

Religion in Early Assam

Religion in Early Assam:

An Archaeological History

By

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To
My Parents
Ima and Pabung

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PREFACE

Religion is a phenomenon that is as complex as it is paradoxical. Today, the debate on the relevance of religion to society continues, and religion has once again come to the forefront of human concern, though more often than not, for negative reasons. Religion has survived because it has accommodated itself to the dominant ethos of modern society. Another significant factor for its continued existence is the pursuit for the spiritual renewal of self and society that has been manifested in new religious movements. By the end of the 20th century CE, globalization had indeed increased the pace of cultural interaction, which initiated debates on the place of the individual and society in the perceived order of the universe. Closely linked to the process of globalization, was the comparison and confrontation of worldviews which led to cultural conflicts on issues of identity and nationality. It is in such a situation that religious traditions began to occupy a distinct role, since they could be mobilized to provide an ultimate justification for one's view of the globe, the resurgence of traditionalists with a global agenda being a case in point. As a response to the demands of the contemporary world, the search for a new consciousness has been enhanced by some key processes of modernity, viz., migration, travel, and, perhaps most importantly, mass communication, such as films, television, and the internet. It may be noted that, often, ethnic movements and issues of nationality have begun to involve archaeology, and assumptions drawn from it, to prove or refute claims of a community's identity. Thus, the political implications of archaeological enquiry may play a role in contemporary concerns of the legitimation of modern ethnic and national claims. The material dimension of religion does not exist outside the ideological realm. This study on the religion of Early Assam attempts to gain insights into the ways in which material culture interacts with religion, which is evident in the divine representations of art and architecture.

Situated as it is, Assam formed a link between Southeast Asia on one side, and the Indian mainland on the other, a factor of importance in understanding the history and identity of the diverse ethnic communities who migrated and settled in the land at different periods of history. Its most ancient name is Prāgijyotiṣa, which finds mention in the two epics: the *Rāmāyana* and the *Mahābhārata*, and also in the principle *Purāṇas*. According to the *Kālīka-Purāṇa*, a text dated to about the 11th century CE,

the kingdom changed its name to Kāmarūpa, due to the association with the presiding deity Kāmākhyā, and came to be referred to as Kāmarūpa-Kāmākhyā. However, in epigraphic records, the name Kāmarūpa was first mentioned, along with Davāka, in the Allahabad Pillar Inscription (350 CE) of King Samudragupta, as a frontier kingdom of the Gupta Empire. The political boundaries of Prāgijyotiṣa-Kāmarūpa did not remain static, and at the height of its political glory, the erstwhile kingdom included most parts of modern Assam, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Bihar, and North Bengal. Assam acquired its name in the 13th century CE, when the Ahoms, belonging to the Tai group of people having migrated from Southern China, crossed the Patkai range and settled in the Brahmaputra valley. The year 1228 CE marked the advent of the Ahoms to the Brahmaputra valley, and the beginning of gradual political integration and socio-cultural amalgamation of many ethnic groups under their rule, which was to transform the history of Assam in the next six hundred years (1228-1826 CE). The medieval period of Assam history was followed by the modern period, with the signing of the Treaty of Yandabo in 1826 CE, a historical event that ushered in British expansion in Northeast India.

This book is organized into six chapters. Beginning the discussion with a background to the study of Early Assam, *Chapter One: Introduction*, outlines the context, scope, historiography, conceptual foundation, and the theoretical framework of *doing* the archaeology of religion. Given that religion has ideological concerns, archaeology, with its basis on material culture, is considered an incomplete discipline for the study of religion. It may be noted that the approach to the study of religion has been debated by scholars of varied disciplines, such as archaeology, anthropology, and history. *New Archaeology* explains the possibility of establishing, and methods to establish, a more scientific approach to the study of man and culture by examining artefacts in the context of whole cultural systems. The importance of archaeological evidence, viz., inscriptions, sculptures, coins, and temple ruins, as sources for the reconstruction of the religion of Early Assam, can hardly be over-emphasized, since alternative sources are not available for the study of this aspect of Assam history. Notwithstanding the importance of literary sources for filling gaps in historical research, textual material cannot be fully relied upon as sources without critical scrutiny. As such, mythological narratives may be used as complimentary sources only when compared with other reliable materials. The roots of social formation in Early Assam (4th-12th centuries CE) are necessarily intertwined with the long history of migration and the interaction of multicultural ethnic groups with linguistic diversity which have gradually settled in various parts of the present eight states of Northeast India. It is generally accepted that the

Mongoloids, mentioned as the Kirātas in ancient Sanskrit literature, once occupied practically the whole of Northeastern India. Along with the Kirātas, the demographic profile in Assam also included many social groups, such as the Brāhmaṇas, Kayasthas, and Kalitas. The Brāhmaṇas who migrated to Kāmarūpa were given revenue-free lands by the kings, which led to their settlement in large numbers and influenced the emergence of the Brāhmaṇical faith as the predominant religion in Early Assam.

