and through literary and artistic creations including Borgeet, Ankiya Naat, Bhaona, and Sattriya, he laid the foundation of a vibrant Assamese cultural tradition.

- After Sankardeva's death in 1568, the movement expanded under the leadership of Sri Sri Madhavadeva and other eminent disciples. Differences regarding leadership and the interpretation of religious practices eventually led to the emergence of four principal sectarian orders—Brahma Samhati, Purusha Samhati, Kala Samhati, and Nika Samhati. Although these Sanghatis differed in matters of ritual, organization, and social outlook, they all remained committed to the core principles of Neo-Vaishnavism established by Sankardeva.
- The movement had far-reaching consequences for Assamese society. It promoted social integration by bringing together people from different castes and ethnic communities, encouraged the use of the Assamese language in religious and literary works, and fostered the growth of music, dance, drama, painting, and manuscript traditions. The Satras and Naamghars evolved into important centres of religion, education, culture, and community life.
- Thus, the Neo-Vaishnavite Movement was not merely a religious reform movement but also a powerful force for social transformation and cultural renaissance. Its ideals of devotion, equality, moral living, and communal harmony continue to influence Assamese society, making Sankardeva's legacy one of the most enduring and significant contributions to the history and culture of Assam.

8.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answer no 1:Madhabadeva

Answer no 2:Mathuradas

Answer no 3: Brahma

Answer no 4:Kushumbara Bhuyan

8.8 FURTHER READING

1) Neog, M., (1965), Sankardeva and His Times: Early History of the Vaisnava

Faith and Movement in Assam, Gauhati University, Guwahati

2) Sarma, S.N., (1966), The Neo Vaisnavite Movement and The Satra Institution of Assam, Gauhati University, Guwahati

3) Mahanta, P.J., (2007), The Sankardeva Movement : Its Cultural Horizons, Purbanchal Prakash, Guwahati

8.9 MODEL QUESTIONS

A) VERY SHORT QUESTIONS (Answer each question within 50 words)

Q.1: Who was Sankaradeva?

Q.2: Mention four divisions of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement.

B) SHORT QUESTIONS (Answer each question within 150 words)

Q.1: Briefly discuss the teachings of Neo-Vaishnavite Movement.

Q.2: Write a short note on Sankaradeva.

C) LONG QUESTIONS (Answer each questions within 300-500 words)

Q.1: Discuss the origin and development of the Neo-Vaishnavite Movement in Assam.

Q.2: Discuss the contributions of Sankaradeva towards the Neo-Vaishnavite Movement.

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UNIT 9 :NEO-VAISHNAVITE INSTITUTIONS: STRUCTURE AND CULTURE

UNIT STRUCTURE

9.1 Learning Objectives

9.2 Introduction

9.3 Origin and Development of the Satra institution and Namghar

9.3.1 The Satra

9.3.2 The Namghar

9.4 Influence of the Satra institution and Namghar in Assamese Social Life

9.5 Cultural Practices in the Satra institution and Namghar

9.6 Let Us Sum Up

9.7 Answers to Check Your Progress

9.8 Further Reading

9.9 Model Questions

9.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- Describe the origin and development of the Satra institution and Namghar,
- Discuss the influence of the Satra institution and Namghar in Assamese social life,
- Discuss the cultural practises in the Satra institution and Namghar.

9.2. INTRODUCTION

The culture which developed in Assam surrounding in and around the satra institution is termed in general as the satriya culture. The satra and namghar were established in Assam as a part of the neo-Vaisnavite movement started by Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankardeva during the 15th century. In the earlier unit, we have discussed the neo-Vaisnavite movement in brief along with the other religious traditions of Assam.

In this unit, we are going to study about the origin and development of the satra institution and namghar, its influence in the social life of Assamese people, and the cultural activities which are practised in the satra and namghar.

Sankardeva established satra and namghar which initiated and spread the neo-Vaisnavism in Assam. Surrounding the satras, there developed the satriya culture which comprised various rites and rituals, functions and festivals, customs and traditions, music, dance, drama, etc. The establishment of satras in different places of Assam led to the spread of satriya culture across the state. The satriya culture made deep inroads in the Assamese society as the satras and namghars did influence the religious, social, and cultural, even at times the political, life of the people.

9.3 ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE SATRA INSTITUTION AND NAMGHAR

The satra and namghar can be regarded as the gifts of the neo-Vaisnavite movement in Assam. Sankardeva for preaching his new faith played an influential role in establishing satra and namghar. The satra in the simplest form is a centre for religious discussion. The namghar evolved as an offshoot, an extended wing or a miniature replica of the satra institution. It can be defined as a community prayer hall which is found today in every Assamese locality. In this section, we will study about the satra and namghar in two sub-sections.

9.3.1 THE SATRA

The neo-Vaisnavite movement led to the formation of satras in Assam. But one must not feel that the satras owed its existence to the neo-Vaisnavite movement. We find reference to satras in the Vedic text 'Satapatha Brahmana' where it meant sacrificial sessions.

In the 'Bhagavata Purana' the word satra appears several times, each time connoting different meanings, like satra-sanjakin-karma (performance of sacrifice), satra-samajesu (an assembly), brahma-sattra (a session of discussion of Brahmans), etc. But in the context of neo-Vaisnavism of Sankardeva, satra as stated earlier only means centre for religious discussion having no relation with the sacrificial system.

The satra can be regarded as a Vaisnava monastery. But a satra is more than a Buddhist vihara or a Hindu temple. The satras in Assam are a unique type of institution having a definite structure. It is generally situated in a four-sided enclosed area with four karapat (gateway), kirtanghar or namghar (rectangular

prayer-hall), manikuta (where asana or altar is placed), residential abode of satradhikara (head of the satra), hati (straight row of huts where bhakats or monks used to reside), bharalghar (store house) etc.

There are four principal constituents of a satra, namely, the satradhikara (head of the satra), deka-adhikara (deputy head of the satra), bhakats (clerical devotees residing within the walls of the satra), and sisyas (lay devotees or disciples leading household life living inside and even outside the satra premises in the villages). It preached and spread the Eka-Sarana-Nama-Dharma stressing importance on the four key components, namely, guru, deva, nama, and bhakat.

In general, the satra is divided (in Assamese) as udasin, ardha-udasin, and grihasthi. The satras where the satradhikara, deka-adhikara, and bhakats living within the walls of the satra lead a celibate (unmarried) life are called udasin satras. Then the satras where along with the celibate satradhikara, deka-adhikara, and bhakats, there resides sisyas within the walls of the satra are called ardha-udasin satras. The grihasthi satras are those where the satradhikara, deka-adhikara and bhakats like the sisyas leads a household life and perform the functions of the satra. In Assam, most of the satras belong to the category of the grihasthi satras.

The satras are found today all over the state. On the basis of the founder of the satras, the satras are again classified (in Assamese) as mul satra, agyapor satra, and xolabonti satra. The satra directly established by the neo-Vaisnava preacher or guru himself is the mul satra. The agyapor satra is the one established by the bhakats or sisyas at the order of the guru. Again when the descendants of the guru used to take a sacred item of the mul satra established by the guru and establishes a new satra in the name of the mul satra or with different name, that satra is called the xolabonti satra.

Although, Sankardeva established satra in Assam, yet there exists difference of opinion whether the mahapurusha himself established the satra institution or not. The word satra was not probably used for the religious institution established during the life of Sankardeva. The mahapurusha used the term deva griha or hari griha for referring to the religious institution established by him. The term thaan was also used instead of satra at that time as Purushottam Thakur, grandson of Sankardeva in his writings used the term thaan while referring to the Bardowa satra.

Sankardeva initially at his birth place Tembuani (Bardowa), set up the first deva griha or hari griha with the active assistance of his resourceful cousin Ramaraya. This deva griha or hari griha was the centre for religious discussion, prayer, recitation of religious books, etc. Over the passage of time, it took an institutional shape in the form of satra. No satra in its institutional form was established during the life time of Sankardeva.

It was only after the demise of Sankardeva that his main disciples, namely Madhavadeva, Damodaradeva, and Harideva started the process of establishing satra institution in a formal way. Initially, Damodaradeva established satra at Barpeta and Sundaridiya; and Harideva at Bohori. Later, other neo-Vaisnava preachers or guru like Banshigopaladeva, Narayandas Aata, Aniruddhadeva, etc with their missionary zeal and organising capacity established satras at different places of Assam for spreading the ideals of neo-Vaisnavism.

However, there started ideological differences in neo-Vaisnavism in the post-Sankardeva period resulting in the emergence of four orders or samhatis of satras- (i) Purusha (ii) Nika (iii) Kala and (iv) Brahma. The Purusha samhati derives its origin from Purushottam Thakur, the eldest grandson of Srimanta Sankardeva. The satras of this samhati were founded by the preachers who were direct descendants of Srimanta Sankardeva. This samhati lays emphasis on Nama or prayer.

The Nika samhati was founded by Mathuradas Burha-Ata and Badaluwa Padma-Ata. They organized their satras in strict conformity with the rules and regulations prescribed by Madhavadeva and paid great attention to outward cleanliness (nika). In this samhati, the position of Madhavadeva is more important than that of Srimanta Sankardeva, the latter being revered as the Guru (teacher) of their Guru.

The satras established by Gopaladeva and his successors formed the Kala-samhati. The Kala-samhati gave the guru a supreme position. It was more egalitarian in outlook and more liberal in matters of caste than other samhatis. Besides, the satradhikaras of these satra preached mainly among the tribal and so-called backward or depressed people of the region.

The Brahma samhati consisted of the sub-sects of Damodaradeva and Harideva, the two Brahmana disciples of Srimanta Sankardeva. Most of the satras

affiliated to this samhati are headed by Brahmana preceptors; hence the name Brahma samhati. This samhati permits Vedic rites and devotional practices alongside nama-kirtana and lays highest importance on deva (God).

The satra institution of different orders or samhatis is well maintained with different officials being appointed for it. The nature of the satra led to variance regarding the sets of officials in a satra. Still, there are some common as well as key officials in each and every satra, in addition to the satradhikara and deka-adhikara, like the rajmedhi, bormedhi, pachoni, namghoria, namlogowa, khataniar, pathak, bhagawati, gayan-bayan, etc. These officials used to discharge their assigned duties in complete harmony for smooth functioning of the satra.

9.3.2 THE NAMGHAR

The namghar, as stated earlier, is an extended wing of the satra institution. Namghar also known as kirtanghar is the prayer-hall which is rectangular in shape. It is the centre of all the religious activities and is hence considered the central institute of a satra. It is an indispensable part of the satra institution carrying forward and spreading the ideals of satra institution in each and every place as we do not have a satra everywhere.

In every Assamese locality, the namghar acts as the centre of religious, intellectual, and cultural activities. There the religious texts are recited and expounded; community prayers are held; dramatic performances are enacted; music and dance are performed; festivals are celebrated; greater problems of life, philosophy and religion are discussed and debated. Though, not in practice today, the namghar also acted at an earlier time as a court trying all civil and criminal cases.

As a public institution, the namghar provided a purely democratic platform for the persons of the locality to manage their own affairs. The people of the locality with their combined labour and resources used to build, maintain, and repair the namghar. Sometimes, the satradhikara of the satra to which the namghar is associated used to visit the namghar to initiate new disciples and to disseminate spiritual education among them.

Always, the namghar is constructed facing the eastward direction. At earlier times, the namghar was constructed with bamboo, wood, straw, etc. However, now a days, the namghar is constructed with brick, stone, iron, etc. The area or the space inside namghar is used to be divided for its numerous activities like offering of prayer, recitation of religious text, cultural performances, etc. The seat for the satradhikara, deka-adhikara, bhakats, sisyas, etc are all fixed for the smooth and systematic functioning of the activities in a namghar.

At the way of entry to the namghar, there used to be the batchara or entrance. Inside the namghar, there is the manikuta where in an asana or altar the religious text like Kirtanaghosa, Namaghosa is placed as no image of god is worshipped in neo-vaisnavism. Then the central area inside is the kirtanghar, the other name for namghar where the kirtana or prayer sessions are held. There is also a sowghar where the items required for dramatic performances like masks or mukha, costumes, ornaments, etc are kept.

A set of officials like satola, deori, namlogowa, pathak, pachoni, etc are there in the namghar for smooth running of its activities. They used to have their position in the namghar in order of their gradation and used to have their seat on gradation basis during public functions in the namghar. On the basis of that gradation, they also used to get an additional share in the prasada (offering in the form of fruits, grams, etc) on public functions held in the namghar.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answer the following questions:

Q 1.What is Satra according to the Satapatha Brahmana'?

.....

Q 2. Define the agyapor satra?

.....

Q 3. In which direction is the namghar constructed?

.....

Q 4. In the Neo-Vaishnava faith, what is placed at the altar, and is at the same time the source of worship?

.....

9.4 INFLUENCE OF THE SATRA INSTITUTION AND NAMGHAR IN ASSAMESE SOCIAL LIFE

A new outlook has been provided to the Assamese society by the satra institution and namghar. These two religious institutions are connected with almost all the aspects of Assamese life. As such the Assamese social life cannot be even imagined without these two neo-Vaisnava institutions. Deep influences are there of the satra institution and namghar in Assamese social life which covers every other aspects of life. The following influences we are now going to discuss in this section.

● **Social Harmony and Oneness**

The satra institution and namghar by providing to the people a simple and common religious faith in the form of neo-Vaisnavism did away with the contemporary faiths and creeds of diverse shades and grades. Without any caste or creed barrier, even religious barriers at times, the satra institution and namghar gave a free and open platform to people for assembling together and thereby created social harmony and promoted oneness. This to a great extent paved the way for the abolition of rigid caste system prevailing then in a strict manner in the society.

● **Up-liftment of Socially Backward Classes**

Each and every class in the society is equally treated in the satra institution and namghar. The socially backward classes and various tribes are included in the neo-Vaisnava religious faith. Their social position is thereby uplifted and better standards of living are provided to them.

● **Creation of Morality and Social Consciousness**

Moral life of the people is greatly uplifted by the satra institution and namghar. The two institutions used to maintain the moral and ethical code to regulate the life of people. Emphasis is laid on making the people socially conscious so that they lead a life by maintaining discipline, order, and morality. The society should be duty based so that a feeling of sacrifice and co-operation is created reducing enmity and conflict among the people.

● **Development of the Concept of Assamese Nationality**

With the creation of the satra institution and namghar all over Assam, a feeling of unity and togetherness developed among the Assamese people. A common culture provided

by these two neo-Vaisnava institutions created one culture in the Assamese society, what we call today as the Satriya culture. This feeling of unity and togetherness brought close the people of different places of Assam closer to one another and thereby gradually created the way for the development of the concept of Assamese nationality.

- **Centre for Providing Justice**

At earlier times, the satra institution, more particularly the namghar used to provide justice to the people in both civil and criminal cases. As a social institution, it acted as a loka adalat (public court) solving individual conflicts and differences of opinion through mutual understanding. For serious offences, punishment was provided in the form of expulsion from namghar, social boycott, deprivation from property rights, etc. Even today, the namghar in many villages is used to settle amicably the disputes of minor nature.

- **Promoting Economic Growth**

The satra institution and namghar even promoted economic growth in the Assamese society. In the field of agriculture, scope was provided for farming of fruits, grams, pulses, etc which are required for religious offerings. Weaving industry got encouragement as various types of dresses are need for the dramatic performances, etc in the neo-Vaisnava institutions. Bell and brass metal industry grew a lot as its products in the form of mainly utensils are used in the satra institution and namghar. Locally available products like bamboo, wood, straw, etc were also brought into proper utilization by using in construction works.

- **Centre for Spreading Education**

Both the satra institution and the namghar were a centre of learning and education. During the earlier times, even today through rarely, the satra institution used to maintain educational institutions like the pathsala, catuspathis, tols, etc which were run by the reputed scholars. In these institutions, instructions were imparted on religious scriptures and lore, grammar, law, music, dance, art, craft, etc. The satradhikara himself used to be an intellectual and a knowledgeable person providing religious education and spiritual guidance to the bhakats and sisyas. In the namghar, through the recitation and discussion of religious texts, prayer sessions, religious debates, performances of religious cultural items etc, education is imparted to the people in an informal way. Library was also maintained earlier by the satra institution and namghar for preserving books on religion,

philosophy, literature, music, dance, etc. Even, paintings were preserved there.

- **Centre for Literary Activities**

The satra institutions can be called the birth place of Assamese literature. Infact, the religious literature in Assam is a part of the neo-Vaisnavite movement. Sankardeva and his chief disciple and apostle, Madhavadeva composed a good number of songs (Bargeet), dramas (nat), verse narratives, and other types of work describing the teachings of neo- Vaisnavism. Most importantly, Sankardeva wrote the Kirtanaghosa and Madhavadeva wrote the Namaghosa, the two most sacred texts of neo-Vaisnavism faith. Sankardeva wrote in a new language called Brajabuli which is a mixture of Assamese and Maithili language.

The system of composing literary works started by Sankardeva and Madhavadeva continued with other neo-Vaisnava preachers who also contributed in a significant way to the literary field. Sankardeva even translated the Sanskrit scriptures into to Assamese and this continued resulting in the translation of the Bhagavata Purana, Mahabharata, Ramayana, various Kavyas, etc into Assamese language. There also started the practice of writing the biographies of the neo-Vaisnava saints in the form of Charitaputhis. The namghar provided the much needed platform for the public accessibility of the different types of literatures composed in the satra institution through recitation, discussion, debate, cultural performances, etc.

- **Centre for Cultural Activities**

For performing the cultural activities like singing, dance, drama, etc, the satra institution, more particularly the namghar, provided a wider platform. Devotional songs in the form of Bargeet are sung with the tune being maintained by musical instruments like khol (drum), taal (cymbal), etc. Dramas are performed in the form of dance drama called bhaona. Mostly the dramas are the ankiya nat (one act plays). The satra institution developed a school of traditional dance known as the satriya nritya. Some other forms of dance are also there like the oja-pali, sutradhar nritya, natuwa nach, rasa nritya, krishna nach, etc.

9.5 CULTURAL PRACTICES IN THE SATRA INSTITUTION AND NAMGHAR

The Assamese culture has been highly enriched by the cultural practices prevalent in the satra institution and namghar. The cultural practices are satriya nritya, Bargeet,

ankiya nat, bhaona, etc. These cultural practices constituted the performing arts of Assam about which we will study in detail in the next unit. In this section we will just provide a rough outline to let you know about the cultural practices.

- **Satriya Nritya**

Satriya Nritya is one among the eight principal classical Indian dance traditions. This dance form developed within the satra institution as an accompaniment to the ankiya nat and is hence termed as satriya nritya. Traditionally the theme of the satriya nritya was that of the mythological stories and was performed by the bhakats (only male) in satras as a part of their daily rituals or to mark special festivals. However, today, the satriya nritya is performed even on stage on both mythological and other themes by both men and women who may not be associated with any satra.

- **Bargeets**

Bargeets are a collection of lyrical songs. These were composed by Sankardeva and Madhavadeva for beginning the prayer services in the satras and namghar. The Bargeets are written in the pada form of verse. The Bargeets have specific ragas and tala. It expresses the religious sentiments of the neo-Vaisnava preachers. But similar type of song composed by others is not considered to be Bargeet proper.

- **Ankiya nat**

Ankiya nats are the one act plays performed in Assam. It was Sankardeva who started composing and performing the ankiya nats. The ankiya nats are written in the brajabuli language. The prevailing theme of the composition primarily centered round Lord Krishna. The ankiya nats usually combine live instruments and singers, dance and elaborate costumes in production.

- **Bhaona**

Bhaona is a form of drama created by Sankardeva. It has been a traditional form of entertainment with religious messages. The bhaona is generally staged at satras and namghars . The bhaona has some special characteristics like the plays, dialogues, costumes, ornaments, entry and foot-steps of the characters which differentiated it from other plays.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answer the following Questions:

Q 5. What do you mean by “Bargeet”?

.....

Q 6. What is the theme of Ankiya nat?

.....

Q 7. What differentiates Bhaona from other plays?

.....

9.6 LET US SUM UP

After going through this unit, you have learnt about

- The growth of satras as a vital part of the neo-Vaisnava movement,
- The importance of Namghar as a centre for discussions, religious and intellectual.
- The influence of the satra institution and namghar in creating social harmony and uplifting the socially backward classes, thus rousing the moral and social consciousness.
- The cultural practices prevalent in the satra institution and namghar.

9.7 FURTHER READING

1. Neog, M., (1965), Sankardeva and His Times: Early History of the Vaisnava Faith and Movement in Assam, Gauhati University, Guwahati
2. Sarma, S.N., (1966), The Neo Vaisnavite Movement and The Satra *Institution of Assam, Gauhati University, Guwahati*
3. Mahanta, P.J., (2007), The Sankardeva Movement : Its Cultural Horizons, Purbanchal Prakash, Guwahati

9.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: Sacrificial sessions

Ans to Q No 2: The satras established by the bhakats or sisyas at the order of the guru.

Ans to Q No 3: Eastward

Ans to Q No 4: Kirtan Ghosa/ Naamghosa

Ans to Q No 5: Composed by Sankardeva and Madhavadeva are a collection of lyrical songs

Ans to Q No 6: The theme of the composition of Ankiya nat is primarily centered round lord Krishna.

Ans to Q No 7: The bhaona has some special characteristics like the plays, dialogues, costumes, ornaments, entry and foot-steps of the characters which differentiate it from other plays.

9.9 MODEL QUESTIONS

A) VERY SHORT QUESTIONS (Answer each question within 50 words)

Q 1: What is the “manikuta”?

Q 2: Who is a Satradhikar?

Q 3: Who founded the Purusha Samhita?

Q 4: Who were the founders of the Nika Samhati?

B) SHORT QUESTIONS (Answer each question within 150-300 words)

Q 1: Write short notes on the role of -

a) Namghar as a public institution

b) Satras and Namghars as centre of learning

Q 2: What was the status of the Satras in the post-Sankardeva period?

C) LONG QUESTIONS (Answer each question in between 300-500 words)

Q 1: Describe the role of Satras and Namghars in the development of the Assamese society.

Q 1: Discuss the growth of Assamese literature during the Neo-Vaishnavite movement.

Q 3: Explain the prevalent cultural practices in the Satras and Namghars of Assam.

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Unit 10 : PERFORMING ARTS OF ASSAM

UNIT STRUCTURE:

10.1 Learning Objectives

10.2 Introduction:

10.3 History of Performing Arts

10.4 Temple Dances in Early Assam

10.4.1Devadasi

10.4.2 Ojhapali

10.4.3 Mati-Akhora

10.5 Let Us Sum Up

10.6 Further Reading

10.7 Answer to check your progress

10.8 Model Question

10.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- To explain about the origins of dance formswith the history of performing art of Early Assam.
- To discuss about the different forms of temple dances in early Assam.
- To elaborate how temple dances are performed especially the Devadasi Dance.
- To trace the growth and development of Xatriya dance and its importance to the Satras.
- To analyze the present status of these dances.

10.2 INTRODUCTION

The performing arts are a vital and necessary part of our culture and society and exist in many formal and informal settings. The Performing Art, while projecting itself, assimilates all other art forms such as acting, singing, dancing, drawing etc. Hence, performing arts is a form of art where artists use their voices, and bodies to convey a message or artistic expression. It is different from visual arts, in which an artist use paint,

canvas and various materials to create art objects.

10.3 HISTORY OF PERFORMING ARTS

The classical period of performing art began in Greece in 6th century BCE, ushered in by the tragic poets such as Sophocles. These poets wrote plays which, in some cases, incorporated dance. The Hellenistic period began the widespread use of comedy. However, by the 6th century CE, the western performing arts had been largely ended, as the Dark Ages began. Between the 9thand 14th century, performing art in the West was limited to religious historical enactments and morality plays, organized by the Church in celebration of holy days and other important events. But in the 15th century performing arts, along with the arts in general, saw revival as the Renaissance began in Italy and spread throughout Europe.

India is a land of rich culture and heritage. Since the beginning of our civilization, music, dance and drama have been an integral aspect of our culture. Initially, these art forms were used as medium of propagation for religionand social reforms in which music and dance were incorporated to gain popularity. From the Vedic era to the medieval period, the performing arts remained an important source of educating the masses. The Vedas laid down precise rules for the chanting of Vedic hymns. Even the pitch and the accent of singing different hymns have been prescribed. There was more of exemplary presentation through them than education or social reforms. Presently, these art forms have become means of entertainment for people all over the world.

