

CASTE AND SECT IN AN ASSAMESE VILLAGE

by

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ABSTRACT

The thesis is concerned with the relations between the Vaishnava devotional movement and the caste order in Assam. The first part is a village study in which caste is analysed with reference to economic differentiation, kinship, affinity and food transactions within the context of local sectarian organization. The second part examines the nature of the caste process in historical perspective and discusses both the traditional institutions and beliefs of the sect and the impact upon these institutions of the new reform movements which have arisen since the 1930s.

The object of the thesis is to describe the beliefs and practices of one regional variant of the many devotional sects based on the teachings of the Bhagavata Purana with specific reference to its complex and changing relations with the caste order.

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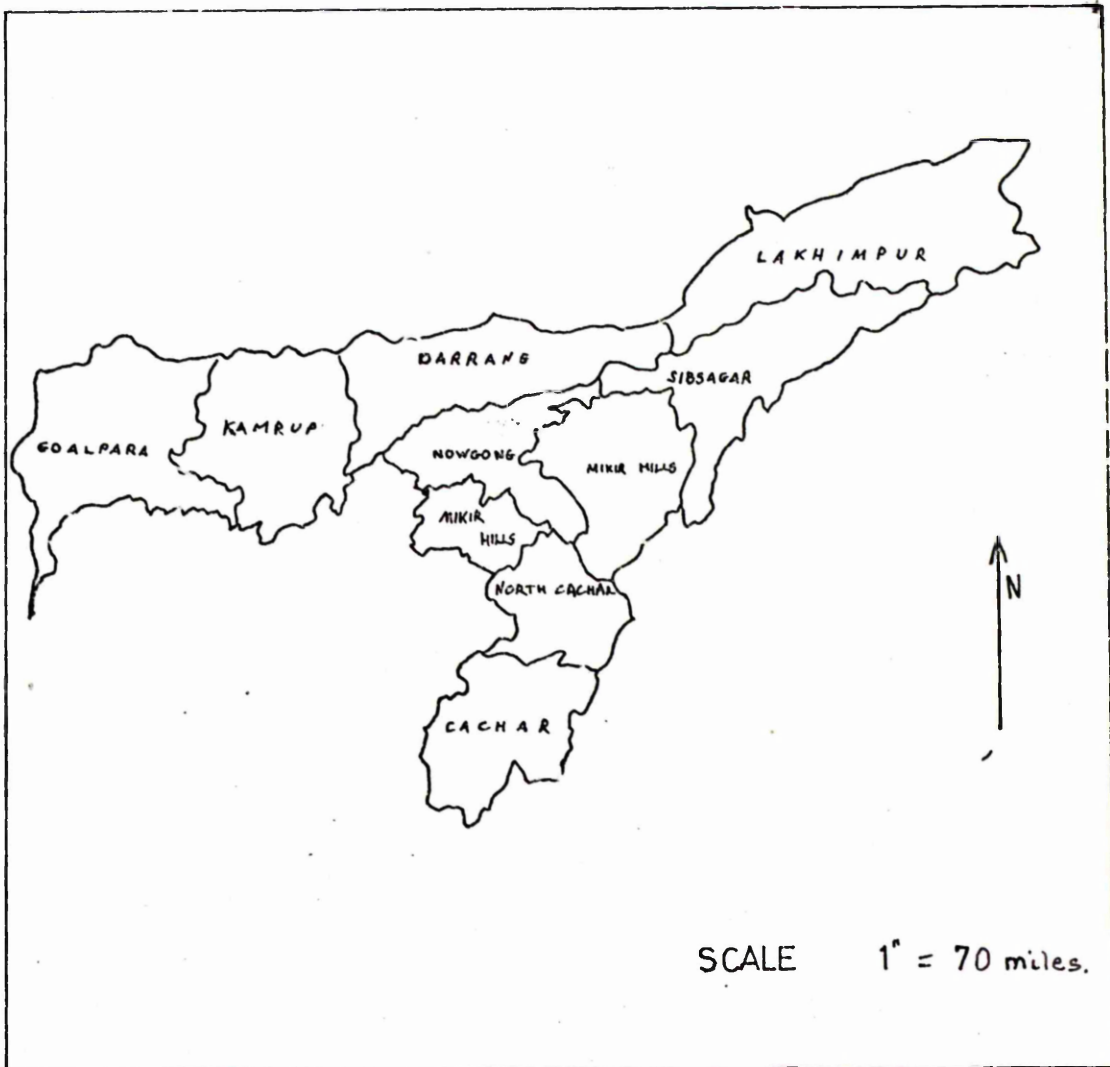
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MAP 1.