Chapter Two: Śaivism and Śaktism, discusses the cults of Śiva and Śakti in the context of the rich material remains that have been discovered from the Pre-Ahom period. The majority of the kings of Early Assam invoke Śiva, as revealed by the inscriptions of the period. Śiva was worshipped in Kāmarūpa in the iconographic and *līṅga* (phallic) representations, and in composite forms such as Uma-Māheśvara and Hari-Hara. Śaivism was patronized by the kings of Kāmarūpa, and occupied an important position in the pantheon of the Brāhmaṇical deities. The worship of Śakti was associated with its famous shrine at Kāmākhyā. There are very few architectural remains of temples associated with the goddess belonging to the pre-Ahom period. The worship of Śakti in the *yonī* (female principle representing the Mother Goddess) form may explain the comparatively lesser popularity of the iconographic representation of the goddess. Epigraphic references to Śakti worship are also found only by implication, such as in the inscriptions of Vanamāla and Indrapāla, which refer to the temples of Mahāgauri, another name of the goddess. Śakti worship seems to have gained greater predominance over Śaivism by the time of Indrapāla, that is, around the 11th century CE.

Chapter Three: Vaiṣṇavism deals with the worship of Viṣṇu, one of the gods of the ‘Hindu Triad’ of the Brāhmaṇical faith. Mythological narratives in traditional accounts mention that the ruling houses of Prāgjyotiṣa and Kāmarūpa traced their lineage to Viṣṇu through Narakā, the mythological king of Prāgjyotiṣa. The *Mahābhārata* mentions that Viṣṇu is called Prāgjyotiṣa Jyestha. The earliest reference to Viṣṇu worship in Assam is recorded in the Umāchal inscription of the 5th century CE. The temple ruins dedicated to Viṣṇu and his *avatāras* (incarnations), and icons of the deity discovered throughout Assam, prove that Vaiṣṇavism was prevalent, and that it was not far behind Śaivism in its popularity.

Chapter Four: Miscellaneous Cults: Sūrya and Other Minor Deities, examines the archaeological sources related to many other gods and goddesses worshipped in Early Assam. It may be noted that the existence of a variety of deities is a marked feature of the history of religion during the

period. Śiva, Viṣṇu and Śakti were worshipped as major deities under the patronage of the kings belonging to the Varman, Salastambha and Pala dynasties, who ruled from the 4th to the 12th centuries CE. The miscellaneous cults belonged to Brāhmanical as well as non-Brāhmanical faiths. These deities did not rise to the position of independent cults, but were popular nevertheless, since their images were found in several places in Kāmarūpa. Independent representations of the deities are rare, though not altogether lacking in Assam. The minor deities were represented mostly as consorts and associates of the chief god or goddess. The deities which are categorized as minor deities include Sūrya, Indra, Gaṇeśa, Kārttikeya, Agni, Kuvera, Manasā, and Brahmā. The archaeological sources reveal that there was an overwhelming predominance of Brāhmanical gods and goddesses prevalent in Assam during the period, and there is evidence to suggest that Buddhism and Jainism were not altogether absent.

Chapter Five: Religious Heritage and Conservation: Kāmākhyā, discusses issues of the past in the present, concerning religious heritage sites which are facing the impact of rapid urbanization accompanied by migration and the growth of cities. The Kāmākhyā temple located at Guwahati city in the Kāmrup metropolitan district of Assam, which has emerged as a major destination for tourists and pilgrims alike, exemplifies the challenges of conservation of religious heritage sites in urban settings. Religious heritage sites are popular as tourist destinations, since they offer visitors an insight into the history and identity of a community. The study of sacred landscape involves examining the relations between monuments and landscape, and the ways in which they are connected to the communities in everyday lives. Urban conservation lies at the very heart of urban planning, and conservators need to ensure the long-term protection of urban historic sites, which necessitates re-examination of linkages between sacred space and the secular city. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has been playing a principal role in the protection of cultural heritage in all its forms. The Archaeological Survey of India, the Assam Circle, and the Directorate of Archaeology of the Government of Assam have been maintaining and regulating archaeological activities at the state level, and have declared some of the sacred sites as protected monuments of national importance. The chapter draws attention to the urgent need to formulate a sustainable management plan for the conservation of religious heritage sites in Assam, by engaging various stakeholders in the field of heritage, including academics, managers, architects, local communities, and market forces.

Chapter Six: Conclusion, reviews the material dimension of religion based on a coherent analysis of archaeological evidence relating to the period from the 4th to the 12th centuries CE. The migration of Brāhmaṇas to Kāmarūpa in large numbers, and the land grants given to them by the kings, facilitated the spread of the Brāhmaṇical faith. There are references to the kings of the period performing *yajñas* (sacrificial rituals of Vedic tradition) for various purposes, and this required the specialized guidance of the priests. The two deities that emerged as prominent in the hierarchy of the Brāhmaṇical pantheon during the period were Viṣṇu and Śiva, although Sūrya and Gaṇeśa also occupied an important position, as compared to the other miscellaneous deities. The temple ruins indicate that the people also worshipped minor deities such as Indra, Kārttikeya, Agni, Kuvera, Manasā, and Brahmā. Yet, not a single temple ruin dedicated to the minor deities has been found, since they did not develop as independent cults. That Brāhmaṇical religion was the dominant faith in Early Assam can be surmised from the rich material remains discovered in the form of epigraphs, sculptures, temple ruins, coins, etc. Śaktism influenced both Śaivism and Vaiṣṇavism. Buddhism and Jainism attracted a section of the population. It may be noted that the Kāmarūpa kings were tolerant in their approach towards the various religious faiths and their adherents. A king may support and patronize a deity while at the same time eulogizing another, without any apparent distinction. A characteristic feature of the history of religion in Early Assam was that it was not unusual to find the worship of many deities belonging to different cults, such as Viṣṇu, Śiva, Sūrya, Gaṇeśa, etc., in a single temple. Such types of temple are rarely found in other parts of India.