The state of Assam is the heart of the India's Northeast and it described as a land of dances. In Assam the history of performing art is very old. We have found some information about dance and music of ancient Assam from the accounts of Hiuen-Tsang, the Chinese Traveller, who visited Assam in 7th century CE at the time of Kumar Bhaskarvarman, the ruler of Kamarupa. For the honor of this travellor, king Bhaskarvarman arranged dance and music in his court to welcome the guest. This party was continued for one month in every day. In a copper plate inscription of king Valavarman (11th century CE) mentioned that, in a temple Hetukasulin, Shiva was worshipped with dance and music.

There are various tribal communities lived in the hills and plains, among them are the Dimasa-Kacharis, the Karbis, the ZemiNagas, the Kukis in the hills, and the Bodo

Kacharis, the Mishing, the Deuris, the Rabhas, the Tiwas in the plains are prominent. All those tribes have been their own traditional festivals which they perform according to their calendar.

Mythology refers to music being brought to the people of Assam from a place of celestial beings. Assamese music is as ancient as the Puranas, Mahabharata etc. Historians claims that Musical instruments and Dance was observed in Assam from 2nd century A.D. It started its maiden journey in the days of King Baana of Sonitpur kingdom, when princess Usha and her friend Chitralekha sang and danced together at Agnigarh (Tezpur, Assam). Chitralekha is said to be the first artist of Martyaloka (Earth). So, the music of Assamese people which is so grand and special in its origin, thus dates back to the time which history can hardly reach. During the period of the Early Vedic times and the later Vedic times, Assam was introduced with “Ragas” and “Dhrupad Shailee” of the Indian Classical music. The experts however have divided the classical Assamese music into two parts - Borgeet and Ojha-pali. The composer of Borgeet, SrimantaSankardeva and his disciple Madhavdeva gave a new definition to the Assamese music. However, it could be stated that Assam has been musically affluent since the birth of the Brahmaputra River.

10.4 TEMPLE DANCES OF ASSAM

Dance and Music was an integral part of ancient Indian theatre as established by the Natya Shastra, the oldest and exhaustive treatise on theatre and dramaturgy.Dancedramas were performed in temple precincts. Dance movements were crystallised in stone as karanas in temple sculpture. Following the Bhakti movement in the 6th century, dance and music became powerful vehicles of worship. The deity was treated like a much-loved king, praised and royally entertained with music and dance, as part of the daily sacred rituals of worship. Gifted, highly educated temple dancers or devadasis were supported by the temples that were richly endowed by the rulers. Dance evolved as a composite art in temples as dancers,dance gurus, musicians, poets, composers, architects, sculptors and painters shared a holistic approach to all the arts. In Assam from the earliest time, people observed temple dance and music in the temple premises, among them Devadasi dance is prominent. In the later period (from 15th

century), Xatriya dance was performed in Xatras, which are the important centres of learning of Vaishnavism till today. Following dance form are the major dances which are observed in the temples.

10.4.1 DEVADASI

The Devadasi dance form of Assam is 1,300-year-old tradition, prevalent since the 3rd century when the Devadasi system was in place. In a copper plate inscription of Vanamala Varma Deva, we find the mention of 'Devadasi'. This dance form continues up-to the reign of king Ratnapala of 11th century. The Girls were offered to Saiva, Sakta and Vaishnava temples to dance as part of a daily ritual. Ancient texts like the KalikaPuran and Yogitantra carry references to this ritualistic dance practice.

The word Devadasi comes from the two Sanskrit words, 'Deva' meaning 'God' and 'Dasi' meaning servant or slave. Thus, Devadasi meant 'one who had devoted her life in service of god. According to the KalikaPuran and the Yoginitantra, ancient Kamarupa was a seat of tantra and the advent of Devadasis to Assam was due to tantric influences. The origins of the Devadasis in Assam can be traced to the reign of King Bhaskaravarman of the Varman dynasty (7th century A.D.). Doobi Copper Plate also mentions that the Chinese traveller Hiuen Tsang's praise of the Kamrupi arts and dance. The Negheriting Siva temple at Dergaon, the Kamakhya temple of Guwahati, the Siva doul in Sivasagar, Hayagriva Madhaba and Kedara temple of Hajo and the Porihoreshwarmandir in Dubi, Pathsala were the centers where Devadasi tradition prevailed.

Devadasi dance was performed during morning worship and 'aroti' in the evening in the temple premises. This dance is set to the tune of song and is accompanied by the musical instruments like khol, taal etc. The songs were composed by the singers and were based on songs in praise of Siva, Parvati, Durga, Vishnu etc. This dance form in the earlier times confined to only temples but at the time of Ahom king Shivasingha, it was performed outside the temples also, which were called as 'nati'. Ahom king Shivasingha himself married one such devadasi known as Phulleswari.

The sanctity of the Devadasi dance in Assam was preserved with utmost

care in comparison to the other state. But unfortunately, the Devadasi dance's fall from glory happened around the 17th century when there were repeated foreign invasions and the colonial educational system. The colonial education curriculum considered it as against of humanity. Therefore, it was forbidden, with the assistance of Indian Social reformers and finally it was abolished. Although, "the devotees continued to practice the same in the seclusion of their homes"- Vatsyana, Dr. Kapila, "Indian Classical Dance".

10.4.2 OJHAPALI

The term Ojhapali is coined from two separate word "Oja" or "Ojha" and "Pali". The word Ojha has come out of the Sanskrit Word "Upadhaya" and "Pali" has come out of "Palita". It is one of the unique form of arts of Darrang District of Assam, which involves three art forms - Song, Dance and Drama. It is performed by a group of 4 or 5 men of whom the chief performer is called Oja who is supported by 3 to 4 Palis, and hence the name Ojhapali. The only instrument played by Ojhapali is Khutitaal (palm sized Cymbal). The performers wear long sleeved white gowns, silver jewelry etc. and Nupur (bundle of tiny metallic percussions played by body vibrations).

The Oja is the chief singer, i.e. Oja recites themes from the mythological stories with music, mudras and dance. The palis take up the refrain and repeat the song with playing of cymbals and marking of time with their feet. Palis are of two types (1) Dainapali, so called because he acts as the right-hand man of the Oja (2) General or assisting Palis. The oja sings the epic poems, mythological stories in verse keeping in time ragas, talas, mudras and takes part in conversation with the dainapali and the dainapali relates the meaning of the verse in front of the audience. In general, the Dainapali seems to add crude humour to the unsophisticated listeners.

Dress&Costumes:

A troupe of Ojha-pali consists of one Oja and four to six palis. The dresses and costume bear signifance. The Oja of Biyah-gowa variety puts one capcan (a kind of flowing shirt with the pyjamas). He also put on a girdle around his waist and hangs an ornate pachara (a kind of cloth made form muga cocoon) on his

either shoulders. The Oja wears a special type of white turban. He puts on anklets and gamkharu, necklace and rings on his fingers and mark of sandal wood on his forehead. The palis too put on loin cloth made from cotton and a capcan. They also wear stylish turban of white sheet over their heads.

Types of Ojhapali

Based on the performing style and the themes of song, the ojhapali can be classified in two heads. (a) Epic-based Ojhapali(b) Non-epic based Ojhapali.

Epic Based Ojhapali depend solely on the epics like the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the Purana. This type of Oja recites ballads of Sri Bishnu and Krishna. This type of Ojhapali is called BaishnavOjhapali because this art form is presented in the Baishnavite rituals. Epic-besedOjhapali can be divided into seven sub-types (1) BiyaharOjhapali or Biya-gowaojhapali or Vyasa ojhapali or sabha-gowaojhapali (2) Ramayana OjaPali. (3) Bhaura or Bhauria or BhairaOjhapali (4) DurgavariOjapali. (5) SattriyaOjhapali. (6) Pancaliojhapali.(7) DuluriOjhapali. Among the various types of Ojhapali the Biyahar variety is the most ancient. The tradition of biyaharojhapali goes back to Vyasa Sangita which involves the recitation of the Mahabharata, the Ramayana and the Puranas.

Non-epic based Ojhapali differs from the Epic-based variety in respect of content, structure and context, since this form of ojhapali depends on the theme of the snake goddess Manasa or Bisahari, Padma, Brahmoni or Barmoni. These ritualistic songs sung by the ojhapali to invoke the snake Goddess Mansha are known as ManasaSangita. This variety may be sub-divided into five heads viewing the thematic differences apparent in the context of per formances. (1) Sukanniojhapali or Rang-gowaojhapali (2) BisahariGan (3) Mare PujarGan or Mare Gan (4) Padma PuranarGan (5) Tukuriaojhapali.

The SuknaniOjhapali recites the songs of Goddess Manasa from the Padma Puranas composed by Sukavi Narayan Deva (17th century) . The word Suknanni or Suknani is coined form the initial letters of each word of the sentence “SukaviNarayandevanigadati”. The worship of Manasa may be styled as Rang Puja and similarly the art form takes the name Rang-Gowaojapali. The

Suknanniojapali, prevalent in Darrang is heavily influenced by the biyahgowa form in its musical aspects and so nearer to classical style of this art form, while the ojhapali in Kamrup is pervaded by folk elements.

Bishaharirgan or mare-pujarrgan bears some differences with the Suknani form of ojapali in the context of theme, structure and style of music. Bishaharirgan or mare-pujargan does not depend on the Padma-purana but on the songs composed by Mankar and Durgabar. Another form of this variety is Padma Puranargan. i.e. the story about the goddess Padma. This tradition is current in North and West Goalpara. The troupe consists of one head singer or gidal, palis and bails (who beats khol and plays on cymbal). Very often boys dress themselves in girls' clothes and present dances along with the main performance.

Tukuriaojhapali recites the themes of Epics and Puranas that handed down to them traditionally. A Tukuriaojhapali consists of four palis sittings in a row and a oja in the middle. The oja relates a story in a simple language with the help of a pali after reciting a song.

10.4.3 Sattriya Performing Art

Sattriya is one of the major performing art traditions of Assam and is recognized as one of the eight classical dance forms of India. It originated in the 15th–16th centuries under the influence of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement initiated by Srimanta Sankardeva and was further developed by his chief disciple Madhavdeva. As part of the Vaishnavite religious reform movement, Sankardeva introduced dance, drama, music, and literary compositions as effective mediums for spreading the ideals of devotion, morality, and social harmony among the people. Initially, Sattriya performances were confined to the Satras, the Vaishnavite monasteries of Assam, where they were performed by male monks or *bhokots* as a part of religious rituals and devotional practices. Over time, the tradition expanded beyond the religious boundaries of the Satras and emerged as a prominent stage art performed by both male and female artists. The term 'Sattriya' itself is derived from the word *Satra*, indicating its deep association with the

monastic institutions established by the Neo-Vaishnavite movement.

Sattriya is a composite performing art that combines dance, music, drama, and devotional expression. It includes various forms such as Sattriya dance (*Sattriya Nritya*), *Ankiya Naat* (one-act devotional drama), *Gayan-Bayan* (vocal and instrumental performance), and *Borgeet* (devotional songs composed by Sankardeva and Madhavdeva). The themes of Sattriya performances are mainly drawn from the *Bhagavata Purana*, the life and activities of Lord Krishna, and episodes from the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Through symbolic gestures, expressive movements, and dramatic presentations, Sattriya communicates religious narratives and moral teachings. The *Ankiya Naat*, created by Sankardeva, occupies a significant place in Assamese theatre tradition as it represents the integration of literature, music, dance, and visual expression. These plays are characterized by the use of Assamese and Brajavali languages, elaborate costumes, masks, music, and devotional themes.

The dance vocabulary of Sattriya is based on the principles of Indian classical dance traditions, particularly the concepts of *Nritta* (pure dance movements), *Nritya* (expressive dance), and *Natya* (dramatic representation). It incorporates graceful body movements, rhythmic footwork, hand gestures (*mudras*), facial expressions (*abhinaya*), and controlled postures. The training system of Sattriya includes *Mati Akhara*, a set of foundational exercises that develop physical discipline, flexibility, balance, and coordination among performers. The dance reflects a combination of energetic movements associated with *Tandava* and graceful expressions associated with *Lasya*. The musical accompaniment of Sattriya consists mainly of the *khol* (a traditional drum), *taal* (cymbals), flute, and devotional singing. The *Gayan-Bayan* tradition provides rhythmic and musical support to dance and theatrical performances, creating a unique artistic experience.

The costumes and ornaments used in Sattriya performances reflect the cultural heritage of Assam. Male performers traditionally wear white or cream-coloured *dhoti*, *chadar*, and *paguri* (turban), while female performers wear traditional Assamese silk costumes, particularly garments made of *muga* and *pat* silk, along with indigenous jewellery. Masks, especially those used in *Bhaona* performances, form another important element of the Sattriya tradition. These masks, traditionally

prepared by artisans of Assam using bamboo, clay, cloth, and natural colours, represent mythological characters and enhance the dramatic appeal of performances.

Sattriya is not merely an artistic expression but also a cultural institution that preserves the religious philosophy, social values, literary traditions, and artistic creativity of Assam. The Satras served as important centres for the preservation and transmission of Sattriya through generations. It contributed significantly to the development of Assamese literature, music, theatre, and visual arts. The recognition of Sattriya as a classical dance form by the Sangeet Natak Akademi in 2000 brought national and international attention to this unique tradition. Today, Sattriya has moved beyond the boundaries of the Satras and is performed on national and global platforms, while continuing to maintain its spiritual foundation and historical connection with the Neo-Vaishnavite cultural heritage of Assam. It represents the harmonious blending of religion, art, and society and remains one of the most significant symbols of Assamese cultural identity.

The Sattriya dance training begins with these Mati-Akhoras. It is considered as the grammar of Sattriya dance. After completion of all the Mati-Akhoras, the dancer can be taught the individual dance numbers of Sattriya. Mati-Akhoras are foundation for the learners to make a healthy physical, mental and spiritual set-up which is very necessary for a classical dancer. Some of these Mati-Akhoras are similar with some yogic postures or asana (based on Yoga Shastra), which help the learners to maintain a physical and mental discipline. These many Mati-Akhoras have yogic quality which help the learners to shape their body from all sides. It is worth mentioning that Mahapurush Sankaradeva, the architect of Xattriya dance was a great exponent and expert of yoga, who studied Yoga Shastra thoroughly. Each Mati-akhora is like a letter in an alphabet and if we join together some postures of the Mati-akhora it gives rise to a beautiful dance sequence. The Mati-Akhoras are broadly categorised into two parts i.e- (a) pure exercises and the other (b) basic dance units. Pure exercises are based on some acrobatic poses. For example–thiyolon, athulon, tamalmusura, moraipanikhowa etc. These exercises are generally not used in dance, though there are some exceptions. For instance,

we can refer to the Natuwa dance of AuniatiSattra, where in these exercises or acrobaticposes are extensively used. On the other hand, most of the MatiAkhoras belong to the basic dance units. It has already been mentioned that the MatiAkhoras are grammatical forms for Xattriya dance, and at the same time they are the exercise as well as the structural basis of this dance form. That is why, almost the entire body processes are covered by the Mati-Akhoras and they are- (a) Utha (rising); (b) boha (squatting),(c) thiyo (standing position), (d) calana (gati or gait), (e) pak (turns and spins), (f) jap (jump), (g) ulaha (undulating or wavy movements), (h) citika (springing), (i) bura or duba (porpoising) etc. On the other hand, the Mati-Akhoras are categorized under eight different broad units, such as- (i) ora, (ii) chota, (iii) jhalak, (iv) jhap, (v) muruka, (vi) khar, (vii) pak and (viii) lon. These are categorised on the basis of different characters and application patterns. Under these broad units, there are many sub-units. For example - there are four types of ora - PurushOra, Prakriti or StriOra, PhulOra,andLahiOra. Like that there are at least six types of chota- orachota, katichota, Udhachota etc.

Mati-Akhoras embrace all the features of Sattriya dance. They are the basic body positions or stances, bhangas or body bending, body movements, foot-stances and foot movements, various utplavanas or jumps, bhramari or paks, gati or gaits, various hastas, sirabheda or head movements, griva - bheda or neck movements, dristi-bheda or eye movements etc.

10.5 LET US SUM UP

After going through this unit, you have learnt-

● The origins or history of the performing arts. The Dance and Music of Assam is also very old with India. The evident like Kalika Purana, Yoginitantra, accounts of Hiuen-Tsang and different copper plates and inscriptions of Assam tells us about the history of performing arts in Assam.

● From Bhaskarvarman to Valabarman and then Shiva Singha (the Ahom king) preached and gave royal support to these dance forms. From 15th century onwards Mahapurush Srimanta Shankardeva added a new form of dance in to Assamese culture

i.e. the Xatriya dance, which became the lifeline of the Satras.

CHECK YOUR PROGRES

Answer the following question

Q.1: Dasi means _____(Fill in the blank)

Q.2: Mention the two types of Ojahpali.

.....

Q.3:What does Mati Akhara mean?

.....

10.6 FURTHER READING

1) Baruah, B.K (2011), A Cultural History of Assam,(5th Ed.) Guwahati Bina Library, Guwahati.
2) Goswami, Kali Prasad (2000), Devadasi: Dancing Damsel, APH Publishing Corporation, New Delhi.
3) Choudhury, P.C; The History of Civilisation of the people of Assam to the Twelfth Century AD, Guwahati.

10.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answer to Q. No. 1 : Slave

Answer to Q. No. 2 : Epi-based Ojahpali, Non-epic based Ojahpali

Answer to Q. No. 3 : Exercise done on the ground.

10.8 MODEL QUESTIONS

A) Very Short Questions :

Q.1. Who is a Oja?

Q.2. Define Epic Ojhapali.

Q.3. Mati-Akhoras embrace all the features of_____dance. (Fill in the blank)

B) Short Questions : (Write short Notes on)

(a) Mati-Akhora

(b) Dress and Costumes of Ojhapali

C) Long Questions :

Q.1. Discuss Devadasi dance in reference to Assam.

Q.2. Discuss different forms of Ojhapali in your own words.

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UNIT 11 : CONTRIBUTION OF ISLAMIC CULTURE

UNIT STRUCTURE:

11.1 Learning Objectives

11.2 Introduction:

11.3 Settlement (early) and formation of Muslim society in Assam

11.3.1 Muslim Invasion

11.3.2 Settlement through Trade

11.3.3 Settlement of war prisoners

11.3.4 Import of Muslim Artisans and Learned men

11.3.5 Propagation and Conversion

11.4 Contribution to the Assamese Culture

11.5 Islamic Architecture

11.6 Paintings

11.7 Music and Dance

11.8 Let us Sum Up

11.9 Further Reading

11.10 Model Questions

11.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- To explain about the origins and settlement of the Muslims in Assam.
- To discuss about the different factors which help for the settlement of the Muslims in Assam.
- To elaborate how Muslim people helped for the formation of Assamese society with new elements.
- To trace the growth and development of Islamic Art and Architecture.
- To analyze the development of Islamic Music in Assam and how it related to Assamese Music.

11.2 INTRODUCTION

The Muslims of Assam have been playing a very significant and positive role in the

formation and development of Assamese society and their culture from ancient time to today. Being integrated by the various socio-economic and cultural factors, they are spread over the length and breadth of the state, particularly in the Brahmaputra valley which is the home land of the Assamese culture. The Muslims is the largest minority group in Assam, with strength of 34.22% (2011, census report) of the total population. Assamese Muslims like other Muslims in India reflect significant variations in terms of culture, caste, class, language, occupation, geographical distribution and ideology. The contemporary Assamese society is fundamentally a multi-religious, multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-caste, multi-class and dominantly unilingual, composite and by and large a secular society. The Muslims are scattered in all the areas of Assam, with high concentration of 75% of total population in Dhubri district, western part of Assam and the lowest density of 1.96% in Dhemaji district as per the census report of 2011.

11.3 SETTLEMENT (EARLY) AND FORMATION OF MUSLIM SOCIETY IN ASSAM

Formation of the Muslim society in Assam can clearly trace back to the last decade of the 12thcentury before the Ahoms. Since then, this community has been evolved gradually over a very long stretch of time. The early settlement and growth of Muslim population in Assam has been discuss below.

11.3.1: MUSLIM INVASION IN ASSAM (1206-1682)

Towards the close of the 12th century, Mahammad Bin Bakhtiyar, a military commander under Qutubuddin Aibak, the founder of the slave dynasty in India invaded Assam in 1206 A.D. According to Tabaqat Nasiri of Minhajudin Siraj, it was during this time that Assam for the first time came in contact with the Muslims. Thereafter began a series of Muslims invasion over a period of 475 years, which eventually culminated in the battle of Itakhuli that was fought between the Ahom and Mughal in 1682 CE. Although Muhammad Bin Bakhtiyar Khilji was defeated severely and most of his soldiers that, it can be presumed from that fact that some of the Muslims who survived their lives preferred to stay in Assam instead of going back with their defeated General. They may be regard as the first batch of Muslims settlers who decided to stay in Assam even before the advent of the

Ahoms to this land. Muhammad Ibn Bakhtiyar Khiliji was guided to Assam by a local chief of this land, Ali Mech. It indicated that from this time or much earlier to it, the Muslims had established contact with Assam large section had accept this region as their home land.

It is depicted in the account of Minhajuddin that the invasion of Malik Yuzbak Tugril Khan (1256-57) was mainly inspired by the desire of spreading the Islamic faith. It is also recorded in the history that Malik Yuzbak erected a mosque on the soil of the country celebrating his victory. It is mentioned in the Assam Buranji that the southern partition of the erstwhile district of Goalpara and Kamrup remained under the authority of the Gauda Sultan from the time of Ghiyassudin Bahadur Shah's invasion of the south western part of the Brahmaputra valley in 1320-21, till the Kamata king Mriganko conquered the entire region to the east of the river Korataya sometime during 1397-1407, with the help of the Ahom monarch Sudangpha.

11.3.2: SETTLEMENT THROUGH TRADE

The trade relation between Assam and Bengal might have flourished during the middle of the 15thcentury and some of the Muslims traders and travelers with other travelers from Bengal had entered and settled at last in western Assam. A regular and systematic process of Muslim influx into Assam seems to have commenced since the reign of Niladhwaja s successors Chakradhwaja, the king of kamata. During the war of Hussain Shah with Nilambar the influx of Muslims continued with growing more intensity. It was actually during the period of Muslim occupation of the Kamrup and Goalpara region and particularly after the creation of the colony of the Afghan warriors in Hajo by Hussain Shah that a large number of Muslim could find an opportunity for the first time to settle in erstwhile district of Goalpara and Kamrup permanently.

11.3.3: SETTLEMENT OF WAR PRISONERS

The settlement of the Muslims in the eastern region of Assam started from 1530, when the Muslims army under Turbak invaded Assam and Ahom king Suhungmung defeated the Muslim invader and those who were taken as prisoners were settled in different parts of the state and they subsequently came to be known as the Mariyas. In this regard Edward Gait remarks that the Muslims who were

taken as prisoners by Suhungmung were the earliest Muslim settlers in the eastern valley of the Brahmaputra.

During the 17thcentury the Islamic faith grew more intensity when a major part of western Assam was occupied by the Muslims and also established their court at Rangamati (Near Gauripur) and Hajo (in Kamrup). Later on the Muslims settlers in those region stayed by freely mingling with the indigenous people. Again, the 2nd phase of the Muslims influx into the western part of Assam began with the Koch-Mughal alliance and these Muslim soldiers settled there and increased the Muslim population of Assam when the Koch-Hajo region fell under the Muslim power. Many Muslims serving in the fighting forces of the Mughal in Assam and employed in other activities might have poured into this region in continuous streams from different parts of the Mughal Empire to help the local Muslim authorities in the war and the civil administration besides trade and commerce.

It is one of the important points that they had to marry non-Muslims from Assam due to absence of their wives. During the region of Ahom King Gadadhar Singha the last battle of Ahom-Mughal conflict broke out in 1682 where Mughal vacated Kamrupa in 1682 and retreated again to Rangamati and thus the long period of Assam's tedious warfare with the Muslim began in 1206 A.D., came to end. The direct and indirect outcome of the intermittent wars and conflicts between the rulers of Assam and the Muslim power was really fruitful for the political and socio-cultural life of Assam in many ways. It helped to strengthen the Muslims population in Assam.

11.3.4: IMPORT OF MUSLIM ARTISANS, LEARNED MEN BY THE AHOM RULERS

Another important aspect for the growth of Muslim population in Assam is import of Muslim artisans and educated and skilled men by the Ahom rulers. A large numbers of Muslim artisans and learned men were brought by the Ahom Rulers and were appointed in various developments of the state during the medieval period. These people were mainly employed in the professions in which they possessed.

Especially skills, like embroidery, engraving, wood carving, cannon casting, sward making and similar fine works. Muslim artisans and craftsmen belong to the Khanikar khel and under a superintendent known as Khanikar Barua. 'Nawab Deka' is a post in the Ahom court absolutely for talented Muslim nobles, carried a vast tract of revenue free land.