ASSAM.



ADAPTED FROM
CENSUS OF INDIA
VOLUME III,
ASSAM.

INTRODUCTION

The State of Assam in the north-east of India formerly consisted of the fertile valley of the Brahmaputra, along which lie the six plains districts of the State, surrounded by hill tracts inhabited by a great variety of tribal peoples. These hill areas, most of which have now been formed into separate States, early engaged the attention of anthropologists, but no significant studies have been made among the Hindus of the Assam Valley itself. Anthropologically speaking, almost nothing is known of Assam. The purpose of this thesis is to give an account of the customs of the Assamese people with specific reference to the relations between the Vaishnava devotional sects and the caste order.

Data for the thesis were collected during two visits to the field, the first of four months in 1969 and the second of two and a half months in 1971. The first visit was spent almost entirely in the study of one village, here called Panbari, and the second visit was spent partly in Panbari and partly in areas where the Vaishnava reform sects originated and were most active. I also collected much general information on Assamese customs in the period from 1940 to 1950 when I was living in Assam.

I wish to acknowledge my indebtedness to Professor Adrian Mayer for his unfailing support and advice and to Richard Burghart for kindly reading the text and making many helpful suggestions. I am deeply grateful to the many Assamese friends who unstintingly gave up their time to respond to my queries, notably Mohan Chandra Mahanta, Mitradeva Mahanta, Padma Dhar Saikia, Sosi Barbarooah and Prabhas Chandra Goswami. I am indebted to Caroline Law and Peter Golden for their assistance with the maps.