It is apparent that religion in Early Assam was rooted in, and sustained by, the material practice of divine representations, with the active support of the kings. The available archaeological evidence throws a flood of light on the religious history of Early Assam from the 4th to the 12th centuries CE. It is hoped that, through an intensive study of the materials at hand, a more meaningful understanding of the religious condition that prevailed in the period will emerge.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book has been a long time in the making and I am grateful to a considerable number of individuals who gave me indispensable advice and constructive criticism. This study represents not only my work, but the support of many whom I would like to acknowledge at the publication of this book.

I am deeply grateful to Professor Kunal Chakrabarti, Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi who evinced keen interest in the subject and initiated me into the exciting field of research in the study of religion. It has left an indelible mark on gaining insights into the ways in which religion can be perceived from various perspectives according to the vantage point and histories of communities. The process of learning from, and inspiring, people of a different faith has far-reaching implications even outside the strictly religious realm, and this has remained my field of scholarly interest in my academic career.

I must express my gratitude to the scholars who have shared their knowledge on this specialized field of archaeology in Northeast India. I have benefitted from the interactions with them, particularly on aspects of archaeology and religion in Assam, the area of study under review. Mr. R.D. Choudhury, former Director, National Museum, New Delhi and former Director, Assam State Museum, Guwahati, provided me with the opportunity to use the museum and library facilities at the Assam State Museum. Dr. Gautam Sengupta, former Director General, Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi, was of great help in the collection of data at the North Eastern Hill University, Shillong. I am thankful to them.

The contributions made by the Kāmarūpa Anusandhāna Samiti, also known as The Assam Research Society, established in 1912 CE, towards the history and culture of Assam, are commendable. This institute functioned as a museum long before the establishment of the Assam State Museum at Guwahati and is a rich resource centre for subjects on the erstwhile kingdom of Prāgijyotiṣa-Kāmarūpa and neighbouring places. The reports on excavations conducted in archaeological sites in Northeast India, and studies on the sources of Assam history, are particularly valuable. The Samiti continues to provide library facilities for scholars interested in the

study of the cultural heritage of Assam, on subjects ranging from inscriptions, sculptures, objects of religious importance, relics and temple ruins, to indigenous manuscripts. I thank the staff and members of the Samiti for allowing me to use the library facilities and making available the rare volumes of the *Journal of the Assam Research Society*.

The collection of data from libraries and institutions in Assam, Meghalaya, and New Delhi, have been facilitated by the help and support of the staff, for which I am thankful. In Assam, the libraries consulted include: The Assam Institute for Tribal Research and Scheduled Tribes, Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Directorate of Archaeology: Guwahati, Indian Council of Historical Research: North East Regional Centre, K. K. Handique Library of Gauhati University, OKD Institute of Social Change and Development, and Directorate of Library Sciences, Government of Assam. I also had the opportunity to utilise library facilities at North Eastern Hill University, Shillong and Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

I will be failing in my duty if I do not acknowledge with thanks, the many individuals, especially students and faculty members at the Department of History, Gauhati University, with whom I have had a long association. The ongoing process of learning through interactions and discussions on the history of the region have widened my understanding of the subject. My interest in the history of Assam was enthused with visits to sacred sites in the state, which were later to form part of my field study experiences. It is essential to have a knowledge of the social demography of Northeast India where the majority of the ethnic communities do not possess a script of their own, and as such, do not have a 'documented history'.

The modern city of Guwahati, or Gauhati as it was known in early times, is a rich field for research on history and archaeology. Being a resident of the city for almost two decades has enabled me to visit sites in and around the city, for work and pleasure, and to observe the expanding city from the perspective of a historian, and a tourist. I have also benefitted from my participation in seminars, conferences and workshops, which has changed my outlook towards the seeming divide between the disciplines of history and archaeology. I would like to mention two events held in Guwahati: *The Regional Conference on Archaeology of North-Eastern India: 150th Anniversary Celebrations, Archaeological Survey of India (ASI)*, organized by ASI, New Delhi, July 20-21, 2012, and *The National Workshop on Archaeological Ceramics and Stone Tools*, organized by IIT-Guwahati, Indian Council of Historical Research (ICHR) and Centre for Archaeological

Studies and Training Eastern India (CASTEI), Kolkata, November 10-14 2008. It will not be out of place to note that the majority of the available works on archaeology and religion in Assam are descriptive in nature, which fails to contribute to theoretical perspectives on the interlinkages between history, archaeology, and religion. This book, titled *Religion in Early Assam: An Archaeological History*, is a concerted attempt towards exploring this perspective in the context of Early Assam.

I remember with deep respect my parents Laisram Gopal Singh (*Pabung*) and Rajkumari Kadambini Devi (*Ima*) who instilled in me the value of diligent and earnest hard work, which has always given me the motivation in my journey of research.

Jasendra kindly typed this manuscript during his trying days at Mumbai, and it is with gratitude that I acknowledge his contribution to this work.

Last, but not least, this book would not have seen the light of day without the constant encouragement from Jeevan, my husband, whose appreciation for research has been reassuring during some trying times. To balance professional and personal commitments requires the patience and understanding of family members. The support of my sons, Bani and Kris, in their own ways, throughout the journey of this book is acknowledged with affection.

The final stages of this work were put together during my stay at Doha, Qatar, a modern city with a rich historical past. The extraordinary desert calm has been an inspirational experience.