There are many instances where the Muslims and Hindus of Assam combined to resist a Muslim invader. These Muslims were assimilated into the Assamese society so deeply that the Ahom army included many Muslim soldiers and officers who fought against the Mughals in several battles including the historic battle of Saraighat in 1671. The Assamese Buranjis provides us with ample evidence about the patriotism and influential high position of the Assamese Muslims as for example, Rupai Goriya, a Muslim officer of Ahom Court, Bagh Hazarika, the Muslim captain under Lachit Barphukan, Sardar Julfikar Barua, one of the martyars of Assam's freedom struggle which ended in 1858 etc. perhaps the full supports of our contention.

Besides, eight Muslims families said to have come to Assam and employed in different capacities and created some new avenues for prospective employment in various field like engraving, painting, tailoring, music, arts and architecture etc. These eight families are known as Parsi Parbiya (Persian transcribers), Akbar kuliya, (the royal engraver), Khanikar, (masons and artisans), Silakutiya, (stone engraver), Guna katiya (makers of gold and silver thread), Negeriya (the player of negera), Darji (tailors), Jala (weaver).

Apart from the above Muslims families there are some other Muslim professional groups, who were employed in different departments according to their capacity and skill, such as Kharghariya, Senchowa, Jalambata, Rajmistri etc. Thus, Muslim community found a favourable atmosphere to assimilate with the broader Assamese Hindu Society and harmoniously merged with the socio-cultural milieu.

11.3.5: PROPAGATION AND CONVERSION

Minhajuddin Siraj tells us that the Koch and Mech people were the inhabitants of the western part of the old kingdom of Kamrupa. This show that

with the first political contact of Assam with Muslim powers, the Islamic faith found its way into this lands through the process of conversation. It can be assumed that the influence of Islam on the people of east Bengal and western Kamrupa was felt to some extent since few centuries back before the invasion of Muhammad Bin Baktiyar Khiliji. Most of the historians acknowledged that there existing several trade routes connecting India with China and South East Asia through Kamrupa in ancient times. Some historians believe that this route was known as Rajgarh Ali which remnants can be seen in Arunachal Pradesh. Therefore, it appears that the land of China and Kamrupa, and perhaps its routes was known to the Muslim world from the very ancient times. Bhajan, a Brahman converting into Islam in the early part of 13thcentury when Alberuni visited India. These adequately proved that the impact of Islam in North Bengal and Kamrupa kingdom was noticed much earlier than the first Muslim invasion of Assam.

The accounts of King Ratnadhwaja Pala of the Chutiya Kingdom show and Deodhai Assam Buranji indicate that this King of the Chutiya Kingdom established friendly relations with the Sultans of Gauda. It is mentioned that during the reign of Sukaranka, the successor of Arimatta, Ghiyasuddin Bahadur Shah conquered the kingdom of Kamrupa and including western part of the Brahmaputra valley. Many Muslim saints had entered Assam and some of them came with invading army at different historical times. Some of them settled in the country, while other might have returned after a short stay. Shah Mian, popularly known as Azan Fakir was one of the saint who came to Assam in 1630 and through the preaching of him, a large section of the indigenous population was converted into Islam. Most of the Ahom rulers patronized many ways in Assam. Again establishment of Madrasa schools, mosques, dargahs, mazars, etc. tremendously helped to growth Muslim population of Assam that the great majority of persons professing the Islamic faith in Assam are as in Eastern Bengal, local converts from the lower castes and aboriginal tribes who on conversion described themselves as Sheikh. Gait also mentioned that a good numbers of Muslims in Assam, especially in western Assam have designed themselves as Sheikh and many of their ancestors appear to have been early local converts, as manifested through their physical features, manners and customs. The Imperial Gazetteers of India, vol.-1 refers to the converts Muslims of Assam who were as ignorant of

Islam as the Hinduism. Some of them have never heard of Muhammad, some regard him as a person corresponding in their system of religion to Rama or Lakshmana of Hindus.

Although, the Assamese Muslims are Islamic, they share some Hindu customs and practices, which are contradictory to Islamic conventions. While intermarriage with Hindus is rare, many Assamese Muslims identify more strongly with other Assamese who are Hindu than with other Muslims. Their identity is inexorably connected with the Assamese language and the region of Assam.

11.4: CONTRIBUTION TO THE ASSAMESE CULTURE

The Assamese speaking Muslims of Assam developed their culture through continuous contact between Islam and native regional cultures. They have many cultural traits in common with Assamese Hindus and are less orthodox than other Indian Muslims. Agrarian Assamese Muslims inhabit clustered hamlets and villages surrounded by their fields. Hindu and Muslim Assamese generally live separately; some do live together, however, keeping their separate identities but sharing some common institutions. Approximately 70% of Assamese Muslims are farmers by occupation. The principal crop of the region is paddy (rice) of several different local varieties. Other important crops include, maize, wheat, oilseeds such as mustard, jute, and sugarcane, and various seasonal vegetables. Many farmers also engage in small commerce, trade, and work as wage laborers. The Marias are traditionally brass workers. Most urban Muslims pursue varied occupations including the professions.

Assamese Muslims combine many Islamic and Hindu customs. Assamese Muslim families are patriarchal and patrilineal. Women are allowed to inherit one-eighth of their father's property. The kinship terminology is very similar to the Hindu. Avoidance relations between father-in-law and daughter-in-law and between husband's elder brother and younger brother's wife are practiced among both Muslims and Hindus. Marriage among Assamese Muslims entails two separate events: the ring ceremony, which is followed by the actual marriage. After the negotiations are fixed, the future groom's parents and kin visit the bride's home. The entourage brings a gold ring, silk clothes, and sweets as gifts. The marriage ceremony is consummated with the reciting of verses from the Quran by a Muslim cleric. Cross-cousin Marriage is not encouraged.

Components of the Hindu caste system are present among Assamese Muslims. They are divided into a three-tier system: (i)the Sayyids, who hold the highest status and claim to be descendants of the prophet Mohammed, (ii)the Sheikhs, composed of the local peoples, who are second in social Status, (iii)the Marias, who hold the third social slot and are the descendants of the Muslim soldiers captured in the Muslim invasion of 1532. The vast majority of Assamese Muslims are Sunni of the Hanafi juridical rite; however, they observe many local Hindu rites that put them at odds with Islamic practice. For example, many are attracted to the Vaishnavite philosophy preached in Assam by the sixteenth-century philosopher Sankaradeva.

It may be noted that the Muslim settlers when they initially settled in Assam not only did they have to adjust themselves to the climatic conditions of the region nevertheless they also were said to have adopted the dietary system of the Assamese people. As it is in the present day, the use of chira or fried and flattened rice, 'Sandah' a kind of flour from fried rice, laru a kind of balled sweetmeat from rice and pitha or cakes made out of rice comptised a part of the main meals for both Hindu and Muslim families. 1 The Muslim on the other hand, introduced many food items to Assamese dietary system such as polao, khichri, kabab, halwa. The Musalmans were also created with the introduction of fruit pickles (achar) and various other items like khichri, polao (peas polao) which according to B.K. Barua were said to have been popular among the Aristocratic sector of the Assamese society. Again the Persian chronicles mentioned that the Mughals were fond of spicy food and prepared them by using spices such as almond, cardamom, cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg, raisin, saffron and many others. This type of food preparation is at present quite popular in Assam.

The Assamese chronicles mentioned that in the beginning of the 17th century tobacco was first brought to Assam by a Mughal trader, this implies the introduction of the habit of smoking tobacco in Assam by the Mughals. It is also said that the use of smoking pipes and hookahs among the Ahom royalty and nobles was a result of the Mughal influence. Added to this the Mughals knew the use of wine prepared from the juices of fruits which they termed 'Sarbat'. This habit became prevalent among the Assamese only after they had come into contact with the Mughals.

Assamese chronicles also mentioned that the Mughal traders imported Agar wood from Assam for the purpose of producing Atar which is a kind of a perfume. Ahom rulers

were also said to have imported a section of Muslims known as Atargharias for the purpose of producing perfumes for the royalty.

Nevertheless, it can be truly said that the coming of Islam and the Muslims to Assam certainly created an impact in the social system prevalent in the region. The very liberal nature of Islam appealed to the sentiments of the commoners in Assam especially those belonging to the lower divisions where they became drawn towards Islam. Islam with its liberal nature certainly made an impact in Assam whereby people came to realise the burden of ritualism. This paved the way for the emergence of the Vaishnavite movement led by Sankaradeva in the 16th and the 17th centuries which brought about considerable changes to medieval Assamese society.

11.5: THE ISLAMIC ARCHITECTURE

The architecture of the Muslims contains two types of buildings, i.e. Mosque and Rowza or tomb. According to religious need the essential parts of a mosque in India consist of a Western Wall containing a recessed alcove called mihrub in its centre denoting the direction of Qibla or direction towards Baitullah, the House of God at Mecca; a mimbar or a small room structurally in the form of stairs and a tank in the open courtyard for making cleansing. In Assam, early extent of mosques is only in the form of remains. In Brahmaputra valley remains of these form of mosques is found in Dhubri (at Panbari) and Kampup (at Hajo) district. But in Barak valley, numerous sites with ruins of mosques in the Karimganj district alone have begun to show attention of the scholars. In the area under the Karimganj Police Station alone contains the remains of as many as three mosques. But as no archeological excavation has hitherto been undertaken, nothing can be said with certainty about the architectural features of these edifices except about one situated at the village Suryadas near Kaliganj. The mosque near Kalinganj in the Karimganj district is in a very fragmentary condition.Only the four walls with a corridor in the front, with octagonal corner turrets are visible. An inscription written in Arabic carved on a piece of black stone was also found there. According to this inscription the mosque was built during the reign of Alauddin Hussain Shah in the month of Shaban of 909 H.H (1501 CE).

As a result of the employment of Musalmans in various capacities in the department, notable Islamic influences could be seen in the realm of art and architecture in Assam. The salient characteristics of the Muslim types of decorative art or masonry

construction which comprised of rounded pillars, carved door frames, windows, calligraphy or decorative writing with intricate designs of geometrical patterns and floral representation, the domes and minarets wearing the shape of inverted pitchers could be well traced in some buildings and temples of medieval Assam. Some of these motif could also be seen in the Kamakhya temple which was reconstructed by the Koch Kings in the 16thcentury whereby the door frames of the front hall of this temple contain dome shaped curves on the top, decorated with small curves linked together. Similarly, the entrance gate of the Hayagriva-Madhava temple at Hajo is also decorated with small domes in the shape of inverted pitchers.

11.6: PAINTINGS

The influences of the Muslims can also be seen in Assamese paintings. During the medieval period with the advent of the Mughals, miniature painting came to form an important feature of Indian art and in the 18th century. These miniature paintings consisted of the culmination of Persian art form into the realm of Mughal painting and according to Percy Brown these paintings represented scenes from actual life, hunting, combat, mythological stories, durbar scenes, representation of plants and animals as well as bearing religious stances.

It was in the regime of Ahom king Siva Singha which marks the remarkable development of Assamese painting in the Ahom court under Muslim influences. Most notable among them were, the miniature of ‘Hastividyamava’, ‘Dharma Purana’ and ‘Gita Govinda’. These painting both in their style and character depicted influences of the Mughal school of painting. The ‘Hastividyarnava’ was compiled under the orders of king Siva Singha and his wife Ambika Devi whereby two painters were appointed to illustrate the manuscript namely Dilbor and Dosai the Muslim painter. Similar paintings in the manuscript called ‘Lava-Kushar Yuddha’ bear indelible marks of the influence of the Mogul school of painting.

11.7: MUSIC AND DANCE

The greatest contribution of the Assamese Muslim to the popular, Music of Assam is the ‘Zikirs’ and ‘Zaris’ which were composed in the period of Ahom rule. They were

composed by the Muslim Pirs, most notable among those who compiled the Zikirs were Azan Pir, Chandsai, Sheikh Farid etc.

These Zikirs and Zaris side by side with the preaching of Islam sing the glory of Sankaradeva, Madhavadeva and Bhakti and in their form, style and expression resembles the Assamese folk songs and neo Vaishanava poetry. The Zikirs and Zaris succeeded in ensuring a harmonious blend between Hinduism and Islam and remained an important part of modern Assamese literature.

Many Muslim Pirs compiled Zikirs with the objective of reorganising the Assamese Muslim society by regenerating their faith. Thus the Zilirs and Zaris which formed the devotional. Songs of Ajan Fakir is a notable example of the development of music during the period. It is important to note that the Zikirs of Ajan Fakir were very much in harmony with the 'Nam Kirtan'or congregational prayers of the Vaishnavas and therefore we may say that not only did the Zikirs projected the harmonious relationship between Islam and Hinduism especially with Yaishnavism preached by Sankaradeva but in fact it also projected the influence of the latter on the Muslims. The Zikirs sings the glory of the religious preceptor or Guru in conformation with the concept of guruship prevalent in Vaishnavism. The Zikirs also in their subject matter resembles the Bargits or the devotional songs of the Vaishnava saints. However, the Zikirs in their_ line of expression bears much resemblance to the 'DehVicharar Git' or devotional songs of Assam as well as with other folk songs such as the Bairagigeet and others. The Zikirs bears much resemblance to the congregational songs or 'Nam Kirtan' of the Vaishnava saints.

Added to the Zikirs we also have the compilation of the Zaris or Marshiyas which are songs depicting sorrow and misery relating to the tragic tale of Karbala. The Zaris were very much popular among the Muslims in different parts of the world and in course of time they also gained popularity among the Hindus of Assam. Assamese chronicles mentioned that in some parts of Western Assam, some sort of a religious song known as the 'Marfati Geet' was commonly sung by the Muslims of the area bearing influences of the Vaishnava congregational songs.

The period of the Ahom ruler King Rudra Singha witnessed the enrichment of Assamese music. Being a great lover of music, he came to be intensely influenced by the Hindustani music whereby during his reign we have its importation into Assam. It is recorded that he imported and settled a large number of Hindustani musicians in the

country. The Assamese chronicles mentioned that he sent Assamese artists to Delhi and other places for training in Indian music as well as for learning the use of various musical instruments used in those places.

Besides these we can also trace the influences of the Assamese Muslims in the growth of Assamese folk songs such as the 'Nawariyageet' or songs sung during the sowing seasons, the 'Nichukanigeet or children's songs, 'Ainam' or the songs sung to please 'Ai' the goddess or mother of pox and most notable are the songs sung during the Bihu festival known as the Bihu Geet. All these songs hinted at the presence of Islamic influence. Thus, the Muslim contact have greatly led to the enrichment of Assamese music and have widened the use of musical instruments in Assamese music.

Establishment of historic mosques, dargahs, mazars, in various places of Assam also proved that Assam became richer and healthier with the establishment of Assamese Muslim society in the Brahmaputra valley. Finally, Many Muslim soldiers and officers who fought against the Mughals in several battles including the historic battles of Saraighat in 1671 and it was one of the fact that the Mughals were defeated because of the active participation of Muslim soldiers in the battles like Bagh Hazarika, sardar Julfikar Barua, Ramjan khan etc. So it can be argued that the Muslims of Assam are an inseparable and integral part of the contemporary Assamese political and socio-cultural milieu.

11.8 LET US SUM UP

After going through this unit, you have learnt about

- The origins or history of the early Muslim settlement in Assam. Along with their contribution towards the formation of Assamese society.
- The Muslims entered this region before the Ahoms in 1206 CE. Though at the beginning they invade Assam on political purpose, the military generals, soldiers wanted to remain here permanently. Some of them were settled here as war prisoner.
- During Ahom rule, they imported some Artisans and skilled Muslim men from India to Assam.
- During mid of 17th century indigenous people were converted to Islam by the influence of Islamic saints viz. Shah Milan or Azan pir.

- In this long period of Muslim settlement in Assam helps in different way for the formation of greater Assamese society by giving a unique identity.

11.9 FURTHER READING

1) Ahmad, Imtiaz (1976). "For a Sociology of India." In Muslim Communities of South Asia, 172-178. New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House.

2) Syed Abdul Malik, Zakir Aru Zari, Gauhati, 1958.

3) Ali, A. N. M. Irshad (1979). "Hindu Muslim Relations in Assam.

4) S.N. Dasgupta, Fundamentals of Indian Art(Bombay, India: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1960).

5) Ahmed, Kamaluddin (1984) Art and Architecture of Assam.

11.10 MODEL QUESTIONS

A) Very Short Questions (Answer each Question within 50 words)

Q.1. Mention some common professions among the Assamese speaking Muslims.

Q.2. What were the main contributions of Assamese Muslims to the popular Music of Assam?

B) Short Questions (Answer each Question within 150 words) Write short note on

(a) Influence of Islam on Painting

(b) Islamic Architecture

(c) Azan Pir

C)Long Questions (Answer each Question Within 300-500 words)

Q.1 : Discuss the Islamic Culture Towards Assamese Society.

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UNIT 12: CHRISTIANITY IN ASSAM

UNIT STRUCTURE

12.1 Learning Objectives

12.2 Introduction

12.3 Missionaries and their activities

12.4 Issue of conversion

12.5 Christianity and tribal people of Assam

12.6 Contributions

12.7 Let us sum up

12.8 Further reading

12.9 Answers to check your progress

12.10 Model questions

12.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- Learn about the influence of Christianity in Assam
- Understand about various issues and contributions brought with it

12.2 INTRODUCTION

The history of Christianity in Assam is an important chapter in the region's socio-religious and cultural transformations during the colonial and postcolonial centuries. Although Christianity entered in India through the St. Thomas tradition on the Malabar Coast and later through European missionaries, its methodical spread in Assam began in the nineteenth century, following the British conquest of the province in 1826 under the Treaty of Yandabo. The advent of British colonial control provided favorable conditions for the arrival of Christian missionary groups, who saw Assam as an important arena for evangelism, education, and social change. Christianity gradually expanded its effect beyond religious conversion, shaping the region's educational, linguistic, literary, medical, and

socio-cultural development. The activities of Christian missionaries, their engagement with tribal communities, the debates surrounding religious conversion, and their contribution to the modernization of Assam remain subjects of considerable historical interest.

The American Baptist Mission, led by Reverend Nathan Brown and Oliver Thomas Cutter, launched the first organized missionary activity in Assam in 1836, with its initial mission station in Sadiya. They were soon joined by Miles Bronson and other missionaries, who expanded their work throughout Upper Assam. Their goals went beyond religious preaching to encompass education, translation of religious texts, language research, healthcare, and social welfare. Missionaries quickly realized that spreading Christianity requires communication in native languages. As a result, they worked hard to learn Assamese and other tribal languages, compiling grammars, dictionaries, and translating religious literature. Their work played a significant role in the revival and standardization of the Assamese language during a period when Bengali had been introduced as the official language of administration.

Education became one of the most efficient means by which Christian missionaries established themselves in Assam. Mission schools were established throughout the province, teaching not only religious beliefs, but also reading, writing, mathematics, science, and vocational skills. These schools introduced contemporary educational methods and dramatically increased literacy rates among tribe and non-tribal communities. Female education, which had hitherto received little institutional attention, also benefited from missionary efforts. Schools for girls and boarding schools fostered increasing participation of women in formal education, therefore contributing to broader processes of social development.

Christian missionaries also contributed significantly to the development of Assamese printing and literature. Nathan Brown and Oliver Thomas Cutter founded one of the first printing presses in Assam, publishing educational and religious literature in Assamese. The first Assamese monthly magazine, Orunodoi, was published in 1846, marking a watershed moment in Assam's intellectual history. Although founded for missionary goals, Orunodoi published articles on history, science, agriculture, medicine, geography, and current events, promoting the development of contemporary Assamese prose and public discourse. Missionaries also translated the Bible into Assamese and developed dictionaries, grammar books, and school textbooks, considerably enhancing

Assamese literature and language.

The topic of religious conversion has long been a source of contention in Assam's Christianity. Missionary organizations saw conversion as an important part of their religious mission and strove to spread Christian teachings throughout society. However, conversion was not consistent, nor was it primarily due to missionary preaching. According to historical research, many individuals and societies adopted Christianity for a variety of religious, educational, social, and economic reasons. Access to modern education, healthcare, protection against exploitative social structures, and prospects for social mobility all have an impact on conversion decisions, in addition to personal religious belief. At the same time, missionary activity drew criticism from some members of Assamese society, who saw conversion as a threat to local religious traditions and cultural identity. Consequently, the history of conversion in Assam has remained a subject of scholarly debate, requiring careful examination within its broader historical and social context rather than through simplistic explanations.

Christianity made its most substantial impact among the tribal communities of Assam, particularly those residing in the hill and frontier regions. Groups such as the Nagas, Mizos, Garos, Khasis, Karbis, Dimasas, Bodos, and several smaller indigenous communities experienced significant missionary engagement during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Missionaries often learned tribal languages, devised scripts where necessary, translated religious literature, and established schools and medical centres in remote areas that had previously received little administrative attention. Through these efforts, literacy rates improved, written literature developed in several tribal languages, and educational opportunities expanded considerably. For many tribal communities, Christianity became closely associated with access to modern education and socio-economic advancement while simultaneously contributing to the preservation and documentation of indigenous languages through written forms. Christianity's impact to the development of Assam extends beyond religion. Missionaries developed hospitals, dispensaries, orphanages, vocational schools, and teacher training centers to improve social welfare and public health. They implemented contemporary medical techniques in rural areas, treated epidemic diseases, and raised sanitation and public health awareness. Missionary institutions also promoted women's education, vocational training, and community development programs, all of which helped to bring about long-term societal transformation. Furthermore, Christian groups continue to play a vital role in education, healthcare, rural development, and humanitarian assistance in modern Assam.

At the same time, the introduction of Christianity has prompted fundamental discussions about identity, culture, and tradition. While conversion resulted in new religious identities, many tribal Christian communities kept some of their original cultural practices, languages, music, festivals, and customary institutions. The combination of Christianity and indigenous traditions has resulted in unique cultural forms that demonstrate adaptability rather than complete cultural replacement. As a result, Christianity in Assam reflects not only the introduction of a new religion, but also a multifaceted historical process including cultural interchange, negotiation, and social development. The history of Christianity in Assam demonstrates the complex connection of religion, colonialism, education, language, and social reform. The actions of Christian missionaries, conflicts over religious conversion, contact with indigenous tribes, and contributions to education, literature, healthcare, and linguistic development have all left an indelible mark on the region's history. Understanding these developments helps to shed light on the larger cultural shift and modernization processes that have shaped Assam's diversified socio-economic milieu.

12.3 MISSIONARIES AND THEIR ACTIVITIES

Christian missionaries arrived in Assam in the nineteenth century, ushering in a significant period in the region's social, educational, linguistic, and cultural history. Although the missionaries' primary goal was the spread of Christianity, their actions went far beyond religious evangelism. They created schools, printing presses, healthcare facilities, translated religious and educational literature, documented indigenous languages, and implemented a number of social reforms. These efforts had a considerable impact on Assam's modernization under colonial control, contributing to the province's intellectual and cultural development. As a result, the study of missionary operations has an important place in the history of colonial Assam.

Organized missionary work in Assam began shortly after the British takeover of the province under the Treaty of Yandabo (1826). The introduction of British political control improved the conditions for missionary organizations to penetrate the region. Among the first and most prominent was the American Baptist Mission, which founded its first mission station at Sadiya in 1836 under the leadership of Reverend Nathan Brown, Oliver Thomas Cutter, and their spouses. Shortly after, Miles Bronson joined the mission and expanded its operations to other districts of Assam. Unlike many previous missionary attempts in

India, which focused mostly on urban centers, the American Baptists prioritized frontier regions and indigenous communities, recognizing Assam's linguistic richness as well as its strategic value.

One of the missionaries' primary activities was the dissemination of Christian education. Mission schools were founded in Sadiya, Sivasagar, Nowgong (Nagaon), Guwahati, and other locations to provide contemporary education. In addition to Biblical teachings, the curriculum included reading, writing, arithmetic, geography, history, science, and moral training. These schools adopted Western techniques of teaching and dramatically increased access to formal instruction. Missionaries especially prioritized female education, creating separate schools for girls at a time when women's educational prospects were severely limited. Their initiatives challenged dominant social attitudes on female literacy and contributed to the gradual rise of educated women in Assamese society. The missionaries contributed significantly to the development of the Assamese language and literature. During the early colonial period, Bengali took over as the official language of administration and education in Assam in 1836. Nathan Brown, Oliver Thomas Cutter, and their associates strongly lobbied for the reinstatement of Assamese as a separate literary language. They studied Assamese grammar, compiled dictionaries, translated educational resources, and created school textbooks. Their linguistic studies revealed that Assamese was a separate Indo-Aryan language, not just a dialect of Bengali. These intellectual contributions swayed colonial rulers, and Assamese was finally reestablished as the province's official language in 1873.