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PART ONE

THE VILLAGE

CHAPTER ONE

ECONOMIC DIFFERENTIATION AND CASTE IN
PANBARI

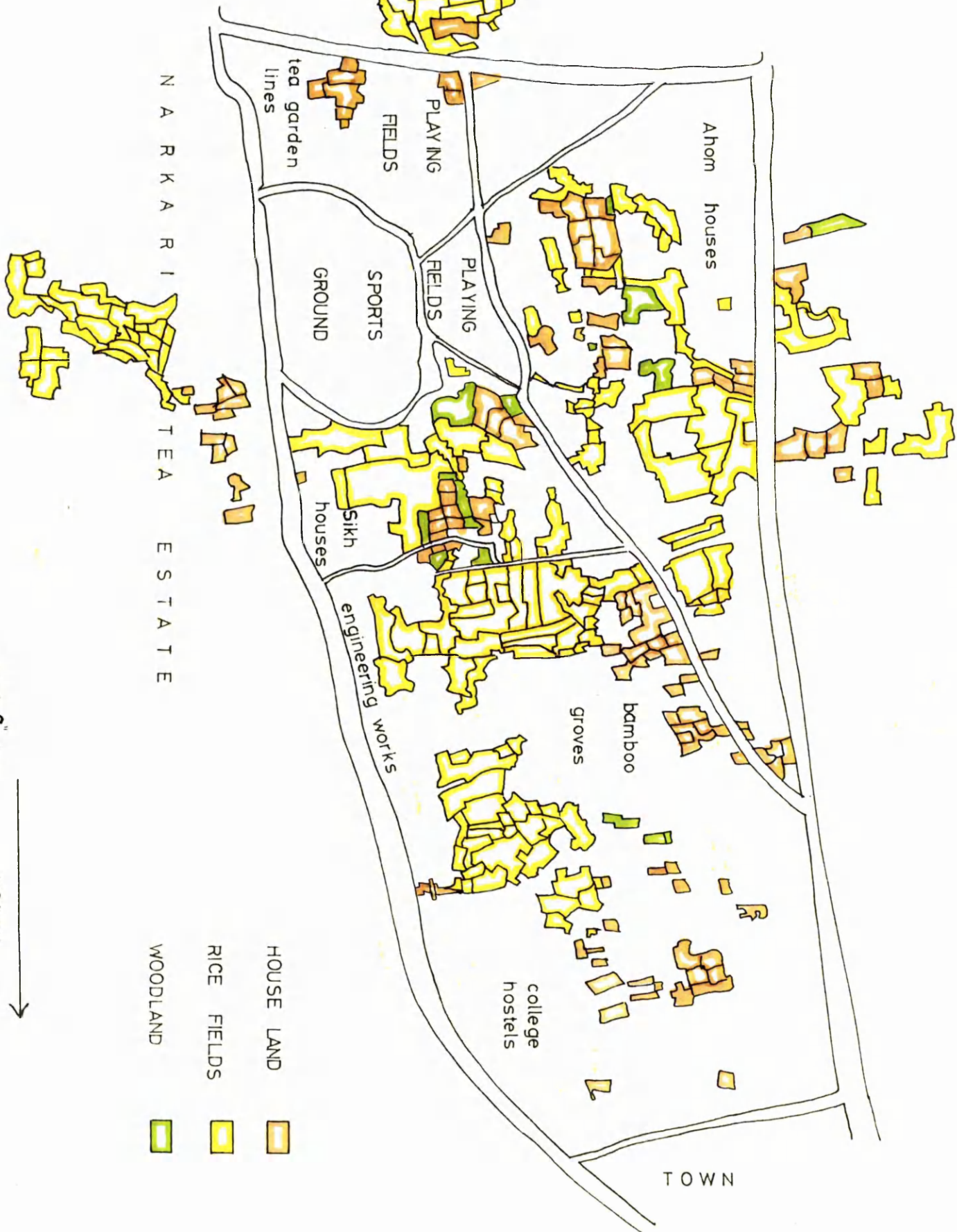
At the time of the 1961 Census there were 16,307 inhabited villages in Assam with an average population of a little over 500 (Census of India 1961, vol. 111, Assam: 113). Of these 2,300 were in Sibsagar District. The cadastral village, however, is not a social unit and the village, as such, is not a social fact. Villagers associate on the basis of membership of a local centre of devotional worship called a Name House (nām ghar) whose members describe themselves as 'one people' (rāij). Name Houses may be single-caste or multi-caste, and there are usually several Name Houses in a village.

The village of Panbari is a multi-caste village situated near a town in the Sibsagar District of Upper Assam. It was selected for study on two grounds. In the first place, its multi-caste composition provided material for a study of relations between different castes within a single Name House; and secondly, the village contained two groups of the new reform sects, the Harijanis and the Thirteen-day people, which are discussed in Part II of the thesis.

Panbari is roughly 2 miles long and 1 mile across. It is bounded on three sides by roads which divide it from Gayangaon on the west, Bar Chungigaon on the south and Narkari Tea Estate on the east. To the north lies the encroaching town. The general lay-out of the village is shown on Map 2. The rural landscape in Assam consists of wide plains of rice fields dotted over with tall groves of bamboo and fruit-bearing trees; within lie buried the houses of the inhabitants. The south side of the village presents an essentially rural appearance but on the north side many rice fields have been converted into house plots for sale at high prices to newcomers who commute to the town. The suburban character of the village is reflected in the high rate of mobility, both in and out of the village, and in the pattern of employment which is no longer rooted in the land. Within a generation Panbari as a village will cease to exist and the name will be used