I take this opportunity to thank Cambridge Scholars Publishing for their active cooperation towards this publication, and for giving me a platform to present my research work to a wider audience.

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A NOTE ON THE MAPS

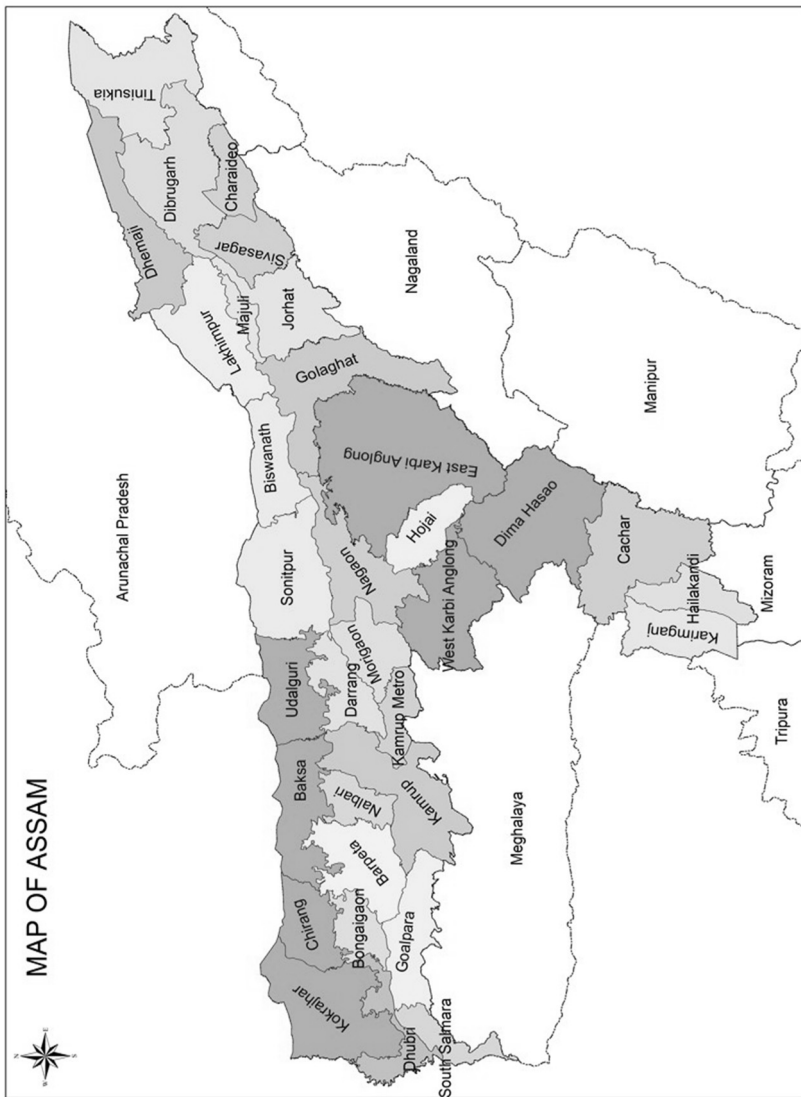
An attempt has been made to locate as many sites of religious importance in Early Assam as possible, in the context of the material culture discovered so far. The outlines used for Maps 3, 4, and 5 in this study are taken from P.C. Sarma's book, titled *Architecture of Assam* (1988), on early medieval sites of Assam. It may be noted that Ancient Assam is coterminous with Early Assam, a period of Assam history from the 4th to about the 12th centuries CE. A study of the archaeological remains of the period under review shows that most of the sites which have been possible to locate come within the boundary of the modern state of Assam. The site of Malinithan, now in Arunachal Pradesh, bordering Assam, is the only exception. Therefore, for all practical purposes, the outline of this map serves the requirement of the book.

Map 1: Map of India: Location of Assam



Source: emapsworld.com, Accessed July 12, 2018.

Map 2: Map of Assam: Districts and Neighbouring States



Source: <https://assam.gov.in/>. Accessed July 27, 2018.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The Context

The material dimension of religion is a comparatively unexplored area of study, particularly in Northeast India,¹ although sites of religious importance and artefacts constitute a major component of archaeological history. Religion, as commonly understood, is a system of beliefs which evoke a sense of reverence and awe, and are linked to doctrines, myths and rituals. Given the centrality of ideology in religion, archaeology, with its focus on material culture,² is generally considered as an incomplete method for its study. As such, mythological narratives make up much of the background of religious studies, and there is the challenge of defining and theorizing religion in archaeology and dealing with the methodological issues of how to *do* the archaeology of religion. In traditional societies,³ religious symbols and rituals are often integrated with material culture, and religious places represent extensions of an interdependent socio-economic system.⁴ It is well recognized that the distinction between secular and religious dimensions is an artificial one, often blurred in real life situations. ‘Sacred Spaces’⁵ are a key element in understanding how religions operate, and under what context the believers participate in the religion. These places are set aside according to various mythological, symbolic, and shamanic factors. It may be noted that, with the pace of development across the globe, a large number of historic archaeological sites are lost every year. An important aspect of archaeology in contemporary history is that, often, ethnic movements and issues of nationality have begun to involve archaeology, and the assumptions drawn from it, to justify their aspirations. As such, archaeology can be a powerful tool in proving or refuting claims of a community’s identity.