The establishment of printing presses constituted another landmark contribution of the missionaries. In 1836, the American Baptist Mission established one of the earliest printing presses in Upper Assam, enabling the publication of books, educational materials, religious literature, and periodicals in Assamese. The most celebrated outcome of this initiative was the publication of Orunodoi in January 1846, the first Assamese monthly magazine. Although intended primarily as a missionary publication, *Orunodoi* soon evolved into an important platform for disseminating knowledge on science, history, geography, agriculture, medicine, current affairs, and social issues. It also encouraged the growth of modern Assamese prose and stimulated literary and intellectual activity among emerging Assamese writers and scholars.

Translation work formed another important aspect of missionary activities. Missionaries translated the Bible into Assamese and several tribal languages, making

Christian scriptures accessible to local populations. In the process, they prepared grammars, dictionaries, and language manuals that remain valuable sources for linguistic and historical research. Their engagement with local languages extended beyond Assamese to include several tribal languages such as Naga, Mizo, Garo, and Karbi dialects. In certain cases, missionaries helped develop standardized orthographies and promoted literacy by reducing oral languages to written form. These efforts contributed significantly to the preservation and documentation of indigenous linguistic traditions.

Missionary engagement with tribal communities represented one of the defining features of Christianity in Assam. Rather than concentrating exclusively on caste Hindu society, missionaries devoted considerable attention to communities such as the Nagas, Garos, Khasis, Mizos, Karbis, and other indigenous groups inhabiting the hills and frontier regions. Schools, churches, hostels, and medical centres were established in remote areas where colonial administrative presence remained limited. By providing education and healthcare, missionaries gradually gained the confidence of local populations and facilitated the spread of Christianity. At the same time, their work contributed to increased literacy, leadership development, and the emergence of educated tribal elites who later played important roles in regional politics and community development.

Healthcare and social welfare constituted another important sphere of missionary activity. Missionaries established dispensaries and small hospitals that provided treatment for common illnesses, maternal care, and epidemic diseases. They introduced basic principles of sanitation, hygiene, and preventive healthcare while offering medical assistance in regions where modern healthcare facilities were largely absent. Mission ospitals frequently served all sections of society irrespective of religion, thereby enhancing their acceptance within local communities. These initiatives complemented government efforts and contributed to improvements in public health during the colonial period. Missionaries also undertook various social reform initiatives aimed at improving living conditions within the communities they served. They encouraged literacy, discouraged certain social practices considered harmful, promoted women's education, advocated temperance, and supported vocational training. Through orphanages, boarding schools, and teacher-training institutions, missionary organizations sought to create educational opportunities for socially and economically marginalized populations. These activities reflected the broader missionary belief that religious transformation should be accompanied by social and educational advancement.

However, missionary endeavors were not without controversy. The introduction of Christianity through educational institutions and social services drew criticism from some parts of Assamese society, who saw missionary initiatives as vehicles of cultural and theological transformation linked with colonial power. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, debates about religious conversion, cultural identity, and the preservation of indigenous customs grew in prominence. Historians, however, often emphasize that conversion happened from a combination of religious conviction, educational possibilities, social mobility, and local historical circumstances rather than from a single determinant.

Aside from their primary goal of evangelism, Christian missionaries made significant contributions to Assam's history. Their initiatives in education, language development, printing, literature, healthcare, tribal welfare, and social change contributed significantly to the region's modernization. Missionary-founded institutions created the groundwork for educational growth, linguistic revival, and public health improvements that are still influencing Assamese society today. Thus, missionary efforts in Assam should be viewed as more than just religious ventures, but as comprehensive interventions that influenced the province's intellectual, cultural, and social history.

12.4 ISSUE OF CONVERSION

Religious conversion has long been a contentious topic in Assam's Christian history. Conversion has sparked scholarly interest since the beginning of organized Christian missionary activity in the nineteenth century, owing to its religious, social, cultural, and political ramifications. While missionary groups saw conversion as a crucial component of their evangelical ministry, its reception in Assam varied greatly between communities and historical times. The phenomena cannot be understood only as a religious process; rather, it must be considered in the context of colonial administration, educational growth, tribal communities, socioeconomic transformation, and identity development. Consequently, historians increasingly argue that religious conversion in Assam was a complex historical process shaped by multiple interacting factors rather than by a single cause.

The beginning of organized missionary work in Assam followed the establishment of British colonial rule after the Treaty of Yandabo (1826). The arrival of the American

Baptist Mission in 1836 under Nathan Brown, Oliver Thomas Cutter, and later Miles Bronson marked the commencement of systematic evangelization in the province. Initially, missionary efforts among caste Hindu Assamese society achieved limited success. Deep-rooted religious traditions, the influence of Neo-Vaishnavism established by Srimanta Sankardeva, and the resilience of indigenous social institutions restricted the number of conversions among the Assamese Hindu population. Consequently, missionaries gradually shifted their attention towards the tribal communities inhabiting the hills and frontier regions, where they found comparatively favourable conditions for missionary engagement.

Religious, educational, social, and economic issues all had an impact on conversion inside indigenous groups. Missionaries founded schools, dormitories, dispensaries, churches, and vocational centers in rural locations where formal education and healthcare were scarce. These institutions promoted literacy, modern education, medical care, and social mobility. For many indigenous people, conversion to Christianity meant not just accepting a new faith, but also having access to institutions that allowed educational growth and economic development. Historians caution against viewing these events solely as the consequence of missionary persuasion, instead emphasizing tribal populations' active agency in choosing Christianity based on their own aspirations and circumstances.

Another significant aspect contributing to conversion was the lack of formal caste hierarchies in many tribal tribes. Christian doctrines emphasizing spiritual equality, worldwide brotherhood, and equal access to education and religious involvement frequently appealed to populations who had traditionally been excluded from the dominant social institutions of the Brahmanical system. Missionary schools helped inhabitants of these villages gain literacy and administrative skills, opening up new prospects for work and leadership. In numerous instances, conversion promoted the rise of educated tribal leaders who ultimately took key roles in social change, political representation, and communal development.

However, the issue of conversion has sparked heated debate in Assam. Critics of missionary operations have claimed that educational institutions, healthcare services, and humanitarian aid have occasionally served as indirect tools for religious conversion. Such objections were more strong in the late colonial period and have persisted in modern political discourse. However, many historians reject simplistic theories that depict conversion purely as a result of material incentives. According to archival records and

ethnographic studies, conversion decisions were frequently influenced by long-term interactions between missionaries and local communities, personal religious experiences, changing socioeconomic conditions, and educational and social advancement goals.

The link between conversion and cultural identity is the subject of a significant scholarly discussion. Earlier views frequently concluded that conversion implied the abandoning of indigenous traditions. More recent research, however, paints a more complicated picture. Even after embracing Christianity, many tribal Christian groups maintained important features of their old culture, such as language, customary institutions, music, dance, folklore, and social organization. Rather than causing full cultural discontinuity, conversion frequently resulted in processes of adaptation and synthesis in which Christian beliefs coexisted with local cultural traditions. This event demonstrates that religious reform did not always eliminate ethnic identity, but rather facilitated the formation of new forms of cultural expression.

Religious conversion has also influenced the political development of Assam and the wider North-East. The spread of Christianity among communities such as the Nagas, Mizos, Garos, and sections of the Karbis and Dimasas contributed to the emergence of educated leadership and strengthened ethnic consciousness during the twentieth century. Educational institutions established by missionaries produced leaders who later participated in regional political movements and community organizations. Consequently, Christianity became intertwined not only with religious identity but also with broader questions of ethnic self-representation, cultural preservation, and regional politics.

Religious conversion remains a source of legal, political, and social debate in Assam after independence. Public discourse frequently includes debates over religious freedom, constitutional safeguards, indigenous cultural rights, and missionary operations. Article 25 of the Indian Constitution provides every person the right to profess, practise, and promote religion, but also allowing the state to control secular activities related with religious activity. This constitutional framework has affected discussions on conversion in Assam, where cultural preservation often intersects with religious liberty and minority rights.

The subject of religious conversion in Assam is a complex historical event that cannot be reduced to a simple religious or political process. Conversion was affected by the interaction of missionary activities, educational possibilities, healthcare services,

socioeconomic mobility, tribal agency, and changing historical conditions. While discussions over the repercussions remain, historical data suggests that conversion in Assam was marked by diversity of experience rather than uniformity. Its research thus provides important insights into the larger processes of cultural exchange, identity formation, social transformation, and religious change that have formed Assam's history.

12.5 CHRISTIANITY AND TRIBAL PEOPLE OF ASSAM

The introduction of Christianity among Assamese tribal people is one of the most significant socio-cultural changes in North-East Indian history. Unlike the caste Hindu population of the Brahmaputra Valley, where Christian missionary efforts had limited success, numerous tribal populations accepted Christianity to varied degrees in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This shift was more than just a religious phenomena; it also included significant changes in education, literacy, healthcare, social structure, and identity creation. As a result, the link between Christianity and the tribal societies of Assam must be understood within the larger framework of colonial administration, missionary operations, indigenous agency, and the modernization of tribal groups.

The spread of Christianity among tribal people began shortly after the advent of the American Baptist Mission in Assam in 1836. Missionaries such as Nathan Brown, Oliver Thomas Cutter, Miles Bronson, and subsequently Edwin W. Clark noticed that the tribal groups living in the hills and border regions had stayed relatively separated from colonial India's mainstream educational and administrative systems. Unlike the Assamese caste society, which was heavily influenced by Neo-Vaishnavism and Hindu social institutions, many tribal cultures had indigenous religious systems based on ancestor worship, animism, and the worship of nature and local deities. Missionaries focused their efforts on these areas by learning local languages, building schools, creating dispensaries, and translating Christian scriptures into tribal languages.

The Garos, Karbis, Dimasas, Rabhas, Tiwas, Bodos, and other indigenous communities were all influenced by Christianity to differing degrees. Although neighboring states such as Nagaland, Mizoram, and Meghalaya saw far more widespread conversions among the Nagas, Mizos, and Khasis, Christianity also had a significant impact on some tribal populations in Assam. Conversion was typically accomplished gradually by ongoing engagement between missionaries and indigenous populations, rather than through abrupt

religious transformation. Education became the most efficient medium for spreading Christianity among primitive societies. Missionaries constructed schools in rural villages where formal education was nearly nonexistent. In addition to Christian teachings, these institutions taught reading, writing, arithmetic, geography, and moral education. Mission schools also introduced boarding facilities for children from distant villages and encouraged female education, which had previously received limited institutional attention. The availability of modern education enabled many tribal youths to obtain employment in government services, teaching, healthcare, and other professions, thereby facilitating social mobility and the emergence of educated leadership within tribal communities.

One of Christianity's greatest lasting contributions to tribal life was the creation and maintenance of indigenous languages. Missionaries worked hard to research local dialects, compile grammars and dictionaries, and translate religious literature into tribal languages. In some places, missionary linguists used the Roman script to convert previously unwritten languages into written form. This technique not only promoted the spread of Christianity, but it also helped to preserve and standardize tribal languages. The publication of instructional materials, hymn books, catechisms, and Bible translations promoted literacy and the development of written literature in many indigenous communities. As a result, missionary research played an essential role in documenting the language heritage of Assam's indigenous communities.

Healthcare and social welfare activities reinforced the bond between Christians and native groups. Missionaries established dispensaries, hospitals, orphanages, and vocational training centers in rural areas where government medical services were scarce or nonexistent. They offered sophisticated medical treatment, promoted sanitation and cleanliness, and helped people during epidemics and natural calamities. These humanitarian efforts boosted popular trust in missionary institutions and helped to promote public health and communal welfare. The embrace of Christianity had an impact on tribal social organization and identity. Christian teachings fostered literacy, opposed harmful activities like excessive alcohol use in many societies, promoted formal education for both men and women, and reinforced institutional structure through churches and community associations.

The acceptance of Christianity also influenced tribal social organization and identity. Christian teachings encouraged literacy, discouraged practices such as excessive alcohol consumption in many communities, promoted formal education for both men and women,

and strengthened institutional organization through churches and community associations. Educated Christian leaders emerged who later participated actively in social reform, educational development, and regional politics. Thus, Christianity became closely associated with the modernization of several tribal societies without necessarily eliminating their ethnic identity. Modern study underlines that conversion did not always imply the complete abandoning of indigenous culture. Many tribal Christian groups have preserved significant portions of their traditional heritage, such as customary laws, kinship systems, folklore, music, dance, weaving practices, and indigenous festivals. In many situations, Christian worship blended local musical traditions and vernacular languages, resulting in unique forms of religious expression that mirrored both Christian theology and indigenous cultural practices. This cultural adaption process reveals that conversion was frequently achieved through negotiation and synthesis rather than total cultural replacement.

At the same time, Christianity has helped to develop ethnic identity among some tribal tribes. Missionary education promoted literacy and historical awareness, allowing communities to document their traditions, preserve oral histories, and express their aspirations for political representation and cultural rights. The advent of educated tribal elites encouraged the foundation of literary groups, student unions, and sociopolitical organizations that were critical to Assam's and the North-East's growth in the twentieth century.Nonetheless, the relationship between Christianity and primitive communities has sparked discussion. Scholars continue to debate issues such as religious conversion, cultural preservation, indigenous belief systems, and identity. While some critics argue that missionary activities undermined traditional religious institutions, many historians believe that Christianity provided tribal communities with new educational opportunities, healthcare facilities, and institutional resources while allowing many aspects of indigenous culture to survive in modified forms. According to current study, Christianity is more than just an external religious influence; it is a powerful historical force that engaged with local civilizations in a variety of intricate ways.

Christianity has a tremendous and long-lasting impact on Assam's tribal groups. Missionary operations helped many indigenous communities modernize by providing education, language development, healthcare, social change, and community organization. Simultaneously, tribal societies actively adapted Christian teachings to their own cultural contexts, resulting in unique forms of religious and social activity. The history of Christianity among Assamese tribal peoples exemplifies a complicated process of cultural contact,

adaptation, and identity creation that continues to shape the region's socio-cultural landscape.

12.6 CONTRIBUTIONS

The introduction of Christianity in Assam throughout the nineteenth century resulted in enormous transformations that reached far beyond the realm of religion. Although Christian missionaries initially came to the region to spread the Christian faith, their efforts greatly aided Assam's educational, linguistic, literary, medical, and socio-cultural development. During the colonial period, missionaries played a major role in modernizing by establishing schools, printing presses, healthcare institutions, and social welfare programmes. Their efforts have had a long-term impact on Assam's intellectual and institutional growth and continue to shape different areas of the state's educational and social scene.

One of the most lasting contributions of Christianity to Assam was in the sphere of education. The American Baptist Mission, which founded its first mission station in Sadiya in 1836 under Nathan Brown and Oliver Thomas Cutter, saw education as an efficient way of both social and religious upliftment. Missionaries established several primary schools, boarding schools, and eventually secondary educational institutions throughout the province, especially in rural and tribal areas where educational opportunities were few. These institutions implemented modern curricula that included science, mathematics, geography, history, and English language education, in addition to moral training. Missionary schools also emphasized discipline, teacher training, and methodical methods of instruction, providing the groundwork for modern education in many areas of Assam. Their commitment to female education represented another landmark contribution, as schools for girls challenged prevailing social attitudes and promoted greater educational opportunities for women.

Christian missionaries also played a pivotal role in the development and revival of the Assamese language and literature. During the early years of British administration, Bengali had replaced Assamese as the official language of education and administration in Assam. Missionaries such as Nathan Brown, Oliver Thomas Cutter, and Miles Bronson undertook extensive linguistic research to demonstrate that Assamese was an independent language with its own literary tradition. They prepared grammars, dictionaries, primers,

and school textbooks that strengthened the use of Assamese in education. Their advocacy significantly influenced colonial language policy, culminating in the restoration of Assamese as the official language of the province in 1873.

The printing press was established, marking another milestone in Assam's intellectual history. The American Baptist Mission developed one of the first printing presses in Upper Assam, enabling the publication of educational materials, religious literature, dictionaries, and textbooks in Assamese. The most remarkable success was the production of Orunodoi, the first Assamese monthly magazine, in 1846. Despite being produced for missionary objectives, Orunodoi quickly became a vital medium for sharing knowledge in science, agriculture, geography, medicine, history, and current affairs. It also boosted the popularity of modern Assamese literature and provided a platform for aspiring Assamese writers and thinkers. Historians usually see Orunodoi as the beginning of contemporary Assamese journalism and the literary renaissance. Christianity made important contributions to the documenting and preservation of indigenous languages and traditions. Missionaries operating in tribal areas spent a lot of time learning local languages, converting oral languages to written form, creating dictionaries and grammars, and translating the Bible into different tribal dialects. These linguistic endeavors benefited communities like the Karbis, Garos, Bodos, and Dimasas by promoting literacy and facilitating the creation of written literature. In many cases, missionary study preserved important portions of indigenous linguistic legacy that would otherwise have gone unreported.

Another significant contribution of Christianity was in the area of healthcare and medical services. Missionaries created hospitals, dispensaries, maternity centers, and mobile medical units in areas where government healthcare facilities were scarce or nonexistent. They implemented contemporary diagnostic and treatment techniques, supported immunization campaigns, maternal and child healthcare, sanitation, and public hygiene, and provided medical help during epidemics. Mission hospitals routinely serviced people regardless of religion, caste, or ethnicity, gaining great acceptability in local communities. These healthcare initiatives supplemented government services and dramatically improved public health in numerous districts of Assam.

Christian missionary organizations also helped with social reform and community development. They founded orphanages, vocational training centers, hostels, and rehabilitation programs for economically and socially underprivileged people. Missionaries

encouraged self-sufficiency and societal progress through literacy campaigns, vocational education, and communal welfare programs. Sewing schools, nursing courses, teacher-training institutions, and adult literacy programs all focused on empowering women. Such programs improved the socio-economic position of neglected parts of society and increased women's participation in public life. Among the tribal communities of Assam, Christianity facilitated the emergence of educated leadership and strengthened access to modern institutions. Missionary schools produced teachers, administrators, healthcare workers, and community leaders who later contributed to regional development. At the same time, Christian institutions encouraged the documentation of tribal folklore, oral traditions, customary laws, and cultural practices, thereby contributing to the preservation of indigenous heritage. Modern scholarship recognizes that many tribal Christian communities successfully retained significant elements of their traditional culture while simultaneously embracing new religious beliefs and educational opportunities.

Christian organizations have also made significant contributions during the post-independence period. Numerous educational institutions, colleges, nursing schools, hospitals, and charitable organizations run by Christian religions continue to provide high-quality education, healthcare, disaster relief, and humanitarian services throughout Assam. Their participation in rural development, skill development, environmental awareness, and social welfare programs illustrates Christian institutions' ongoing relevance in the state's development process.

Christianity has made significant achievements in Assam that go far beyond religion. Missionary endeavors in education, language development, printing, literature, healthcare, social reform, tribal welfare, and community development had a considerable impact on the modernization of Assamese society. These efforts improved literacy rates, strengthened public institutions, protected indigenous languages, extended healthcare facilities, and promoted social inclusion. As a result, Christianity has played an essential role in Assam's sociocultural history, not just as a religious tradition, but also as a catalyst for educational advancement, intellectual awakening, and institutional development.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Which missionary organization established the first permanent Christian mission in Assam?

2. Who published *Orunodoi*, the first Assamese monthly magazine?

3. In which year was *Orunodoi* first published?

4. Which treaty facilitated the beginning of organized Christian missionary activities in Assam after British rule was established?

12.7 LET US SUM UP

After going through this unit, you have learnt-

- Christianity was introduced into Assam during the nineteenth century following the British annexation of the region in 1826, with the American Baptist Mission establishing the first permanent mission at Sadiya in 1836.
- Christian missionaries made significant contributions to the educational, linguistic, and literary development of Assam. They established schools, promoted female education, founded printing presses, published *Orunodoi* (1846), translated the Bible into Assamese and tribal languages, and contributed to the revival and standardization of the Assamese language.
- Religious conversion in Assam was a complex socio-historical process influenced by missionary activities, access to education and healthcare, social mobility, and the aspirations of tribal communities.
- Christianity had a profound impact on the tribal communities of Assam, particularly through the spread of literacy, documentation of indigenous languages, provision of healthcare, and the emergence of educated tribal leadership.
- The legacy of Christianity in Assam extends beyond religion to the fields of education, healthcare, social welfare, and community development.

12.8 FURTHER READING

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12.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answer 1: The American Baptist Mission

Answer 2: Nathan Brown and The American Baptist Mission

Answer 3: 1846

Answer 4: The Treaty of Yandaboo (1826)

12.10 MODEL QUESTIONS

A) Very short questions:

1. Which missionary organization established the first permanent Christian mission in Assam?
2. Who founded the first American Baptist Mission station at Sadiya in 1836?
3. What was the name of the first Assamese monthly magazine published by the missionaries?
4. In which year was Assamese restored as the official language of Assam under British administration?

B) Short questions :

1. Discuss the major activities of the Christian missionaries in Assam during the colonial period.
2. Explain the factors that contributed to the spread of Christianity among the tribal

communities of Assam.

3. Examine the issue of religious conversion in Assam during the colonial period.
4. Assess the contributions of Christian missionaries to the development of Assamese language, literature, and education.

C) Long questions:

1. Critically examine the growth of Christianity in Assam with special reference to the activities of Christian missionaries and their impact on Assamese society.
2. Analyse the issue of religious conversion in Assam, highlighting its historical background, causes, debates, and socio-cultural implications.
3. Discuss the relationship between Christianity and the tribal communities of Assam, emphasizing the role of missionary education, healthcare, language development, and identity formation.
4. Evaluate the contributions of Christianity to the socio-cultural, educational, linguistic, literary, and healthcare development of Assam during the colonial and post-colonial periods.

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UNIT 13: ASSAMEASE SOCIETY AND SPORTS

UNIT STRUCTURE

13.1 Learning Objectives

13.2 Introduction

13.3 The role of sports in the society and culture of Assam

- Sports sponsored by the royal family:
- Festival-centric sports:
- Animal-related sports:
- Children's games
- Some games and sports of ancient Assam

13.4 Some traditional sports of Assam

- Elephant Fight
- Hawk Fight
- Bull Fight
- Bulbul Bird Fight
- Hen Fight
- Egg Fight
- Coin Games
- Boat Game
- Ring Hiding Game
- Ghila Khel (Mud Ball Games)
- Open Bead Game
- Spinach Seed Game

13.5 Let Us Sum Up

13.6 Further Reading

13.7 Answers to Check Your Progress

13.8 Model Questions

13.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to learn

- The role of sports and traditional games in the society and culture of Assam.

- The historical development and cultural significance of various traditional sports practiced in Assam.
- The contribution of traditional games to social unity, physical development, folk traditions, and the preservation of Assamese cultural heritage.

13.2 INTRODUCTION

Sport is a silent narrator in culture. Assam is a state rich in natural abundance and heritage. Along with its natural diversity, there is also a rich cultural diversity. Geographically, Assam is located in the northeastern part of India and has a variety of cultural elements. Festivals and environmental arts alone do not represent its cultural identity. In addition to these, sports is an integral part of Assamese culture – which expresses the spirit of Assamese peasant life. In this lesson we will discuss—the value of sports as the focus of Assamese culture and identity, and various traditional games.

12.3 THE ROLE OF SPORTS IN THE SOCIETY AND CULTURE OF ASSAM

Sports are a means of physical and mental development. It is also an integral part of culture. Various archaeological sources prove that sports played a special role in human evolution from the early stages. Hunting scenes carved in various Stone Age cave paintings suggest that hunting was not only a food gathering technique, but also a means of entertainment for early humans. Various hunting practices that have been practiced until very recent times strongly support this argument. Over time, cultural development is visible along with the evolution of society. Similarly, sports evolved as a means of entertainment and physical and mental development.

There are many sports in the ancient historical sources of Assam such as history, folklore, songs etc. These games were used as a means of entertainment, physical and mental development and acquisition of knowledge and skills. There are many sources that say that archery and war games have been practiced in Assam since ancient times. These sports were symbols of physical strength, courage, pride and masculinity. Sports have contributed to social life since ancient times as symbols of physical pursuits.

The traditional sports of Assam can be divided into several special categories. These include royal sponsored sports, festival sports, animal sports, children's games, etc. These sports will be briefly analyzed below.