G A Y A N G A O N

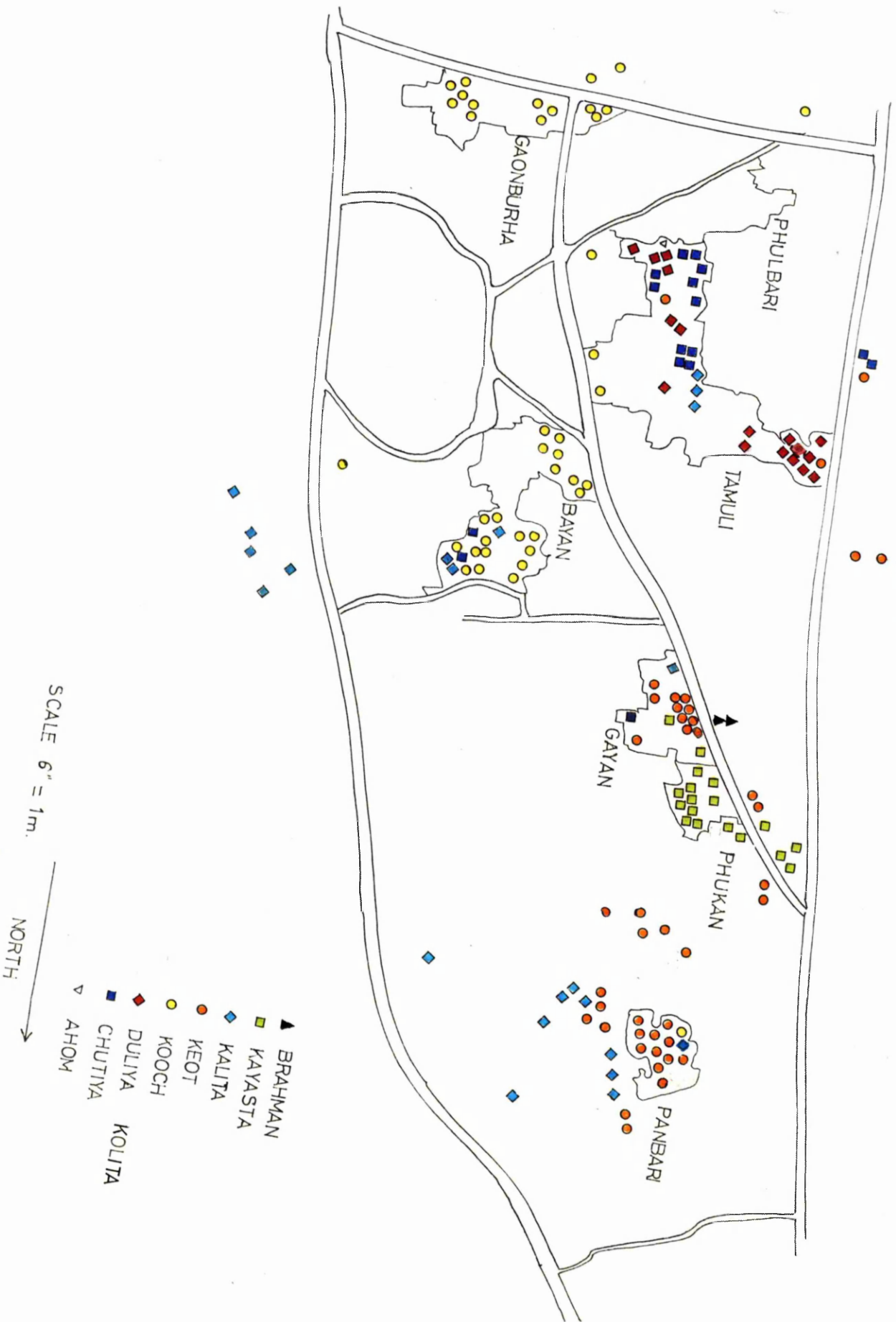
B A R C H U N G I G A O N



scale 6" = 1 m.

NORTH

MAP 3.
PANBARI : LOCATION OF HOUSEHOLDS BY CASTE



to indicate a ward of the town.

The Assamese village is not a well-defined geographical unit clearly isolated from other villages. Men in Panbari sometimes buy land in adjacent villages. When the property is later divided after death, one of the sons may move his house to the new land although he remains socially attached to his old village. The house plots shown in Bar Chungigaon and Narkari Tea Estate resulted from such purchases. Similarly men from adjacent villages may settle across the road in Panbari, but they are not considered to belong to Panbari (v. the Ahom settlement in the south-west of the village). The cadastral village contains a population of Sikhs and ex-tea garden labour with whom the Assamese have no contact and for whom, in a sense, they have no social existence.

The social unit in rural areas consists of the households who are members of a single Name House. There are three Name Houses in Panbari: Panbari Name House, Bayan Name House and Tamuli Name House. The membership of these three Name Houses, together with the two seceding groups of Harijaniya and Thirteen-day people, is 996 distributed in 161 households. This study is confined to the households who are members of the three Name Houses and of the two seceding groups, and the term Panbari is loosely used to indicate this unit.