This study attempts at an objective reconstruction of the history of religion in Early Assam (4th-12th centuries CE),⁶ based on archaeological evidence, viz., architectural remains, inscriptions, coins, sculptures, and other artefacts discovered so far. It is an endeavour at a departure from earlier

works, in that its purpose is to gain insights into the interlinkages between history, archaeology, and religion, in the light of the divine representations in art, and architectural remains, etc. The importance of material evidence in the reconstruction of religion in Early Assam can hardly be over-emphasized, particularly when scholars must rely largely on such evidence to rediscover Assam's ancient past. Literary sources, such as the *Kālika-Purāṇa* (11th-12th centuries CE),⁷ and *Yoginī-Tantra* (16th century CE), contain much information about the myths and meaning of the sacred history, but the authentication of them is a difficult task. Yūan Chwāng's⁸ (Hiuen Tsang's) accounts of his visit to the Kāmarūpa kingdom in the 7th century CE is a valuable record, but cannot be entirely relied upon, as it is written through the eyes of a traveller. It is crucial to mention here, that in the context of religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, etc., with large corpuses of literary sources, texts have often determined the nature and form of archaeological research.⁹ However, in spite of the challenges relating to the reliability of using such sources, text-aided archaeology, when used in a critical manner, can offer clues for the identification of sculptures and sacred ruins within a historical context. The practice of idol worship promoted the positioning of the representation of deities inside temples, and the ruins of the sacred sites are now treasured as part of the cultural fabric of the society. The sacred archaeology of the period acquires significance, in that it marks the gradual formation of cult worship of Śiva and Viṣṇu, and also the worship of several deities, such as Śakti, Sūrya, Indra, Gaṇeśa, Kārttikeya, Agni, Kuvera, and Brahmā. The absorption of the various religious ideologies by the people of Assam, with a spirit of mutual tolerance, is a distinctive characteristic of the period. Early Assam witnessed the coming of the *Purāṇic* Hindu faith, and the Brāhmaṇas played a crucial role in the gradual dissemination of the Brāhmaṇical ideology.

The modern state of Assam,¹⁰ situated in Northeast India, acquired its name in the 13th century CE, when the Ahoms,¹¹ belonging to the Tai¹² group of people having migrated from Southern China, crossed the Patkai range and settled in the Brahmaputra valley. Its most ancient name is Prāḡjyotiṣa,¹³ and this finds mention in the two epics: the *Rāmāyana* and the *Mahābhārata*, and also in the major *Purāṇas*.¹⁴ According to the *Kālika-Purāṇa*, the kingdom changed its name to Kāmarūpa due to the association with the presiding deity, Kāmākhyā, and was often referred to as Kāmarūpa-Kāmākhyā.¹⁵ However, in epigraphic records, the name Kāmarūpa was first mentioned in the Allahabad Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta of 350 CE, along with the kingdom of Davāka, as a frontier kingdom of the Gupta Empire.¹⁶ The mention of Lauhitya in the *Arthaśāstra* authored by Kautilya is taken to be a reference to the river Brahmaputra, indicating knowledge of

this region.¹⁷ The *Yoginī-Tantra* and the *Kālīka-Purāṇa* give an indication of the geographical boundary of the erstwhile kingdom, and mention that the western boundary of ancient Kāmarūpa was marked by the river Karatoya in Koch Behar.¹⁸ The kingdom of Kāmarūpa once included almost the whole geographical region of Northeast India, including Bhutan and Sylhet in Bangladesh, except Manipur and Tripura, which existed as independent kingdoms for a greater part of their history. During British rule in India, the erstwhile kingdoms of Manipur and Tripura were given the status of princely states and were finally merged with the Dominion of India in 1949 CE.

The roots of social formation in Assam are necessarily intertwined with the history of migration of Northeast India, which is characterized by a multi-ethnic population which now inhabits different parts of the present eight states of the region. It is generally accepted that the Mongoloids, mentioned as the Kirātas¹⁹ in ancient Sanskrit literature, once occupied practically the whole of Northeastern India. B. C. Allen²⁰ noted, in the *Census of Assam 1901*, that, “North West China between the upper waters of the Yangtse Kiang and the Ho-ang-ho was the cradle of the Indo-Chinese race, and that, from the starting point, successive waves of emigrants entered Assam and India. A branch of them came southwards down the Chindwin, settled in the Chin hills, and were compelled by the pressure of population to move northwards into Cachar, Manipur and even the Assam range.”

S. K. Chatterjee²¹ has studied various tribes from the linguistic point of view, and inferred that, “The great Sino-Indian speaking people, who had their origin within Yangtse-Kiang and the Huwan-Ho rivers of north-west China, had migrated in a southerly direction, probably in 2000 BC, and appeared in the mountains of the north of the Brahmaputra plains, where the Bodos had already established themselves.” From an archaeological perspective, M. K. Dhavalkar²² explains the cultural diversity of the region, thus: “Geographically, the region provided links between China and Burma. It may be mentioned that the pre-historic cultures of Assam have more in common with East Asian and Southeast Asian tradition than with those of the (Indian) subcontinent.” The Mongoloid groups spread over the entire Northeastern region, and, having experienced cross-cultural contact, eventually settled in different ecological settings and formed various ethnic communities.²³ Along with the Kirātas, the social composition of the population in Assam also included many social groups, such as the Brāhmaṇas, Kayasthas, and Kalitas. It may be mentioned that the Northeast states, except Sikkim, share a common historical experience, the British

having administered the region during a greater part of the 19th century CE. The coming of the British, associated with modern education and the market economy, brought about dynamic changes in the socio-cultural milieu of the communities.