Sports sponsored by the royal family:

It has already been mentioned that various sports have been held in Assam since ancient times under the patronage of the kings. The histories of the Ahom period in particular testify to the holding of royal sports festivals. Apart from the Ahom dynasty, other dynasties that ruled Assam also sponsored various sports festivals. These royal powers emphasized the introduction and sponsorship of various sports for the entertainment of the people as well as for their physical and mental development. The Rangghar was established during the reign of Swargadeo Rudra Singh during the reign of the Ahoms and was a major venue for holding sports festivals. There are many sports such as horse racing, wrestling and elephant racing held in the courtyard of the Rangghar under the patronage of the king. These games were held in the courtyard of the Rangghar during the Ahom era under the patronage of the king. The main purpose of these games was to entertain and create a sense of unity among the people.

Festival-centric sports:

There are many different types of games and entertainment that have been played around the folk festivals of Assam since ancient times. Over time, these games have become an integral part of a particular folk festival. There are many games and sports related to the national festival of Assam, Bihu, which are still widely popular and prevalent in the farming life of Assam. These traditional games are popular especially around Bhogali Bihu and Rangali Bihu. There are many games like bullfighting, egg fighting, butterfly fighting, palm tree climbing, jar breaking, rope pulling, coin games etc. which are popular during Bihu. Apart from Bihu, other folk festivals are also celebrated with various traditional games and sports. These vary in popularity from place to place. For example, in southern Assam, elephant races and pitcher races are still practiced in conjunction with folk festivals like Bhatheli and Suwari. There are many such indigenous games and games that are celebrated during the folk festivals of the various ethnic groups of Assam. These games play a special role in creating a sense of unity and harmony among the people while providing entertainment during the festivals. At the same time, these traditional sports also carry special significance in a symbolic sense. For example, the game of climbing

palm trees during Bihu is considered a symbol of strength in different parts of Assam. There are many different types of coins played during Bihu. Therefore, it is important to understand the significance of the agricultural festival of Bihu.

Animal-related sports:

There are many games and games centered around animals in Assam since ancient times. The aforementioned games include bullfighting, elephant racing, butterfly fighting, etc. There are many animal-centric games in different parts of Assam. Examples of animal-centric sports include bullfighting, chicken fighting, elephant racing, butterfly fighting, deer fighting, monkey dance, snake dance, etc. There are many different types of sports in the country. These traditional sports have been discontinued due to legal obligations but they have carried special significance in the cultural history of Assam.

Children's games:

There are many games and games that have been played among children and youngsters in Assam since ancient times. There are many traditional games and games that have disappeared due to globalization and modernity. However, various traditional games are still played among children and youth in villages of Assam. These games are especially helpful for children's physical and psychological well-being. At the same time, these games play a special role in involving children and young people in social life. There are many different types of games played by children and adolescents in Assam.

Some games and sports of ancient Assam:

There are many different types of games and games that have been played in Assam since ancient times. Some games are described in the Ramayana by Madhava Kandali. They are akuti-bhrukuti, khedi, gowal-gowali, ghila, gambling, jhunti, tokra, topkheri, dali yuj, dice, fruit-flower games, bhanta, malyudha, larmara, luni and hata-hati (source: Assam Culture Cell, Dr. Narayan Das). (Ed.), Pragjyotish College, Guwahati, 2009). These games are believed to have been prevalent in medieval Assam. There are many other games played in ancient Assam besides these -

Ring games, ginger games, ali chiga games, irikti-mirikti (ichni-bichani) games, ukuli-mukuli, waist chiga, spinach seed games, egg fights, parrot-ku-games, karikhel, pot breaking games, egg-muni games, (blindfolded). There are many different types of games, such as games, games, games, games, games, games, games, games, games, games, games, games, games, games, games, There are many different types of games

such as knocking, topa games, sword turning, tai-bai, tangoti, bride and groom, dol (daul) making, daibabanda, dola, dhop, boating, nagari, rat-cat, turning, dice, bata, tiger-cow (tiger-bol). Kut, wrestling, Mangal, Moi fighting, Muthi fighting, Mughal Pathan, Lathikhel, Lukavaku (Lukaluki), Leteku, Shalika Jot, Shan fighting, Sol Khel, Hao (Hai Gudu), Hat Uliwa, Elephant fighting, Hathabata, Hafola, Hetali etc (Ed.), Pragjyotish College, Guwahati, 2009). Some of these games are indigenous and others are a mixture of other cultures. Some of these games are still prevalent in the villages of Assam, while many of them have now disappeared with the passage of time.

13.4 SOME TRADITIONAL SPORTS OF ASSAM

In this section we will briefly discuss some of the traditional sports of Assam. Due to the limitations of the discussion, only selected sports will be discussed.

Elephant fighting :

Elephant fighting was a prominent sport in medieval Assam. According to Ahom history, elephant fights were held in the courtyard of the Rangghar since the reign of Swargadeo Rudra Singh. Since the elephant was an essential part of the Ahom warfare strategy, this special sport was held as a symbol of entertainment as well as strength and warfare strategy. According to the history of Tamuli Fukan, during the reign of Swargadeo Rudra Singh, the toothed elephants were trained for fighting in the elephant cave north of the Rangghar. These elephants were fed rice, ground bean soup, etc. and were specially trained for fighting from the day of the battle. Elephant fighting was held in two ways. Sometimes two elephants were left open and engaged in battle. There were yard bells attached to the necks of the elephants fighting openly. Sometimes, one elephant was trapped in the elephant's nest and the other was kept outside the nest. The two elephants fought head-to-head and tooth-to-tooth. If the battle was won, a new elephant was fought. The skilled Maute conducted the elephant fight on the back of an elephant.

Hawk Fight :

Bird fighting has been practiced in Assam since ancient times. These include swan fights, chicken fights and butterfly fights. During the Ahom rule, Hawk fighting was a significant form of entertainment. The Ahom king created a special officer named Shenchwa Barua to train the Shan birds for this fight. The main responsibility of the Shenchwa Barua

was to train the Shen birds (hawk) for fighting and to conduct the fighting on the day of the fighting.

The Shen Juj (Hawk Fight) was usually held from the month of Magh to the month of Bohag. There were bird's nests in places for deer fighting. Hundreds of young birds were fed on small fish and allowed to graze in these ponds. On the day of the Hawk fight, the trained hawks were released among the young birds. The rule of the fight was that the hawk would fight the egg in the open air and catch the egg and fall into the hands of its owner. If the warrior Shen caught Kanua and fell into the hands of Shenchwa Barua, he was rewarded. Therefore, it is important to understand the importance of these issues. Therefore, it is important to understand the importance of these issues. Therefore, it is important to understand the importance of these issues.

Bull fight :

Another animal-centric game that has been prevalent in Assam since the Middle Ages is bullfighting. Bullfighting was very popular in Assam during the Ahom rule. There are many different types of bullfights, especially during Magh Bihu. In this context, bullfighting was considered an integral part of Magh or Bhogali Bihu. There are many examples of bullfighting in Assam since the Middle Ages, as well as in Bihu songs and folk tales. The bullfight, which was recently stopped following a court order, was a symbol of strength for the lives of the peasant Assamese people. This struggle requires strength as well as strategy and efficiency. The bulls are specially trained by the owner a few months before the bullfight. The bulls are specially decorated and brought to the battlefield. Trained Gona bulls are fought in the open field or in the pen on the day of the fight. Sometimes they fight by holding the nose of the bull. The fight is conducted by an experienced cowboy or bull owner. If one bull loses the fight and runs away, the other bull is declared the winner. During the Ahom rule, bullfights were held under the patronage of the royal family. There are many different types of bullfights in the country. These are the most popular bullfights in the country.

Bulbul Bird Fight :

Bulbul bird fight is an interesting folk sport centered on Bihu in Assam. There is evidence that this sport has been practiced in the Hajo region of southern Assam since several centuries ago. This is a special game held on the first day of Magh Bihu in the premises of the Hoygriva-Madhava temple in Hajo. They are trained for a month and a

half to catch butterflies for fighting. On the night of Magh Bihu, the birds trained for this fight are fed specially prepared ragial bhog and released for the fight the next day. Two birds are allowed to fight at a time. The people who conduct the fight are called marchers. The two marchers showed a piece of bean sprouts and started a fight between two butterflies. At the end of the fight, the winning butterfly is fighting another new bird. Three birds were declared as the first, second and third winners in the final stage. There are many reasons why you shouldn't go to the gym. There are many reasons why you shouldn't go to the gym.

Hen fight :

Hen fight is a traditional and popular sport in Assam. There are two types of this game. One is a fight between chickens and the other is a game between men. Historically, chicken fighting was a popular pastime during the Ahom era. The Ahom kings enjoyed chicken fighting inside the royal court. Facing off two equally powerful chickens, fighting them until one of them died. The fight is still held in some places today. Sometimes a sharp weapon is tied to the tail of a chicken to make the fight more dangerous.

Chicken fighting is a folk game among men in which men participate as chickens. The player holds one foot behind his back, the other hand holds his arm and tries to hit each other with one foot. Games are played in a circular arena and a director gives the signal to start the fight. A player who spreads his leg, falls his arm or goes out of bounds is eliminated from the game. The player who survives to the end wins.

Egg fight :

Egg fighting is a popular Bihu game in Assam. The game continues from before Bohag Bihu until Bihu flies. The game usually uses the hard eggs of the duck, called saiya or haiya. Players find hard eggs from different places and test the hardness of the eggs by smashing them with coins or nails. Before the game starts, the price is agreed between the two sides. This price means deciding which direction to hit the egg. Then, one player hits the designated side of the other player's egg with his egg. Whoever breaks the egg must give up and give the egg to the winner.

The egg of the person who keeps it unbroken for seven Bihu is called the Saiya Kani of Sat Bihu. It is considered a symbol of pride to be able to keep the eggs intact. There is equal participation of people of all ages in this Bihu-centric game.

Coin Games :

Coin game is an old traditional game of Assam. This game is mainly associated with folk beliefs related to agriculture, fertility etc. The coin is considered a symbol of fertility. Therefore, Karikhel is considered as a symbol of fertility and crop growth. Karikhel has been widely practiced in Assam since the Middle Ages. This game is played at the beginning of the year. According to folk belief, if a coin breaks, it brings good luck, that is, nature is destroyed, while if it does not break, it brings bad results—such as disasters such as drought or floods. For these reasons, coin play is considered to be a symbol of the worship of Vasumati and agricultural life.

This game is played by drawing a coin shield on the ground. The game is usually played by two or four people for 5 coins. In the game, coins hit on the ground with their hands are scored according to the number of coins upside down—1 for one upside down and 10 for five upside down. The player who gets 10 points can raise the ball. When a seed falls on someone else's coin, the coin "dies" and must be revived. The eight numbers on the coin shield are counted as Athor, Kathob, Nalab, Jaba, Bamun, Atai, Banshi and Ghora. The first to pick up the ball on the wound wins.

Boat game :

Assam is a riverine country with a variety of traditional recreational activities. One such special and popular sport is boating. In ancient times, the people organized this game for the pleasure of kings and emperors. There are many examples of boat races in the country, especially during the reign of the Ahom king Swargadeo Rudra Singh. Boating is usually associated with various festivals in Assam. This tradition is still alive in Shuwalkuchi, Barpeta, Ramdia, Dhubri, Kukurmara, Gauripur, Dharapur etc. There are many different types of boat races held on the river Brahmaputra on the birth anniversary of Mahapurush Sankardev. There was also a time when boat games were held at the Barpeta Satra along with the kirtans of Sankardev, Madhavdev and Mathura Das Budha Atar. Although the stage has now replaced the river, the tradition continues.

The boats used in the boating are well equipped with hangul-haital and decorated with various designs. Peacock boats are especially popular, which are about 180 feet long and 4 feet wide. This boat can accommodate many sailors. While sailing, the sailors sing special songs in groups called boating songs. These songs describe the love story of Krishna and Radha, their journey to Saudi Arabia and the separation of his wife, the

stories of the Ramayana and Mahabharata, etc. Some of the songs are entirely centered around boats and rivers. Along with the songs, the gital or reader sings songs in a special dance style, which delights the audience. This song is secular. Hindus sing about Allah, and Muslims sing about Hari. This tradition keeps harmony and social unity alive.

Ring Hiding Game:

Ring hiding game is a popular and fun tradition in Assamese wedding ceremonies. After the wedding, the bride and groom are seated at home and the bride's family organizes this game. A pot is filled with rice and the bride and groom's ring is hidden in it and the bride and groom are allowed to find it. This game is used to wish for happiness and peace in the household life, protection of wealth and prosperous family life. The game is played in the homes of both the bride and groom and often the atmosphere is filled with jokes and cheers. After the game, the groom puts the ring on the bride and the bride gives it back to the groom. This game is not part of the Vedic tradition. It is an integral part of the wedding customs of Assamese society.

Ghila Khel (Mud Ball Games):

Ghila is a popular traditional game in Assam. The game is called Ghila Khel"because mud is used as balls. To play this game, six house-like parts are drawn on the ground. The names of the houses from bottom to top are — Elephant, Maut, Dali (Dali is divided into two parts). They throw the mud out of the drawing, they step outside the drawing with their feet, they step on the Dalit, they don't step into their own slaughterhouse, they cross someone else's slaughterhouse,

Then he "dies" means he is out of the game. When the mud crosses all the houses, you have to step on the elephant and throw the mud up and cut a house, ie you can claim it as your own. Whoever cuts the most houses wins the game.

Open Bead Game:

Khuli guti game is a traditional game played between two players. This game is played for pleasure during rest. In the game, five holes are dug in the ground in two equal rows and each hole is filled with 5 beads. Stones, tree seeds or clay batlu seeds are used as seeds. The player takes beads from any of the shells on his side and fills each shell with one bead. When the seeds are filled, the seeds are removed from the next shell and filled again in the same way. While filling the seeds, some of them open and remain empty without falling. The player receives the ball after the empty shell. If he cannot save

his twenty-five beads in this way, the player must open them and pledge or borrow them. He who opens everything and brings it into his hands is the winner.

Spinach seed game :

Spinach ball game is an old and popular game in Assam, which is played between two people or teams. In the game, one person hides a seed (garlic, chickpea or vol) in one hand and the other person guesses the location of the seed by singing a song. 'Alou seeds Talou seeds Spinach seeds Lai, this hand gets the seed in this hand. They sing the song and open the hand on which the song ends. Once the bead is found, the second player can hide the bead. Otherwise, the previous person hides the seed again. In team games, players on one side throw balls into one of the other side's hands, and the rest search by singing songs. When they get the seeds, their team hides them. This game requires pleasure, patience and focus.

In addition to these, many other folk sports have enriched the farming life of Assam. Examples of folk sports prevalent in Assam include How Gudu or Hadugudu, Latum, Chow, Kadhara Tana, Luka Bhaku, Rochi Tana, Chor-Police, Tanguti, Dhop, Tekeli Bhanga, Par-Pani, Dara-Kaina, Alang-Dalong. These folk sports have enriched the Assamese society and culture for many centuries.

Assamese folk sports songs Matah

Folk sports have not only enriched Assamese culture as a means of entertainment. There are many folk songs or proverbs associated with sports that have also enriched the culture and literature of Assam. These songs have a special impact on the mental development of children. One such sports song that affects the minds of children is:

The big cat goes to the small house
They remove the lid and eat the potato rice
Bhakut Kut. Bhakut Kut.
Similarly, the spinach hide song of the spinach game -

Alou seeds Talou seeds
Spinach seeds,
The one with the seeds in her hand
He gets it in his hands.
Another popular children's game is the song sung in the game of raising hands -

Ichni Bichni Darika fish kitchen
Honey from honey to honey
They can egg from the egg.
L hand bell hand
The king cuts off Srihat
Kuch Lanka Budhi Mare Nahat.

Children sing in the Along Bridge game-
“They’ve built a bridge along
The king and queen have come.

These rhythmic songs have greatly influenced the mental development of children and have enriched the folk culture of Assam.

There are many examples of how songs associated with folk sports have inspired the culture of Greater Assam. The cultural importance of these songs is so immense that they have gained a place on stage in recent times. These songs have been able to reflect various social images and have gained a place in the mainstream of culture. A boating song widely used in South Assam is as follows:

Diha :
Oh, my dear
Oh my Molua who killed Oh my oh my Molua he.
Position:
A ya ya ya ya her does she
Oh, my precious one.
I brought it to him
Hey, my dear.
I’m holding the wire and crying, my mother-in-law.
Who killed my precious one? Woe to me, woe to Mob Molua.
A netha netha does she
Hey, my dear.
I brought a netha

Oh, my precious one.
A netha holds and cries my moluah.

Dice is a folk sport associated with Assamese weddings. There are also special wedding names associated with this game. This game is played in conjunction with the wedding ceremony.

“Lai ne dherua tirota serua/Oi Ram follow him/Wherever he takes you, you will go, O Ram/Oi Ram, you are under your wife.

There are many ways in which you can improve your self-confidence. There are many ways in which you can improve your self-confidence.

Conclusion:

Sports is deeply associated with Assamese culture and social life. Sports are not only physical activities, they are an important part of the thought, tradition and folk life of the Assamese society. The unique characteristics of the traditional games and sports of the various ethnic groups of Assam reflect the diverse cultural identity of Assam.

There are many sports held during the Bihu festival such as egg fighting, climbing palm trees, coin games, etc. which convey a message of social harmony and joy. Animal-based games like bullfighting, elephant fighting, deer fighting etc. also reflect the courage and traditional lifestyle of the Assamese. These traditional games are not only entertainment but also a means of developing social cohesion, traditional knowledge and physical attitudes. With thechange of time, many traditional games are now on the verge of extinction. In such circumstances, the preservation and revival of these should be the responsibility of social life.

13.5 LET US SUM UP

After going through this unit, you have learnt:

- Sports and games are an important part of Assamese society and culture. They reflect the traditions, lifestyle, and collective identity of the people of Assam.
- Traditional sports helped in the physical and mental development of people from ancient times. They also encouraged discipline, courage, and social participation.

- Traditional sports in Assam can be divided into different categories such as royal-sponsored sports, festival-centered sports, animal-centered sports, and children's games. Each category reflects a unique aspect of Assamese cultural life.
- Bihu-related games such as egg fighting, buffalo fighting, and coin games are deeply connected with Assamese folk traditions. These games symbolize joy, fertility, strength, and agricultural prosperity.
- During the Ahom period, sports festivals were organized under royal patronage at places like the Rang Ghar. These events promoted entertainment, unity, and physical fitness among the people.
- Many traditional sports carried symbolic meanings in Assamese culture. Games like bullfighting and climbing palm trees represented strength, bravery, and masculinity.
- Assamese folk sports are closely connected with folk songs and rhymes. These songs enriched children's mental development and strengthened the folk culture of Assam.
- Many indigenous sports of Assam are disappearing because of modernization and globalization. Therefore, preserving and reviving these traditional games is important for protecting Assamese cultural heritage.

13.6 FURTHER READDING

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CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q No. 1: What are the categories of traditional sports of Assam?

Q No. 2: Elephant fighting at Rangghar was held during the reign of which Ahom king?

Q No. 3: Egg fight, bullfight and card game are particularly associated with which festival in Assam?

Q No. 4: What is the game of cards mainly symbolized by?

Q No. 5: In which traditional game of Assam do the newlyweds look for the ring inside a pot filled with rice?

12.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans. to Q 1: Royal-sponsored sports, festival-centered sports, animal-centered sports, and children's games.

Ans. to Q 2: Swargadeo Rudra Singha.

Ans. to Q 3: Bihu festival.

Ans. to Q 4: Fertility and agrarian life.

Ans. to Q 5: Hide the ring game.

12.6 MODEL QUESTIONS

A) VERY SHORT QUESTIONS (Answer each question within 50 words)

Q 1: Who built the Rang Ghar?

Q 2: What is "Shen Juj"?

Q 3: What is the traditional boat race of Assam called?

Q 4: Which traditional Assamese game is played with eggs?

B) SHORT QUESTIONS (Answer each question within 150 words)

Q 1: Discuss the importance of traditional sports in Assamese culture.

Q 2: Write a short note on buffalo fighting in Assam.

Q 3: Explain the cultural significance of boat racing in Assam.

C) LONG QUESTIONS (Answer each question within 300-500 words)

Q 1: Discuss the role of sports and games in the society and culture of Assam. Explain how traditional sports contributed to social unity, physical development, and cultural identity.

Q 2: Discuss in detail the festival-centered traditional sports of Assam. Analyze the cultural and symbolic significance of the games associated with Bihu.

Q 3: Discuss the historical background and cultural importance of animal-centered sports in Assam. Give examples of elephant fighting, buffalo fighting, and hawk fighting.

Q 4: Analyze the relationship between folk sports and folk songs in Assam. Discuss how songs associated with traditional games influenced Assamese folk culture and the mental development of children.

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UNIT 14: EMERGENCE OF MOBILE THEATRE

UNIT STRUCTURE

14.1 Learning Objectives

14.2 Introduction

14.3 Historical Background of *Yatra* (*Jatra*) Parties

14.4 Emergence of Mobile Theatre in Assam

14.4.1 Eminent Personalities

14.4.2 Infrastructure

14.5 Socio-Cultural Influence

14.6 Women and Mobile Theatre

14.7 Theatre as an Industry

14.8 Let us Sum up

14.9 Further Reading

14.10 Answers to Check Your Progress

14.11 Model Questions

1.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through the unit, you will be able to:

- explain the meaning of mobile theatre in Assam
- describe the historical background of *Yatra* or *Jatra* parties
- trace the emergence of Assamese mobile theatre
- identify important personalities connected with this theatre form
- explain the main infrastructure of a mobile theatre group
- discuss the socio-cultural influence of mobile theatre
- understand the role and problems of women in mobile theatre
- explain why mobile theatre can also be called a cultural industry

1.2 INTRODUCTION

Mobile theatre is one of the best-known cultural forms of Assam. In Assamese it is called *Bhramyaman* theatre. The word *Bhramyaman* means moving or travelling. This name is very suitable because the theatre group moves from one place to another with its actors, singers, musicians, dancers, stage workers, light and sound workers, costumes, props, stage materials and temporary seating arrangement.

Unlike a permanent theatre hall, mobile theatre does not wait for the audience to come to a city stage. It takes the stage to the audience. A group may perform in a village field, a school ground, a town playground or an open community space. A temporary pandal is built. Two stages, light, sound and sitting arrangements are made. Then the plays are performed for a large local audience.

This unit discusses the emergence of mobile theatre in Assam. The syllabus asks us to study the background of *Yatra* or *Jatra* parties, personalities, infrastructure, socio-cultural influence, women and mobile theatre, and theatre as an industry. Mobile theatre is not entertainment only. It is also a public meeting place, a workplace, a form of cultural memory and a business organisation.

14.3 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF *YATRA* (*JATRA*) PARTIES

The story of mobile theatre cannot be understood without looking at older travelling performance traditions. In eastern India, *Yatra* or *Jatra* is an old popular form of dramatic performance. The word suggests movement, journey and public presentation. *Jatra* parties generally travelled from place to place and performed before large gatherings. They did not need a modern auditorium. A temporary stage, open ground and public interest were enough.

Assam had its own rich performance traditions before modern mobile theatre. Bhaona, Ankiya Nat, Ojapali, Kusan gaan, folk songs, religious storytelling and local dramatic practices had already trained people to enjoy performance. These forms were not the same as mobile theatre, but they created a cultural habit of watching dramatic action, song, music, costume and gesture in a public space.

The word *Yatra* was not unknown in older Assamese theatre. Sankardeva's dramatic tradition itself remembers Chihna *Yatra*, and the name *Sri Parijat Haran Yatra* also shows

the older use of the word. In Bhaona, performance could take place in the namghar, in a khola, or under a temporary rabha or pandal. The whole village could take part in preparation, rehearsal, costume making, music and audience arrangement. This older community habit later helped people accept a travelling theatre group.

During the colonial period, Bengali *Jatra* parties also came to Assam, especially through festivals, migration and tea garden areas. Assam had local *Yatra* names too, such as *Goalini Yatra*, *Monai Yatra* and *Bhasan Yatra*. These forms were not modern mobile theatre, but they show that moving dramatic performance had an old background in the region.

Between the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, many *Yatra* or opera parties grew in lower Assam, especially around Kamrup and Goalpara. Jaydev Sarma of Murkuchi is remembered for forming an early commercial dramatic group around 1868-78. Later names such as *Assam Kohinoor Opera Party*, *Rampur Yatra Party*, *Bina Pani Natya Sangha*, *Hajo Natya Kala Kendra, Kohinoor Opera* and *Sanjivani Opera* became part of this history. At first many performances used Bengali, but later Assamese translations and Assamese plays became important. Dhaneswar Sarma's translated *Nal Damayanti* is remembered as an early Assamese play performed by a *Yatra* party.

The *Yatra* or *Jatra* influence was especially important in lower Assam. Bengali *Jatra* parties and Assamese travelling dramatic groups helped to build a public taste for moving theatre. They showed that a dramatic group could travel with actors and materials and perform before people in different places. Later Assamese groups changed this model according to Assamese language, local stories, local music and the needs of Assamese audiences.