Panbari contains seven hamlets (cuk), the boundaries of which are shown on Map 3. A hamlet is an area differentiated out of the village and usually named after the caste who inhabit it (e.g. Tamuli hamlet was formerly called Jugi because it is inhabited by a sub-caste of Jugis) or after a prominent man (e.g. the core of the hamlets known as Gaonburha, Phukan, Bayan and Gayan consists of families claiming descent from a Gaonburha or village headman, a Phukan or official under the Ahom kings, a celebrated Bayan or drummer and a Gayan or cymbal-player respectively). The names of the hamlets change with the social re-arrangements of the village. Since the Kooch brothers who live in Gaonburha hamlet to the south have joined the Panbari Name House, the area is usually referred to as Panbari and the hamlet name is becoming obsolete. Similarly, the north of the village, which is now largely inhabited by outsiders, has come to be called East Dahotia rather than Panbari and the hamlet within it containing a concentration of old inhabitants, formerly also called Gaonburha, is now known as Panbari hamlet, East Dohotia.

Settlement of the village.

The 161 households of the village are divided into 59 agnatic descent groups (bangśa). 2 of these resisted investigation and other villagers were not familiar with their family history. The date of settlement in the village of the remaining 57 descent groups is as follows:

As far back as known:	17 descent groups
3rd generation immigrants:	8 descent groups
2nd generation immigrants:	17 descent groups
1st generation immigrants:	15 descent groups

N.B. Generations are reckoned from the senior living male.
Memory usually extends to the paternal grandfather of the senior living male.

40 descent groups out of 57 therefore had a history of migration. The reasons for settlement in the village were given as follows:

13 descent groups originated from men who came to live in the village of their wife's father. It is not easy, especially after the lapse of time, to differentiate between men brought in to live with a daughter of the house as a dependent son-in-law (gharar jovāi) and men who migrate to their wife's village after marriage and support themselves independently. Only one case fell clearly into the last category.

Ghee-khowa was a poor cultivator with three daughters and no sons. The two elder daughters were married. Five years after the marriage of his second daughter, he asked her husband to come and live in his house.

Lakhi's parents died when he was young and he went to live with a married sister in Nowgong. There he met a transport driver living in Panbari who arranged that he should come to live with his elder sister. His 'wife's' father gave him land for a separate dwelling and later some fields for his own cultivation.

9 descent groups originated from migrants from the neighbouring town who moved out in the wake of its expansion. Often their land was requisitioned. This category includes cultivators whose fields became house plots and men working in the town who found it pleasanter and more economical to live in the surrounding country.

6 descent groups originated from men coming to live with relations in the village. They were usually poor.

Nobin's parents died when he was ten and he was sent to live with his married sister in Panbari.

Deoram was born in a village 3 miles away. His mother died when he was four and his little brother was two. His father remarried and his mother's elder brother in Panbari took in the children and brought them up.

Phuleswari was a poor widow. Her daughter had been married to Panbari. After the death of her husband she came to live in the compound of her daughter's father-in-law, bringing her son and her husband's younger brother with her. Some years later this land was sold, but her son had in the meantime eloped with a village girl. Her son's wife's mother's younger brother allowed her to build a house on his land.

4 descent groups originated from men who had been brought in as children to do domestic work and assist in cultivation.

Hari's father, who was a devotee of Garamur satra (a monastic centre), died before his birth. Probin went on a visit to the satra when Hari was ten and arranged to take the boy back with him to help in the cultivation of his fields.

Mohan was a landless orphan whose mother's younger sister was married to Panbari. Krishna Dutta of Panbari took him into his house at the age of twelve. He later married Krishna's daughter.

The remaining 8 cases came for a variety of reasons, including the education of children and proximity to work in the town.

No data are available to compare these figures with migration elsewhere, but villages within working-distance of a town usually attract settlers and tend to have a high rate of immigration. This also accounts for their multi-caste character.

It was not possible to collect comprehensive figures for families who had emigrated from the village. The scarcity and high cost of land in the area had led a number of families to sell their holdings and move into the interior where they could buy more land with the money. This trend is likely to accelerate as the town expands. With the emigration of many of the poorer inhabitants and the advent of new settlers oriented to the town, the existing community ties of the village will soon be lost.

Occupation by Caste.