Northeast India exhibits a rich ethnic, cultural, religious, and linguistic diversity, with more than four hundred distinct tribal and sub-tribal groups, speaking more than a hundred dialects, and a large and diverse non-tribal population. Linguistically, the population may be broadly classified into speakers of three groups of languages, viz., Austro-Asiatic, Tibeto-Burman, and the 'Indo-Aryans'. The first group is represented by the Khasi, Jaintia and War languages (Meghalaya), and the Tai languages of the Ahoms, Tai-Phake, and Tai-Khamti (Assam). The speakers of the Tibeto-Burman group of languages include: the Bodo, Rabha, Karbi, Mising, Tiwa, Deori (Assam); Ao, Angami, Sema, Lotha, Konyak (Nagaland); Mizo, Hmar (Mizoram); Nyishi, Adi, Abor, Nocte, Apatani, Mishmi, etc. (Arunachal Pradesh); and Manipuri, Mao, Maram, Rongmei, Tangkhul, Simte and Paite (Manipur). Some of the 'Indo-Aryan' languages spoken in the region are Assamese (Assam), Bengali (Assam and Tripura), Tripuri (Tripura), and Nepali (Sikkim). While there is no denying that there are considerable diversities among various ethnic groups, certain common traits are discernible, since the communities, presently at different stages of cultural transformation, are essentially clan-based societies. Clans and lineages are central to the social organization of the tribal societies, thereby forming the basis of the various stages of development of religious philosophical thoughts. The Khasi, Garo, and Jaintia, inhabiting the present state of Meghalaya, are matrilineal, tracing inheritance and descent through the female line, but authority is vested in the mother's brother. The Tiwas (formerly called Lalungs) in Assam used to be a matrilineal group, but are now in the process of transformation to patriliney. The Dimasa-Kacharis in Assam have a unique form of dual female and male descent, daughters tracing lineage through the mother, and sons through the father. The society of all other communities in the region are patrilineal and patrilocal. Most communities are monogamous, but polygyny is also practised. A few groups are polyandrous.

The history of the region reveals that the different ethnic groups at different periods of history began to gradually figure within the ambit of the pan-Indian culture continuum, with Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism, being followed by different sections of the population.²⁴ Birendranath Datta²⁵ gives a broad categorization of the people into three groups, viz., tribal communities not influenced by institutionalized

religions; tribal communities at various levels of acculturation²⁶ due to contact with the institutionalized religions; and societies which have been influenced by Sanskritization. Among the Plains' Tribes in Assam, which are undergoing different stages in the acculturation process, mention may be made of the Sonowal Kacharis of Upper Assam, the Lalungs of Nagāon, the Barmans of Cachar district, and the Bodo Kacharis of Kām̄rūp, Goalpārā and Darrang districts. It is crucial to note that, although the process of acculturation leads to changes in the traditional culture, the indigenous culture is not always replaced in its entirety. As Dennis O'Neil²⁷ explains, "There is often a syncretism, or an amalgamation, of traditional and introduced traits. The new traits may be blended with, or worked into, the indigenous culture to make them more acceptable." This is particularly true in the context of cultural interactions and assimilation of the various ethnic groups in Northeast India.

The recorded political history of Assam begins with the Varman dynasty (4th-7th centuries CE), established by King Pushyavarman in the 4th century CE. He was a contemporary of King Samudragupta (350-380 CE) of the Gupta dynasty. The most famous, and last, king of the Varman Dynasty was Kumar Bhaskaravarman (594-650 CE), a contemporary of Harsavardhana. Since Bhaskaravarman was a *Kumar* (bachelor) and left behind no heir, the Salastambhas (7th-10th century CE) established a new dynasty which ruled until about the middle of the 10th century CE. The kingdom then passed into the hands of a new line of kings, namely the Pala dynasty (10th-12th centuries CE) which was established by Brahmapāla and lasted till about the middle of the 12th century CE. It may be mentioned that Assam, in its formative period, witnessed the prevalence of several religions such as Vaiṣṇavism, Śaktism, Śaivism and Buddhism. The kings of Early Assam claimed themselves to be upholders of the *varṇāśramadharmā*,²⁸ and the Brāhmaṇas played a crucial role in legitimizing their position.

The Brāhmaṇas migrated to Kām̄arūpa from at least the 7th century CE, and contributed to the emergence and development of the *Purāṇic* Hindu faith.²⁹ The emerging political influence of Kām̄arūpa in the region, around the later part of the 5th century CE, coincided with the period of downfall of the Imperial Guptas. Romila Thapar³⁰ explains the development and spread of the *Purāṇic* worldview thus:

"The corpus of literature called the *Purāṇas* which evolved out of the interaction between Brāhmaṇical tradition and many local traditions created composite religious systems reaching areas hitherto peripheral to Brāhmaṇical influence. Large scale Brāhmaṇa migration from the post-Gupta period, to various places, facilitated the incorporation of diverse

rituals carrying with them a *Puranic* world-view which became recognized as part of the Brāhmanical tradition. A major part of each *Purāna* focuses on a deity and its sects, and these texts therefore are essential to the evolution of what has come to be called *Purāṇic* Hinduism.”