The word *Jatra* should not make us think that Assamese mobile theatre is only a copy of Bengali *Jatra*. It is better to say that *Jatra* was one important background. Assamese mobile theatre grew from many streams: *Jatra*, opera party, local dramatic practices, proscenium theatre, cinema, popular music, community organisation and commercial management. It became a new form because it combined all these in a practical way.

One important early name is Brajanath Sarma, often known as Natyacharya. His *Kohinoor Opera Party* is remembered as an important stage in the development of travelling theatre in Assam. Opera parties brought dramatic performance, music, staging and travel

together. They also helped performance become more organised. In this way they prepared the ground for the later mobile theatre groups of Pathsala and other places.

The *Yatra*/*Jatra* background is important for three reasons. First, it gave the idea of movement. Second, it created rural and semi-urban audiences for dramatic performance. Third, it showed that theatre could be organised outside a permanent hall. Modern mobile theatre took these ideas further and added better management, more technical equipment, paid artists, double stages and a stronger business structure.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. What does the word Bhramyaman mean?

.....

Q2. Why is *Yatra* or *Jatra* important in the history of mobile theatre?

.....

Q3. Name one early personality connected with travelling theatre in Assam.

.....

14.4 EMERGENCE OF MOBILE THEATRE IN ASSAM

The modern form of Assamese mobile theatre is usually traced to the post-independence period. Pathsala became one of its most important centres. This is why Pathsala is often called a major home of mobile theatre in Assam. Many important groups, artists and producers have been connected with this area.

A major step came in 1959 when the Lahkar brothers, Sada Lahkar and Achyut Lahkar, started *Nataraj Opera*. This was still close to the older *Yatra* and opera background, but it was moving towards a more organised modern form. In 1963 Achyut Lahkar established *Nataraj Theatre* at Pathsala. This is usually taken as the beginning of modern Assamese mobile theatre. Some early plays connected with *Nataraj Theatre* were *Jerengar Sati, Beula, Mantri Hom, Erina* and *Alla Ishwar*. Beula became especially popular and is remembered for its long stage life.

The most important figure in the emergence of modern mobile theatre is Achyut Lahkar. He is widely remembered as the father of Assamese mobile theatre. His work with *Nataraj Theatre* gave the form a clear shape. The idea was simple but powerful:

professional theatre should not remain limited to urban halls. It should travel to the people. It should be public-facing, attractive and technically strong.

After *Nataraj*, other groups appeared and the movement expanded. Dharani Barman started *Suradevi Theatre* in 1965, and Bishnu Prasad Rabha worked as its first-year drama director. Plays such as *Karuna Baishya's, Chambalor Abhishap* and *Abhishapta Chambal* created attention. *Purbajyoti Theatre* was also important. In 1968, Bishnu Prasad Rabha, Phani Sarma and Bhupen Hazarika were associated with it, and social plays such as *Siraj* and *Emuthi Saul aru Dabi* helped bring social drama strongly into mobile theatre.

The movement continued through groups such as *Assam Star Theatre, Rupkowar Theatre, Aradhana Theatre, Kohinoor Theatre, Awahan Theatre* and *Hengul Theatre*. *Kohinoor Theatre*, started in 1976-77, and *Awahan Theatre*, started in 1980-81, opened another strong phase. Mahendra Barthakur entered the Awahan stage with *Shimolu Chandan*, and Dr Bhabendra Nath Saikia became closely associated with mobile theatre through plays such as *Ramdhenu*. *Kohinoor* also staged memorable works such as *Saraguri Chapari, Baghjal* and *Matir Gari*.

Mobile theatre became popular because it answered a real need. Many villages and small towns did not have good theatre halls. Cinema halls were also not available everywhere. Television and digital media were not yet common in earlier decades. A travelling theatre group could bring a large live performance to people near their homes. This made theatre exciting, accessible and social.

The working season of mobile theatre is also important. Groups usually rehearse before the touring season and then travel for several months. Local committees invite the theatre group, help in arranging the ground, sell tickets and manage the audience. Thus, the form depends on both professional artists and local community support. This is one reason why it has survived for so long.

Mobile theatre also changed with time. At first, many plays were linked with mythological, historical and social subjects. Later the themes became wider. Family drama, love stories, suspense, political subjects, social problems, crime, comedy, adaptations from novels and even cinema-like spectacles entered the stage. This ability to change with audience taste is one of its main strengths.

Scholars such as Rituparna Patgiri and Ina Ross show that mobile theatre is not only a stage event. It is also a social event, shaped by audience excitement, local participation, publicity, star culture, music and community feeling.

14.4.1 EMINENT PERSONALITIES

The history of mobile theatre is not the work of one person only. It is a collective history. Producers, playwrights, actors, singers, light designers, musicians, set workers, costume workers and local organisers have all contributed to it. Still, some names are especially important.

Brajanath Sarma: Brajanath Sarma is important because his work belongs to the earlier stage of organised travelling theatre in Assam. Through opera party activity, he helped create a bridge between older travelling performance and later mobile theatre. He is also remembered for encouraging a more modern theatrical environment. The importance of his work lies in preparation. He helped prepare the cultural ground from which the later mobile theatre movement grew.

Sada Lahkar: Sada Lahkar is connected with the early *Nataraj Opera* background. His work helped create the practical base for later developments. He belonged to the world of acting and travelling performance. The importance of such figures is that they made theatre a lived practice, not only a written script or a city-based art.

Achyut Lahkar: Achyut Lahkar is the central name in the emergence of modern Assamese mobile theatre. He gave mobile theatre a modern and organised shape through *Nataraj Theatre.* He understood that theatre had to be attractive, fast-moving and technically fresh. He experimented with stage arrangement, performance flow and public appeal. He wanted theatre to be gonomukhi, that is, people-oriented. For this reason he is called the father of Assamese mobile theatre.

Ratan Lahkar: Ratan Lahkar is closely associated with Kohinoor Theatre, founded in 1976. His contribution was very important in taking mobile theatre into a more ambitious phase. Kohinoor Theatre became known for large productions, popular subjects and technical experiments. Its performance before the National School of Drama audience in New Delhi in 2010 also showed that Assamese mobile theatre could attract attention outside Assam.

Bhabendra Nath Saikia: Dr Bhabendra Nath Saikia was a major Assamese literary and cultural personality. His association with mobile theatre, especially through plays for the mobile stage, helped raise the literary and artistic value of the form. His dramatic writing showed that mobile theatre could carry strong stories, emotional depth and serious social observation. This is important because mobile theatre is sometimes wrongly seen only as commercial entertainment.

Pabitra Kumar Deka: Pabitra Kumar Deka was connected with cinema, journalism and cultural writing. He wrote and adapted plays for mobile theatre and also helped create discussion around this form. He is important because he helped bring mobile theatre into a wider cultural conversation. Through writing and criticism, people like him helped mobile theatre gain respect among educated audiences.

Hemanta Dutta: Hemanta Dutta is remembered for creative stage imagination, especially in technically ambitious productions. His work with productions such as Titanic is often mentioned in discussions of spectacle in Assamese mobile theatre. His contribution shows how mobile theatre adopted cinema-like imagination while remaining a live performance form.

Radha Govinda Baruah: Radha Govinda Baruah is remembered in discussions of the term Bhramyaman. His role is important because media, journalism and public language helped mobile theatre become visible. Names, reports, advertisements and reviews made the form part of public culture.

Bishnu Prasad Rabha, Phani Sarma and Bhupen Hazarika: These names show how mobile theatre drew strength from wider Assamese culture. Their association brought serious theatre, music, acting, cultural prestige and public emotion into the mobile stage.

Mahendra Barthakur, Arun Sarma and Munin Baruah: Writers and directors like Mahendra Barthakur, Arun Sarma and Munin Baruah helped mobile theatre handle serious and socially meaningful subjects. Works such as *Saraguri Chapari, Mukhyamantri* and *Baghjal* show that mobile theatre could carry thoughtful drama along with popular entertainment.

Playwrights and play examples: Mobile theatre used mythological, historical, social and imaginative plays. Examples include Atul Chandra Hazarika's

Beula and *Nanda Dulal*, Achyut Lahkar's *Erina*, *Bicharak* and *Alla Ishwar*, Mahendra Barthakur's *Raja Harishchandra* and *Saraguri Chapari*, Hemanta Dutta's *Ganga Putra Bhishma* and *Devi Sannyasini*, Prafulla Bora's *Alankar* and *Agni Kanya*, and Bhaven Baruah's *Kanaklata* and *Shahid.*

We should also remember many unnamed theatre workers. A mobile theatre cannot run only through famous actors and producers. It needs drivers, electricians, cooks, carpenters, costume helpers, tent workers, security workers and publicity workers. Their labour makes the travelling stage possible.

14.4.2 Infrastructure

Infrastructure is one of the most important features of mobile theatre. A normal theatre hall is fixed in one place. But a mobile theatre group carries its own theatre space. The Assam Mobile Theatre (Regulation and Artists' Welfare Fund) Act, 2010 gives us a useful official idea. It says that a mobile theatre group performs live dramatic and cultural programmes in different places on a temporary basis. It must have temporary stages, light and sound, a pandal, sitting arrangement, artists and technical and non-technical staff.

The Act also explains what infrastructure means. It includes stages, settings, pandal, tents, sheds, screens, chairs, gallery and other items needed for live performance. It also lists equipment such as lighting items, generator set, sound system, musical instruments, projector and other mechanical items. This shows that mobile theatre is a complete moving organisation.

A mobile theatre group usually has artistic infrastructure and physical infrastructure. Artistic infrastructure includes playwrights, directors, actors, singers, dancers, musicians, choreographers, make-up artists and costume designers. Physical infrastructure includes stage frames, curtains, props, costumes, light, sound, generator, vehicles, pandal material and seating.

The double-stage system is a special feature often discussed in relation to Assamese mobile theatre. Two stages help the group move from one scene to another quickly. While one scene is being performed, the next scene can be prepared on the other stage. This gives speed to the performance and reduces waiting time for the audience. It also gives a cinema-like flow.

Transport is another major part of the infrastructure. The group has to carry heavy stage materials, electrical equipment, costumes and people. This needs trucks, buses or other vehicles. The group also needs storage space, rehearsal space and workshop support. Without these, the touring model cannot work.

Local infrastructure is also necessary. A local committee usually arranges the ground, helps with ticketing and looks after local publicity. The relation between the travelling group and the local committee is very important. Mobile theatre works because professional organisation meets local community support.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. Who is called the father of Assamese mobile theatre?

……

Q2. Mention two important personalities of mobile theatre in Assam.

……

Q3. What is the double-stage system?

……

Q4. Mention two items of mobile theatre infrastructure.

……

14.5 SOCIO-CULTURAL INFLUENCE

Mobile theatre has a deep socio-cultural influence in Assam. It has made theatre available to people who may not visit an urban auditorium. A person in a village or small town can watch a large professional production near home. This has made performance more democratic and more public.

It also creates a community event. When a theatre group comes to a place, people talk about it before the show. Posters, banners, social media posts and local announcements create excitement. Families plan to go together. Friends discuss actors and songs. The performance becomes part of local social life.

Mobile theatre has helped Assamese language and culture remain active in public entertainment. Most productions use Assamese dialogue, songs and expressions. Local

humour, family feeling, social conflict and emotional speech bring the audience close to the play. This is why many people feel that mobile theatre is a part of Assamese identity.

At the same time, mobile theatre is open to change. It has used stories from history, mythology, novels, films, current politics and social life. Some plays are serious. Some are commercial. Some are full of music and spectacle. This mixture helps the form reach many kinds of audience. A student, farmer, shopkeeper, teacher or office worker may all find something familiar in it.

The plays may be grouped mainly into mythological, historical, social and imaginative or romantic plays. In practice, social plays became the most popular because they showed family conflict, social change, injustice, love, ambition and moral struggle in a language that ordinary people could understand. Mythological and historical plays also remained important because they connected the audience with memory, belief and heroic pasts.

Mobile theatre has also influenced media culture. Newspapers, magazines, television channels and now social media regularly discuss actors, songs, new plays and controversies. This creates a star system. Film actors have also worked in mobile theatre. Because of this, the boundary between theatre, cinema, music and media becomes flexible.

There is also a social education role. Plays may discuss social evils, corruption, family problems, women's suffering, violence, migration, unemployment or moral conflict. Of course, not every play is reformist. Many are made mainly for entertainment. But even entertainment can carry social ideas. A popular play can make people talk about a problem in everyday language.

Mobile theatre has also created cultural memory. People remember the play, the place and the social atmosphere. In this way mobile theatre becomes part of local history.

14.6 WOMEN AND MOBILE THEATRE

Women are important in the history of mobile theatre as performers, workers and audience members. In many older performance traditions, women did not always act openly on stage. Female characters were often played by men. Therefore, the entry of women into travelling theatre and later mobile theatre was a major change.

The idea of co-acting, where men and women act together on stage, changed the performance style. It made female roles more direct and believable. Women became actors, singers, dancers and public faces of theatre groups. Some women artists became very popular and helped attract large audiences.

Women also shaped the themes of mobile theatre. Family stories, love stories, mother-daughter relations, marriage conflict, violence against women, sacrifice, dignity and self-respect became important themes. Sometimes these themes were shown in a melodramatic way. Still, they helped bring women's experiences into the public stage.

Women are also important as spectators. Mobile theatre is not watched only by men. Women attend shows with families and friends. Their presence affects the selection of themes, songs, costumes and public behaviour in the theatre space. A family audience needs a different kind of performance environment from an all-male public space.

At the same time, women artists face serious challenges. Mobile theatre requires travel for many months. Performances often continue late into the night. Artists stay away from home and work under pressure. Safety, dignity, equal payment, rest, health care and proper accommodation are important issues.

The 2010 Assam Mobile Theatre Act includes actors, singers, dancers, costume designers, dramatists, script writers and technical and non-technical staff within the broad idea of artists. This is important because welfare should not be limited only to famous actors. Women artists and women workers also need protection and respect.

A good historical study should also ask whether women are represented fairly, get equal creative space, and remain safe while travelling.

14.7 THEATRE AS AN INDUSTRY

Mobile theatre is art, but it is also an industry. It needs investment, planning, labour, publicity, ticketing, travel and risk. A producer has to spend money before the season begins. The group has to prepare plays, hire artists, build sets, arrange costumes, repair equipment, print publicity material and organise transport.

The official 2010 Act uses the word business in its definition of mobile theatre. This does not reduce the artistic value of the form. It only shows that mobile theatre works through a real economic structure. People pay for tickets. Producers pay artists

and staff. Local committees manage shows. Advertisements and sponsorships may also become part of the system.

Many people earn from this industry. Actors and singers are the visible workers. But many others work behind the stage. Drivers, cooks, electricians, sound operators, light operators, carpenters, tailors, set workers, publicity workers and security workers are also part of the theatre economy. Mobile theatre therefore creates seasonal employment.

The season itself shows the industrial nature of the form. A mobile theatre group generally tours from August to April. Earlier many groups produced four or five plays in a season; now many groups often keep two or three main productions. A short song-dance-drama item is also often performed before the play.

The Shodhganga thesis by Mousumi Devi on managerial and economic aspects of mobile theatre establishments helps us see this form as a cultural enterprise. It has management, human resource needs, cost, revenue and assets. The Shodhganga thesis by Rabindra Sarma also studies modern Assamese mobile theatre as a medium of entertainment. Together, such works show that mobile theatre has to be studied both as culture and as organisation.

Mobile theatre has also been used for communication and marketing. The Q-Connect case shows how brands tried to use Assam mobile theatre to reach rural customers. This tells us something important: mobile theatre has a strong reach among people. It can carry not only plays but also messages, advertisements and public information.

There are risks too. A theatre season can be affected by rain, accidents, political situations, health crises, poor ticket sales or rising costs. When performances stop, artists and workers lose income. Therefore, welfare funds, insurance, safety rules and proper registration are very important.

Mobile theatre is a rare example where theatre has become a popular cultural industry without losing its local base. It is commercial, but it is not rootless. It depends on Assamese language, local committees, rural and town audiences, seasonal travel and public emotion. This makes it different from both fixed urban theatre and ordinary commercial entertainment.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q8. Mention two socio-cultural influences of mobile theatre in Assam.

……....

Q9. Why are women important in mobile theatre?

……....

Q10. Why can mobile theatre be called an industry?

……....

14.8 LET US SUM UP

After going through this unit, we have learnt that-

- The emergence of mobile theatre in Assam. We saw that mobile theatre grew from older travelling performance traditions, especially *Yatra* or *Jatra* parties, opera parties and local dramatic culture. It took the idea of travel and public performance and changed it into a more organised, professional and technically strong form.
- the important personalities such as Brajanath Sarma, Sada Lahkar, Achyut Lahkar, Ratan Lahkar, Bishnu Prasad Rabha, Phani Sarma, Bhupen Hazarika, Bhabendra Nath Saikia, Mahendra Barthakur, Arun Sarma, Pabitra Kumar Deka and Hemanta Dutta. Their contributions were different, but together they show the growth of mobile theatre from travelling opera to a large cultural industry.
- Mobile theatre carries its own stage, sound, light, pandal, seating, costumes, props and workers. The double-stage system gives speed to the performance. The form depends on both professional management and local community support.
- The socio-cultural influence of mobile theatre is very wide. It takes theatre to the people, strengthens Assamese public culture, creates community events, gives space to social themes and connects with media. Women are important as performers and audience members, but their safety, dignity and working conditions need careful attention.
- Finally, mobile theatre is also an industry. It creates employment, uses investment, sells tickets and needs management. At the same time, it is a living cultural form. Its strength lies in its ability to remain close to the people while changing with time.

14.9 FURTHER READING

1) Abhishek, & Dandotiya, G. (2015). *Q-Connect: Reaching rural customers with Assam mobile theatre*. SAGE Business Cases.
2) Devi, M. (2017). *Managerial and economic aspects of mobile theatre establishments of Assam* [Doctoral dissertation, Gauhati University]. Shodhganga.
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5) Ross, I. (2017). The mobile theatre movement in India: A success story in Assam. *New Theatre Quarterly, 33*(1), 65–77.
6) Saikia, B. (1996). Bhramyaman: Traveling theatre of Assam. *Seagull Theatre Quarterly, 11*.
7) Sarma, R. (2016). *Modern Assamese mobile theatre as a medium of entertainment: A study* [Doctoral dissertation, Gauhati University]. Shodhganga..

14.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q1. Bhramyaman means moving or travelling. In this unit it means a travelling theatre group that moves from place to place.

Ans to Q2. *Yatra* or *Jatra* is important because it gave the idea of travelling dramatic performance and helped create an audience for public theatre.

Ans to Q3. Brajanath Sarma is one early personality connected with travelling theatre in Assam.

Ans to Q4. Achyut Lahkar is called the father of Assamese mobile theatre.

Ans to Q5. Two important personalities are Achyut Lahkar and Ratan Lahkar. Other important names include Brajanath Sarma, Bhabendra Nath Saikia and Hemanta Dutta.

Ans to Q6. The double-stage system means the use of two stages so that one scene can be prepared while another scene is being performed.

Ans to Q7. Two items of infrastructure are stage materials and light-sound equipment. Other items include pandal, costumes, props, seating, transport and generators.

Ans to Q8. Mobile theatre has made theatre available to rural and semi-urban people. It has also helped Assamese language, songs, stories and social issues remain active in public culture.

Ans to Q9. Women are important as actors, singers, dancers, workers and audience members. Their presence made female roles more direct and also brought women's experiences, family issues and questions of dignity into the public stage.

Ans to Q10. Mobile theatre can be called an industry because it needs investment, planning, ticket sales, publicity, transport, artists, technicians and many workers. It creates seasonal employment and works through a clear economic structure.

14.11 MODEL QUESTIONS

A) Very Short questions:

Q1. What is mobile theatre?

Q2. What is the relation between *Jatra* parties and mobile theatre?

Q3. Why is Achyut Lahkar important in the history of mobile theatre?

Q4. Mention two features of mobile theatre infrastructure.

Q5. How did mobile theatre influence Assamese public culture?

B) Long questions:

Q1. Discuss the historical background of mobile theatre in Assam with reference to *Yatra* or *Jatra* parties.

Q2. Write a note on the eminent personalities connected with Assamese mobile theatre.

Q3. Explain the infrastructure and organisation of a mobile theatre group.

Q4. Analyse the socio-cultural influence of mobile theatre in Assam.

Q5. Discuss the role of women in mobile theatre.

Q6. Examine mobile theatre as a cultural industry of Assam.

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UNIT 15: CULTURAL MOVEMENT IN ASSAM: IPTA

UNIT STRUCTURE

15.1 Learning Objectives

15.2 Introduction

15.3 Historical Background of the Indian People's Theatre Association

15.4 IPTA and the Cultural Movement in Assam

- 15.4.1 Hemango Biswas
- 15.4.2 Jyotiprasad Agarwala
- 15.4.3 Bishnuprasad Rabha
- 15.4.4 Dr. Bhupen Hazarika

15.5 Let us sum up

15.6 Further Reading

15.7 Answers to check your Progress

15.8 Model Questions

15.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After studying this unit, learners will be able to:

- Explain the historical emergence and objectives of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) and its relationship with the broader progressive cultural movement in India.

- Examine the development of the People's Theatre Movement in Assam, particularly its relationship with Assamese cultural traditions, folk culture, and regional social experiences.

- Analyse the contributions of Hemanga Biswao, Jyotiprasad Agarwala, and Bishnuprasad Rabha to people-oriented and socially committed cultural practices in Assam.

- Discuss the contribution of Bhupen Hazarika to IPTA and people's culture, with particular reference to humanism, communal harmony, social justice, and the dignity of labour.

- Critically understand the relationship between culture, art, ideology, social transformation, and political mobilisation through the experience of IPTA and the People's Theatre Movement in Assam.

15.2 INTRODUCTION

Culture is the way of life of a nation. The totality of the life processes of a people constitutes its culture; it is, in many ways, the heartbeat of a nation. People's culture represents the life and livelihood, aspirations, joys, sufferings, and quest for liberation of people belonging to all sections of society. When culture transcends the boundaries of any particular social group and reflects the experiences of people across society, it assumes the character of people's culture. In this sense, people's culture embodies the intimate relationship between the land and the lives of its people.

Although culture is generally regarded as a mirror of a nation or society, a deeper understanding reveals that it is also an instrument of social transformation. Jyotiprasad Agarwala expressed this transformative conception of culture in the words, *"Through transformation, let us attain form and kindle the lamp of new creation."* Culture, therefore, must not remain passive in periods of darkness; rather, it should function as a progressive force directed towards enlightenment, liberation, and social transformation.

It was within such a historical and ideological context that the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) emerged in 1943, during the intense phase of India's freedom movement. The organisation sought to articulate the stream of people's culture through the everyday lives and livelihoods, joys and celebrations, suffering and pain, and aspirations for freedom of people belonging to all sections of Indian society.

Art and culture cannot be separated from ideology and social struggle. Neither can they be allowed to become barren, stagnant, or detached from the realities of human life. The significance of IPTA lies in its attempt to redefine the relationship between art and society. Instead of viewing theatre as entertainment exclusively for an urban and educated

audience, IPTA advocated a form of people's theatre that could reach workers, peasants, students and marginalised communities. Theatre was expected not simply to represent social reality but also to encourage people to understand and transform it.

The movement acquired a distinctive character in different regions of India. In Assam, its development intersected with an already vibrant tradition of cultural nationalism and socially conscious artistic expression. The ideas associated with Jyotiprasad Agarwala, Bishnu Prasad Rabha, Hemango Biswas and Bhupen Hazarika contributed significantly to the development of a progressive cultural imagination in Assam.

15.3 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE INDIAN PEOPLE'S THEATRE ASSOCIATION

The emergence of IPTA needs to be situated within the political and cultural environment of the 1930s and 1940s. India was experiencing intense anti-colonial mobilisation, while the world was passing through the crisis of fascism and the Second World War. The growth of socialist and communist ideas, workers' movements, peasant struggles and the Progressive Writers' Movement created a new intellectual environment in which artists increasingly questioned the separation between art and politics.

During the intense phase of India's freedom struggle, political efforts to bring the national movement closer to the masses were accompanied by attempts to create the foundations of an authentic cultural movement. It was within this broader historical context that the Progressive Writers' Association and the All India Kisan Sabha were established in 1935.

The organisation of peasants under the red flag, together with their demands for agrarian transformation and their struggles against the colonial land system, created the conditions for the emergence of a new cultural movement. As Hemango Biswas observed:

"In the anti-imperialist and anti-feudal struggle led by the working class, the responsibility arose to build a democratic cultural front under the leadership of communist artists and writers, in order to create a new people's democratic culture against the decadent imperialist-feudal culture."