The Bargaṅgā Rock Inscription of Bhutivarman records that the Brāhmanas came to settle in the Kāmarūpa kingdom as early as the 6th century CE.³¹ The inducement offered to them by way of land grants, or *agrahāras*, must have led to their large-scale migration to the kingdom. The learned Brāhmanas were brought to Kāmarūpa for the performance of the *Asvamedha*, or horse sacrifice, and also for educational and cultural purposes, for which they were gifted the revenue-free land by the kings, and in large measure during the reign of Mahabhūtarman.³² The Nidhanpur Grant confirms the systematic policy adopted by the kings to settle the Brāhmanas in the kingdom by donating land to further their religious pursuits.³³ The increasing influence of the Brāhmanical religion during the period is also indicated by the performance of *yajñas*, or sacrificial rituals, by the rulers, under the specialized guidance of the priests.

It seems likely that the Brāhmanas who migrated to Assam belonged mainly to Madhyadesa and Mithila. A section of them came from Kathiawar of Gujarat and were known as Nagar Brāhmanas. The Brāhmanas of Assam today follow the Mithila School in matters of social law, and trace their descent from the Brāhmanas of Kanya-kubja (Kanauj). They claim that they migrated to Assam during the time of the legendary king Narakā.³⁴ Local scholars, such as P. C. Choudhury, suggest that the original four *varṇās*, i.e. Brāhmanas, Kṣatriyas, Vaiśyas, and Śūdras, did not remain in their traditional position of the *varṇāśramadharmā*, and that even the Brāhmanas had inter-caste marriage.³⁵ According to Thomson,³⁶ “Assam has always been linked with Bengal as a centre of Tantric Hinduism, and, up to the 16th century CE, most kings appear to have been Śaktas, paying great attention to the worship of Śiva and Durga.” There are some references to migration of the Brāhmanas to Kāmarūpa, especially in the 11th century CE, although their existence in Assam prior to this date is known by the reference in the Nidhanpur Grant and the Bargaṅgā epigraphs. The Guwākuchi Grant refers to a donee by the name of Vāsudeva who is said to have come from Vainagrāma in Savathi, identified with Śrāvasti, situated in the border of North Bengal. He was granted land at Mandi-Visaya, located in the present modern Goalpārā district.³⁷ Similar references regarding migration of Brāhmanas to Kāmarūpa are also recorded in the Khānamukh Copper Plates,³⁸ the Subhanṅkarapāṭaka Grant,³⁹ and the Kamauli Grant.⁴⁰

The year 1228 CE marked the advent of the Ahoms to the Brahmaputra valley, and the beginning of the gradual political integration and socio-cultural amalgamation of many ethnic groups, such as the Morans, Borahis, Chutiyas, Kacharis, Misings, and Rabhas, etc., under their rule, which was to transform the history of Assam in the next six hundred years (1228-1826 CE). The Ahoms also underwent a process of acculturation,⁴¹ when they gradually abandoned their native language in favour of the Assamese language, as indicated by the court chronicles known as *Buranjis*, which were initially written in Tai-Ahom, and later in Assamese languages. It is worthwhile to mention that the tradition of chronicle writing was also practised in Manipur (*Cheitharol Kumbaba*) and Tripura (*Rajmala*). It is believed that they learnt the tradition of record-keeping from their cultural interaction with the people of Upper Burma, Southeast Asia, and China. There are also 'local-level texts' known as the *Puyas*, in Manipur, which have five characteristics like the *Purāṇas* and were written after the coming of the Brāhmaṇas to Manipur.⁴² The challenge of using these texts as sources of history lies in the fact that the works are silent on authorship and the period when they were written.

Religion, Archaeology and History: Concept and Definition

Every known society has a religious belief system, although the nature and practice has differed from one society to another. **Religion** is a phenomenon that is as complex as it is paradoxical. As a component of human behaviour, religion has interested, fascinated, confused, and confounded, scientists from an early period of history. Indeed, expressions and functions of religion in human societies are so varied that scholars have contended with the effort to define religion. Sometimes religion was equated with the sacred, i.e. whatever inspired awe, respect, fear, or trust, while at other times it was thought of as a social institution or a social and cultural system. Religion as a tradition naturalizes relationships of domination-subordination, together with the processes and forms of inequalities and exclusions. To view religion simply as a benign 'sacred canopy' over society is to ignore the ways in which religion can, and does, play an active role in everyday lives. Religion can function primarily in two ways: 1] as a legitimizing force, reinforcing dominant power interests; and 2] By providing stimulus and support to individuals and families, helping them to face challenges in a spirit of confidence and bold faith, unafraid to ask questions and seek new directions.

The word *religion* itself is of Latin origin: *religare*, and means, ‘to bind together, to rehearse, and to execute painstakingly’, which suggests both group identity and ritual.⁴³ According to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, religion relates to the “recognition on the part of man of some higher unseen power as having control of his destiny.”⁴⁴ In the Indian context, there is no distinctive Sanskrit word for ‘religion.’ It is generally explained by the term *dharma*,⁴⁵ i.e., what is established, law, usage, and right conduct. The implication is that all religions are founded on basic premises that are ultimately not subject to the scrutiny of reason. Depending on what one chooses to isolate for study, religion can refer to rituals, belief systems, kinships, magical cults, shaman and priestly activities, ceremonial calendars, or states of mind called ‘the religious experience’. All these aspects overlap, though they differ too; but which aspect is more important depends on whether one approaches the field from the viewpoint of history, anthropology, sociology, or psychology, etc.