It was in response to this historical imperative that the Indian People's Theatre Association was established in 1943. The Progressive Writers' Association, formally established in 1936, played an important role in developing socially committed literature. Its writers criticised colonialism, feudalism, communalism, poverty and social oppression. The movement encouraged writers to engage with contemporary social reality rather than confining literature to romantic or purely aesthetic concerns. The cultural atmosphere generated by this movement provided an important foundation for the later development of IPTA.

The Second World War further intensified these concerns. The growth of fascism in Europe and the devastating consequences of war created a sense of urgency among progressive intellectuals. In India, the Bengal famine of 1943 exposed the devastating effects of colonial economic policies and wartime conditions. Millions of people experienced hunger, displacement and death. Artists and intellectuals increasingly felt the need to respond to these realities.

It was in this context that IPTA emerged as an organised national cultural movement. The organisation sought to create a cultural front through which theatre, music and other performing arts could communicate political and social messages to the masses.

15.4 IPTA AND THE CULTURAL MOVEMENT IN ASSAM

The development of IPTA in Assam was closely connected with the region's own history of cultural nationalism and progressive artistic expression. The Assam chapter of IPTA was formed in 1947, with Hemango Biswas playing a central role as its founder-secretary. The organisation subsequently worked with several major cultural personalities of Assam, including Jyotiprasad Agarwala, Bishnu Prasad Rabha and Bhupen Hazarika.

The Assamese context was particularly significant because culture had already become an important medium of social and political mobilisation. The works of Jyotiprasad Agarwala and Bishnu Prasad Rabha had demonstrated that music, drama, literature and performance could address questions of identity, inequality and social transformation.The arrival of IPTA did not therefore represent a complete break with Assamese cultural history.

Rather, it provided an organisational framework through which several existing progressive cultural tendencies could interact with broader all-India movements.

The Assam branch also demonstrated the importance of regional language and folk culture in the people's theatre movement. Assamese songs, folk traditions, indigenous cultural forms and local social experiences were incorporated into performances.

The foundation of the People's Theatre Movement in Assam can be traced to the early encounters of Assamese society with the national liberation movement, the development of Assamese poetry and literature, and the emergence of new vitality within both urban and folk cultural traditions. This new cultural vitality expressed itself through opposition to social superstition, the promotion of rationalism and humanism, the aspiration for freedom, and an ethic of collective action.

The principal task of the People's Theatre Movement was to transform this current of social awakening into a broader people's consciousness and to connect it with a larger social and cultural movement.

The Assamese stage had already developed a tradition of socially transformative drama, extending from *Kaniyar Kirtan* to *Karengor Ligiri*. Similarly, the anti-imperialist tradition represented by works such as *Maniram Dewan*and*Piyali Phukan*, together with songs such as "*Maniram Dewanor Geet*," provided an important cultural foundation for the development of the People's Theatre Movement in Assam.

- **The First Provincial Conference of the Assam People's Theatre Association**

Against this historical and cultural background, the first provincial conference of the Assam People's Theatre Association was held in Silchar in April 1947. The conference was inaugurated by Professor Nalin Mishra, leader of the Khasi-Jaintia Hills delegation, and poet Ashok Bijoy Raha, leader of the Sylhet delegation. Jyotiprasad Agarwala expressed his regret at being unable to attend the conference because of illness and sent a message conveying his congratulations. Niranjan Sen, the All-India General Secretary of IPTA, conducted the proceedings of the conference from the outset.

The conference brought together representatives of diverse ethnic and cultural communities of the region. Nileswar Brahma and Robin Basumatary represented the

Bodo culture of Goalpara. A four-member delegation from the Jaintia Hills also joined. The Miri cultural group from Jorhat was led by Lakshminath Doley, while the Manipuri group was led by Guru Kamini Singh. A fraternal delegation representing the Tripuri community from Tripura further enriched the cultural diversity of the gathering. A fraternal delegation from the Bengal IPTA, led by Binoy Roy, also participated in the conference from Calcutta. Nearly two hundred artists and delegates representing the hill regions of Tripura and Jaintia Hills, as well as Manipuri, Dimasa, Kachari, Bodo, Miri, tea plantation workers, Assamese, and Bengali communities, participated in the conference.

As described in the report of the conference "The gathering of nearly two hundred artists and delegates representing the hill regions of Tripura, Jaintia, Manipuri, Dimasa, Kachari, Bodo, Miri, tea plantation workers, and Assamese and Bengali communities opened a new horizon in the cultural field of Assam." The conference was therefore significant not merely as an organisational event but also as an expression of the plural and composite character of Assamese and Northeastern cultural life. It demonstrated the potential of people's culture to function as a platform for cultural interaction, dialogue, and solidarity among diverse communities.

- **The Second Provincial Conference and the Development of the Movement**

The second provincial conference of the People's Theatre Association was held in Dibrugarh in July 1949. Its inaugural address was delivered by Jyotiprasad Agarwala. Under Jyotiprasad's direct leadership, the People's Theatre Association became increasingly organised and active in Dibrugarh during this period. A number of new theatrical and cultural productions emerged, including the shadow plays "15 August and After" and "Echoes of the Hills," as well as the dance-dramas "The Life of the Fishermen". Numerous new songs were also composed during this period. The short play "Badla Lena," written by Purnendu Pal in the language of tea plantation workers, was successfully staged before tea garden audiences. This was particularly significant because it demonstrated the movement's commitment to communicating directly with working-class audiences within their own linguistic and cultural contexts. For the People's Theatre stage, Jyotiprasad Agarwala also began writing a play based on the life of Kanaklata Barua, the young freedom fighter who became a symbol of resistance during the Quit India Movement. Unfortunately, the play remained unfinished.

15.4.1 HEMANGO BISWAS

Hemango Biswas was one of the architects of an important chapter in the cultural history of Assam. When culture becomes transformed into mere entertainment for powerful and privileged sections of society, when it loses its meaningful connection with the poor, the dispossessed, and working people, and when it ceases to represent the lived experiences of people across different sections of society, it loses its authentic cultural character and instead becomes an instrument for praising and glorifying the powerful. His importance to the people's theatre movement lies not merely in the songs he composed but also in his understanding of culture as an instrument of mass mobilisation. Born in 1912 in Sylhet, Biswas became a singer, composer, writer, cultural organiser and political activist.

Before the formation of the Assam IPTA chapter, Biswas was involved in organising cultural groups. His Surma Valley Cultural Squad, associated with the progressive cultural movement, used songs and performances to reach ordinary people. His activities subsequently extended across Assam and the wider Northeast.

- **Folk culture and political communication**

Biswas understood that a successful people's cultural movement could not depend exclusively on sophisticated literary forms. It had to communicate in a language that ordinary people could understand and identify with.

Consequently, folk melodies and popular musical traditions became important elements of his cultural practice. He drew upon traditions such as Bhatiali, Bhawaiya and other folk forms, transforming them into vehicles for contemporary social and political messages.This approach was significant because it demonstrated that folk culture could become a living medium of political expression.

- **Hemango Biswas and IPTA in Assam**

As founder-secretary of the Assam chapter of IPTA, Biswas played an important organisational role. He helped establish a network connecting artists, musicians, theatre activists and progressive intellectuals. In 1942, under the leadership of Hemanga Biswas, the **Surma Valley Cultural Squad** was formed. Along similar lines, the **Sylhet Sahitya Chakra(Sylhet Literary Circle)** was established following the model of the Progressive Writers' Association. In 1945, the Surma Valley Cultural Squad toured Assam, where it came into contact with and collaborated with the cultural movement led by **Jyotiprasad Agarwala**. This interaction marked an important phase in the development of progressive cultural activities in Assam and the wider Surma Valley region. Biswas's most lasting contribution was perhaps the development of Gana Sangeet, or people's music, as a form of collective cultural expression. His songs frequently addressed poverty, exploitation, social injustice and the aspirations of ordinary people.

The political significance of his music came from its ability to combine ideological content with accessible musical forms. This enabled songs to circulate beyond formal theatre spaces and become part of public and community life.The cultural repertoire of the movement included songs such as **"Amar Sonar Dhane Bargi Name"** and **"CasteTare Diu Jore Saan"**, which reflected the social, political, and anti-exploitative concerns of the period.

His collaboration with Bhupen Hazarika was particularly significant. Biswas and Hazarika jointly organised the third Assam conference of IPTA in 1955, which brought artists such as Balraj Sahni, Salil Chowdhury and Hemanta Mukherjee into the Assamese cultural environment. The songs **Haradhan Rangman**, particularly those composed and performed by **Hemango Biswas and Bhupen Hazarika**, made a significant contribution to the promotion of **communal harmony and solidarity** in Assam. Their music transcended religious, linguistic, and social boundaries and highlighted the shared experiences, struggles, and aspirations of workers and other marginalized sections of society. In the context of Assam's cultural movements of the 1950s and 1960s, such musical expressions demonstrated how culture could become an important instrument of **working-**

class mobilization, bringing together people across community boundaries and fostering a broader sense of social unity and solidarity.

Biswas advocated a socially committed cultural practice in which poetry and art would become instruments of collective consciousness, social criticism, and progressive transformation. In **1970** Hemanga Biswas's poem **"Kul Khurar Chotal"**. The poem can be understood as part of Biswas's broader critique of an increasingly **self-centred and sociallydetached literary culture**. He called for a literature that would move beyond individualistic aesthetic concerns and engage directly with the lived realities of the **working class, peasants, and other marginalized sections of society**.

According to Hemanga Biswas "The principal characteristic of the People's Theatre Movement is the recognition of the artistic talent of the illiterate working people and the discovery of artistic talent from among them." The People's Theatre Movement thus sought not merely to take art to ordinary people but also to recognise ordinary people as potential creators and participants in artistic and cultural production. Therefore, in understanding the emergence and development of the People's Theatre Movement in Assam within the wider historical framework of the Indian People's Theatre Association, it is essential to locate the movement within the cultural traditions of Assam itself—its historical heritage and its healthy, vigorous, patriotic, and progressive cultural currents.

15.4.2 JYOTIPRASAD AGARWALA

The relationship between the **Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA)**and**Jyotiprasad Agarwala** may be understood within the broader history of progressive and socially committed cultural movements in Assam and India. Although Jyotiprasad Agarwala passed away in 1951, before IPTA became firmly institutionalized as a national cultural organization, his artistic vision strongly anticipated many of the principles that later informed the IPTA movement. His commitment to using theatre, music, literature, and cinema as instruments of social awareness established an important foundation for progressive cultural activism in Assam.

Jyotiprasad regarded culture not merely as a form of entertainment but as a means of awakening social consciousness. His theatre and songs addressed questions of **social inequality, exploitation, human dignity, nationalism, and collective identity.** He sought to connect artistic expression with the everyday experiences of ordinary people and emphasized the importance of making culture accessible to wider sections of society. In this respect, his cultural philosophy had a strong affinity with the ideological orientation of IPTA, which sought to bring theatre, music, poetry, dance, and other artistic forms closer to the **working class, peasants, and marginalized communities.**

Jyotiprasad Agarwala, drawing upon the cultural ideals propagated by Srimanta Sankardeva, the spiritual and cultural guide of the Assamese people, described Assamese culture as "Krishna culture**."** He explained: "Even if we take this Krishna and the life of Krishna as a metaphor, our purpose is served; and even if we take him as a historical figure rather than merely as a metaphor, there is no harm. There may perhaps have been a historical person named Krishna whose birth, life, genius and thought fully reflected the truth of human life in this world—the truth upon which the development and manifestation of humanity's enlightened life, overcoming darkness, has depended, and upon which life, through continual transformation from age to age, will continue to develop and manifest itself. The truth of human life was completely reflected in his life." According to Jyotiprasad, the symbol of culture emerges from within the very social environment in which destructive and degenerate forces—what he referred to as **"***duskriti***"**—also exist. Culture develops within society, even as forces of corruption and degeneration seek to suppress or destroy it. He elaborated this idea through the metaphor of Krishna:

For Jyotiprasad, the ultimate struggle between culture and the destructive forces of society could not be undertaken by the artist through passive or merely moral means. The artist had to become a *Krishna-Arjuna*—an active participant in the struggle. Art, therefore, was not simply an instrument of aesthetic expression; it was also a means of confronting injustice, oppression, and social degeneration.

Jyotiprasad also emphasised the inseparable relationship between art and culture. He observed "Human beings are artists who transform dreams into reality…The world is the home of artists, the workshop of artists, and the artist is the exhibitor of cultural resources." This understanding places human beings at the centre of artistic creation and regards culture as a dynamic process through which human aspirations and experiences are transformed into creative expression.

Jyotiprasad Agarwala's songs such as **"AajiJonotar Duware Duware","Gawor Lora Gawe Gawe"** represents an important dimension of his socially committed cultural vision. These songs move beyond aesthetic expression and articulate a strong sense of **socio-political consciousness, collective action, and resistance to injustice.** In the song 'Joy Haturir Joy…Joy Botalir Joy' the repeated celebration of the **hammer, spade, axe, and other tools of labour** foregrounds the dignity and political agency of the working class and peasantry. Similarly, the invocation of victory over **hunger, thirst, and hardship** reflects a consciousness of material deprivation and social inequality. Jyotiprasad therefore used music as a cultural instrument to awaken the people, challenge injustice, and inspire collective resistance. His songs encouraged ordinary people to move from passive suffering to active participation in the making of a more just society. In this sense, his musical legacy anticipated the later development of**progressive and people-oriented cultural movements in Assam,** in which art became a medium for political education, social protest, and the empowerment of marginalized communities.

Through plays, Jyotiprasad transformed theatre into a medium of **social criticism and political consciousness.** Rather than treating drama merely as entertainment, he used it to question established forms of authority, expose injustice, and evoke empathy for the oppressed. Jyotiprasad Agarwala's plays *Labhita*, *Karengar Ligiri* etc occupy an important place in the development of socially conscious Assamese theatre. Both works engage critically with **injustice, exploitation, social inequality, and the oppression of vulnerable sections of society**. Through their characters and dramatic situations, Jyotiprasad exposes

the unequal power relations embedded in society and portrays how people are subjected to exploitation by dominant social, economic and political forces.

15.4.3 BISHNUPRASAD RABHA

Bishnu Prasad Rabha occupies a central position in the history of people-oriented and progressive cultural movements in Assam. Popularly remembered as **"**Kalaguru**,"** Rabha viewed culture not merely as an aesthetic expression but as a powerful instrument of social transformation, political consciousness, and resistance to exploitation. For Rabha, people's culture meant a culture that emerged from the everyday experiences of the people and remained connected to their material and social realities. He strongly opposed the separation of art from society and believed that literature, music, dance, theatre, and other cultural forms should contribute to the emancipation of the oppressed. His cultural practice therefore sought to bridge the gap between the artist and the people. Folk traditions, indigenous cultural practices, and popular artistic forms became important resources through which he articulated questions of land, livelihood, inequality, exploitation, dignity, and social justice.

The central purpose of **BishnuPrasad Rabha's artistic practice** was the emancipation of the **exploited, oppressed, and deprived masses.** His creative works did not glorify the power and privilege of a small group of dominant elites while ignoring the suffering of millions of helpless and impoverished people. Rather, he was deeply concerned with the liberation of those who were subjected to continuous exploitation and deprivation within a **class-divided society**. His art was never constrained by social apathy or indifference; instead, it carried a powerful call for the transformation of an unjust social order.

Rabha's artistic vision was firmly grounded in the **harsh realities of society, economy, and politics.** He did not seek refuge in an imaginary or romantic world detached from the material conditions of ordinary people. On the contrary, his art confronted the difficult truths of poverty, exploitation, inequality, and oppression and expressed his commitment to building a **classless and exploitation-free society**. His vision extended beyond divisions based on caste,

ethnicity, language, and religion and addressed the vast economic inequality between the rich and the poor. He particularly identified with the struggles of **peasants, agricultural labourers, and workers,** whom he regarded as the principal agents of social transformation.

This revolutionary and people-centred consciousness is powerfully expressed in his call to the working people '*Ses Judhar Aami Ranuwa*…'. The lines demonstrate Rabha's conception of **people's culture as a form of resistance and collective emancipation.** The peasant and worker are not portrayed merely as victims of exploitation; they are represented as active historical subjects capable of challenging oppressive structures and transforming society. In this sense, Rabha's art combined **cultural expression with political consciousness**, making his artistic practice an important instrument of social protest, class solidarity, and the struggle for a more egalitarian society.

An important dimension of Rabha's contribution was his engagement with the diverse cultural traditions of Assam. He drew upon the cultural practices of different ethnic and indigenous communities and sought to develop a broader, inclusive cultural consciousness. Rather than viewing folk and indigenous traditions as merely objects of preservation, he recognized them as living forms of knowledge and collective expression. While delivering a speech on the occasion of laying the foundation stone of the**Tezpur Sahitya Sabha in 1969**, Rabha compared the breadth and richness of Assamese culture and literature to the **Brahmaputra**. Just as the Brahmaputra derives its vastness and strength from the combined flow of numerous small streams, springs, rivers, and tributaries, he argued that the richness and magnitude of Assamese culture and literature had emerged through the collective contributions of the many communities and indigenous groups of Assam.

Convinced that genuine progress is possible only when it is firmly rooted in heritage, Bishnu Rabha, deeply inspired by the ideals of Srimanta Sankardeva, called upon the Assamese people to move forward on the path of social and cultural progress in new and creative ways. In this spirit, Rabha urged the younger generation to rediscover its cultural heritage, awaken its sense of responsibility,

and contribute to the transformation of Assamese society. His call for progress through the foundation of tradition is reflected in his inspiring lines *"O, Asomiya Deka Dal.."* Through these words, Rabha sought to awaken the spirit, confidence, and collective consciousness of the Assamese youth. His vision was to combine the progressive ideals of social transformation with the enduring cultural values of the Assamese heritage. Rabha's cultural activism also shared important affinities with the progressive cultural movement and IPTA tradition. Like other progressive cultural activists of his time, he regarded art as a means of confronting colonialism, feudalism, exploitation, poverty, communalism, and social injustice.

15.4.4 DR. BHUPEN HAZARIKA

Dr. Bhupen Hazarika occupies a significant place in the history of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) and the progressive cultural movement in Assam and India. Hazarika's relationship with IPTA should not be understood merely as an organizational association; it was also an intellectual and ideological influence on his artistic development. The progressive cultural movement reinforced his conviction that the artist has a social responsibility to respond to injustice and human suffering. His music consequently became a form of cultural intervention through which he questioned exploitation, inequality, communalism, and social oppression.

A defining feature of Hazarika's contribution was his ability to transform complex social and political questions into accessible and emotionally powerful songs. His music addressed poverty, inequality, exploitation, communal divisions, war, displacement, and the dignity of labour. Rather than portraying the poor merely as passive victims, his songs often presented them as conscious subjects capable of collective action and social transformation.

Hazarika also emphasized communal harmony and humanism. His songs transcended religious, linguistic, and ethnic boundaries and advocated solidarity among diverse communities. This was particularly important in the context of Assam, a region characterized by considerable social and cultural diversity. His

cultural vision sought to construct a broader human solidarity in which differences could coexist without becoming sources of conflict and exclusion.

Dr. Bhupen Hazarika occupies a unique position in the cultural history of Assam, India and world in gneral. His contribution was not confined to music and cinema; rather, he developed a powerful cultural language through which the experiences, aspirations, sufferings and struggles of ordinary people could be articulated. Hazarika's association with IPTA was particularly significant in the context of post-independence Assam. In 1953, he served as the Secretary of the Reception Committee of Assam IPTA. This organizational involvement demonstrates that his relationship with IPTA was not merely artistic but also institutional and ideological. He became part of a broader cultural movement that believed that art should respond to the realities of society. IPTA created a space where folk traditions, modern artistic forms and progressive social ideas could interact. Hazarika absorbed this spirit and transformed it into a distinctly Assamese cultural expression.

The concept of **people's culture** is central to understanding Hazarika's contribution. It became a medium of social communication and collective consciousness. The song **"Dola He Dola"** is an important example of this orientation. The image of the *dola*—the palanquin—evokes a social world marked by hierarchy, labour and unequal relationships. The song is a strong critique to feudalism. Hazarika's engagement with such imagery reveals his ability to transform everyday experiences into cultural commentary. Similarly, **"Sitare Semeka Rati"** reflects Hazarika's ability to connect intimate human emotions with a wider social imagination. His songs often move between the personal and the collective, between individual suffering and universal human experience. This quality distinguishes his cultural practice from narrowly defined political propaganda. His progressive outlook was mediated through melody, poetry, emotion and metaphor, allowing social ideas to reach a much wider audience.

The most profound expression of Hazarika's humanist philosophy is perhaps found in **"Manuhe Manuhor Babe."** The song places human beings and their responsibility towards one another at the centre of cultural consciousness.

The song challenges social indifference and reminds people that human dignity cannot be separated from concern for others. In this sense, Hazarika transformed the idea of people's culture into an ethical project: culture should cultivate empathy, solidarity and responsibility.

Another significant composition, **"Moi Eti Jajabor"** , expresses Hazarika's cosmopolitan imagination. The figure of the wanderer transcends geographical, linguistic and cultural boundaries. Hazarika's own intellectual and artistic journey exposed him to different cultural traditions, particularly during his association with progressive cultural circles in India and abroad. Yet his cosmopolitanism did not lead to the abandonment of his Assamese identity. Instead, it enabled him to reinterpret Assamese culture within a broader humanist framework. The wandering individual becomes a metaphor for cultural exchange, openness and the search for a larger human community.

Hazarika's engagement with IPTA should therefore be understood within the larger history of progressive people's cultural movements in India. IPTA emerged with the objective of making theatre and other artistic forms responsive to the realities of ordinary people. It challenged the separation between elite culture and popular life and encouraged artists to engage with questions of poverty, exploitation, inequality, communalism, war and human suffering. Hazarika internalized this approach but adapted it to the social and cultural realities of Assam. He drew extensively from Assamese folk traditions, rhythms, language and collective memory while simultaneously addressing universal questions of justice and humanity.

Thus, Bhupen Hazarika's contribution to IPTA and the progressive cultural movement lies in his ability to transform music into a language of the people. His songs reveal the deeper ideological and aesthetic influence of progressive cultural practice. By combining artistic creativity with social commitment, he helped establish music as a powerful medium of political education, communal harmony, and social protest. His legacy represents the enduring potential of people's culture to challenge injustice and imagine a more egalitarian and humane society.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answer the following questions:

Q.1: When was IPTA established?

Q.2: What does IPTA stand for?

Q.3: When was the Assam chapter of IPTA formed?

Q.4: Who played a central role as the founder-secretary of Assam IPTA?

Q.5: Where was the first provincial conference of the Assam People's Theatre Association held?

Q.6: Where was the second provincial conference of the People's Theatre Association held?

Q.7: Who inaugurated the second provincial conference?

Q.8: What is meant by Gana Sangeet?

Q.9: Which song of Bhupen Hazarika expresses humanist philosophy?

Q.10: Which cultural form did Hemanga Biswas use extensively for political communication?

15.5 LET US SUM UP

After going through this unit, you have learnt-

- The Indian People's Theatre Movement represents one of the most significant experiments in the history of modern Indian cultural politics. It transformed theatre from a primarily entertainment-oriented form into an instrument of social awareness, political communication and collective consciousness.

- In Assam, this philosophy encountered a particularly fertile cultural environment. Jyotiprasad Agarwala had already demonstrated the possibilities of combining artistic creativity with cultural nationalism and social consciousness. Bishnu Prasad Rabha gave cultural activism a more explicitly revolutionary and democratic orientation. HemangoBiswas transformed folk music into a powerful medium of mass mobilisation

and played a foundational organisational role in the Assam IPTA movement. Bhupen Hazarika subsequently expanded the reach of socially engaged culture through music, cinema and mass communication, transforming local experiences of suffering and inequality into universal humanist expressions.

- The most important contribution of the people's theatre movement was perhaps its insistence that the lives of ordinary people deserve artistic representation and that the artist has a responsibility to society. Theatre, song, poetry, cinema and performance became instruments through which marginalised voices could enter the public sphere.

- Its enduring significance lies in the proposition that art does not merely reflect society; it can also question society, educate society and contribute to its transformation. For postgraduate students of Political Science, Sociology, Theatre Studies, Cultural Studies and History, the movement provides an important framework for understanding the relationship between culture, ideology, power, identity and political mobilisation.