There are, broadly, two approaches to the study of religion.⁴⁶ The first, following the 20th century works of classical sociologist Emile Durkheim⁴⁷ (1858-1917 CE) defines religion in terms of its social functions, thus: “religion is a system of beliefs and rituals, with reference to the sacred, which binds people together into social groups.” The second approach, following Max Weber⁴⁸ (1864-1920 CE) and P. Tillich⁴⁹ (1886-1965 CE), explains religion as any set of coherent answers to human existential dilemmas, such as birth, sickness or death, which make the world meaningful. Religious traditions and beliefs contribute to the organisation of societies but are often understood to support existing power structures. Conversely, how people understand ‘religion’, or, indeed, construct religion, depends on the context and their socio-political or economic agenda. Hence, any discussion on the ‘archaeology of religion’ first encounters the challenge of defining ‘religion’. It is crucial to note that the study of religion has traditionally been a textual discipline, and that the definition of religion has thus remained conventionally text-based.

Archaeology is the study of past cultures through the material (physical) remains preserved from the past, which range from small artefacts to large monumental buildings. But the main aim of the archaeologist is not simply to generate empirical data of specific sites or cultures, but also to investigate the broader intellectual questions, including the role of religion in society, the importance of material culture to religious experience, and the forms of agency employed by both humans and objects. Modern archaeological studies have three major goals, viz., chronology or time perspectives, reconstruction, and interpretation. The inter-linkages between the sacred

and the mundane spaces yield information regarding the way people organize themselves in relation to how they perceive their cosmos.

History may be defined as a chronological and coherent reconstruction of the past to understand the continuity and change of human societies. In general, the sources of historical knowledge can be grouped in three categories, viz., what is said, what is written, and what is physically preserved, and historians often consult all three aspects. The aim of history writing should be to reconstruct objective history that does not have a hidden class, patriarchal, or cultural-political agenda. However, it is important to mention that history is necessarily affected by the circumstances of the age and the society in which it is written. History is a dynamic discipline, and perspectives and interpretations tend to change with new theories, the influence of other disciplines, new methods of analysis, the availability of new sources, and changing contexts. New histories are being written, a variety of sources outside the archives are being looked at, and the discipline is now moving towards a direction of interdisciplinary research and a more ‘total history’. Interdisciplinary approaches to history began in the 1960s, and history departments began to encourage a high degree of sub-specialization in varied fields, such as military, gender, economic, social, environmental, intellectual and cultural, etc.

The distinction between ‘history’ and ‘myth’ is well recognized. Myths are, in a way, the opposite of historical facts, in the sense that, unlike historical facts, what constitutes a myth is not verifiable. Despite this, myth and history cannot be counterpoised as true and false. As such, myths represent reality, but symbolically and metaphorically. Yet, myth is not reality. Mythological narrative is now accepted as one of the necessary complementary sources for reconstructing the past. Historians are increasingly becoming sensitive to the need for a meaningful dialogue between folklore and historiography in the interest of a better comprehension of the past. Yet, the duty of a historian is to examine the acceptability of the myth as source, through a critical reading of the narratives in historical context.

Historical archaeology, as a discipline, addresses the link between archaeology and history. Archaeology, by discovering history first-hand through the mass of physical artefacts left behind from past human activities, has raised the consciousness of the public with respect to the tangible cultural heritage of a community. Intangible cultural heritage, which includes traditions and customs, is also preserved through collective memories, and oral history has emerged as one of the tools to collate these

memories, especially of communities which have been marginalized from history. Oral history, as a discipline applied within archaeological investigation, is growing in popularity in the form of public archaeology. A point of difference between oral historians and oral traditionalists is that the latter are more interested in fables, legends, and stories beyond living memory. It has been increasingly felt that there is a potential for combining oral history testimony with physical archaeological evidence, to enhance the understanding of a community.

Archaeological History: Trends and Possibilities

Excavation is often the public face of archaeology, although it plays a wider role in the discipline with its dynamic methodology, which constantly changes to reflect current thinking and improving technologies. Although there is no single overarching archaeological theory of religion, it will be worthwhile to gain insights into some of the dominant traditions of archaeological theories,⁵⁰ viz., cultural-historical archaeology, processual or new archaeology, post-processual archaeology, or interpretative archaeology, and Marxist archaeology. Early formulations of archaeology in the 19th century CE were based on the empirical methods of collection, description and classification of a body of data. Cultural-historical archaeology, inspired by Charles Darwin's Evolutionary Theory, brought a sense of scientific investigation to construct historical narratives of the past and develop chronologies. It was not until the 1960s that archaeologists such as Colin Renfrew,⁵¹ Lewis Binford, and others, began to move away from the discipline's focus on description and documentation, to one that attempted to discover cultural complexity and change in societies. Artefacts in isolation were considered insufficient indicators for formalised religious practices.⁵²

Processual archaeology, also called new archaeology, examined environmental adaptation as an agent for societal change. The methodology was an endeavour to catch up with the social theory of the social sciences. Thus, there was an attempt to identify universal laws of human behaviour, through which the findings could be interpreted. Post-processual archaeology, or interpretative archaeology, began in the 1980s as a critical response to a set of perceived failings of processual archaeology. The 'postmodern turn' places stress on human agency, the importance of human subjectivity, and lived experience in the past, and maintains that the theory and practice of archaeology can never be separated from its cultural and political context. Renfrew developed a methodological approach, termed cognitive