15.6 FURTHER READING

1. Das Jogesh & Bora Sarbeswar, *Bishnuprasad Rabha Rachana Sambha*r, Rabha Rasanawali Prakashan Sangha, 1989

2. Gohain H, *Jyotiprasad Rasnawali*, Assam Publication Board, 2007

3. Hazarika, S, *Bhinnajanar Dristit Bishnuprasad Rabha*, SH Educational Trust, 2008

4. Hazarika, S, *Dr. Bhupen Hazarikar Geet Samagra*, SH Educational Trust, 2010

5. Majumdar Paramananda, *Hemango Biswas Rasanawali*, Assam Publication Board, 2008

15.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answer 1: IPTA was established in 1943

Answer 2: Indian People's Theatre Association.

Answer 3: In 1947

Answer 4 : Hemanga Biswas

Answer 5 : It was held in Silchar in April 1947

Answer 6 : It was held in Dibrugarh in July 1949

Answer 7 : Jyotiprasad Agarwala

Answer 8 : People's music

Answer 9 : "Manuhe Manuhor Babe."

Answer 10 : Folk music and folk melodies

15.8 MODEL QUESTIONS

A. Very Questions

1. What is meant by people's culture?
2. When was the Assam chapter of IPTA formed?
3. Who was the founder-secretary of the Assam IPTA chapter?
4. Name the Surma Valley cultural organisation associated with Hemanga Biswas.

B. Short Questions

1. Explain the major objectives of the Indian People's Theatre Association.
2. Briefly discuss the contribution of Hemanga Biswas to the People's Theatre Movement in Assam.
3. Explain Jyotiprasad Agarwala's conception of culture as an instrument of social transformation.

C. Long Questions

1. Discuss the historical circumstances behind the emergence of IPTA and examine its role in developing people's culture in India.
2. Analyse the contributions of Jyotiprasad Agarwala, Bishnu Prasad Rabha, Hemanga Biswas and Bhupen Hazarika to the progressive cultural movement in Assam.

3. "The People's Theatre Movement transformed art from a form of entertainment into an instrument of social awareness and political **mobilisation."** Critically discuss the statement with reference to IPTA and its cultural movement in Assam.

4. Examine the contribution of Hemanga Biswas to the people's cultural movement in Assam.

5. Discuss Jyotiprasad Agarwala's contribution to socially conscious Assamese culture.

6. Analyse Bishnu Prasad Rabha's conception of art as an instrument of social transformation.

7. Compare the cultural contributions of Hemanga Biswas and Bhupen Hazarika.

8. Discuss the role of folk culture in the development of people's theatre in Assam.

9. Critically evaluate the relationship between art and ideology in the IPTA movement.

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UNIT 16 : ASSAMESE CINEMA

UNIT STRUCTURE

16.1 Learning Objectives

16.2 Introduction

16.3 Background of Assamese Cinema

16.4 Trends of Assamese Cinema: From Jyoti Prasad Agarwala to Rima Das

16.5 Digital Revolution in Assamese Cinema

16.6 Let Us Sum Up

16.7 Further Reading

16.8 Answers to Check Your Progress

16.9 Model Questions

16.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to-

- Discuss the background of the Assamese cinema,
- Describe the trends of Assamese Cinema from Jyoti Prasad Agarwala to BhabendraNathSaikia,
- Discuss the development of mobile theatre in Assam.

16.2 INTRODUCTION

Cinema and drama are integral part of cultural life of any civilization. These are regarded as one of the best way to reflect the public life at a public platform. In this unit we shall discuss the growth and development of Assamese cinema and theatre.

16.3 BACKGROUND

Assamese cinema had a kaleidoscopic growth. The first Assamese film was Jyoti Prasad Agarwala's 'Joymoti' released in 1935. 'Joymoti' was made at a time when there

was no infrastructure available for such ambitious efforts. Jyoti Prasad took up this mammoth project after he was exposed to Bengali films while he was at Calcutta. This initiative made him establish a small temporary studio at factory office of the Bholaguri tea estate. However, all his toils did not yield lucrative result as his maiden venture failed on the audience. But he did not lose heart and went on to make 'Indramalati', his second film in the year 1939.

Notably, a little over 300 films in Assamese language and other dialects of Assam have been produced so far since the time of the first Assamese film "Joymoti". Out of the lot some of the films could earn national recognition. The themes of these films ranged from mythological to love story, historical to comedy, patriotic to horror and gave the audience an overwhelming experience of celluloid.

It is worthwhile to mention that Assamese films have won awards at the national as well as international level from time to time. Films like 'PiyaliPhukan', 'Mak Aru Maram', 'Tezimala' produced in the fifties were awarded President's Silver Medal. Similarly, during the same period 'Puberun' got international acclaim in the Berlin Film Festival.

The golden era of Assamese film Industry:

The golden era of Assamese film industry was marked by proliferation of film activities in Assam. This period not only saw an increase in number of films produced per annum but also uplift in the kind of films produced in terms of themes and other cinematic techniques. It all happened during seventies and eighties in which films like 'Jug Biyug', 'UpajaSunarMati', 'Bhaiti', 'ChameliMemsaab', 'Meghamukti', 'Duronir Rang', 'AjoliNabau', 'Sendur', 'GharSansar', 'Buwari', 'Sunmaina' and host of other hits and super hit films were produced.

Some of the popular film makers of Assam are Jyoti Prasad Aggarwal, Bishnu Prasad Rabha, Phani Sharma, Parbati Prasad Baruah, Kamal Narayan Choudhury, Dr.Bhupen Hazarika, Shiva Thakur, AjanBarua, PadumBarua, Nip Baruah, SailyaBaruah, BrajenBaruah, Abdul Majid, JahnuBaruah, DrBhabendraNathSaikia, MuninBaruah, Manju Bora, Rima Das to name a few.

16.4 TRENDS OF ASSAMESE CINEMA: FROM JYOTIPRASAD AGARWALLA TO BHABENDRA NATH SAIKIA

The name of the Jyoti Prasad Agarwalla shines gloriously in the annals of Assamese

film for his being the pioneer of Assamese film industry. An artist of composite talents he was equally apt at composing songs, giving music, play writing, film making, besides writing poetry and excelling in other creative fields. This has made him a cultural icon of Assam.

With his first film 'Joymoti' he set the trend for Assamese film industry in the year 1935. He studied music at Edinburgh and Cambridge but introduced the traditional forms of Assamese music in his plays and films.

Assamese Cinema after Jyotiprasad Agarwalla

After Agarwala, Assamese cinema entered a period of gradual development. The industry remained relatively small, but filmmakers continued to experiment with stories drawn from Assamese society and literature. The absence of a large commercial market meant that filmmaking was often financially risky.

The 1940s and 1950s were therefore a formative period. Filmmakers explored subjects related to social life, family relationships, rural society, cultural practices and literary traditions. Cinema gradually became more accessible to Assamese audiences and began to establish itself as a cultural institution.

An important development during this period was the emergence of filmmakers and artists who brought together cinema, theatre, literature and music. The close relationship between Assamese theatre and cinema became one of the distinctive characteristics of the regional film industry. Many actors, directors and technicians had backgrounds in theatre, and theatrical traditions strongly influenced early Assamese filmmaking. But things changed with the onset of World War II, Taking advantage of this, Rohini Kr.Baruah made a film on a relevant historical topic called Manomati in 1941. It was followed by films like Parvati Prasad Baruwa's Rupahi (1946), Kamal Narayan Choudhury's BadanBarphukan (1947), Phani Sharma's Siraj, Asit Sen's Biplabi, PrabinPhukan's Parghat and Suresh Goswami's Runumi.Bhupen Hazarika also produced and directed his first film Era Bator Sur. Bhupen Hazarika made his musical Shakuntala in 1961, which proved equally successful with critics and the press, winning the president's silver medal. Following this, a chain of films went into regular production and got released, including Nip Barua's Narakasur, Another notable film maker of Assam was Bhabendra Nath Saikia, who made seven films during his short career as a film maker. A physicist from London, Saikia was not only an established film maker but also earned as an

established short story writer and play wright of great excellence who can claim credit for laying the solid foundation of Assamese film industry after the initial efforts of Jyoti Prasad. Bhabendra Nath Saikia will always be remembered for his contribution to Assamese film movement through his films like Sandhyaraag (1977), Agnishnaan (1985), Kolahol (88), Sarothi ('91), Abartan (93), Kalasandhya (97) and Exploration (95). It is significant that in all his films he made sensitive and sympathetic portrayal of women.

The Emergence of Jahnu Barua and Realist Cinema

A major turning point came with the emergence of Jahnu Barua. He became one of the most important figures in modern Assamese cinema and played a major role in strengthening the tradition of realist and socially engaged filmmaking.

His films focused on the lives of ordinary people and explored the relationship between individuals and larger social structures. His cinema frequently moved away from conventional commercial formulas and concentrated on character, social environment and human experience.

His *Aparoopa* (1982) was an important work in this development. It was followed by films such as *Halodhia Choraye Baodhan Khai* (1987), which became one of the most significant films in the history of Assamese cinema.

Halodhia Choraye Baodhan Khai

The film portrays the difficult life of a poor peasant family and addresses issues of poverty, exploitation, agrarian distress and social inequality. Its strength lies in the manner in which larger structural problems are represented through the everyday experiences of ordinary rural people.

The film received significant national and international recognition and helped demonstrate that a regional film rooted in the specific social realities of Assam could communicate with audiences beyond the region.

Jahnu Barua therefore represents an important shift from cinema primarily concerned with cultural representation towards cinema that also critically examines social structures.

Assamese Cinema and the Parallel Cinema Movement

The development of Assamese realist cinema was connected with the broader Indian parallel cinema movement. Parallel cinema challenged the dominance of formulaic

commercial filmmaking and emphasised realism, social criticism and artistic experimentation.

Assamese filmmakers found this approach particularly relevant because their relatively small market made large-scale commercial production difficult. Realist filmmaking could often be produced with comparatively limited resources while remaining culturally meaningful.

The parallel cinema tradition encouraged Assamese filmmakers to:

1. Focus on ordinary people rather than heroic figures;
2. Use natural locations;
3. Explore social problems;
4. Experiment with narrative structures;
5. Give greater importance to character development;
6. Incorporate regional language and culture; and
7. Treat cinema as an artistic and intellectual medium.

This tradition subsequently influenced younger generations of Assamese filmmakers.

Assamese Cinema in the 1990s: Popular and Art Cinema

The 1990s witnessed the coexistence of two important tendencies within Assamese cinema. On one side was commercially oriented cinema designed to attract a larger audience; on the other was art and parallel cinema that focused on social and humanistic themes.

Munin Barua emerged as one of the most successful filmmakers of popular Assamese cinema. His films demonstrated that regional cinema could achieve considerable popularity by combining entertainment with Assamese language and cultural contexts.

His success was important because the survival of a regional film industry depends not only on artistic recognition but also on its ability to attract audiences.

At the same time, filmmakers such as Jahnu Barua continued to strengthen the art-film

tradition. Consequently, Assamese cinema developed a productive tension between commercial viability and artistic experimentation.

Challenges before Assamese Cinema

Despite its artistic achievements, Assamese cinema has historically faced several structural challenges.

● Limited Financial Resources

● The Assamese-speaking population represents a relatively small market compared with Hindi, Tamil or Telugu cinema. Consequently, producers often face difficulties recovering production costs.

● Limited Infrastructure

For a long period, Assam lacked adequate studios, laboratories, production facilities and trained technical personnel. Filmmakers often had to depend on facilities outside the region.

● Distribution Problems

Even when films received critical recognition, their distribution remained a major challenge. Limited numbers of screens and competition from mainstream Indian cinema restricted the commercial circulation of Assamese films.

● Competition from Hindi Cinema

The expansion of Hindi television and cinema created strong competition for regional films. The growing availability of entertainment through television and later digital platforms further changed audience behaviour.

● Financial Risk

Because the Assamese film market is comparatively small, filmmaking often depends upon personal investment and individual commitment. This has restricted the frequency with which independent filmmakers can produce films.

Despite these limitations, Assamese cinema has survived largely because of the strong cultural attachment of audiences to the Assamese language and because filmmakers have continually experimented with new forms.

16. 5 The Digital Revolution in Assamese Cinema

The digital revolution brought a fundamental transformation in the development of Assamese cinema, particularly from the late 1990s and more significantly during the

2000s and 2010s. The transition from traditional celluloid film to digital cameras, computer-based editing, digital sound recording and online distribution altered not only the technical process of filmmaking but also the economics, aesthetics and social structure of the Assamese film industry. For a regional film industry operating within a relatively small linguistic market and facing limitations of finance, infrastructure and distribution, digital technology created new possibilities for independent filmmaking.

● Transition from Celluloid to Digital

During the earlier decades, filmmaking depended upon celluloid film stock. Shooting on film involved considerable expenditure because film reels had to be purchased, processed and printed. The filmmaker had limited opportunities to review the footage during production, and mistakes could become expensive. Film processing also required specialised laboratories and technical facilities, which were not easily available in Assam.

Digital technology gradually changed this situation. Digital cameras allowed filmmakers to record images electronically and review footage almost immediately. This reduced production costs and provided greater flexibility during shooting. Scenes could be reshot without the same financial burden associated with celluloid.

For Assamese filmmakers, this technological shift was particularly important because the industry traditionally operated with limited financial resources. Digital filmmaking made it possible for filmmakers to produce films with smaller budgets and greater creative independence.

● Reduction in the Cost of Production

One of the most significant consequences of digital technology was the reduction of production costs. Conventional filmmaking required expenditure on film stock, processing, printing and other laboratory-related activities. Digital filmmaking reduced many of these expenses.

This enabled small producers and independent filmmakers to enter the field. Previously, filmmaking was largely dependent on individuals or organisations capable of mobilising substantial capital. With digital technology, a filmmaker could work with a comparatively small crew and limited equipment.

The reduction in cost also encouraged experimentation. A filmmaker could attempt a new subject or narrative without having to depend entirely on the commercial success of the film. This was particularly beneficial for art cinema, documentary filmmaking and independent cinema.

● Democratization of Filmmaking

Digital technology contributed to the democratisation of filmmaking. The production of films was no longer exclusively dependent upon large studios, established producers or expensive technical infrastructure.

Young filmmakers, students, independent artists and individuals from outside the established film industry gained opportunities to experiment with filmmaking. Cameras became more accessible, while editing software made post-production possible on computers. Consequently, the distinction between professional and independent filmmaking became less rigid. An individual with a strong idea and basic technical knowledge could potentially produce a short film or even a feature film.

This transformation was particularly significant in Assam because it encouraged a new generation of filmmakers who were not necessarily part of the traditional studio or commercial film system.

● Transformation of Film Production

Digital technology changed the entire production process. In the traditional system, filmmaking involved clearly separated stages of shooting, laboratory processing, editing and printing. Digital technology integrated many of these processes into a more flexible workflow.

Filmmakers could:

- Review footage immediately;
- Shoot multiple takes;
- Record large quantities of footage;
- Transfer footage directly to computers;
- Edit digitally;
- Modify sound and images during post-production;
- Experiment with different forms of editing; and
- Produce multiple digital copies at relatively low cost.

This flexibility was particularly useful for filmmakers working with natural locations and non-professional actors. Scenes could be captured repeatedly without the same financial pressure associated with traditional film stock.

● Impact on Cinematic Aesthetics

The digital revolution did not merely change the technology of filmmaking; it also influenced cinematic aesthetics. Digital cameras became increasingly suitable for shooting in difficult and remote locations. This allowed filmmakers to move away from controlled studio environments and work in villages, forests, riversides, markets, streets and ordinary homes.

As a result, Assamese filmmakers could represent everyday life with greater immediacy and intimacy. The camera could become an observer of ordinary social reality.

This development contributed to the growth of realist and minimalist cinema in Assam. Instead of elaborate sets and highly stylised production techniques, filmmakers increasingly relied upon natural surroundings, available light and everyday environments.

● New Possibilities for Independent Cinema

The digital revolution was particularly important for independent cinema. Assamese filmmakers working outside conventional commercial structures could produce films with relatively modest financial resources. Independent filmmaking allowed greater freedom to address subjects that might not be considered commercially attractive. These included:

- Rural poverty;
- Unemployment;
- Migration;
- Childhood;
- Gender relations;
- Social marginalisation;
- Changing family structures;
- Youth aspirations;
- Environmental concerns; and
- Everyday struggles of ordinary people

Thus, digital technology strengthened the relationship between technological accessibility and thematic experimentation.

● Transformation in Post-Production

Digital editing also transformed Assamese cinema. Earlier, editing required specialised equipment and considerable technical expertise. Digital editing software made the process more flexible and accessible.

Editors could experiment with:

- The duration of shots;
- Transitions;
- Sound;
- Music;
- Colour correction;
- Visual effects; and
- Narrative structure.

This encouraged filmmakers to experiment with cinematic language. The possibilities of digital editing also helped independent filmmakers produce technically sophisticated films without requiring the infrastructure of major metropolitan studios.

- Digital Sound and Music

The digital revolution also transformed sound recording and music production. High-quality digital recording equipment became increasingly accessible, allowing filmmakers to improve dialogue, ambient sound and background music.

For Assamese cinema, this was significant because music has historically been an important part of Assamese cultural expression. Digital technology provided filmmakers with greater possibilities to preserve and creatively incorporate local musical traditions while also experimenting with contemporary sound design.

Ambient sounds such as rainfall, rivers, birds, village activities, markets and conversations could also become important elements of the cinematic experience.

- Changes in Distribution

Perhaps one of the most important consequences of digital technology was the transformation of film distribution.

Traditional distribution depended heavily on cinema halls and physical prints. A regional film had to secure theatrical space, which could be difficult because Assamese cinema competed with films from larger industries.

Digital distribution reduced some of these barriers. Films could increasingly be distributed through:

- Digital cinema systems;
- Film festivals;
- Television;

- DVDs and other digital formats;
- Websites;
- Streaming platforms; and
- Social media and online promotional networks.

This created opportunities for Assamese films to reach audiences outside Assam and even outside India.

- Film Festivals and Global Visibility

The combination of digital filmmaking and international film-festival networks created new opportunities for Assamese cinema. Filmmakers no longer had to depend entirely upon commercial theatrical success within Assam.

A critically acclaimed film could travel through the festival circuit, where it could be viewed by critics, scholars, distributors and international audiences.

This development was crucial for the emergence of contemporary Assamese filmmakers such as Rima Das. The international success of *Village Rockstars* demonstrated that the digital era could connect an Assamese village story with global cinematic audiences.

- Social Media and Film Promotion

Digital communication also changed the way films were promoted. Earlier, promotion depended primarily upon newspapers, posters, radio, television and theatrical publicity.

Social media created new channels through which filmmakers could:

- Release trailers;
- Share posters;
- Communicate with audiences;
- Announce festival selections;
- Receive audience responses;
- Create communities around films; and
- Promote films beyond geographical boundaries.

For a small regional industry, such inexpensive promotional mechanisms became particularly valuable.

● Changing Role of the Filmmaker

Digital technology also changed the relationship between the filmmaker and the production process. Earlier, filmmaking was highly dependent upon specialised technicians and institutional structures. In the digital environment, a filmmaker could exercise greater control over several stages of production.

The independent filmmaker could potentially participate in:

Conceptualisation ➔ Scriptwriting ➔ Shooting ➔ Editing ➔ Sound Design ➔ Promotion ➔ Festival Submission ➔ Digital Distribution

This encouraged a more author-driven form of filmmaking, in which the filmmaker's personal vision became increasingly important.

Rima Das's career illustrates this tendency particularly well. Her filmmaking practice reflects a high degree of personal involvement in storytelling, production and aesthetic decision-making.

● Digital Revolution and Rural Representation

One of the most important cultural consequences of the digital revolution has been the ability to represent rural Assam more directly.

Earlier films also depicted rural society, but digital filmmaking made it easier to work for extended periods in remote locations. This allowed filmmakers to capture everyday activities, landscapes and social relationships with greater intimacy.

The village therefore ceased to be merely a picturesque background. It could become an active social and cultural space.

In *Village Rockstars*, for example, rural Assam is central to the narrative. The natural environment, poverty, children's games, family relationships and everyday activities together constitute the film's cinematic world.

● Digital Revolution and New Generation of Filmmakers

The digital era created an environment in which young Assamese filmmakers could experiment with short films, documentaries, independent features and experimental cinema.

Film schools, workshops, film societies, digital communities and online resources further strengthened this process. Young filmmakers could learn cinematography, editing, sound recording and film appreciation without necessarily being part of a traditional studio system.

The result was the emergence of a more diverse cinematic culture in Assam.

The digital revolution should be understood as more than a technological transition from celluloid to digital cameras. It represents a broader transformation in the economics, aesthetics, accessibility, production practices and distribution of Assamese cinema.

It enabled filmmakers to work with smaller budgets, encouraged experimentation, strengthened independent cinema, facilitated location-based realism and created new possibilities for international circulation. Most importantly, it allowed filmmakers to tell deeply local stories using globally accessible cinematic technologies.

In this context, the transition from Jyoti Prasad Agarwala to Rima Das becomes particularly significant. Agarwala had to struggle with the technological and institutional limitations of the 1930s to create *Joymoti*. Nearly eight decades later, Rima Das could use comparatively accessible digital technology to make a film rooted in rural Assam and take it to international audiences. The contrast illustrates the extraordinary transformation of the technological conditions of Assamese filmmaking.

Thus, the digital revolution has helped Assamese cinema move from a largely regional film culture towards a more accessible, independent and globally connected cinematic space, while enabling filmmakers to retain the cultural specificity that has been the defining strength of Assamese cinema since Jyoti Prasad Agarwala.

Rima Das: A New Phase in Assamese Cinema

The emergence of Rima Das represents one of the most important developments in contemporary Assamese cinema. Born and brought up in Assam, Das developed a distinctive filmmaking style centred on everyday life, natural environments and ordinary people.

Her cinema differs significantly from conventional commercial filmmaking. She often works with non-professional actors, natural locations, limited production resources and relatively minimal cinematic intervention. Rather than constructing an elaborate cinematic world, she frequently allows the real environment and everyday experiences of her characters to become the foundation of the film.

Her approach can therefore be associated with independent cinema, observational realism and minimalist filmmaking.

Rima Das's *Village Rockstars* (2017) became a landmark in contemporary Assamese cinema.

The film is set in a rural Assamese environment and centres on a young girl named Dhunu, who dreams of owning a guitar and forming a band. The narrative appears simple, but through the life of the protagonist, the film explores childhood, poverty, gender expectations, aspiration, family relationships and the relationship between human beings and nature.

One of the remarkable features of the film is its authentic representation of rural Assam. The village is not simply used as a background; it becomes an important element of the narrative. The landscape, houses, ponds, fields, rain, animals and everyday activities contribute to the film's emotional and visual character.

The film was made with limited resources but achieved remarkable international visibility. It premiered at international film festivals and received major recognition. It was also selected as India's official submission for the Best Foreign Language Film category at the 91st Academy Awards.

The achievement of *Village Rockstars* was historically significant because it demonstrated that a locally rooted Assamese story could acquire international cinematic relevance without abandoning its regional identity.

16.5 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answer the following questions:

Q. No 1: ……was the first Assamese Cinema. (Fill in the blank)

Q. No.2: Who produced *Siraj* ?

……

Q.No.3: Name the first film of Dr.Bhupen Hazarika.

……

Q. No.4: *Sandhyarag* was produced by…… (Fill in the blank)

16.6 LET US SUM UP

After going through this unit, you have learnt

- The history of Assamese film.
- Contributions of Jyoti Prasad Agrwala to the Assamese film industry.
- Development of*Jatra*groups in Assam.
- Growth and development of mobile theatre in Assam.

16.7 FURTHER READING

1) Sharma Babeeta (2014): *The Moving Image and Assamese Culture: Joymoti, Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, and Assamese Cinema*, Oxford.
2) KakotiSangeeta (2018): *Dimensions of the mobile theater of Assam*, PhD Thesesdigital library, KKHSOU

16.8 ANSWERSTOCHECKYOUR PROGRESS

Answer no 1: Joymoti

Answer no 2: PhaniSarma

Answer no 3: Era Batar Sur

Answer no 4: Dr.Bhabendra Nath Saikia

16.9 MODEL QUESTIONS

A) Very Short Questions (Answer each question within 50 words)

Q. No.1: Where did Jyoti Prasad Agarwala establish his first temporary studio?

Q. No.2: Name the first Assamese film.

Q. No.3: Who directed the 'Village Rockstar'?

B) Short Questions (Answer each question within 150 words)

Q. No.1: Write a short note on Jyoti Prasad Agarwala as a film maker.

Q. No.2: Write a short note on Bhabendra Nath Saikia as a film maker.

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

Q. No.1: Discuss the growth and development of Assamese cinema.

Q. No.2: Discuss the contributions of Jahnu Baruah to the growth of Assamese Cinema.

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