The occupational structure of castes in Assam has certain distinguishing features. The proportion of artisan castes is small and the organization of these castes is relatively autonomous. Mullan comments: 'Caste in the Assam Valley is not, as elsewhere, chiefly a functional division; it is really a racial division and functional castes are very few' (Census of India 1931, Vol. III, Assam: 211). This is partly due to the fact that many tasks, which in other parts of India are assigned to particular castes, are carried out in Assam by individual households. Men and women wash their own clothes

without the service of a caste of Washermen. Excrement is left on the ground so there is no need of a caste of Sweepers. Men (except for Brahmans) shave themselves and cut their hair without the help of Barbers. Bamboo work is not caste-bound and may be undertaken by anyone with the necessary skill. Both men and women can catch fish without objection for household consumption, though not for sale. Further, the specialist castes that exist (Potters, Blacksmiths, Goldsmiths, Fishermen, Weavers, Silk-rearers, etc.) are not tied as dependent serving families to individual land-owning households but sell their wares, either at a fixed price within their village or for what they can get in the market. Most are part-time cultivators. Stack comments that 'perhaps the higher level of respectability on which the lower castes generally stand in Assam may be explained partly by the circumstances of a country where land is abundant, and where nobody is restricted to any degrading occupation as the only available means of earning his bread' (Report on the Census of Assam 1881:63).

Occupation is an important factor in the ranking of castes, artisans and specialist castes usually being considered of lower status than cultivators, and a number of castes are subdivided on this basis. In Lower Assam, for example, the Keots are distinguished as 'ploughing' (hālovā) and 'fishing' (jālovā), the former being superior to the latter. Many of the Kaibarttas (Fishermen) gave up their traditional occupation under the influence of the Garamur satrādhikār and divided into two sections: Fish-killing (māch marā) and Fish-not-killing (māch na-marā). The independent economic organization of the specialist castes, however, who usually live apart in their own villages, has contributed to a high degree of upward mobility. Many now claim to be Kalita, which is the highest of the Shudra castes: e.g. Kumar Kalita (Potters), Kamar Kalita (Blacksmiths), Sonari Kalita (Goldsmiths), Nat Kalita (Dancers), Duliya Kalita (Palki-bearers), Katani Kalita (Silk-rearers), etc. An important consequence of the separate organization of the specialist castes for the structure of the village is the absence of vertical ties based on the jajmani system so that functional integration is low, a factor which contributes to fission in the Name House.

Household occupation by caste in Panbari is shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1. Panbari: Household Occupation by Caste.

Caste	Rice Cultivation only	Rice Cultivation AND Paid Employment or Business	Paid Employment or Business only	No Means of Support	Totals
Brahman	-	50% (1)	50% (1)	-	2
Kayastha	-	-	100% (18)	-	18
Kalita	5% (1)	59% (13)	36% (8)	-	22
Keot	9% (4)	23% (10)	66% (29)	2% (1)	44
Kooch	10% (4)	29% (12)	56% (23)	5% (2)	41
Duliya Kalita	35% (6)	41% (7)	18% (3)	6% (1)	17
Chutiya	6% (1)	31% (5)	63% (10)	-	16
Ahom	-	-	100% (1)	-	1
<u>Village:</u>	10% (16)*	30% (48)	57% (93)	2% (4)	161

* The figure of 16 includes 5 day labourers.

The category 'Rice cultivation only' includes cultivators working their own land, cultivators working land on lease, and 5 poor households of day labourers. The sub-urban character of the village is reflected in the fact that only 10% of households had no other form of occupation. The majority of men were engaged in paid employment, termed 'service' in the village, which comprehends a wide range of occupations of different types. The 10 houses of Harijanis, for example, were employed in the following occupations:

- H. 1: Peon, fitter at sugar mill, driver in Public Works Department, divisional motor mechanic in Public Works Department, gardener.
- H. 2: Driver on Tea Estate, mechanic in Oil and Gas Commission, private tutor.
- H. 3: Rice mill operator, fitter in engineering works.
- H. 4: Brick layer and potter, potter, truck driver, soldier.
- H. 5: Carpenter, shopkeeper, turner.
- H. 6: Electrician, mechanic.
- H. 7: Fitter at Tea Estate.
- H. 8: Fitter at sugar mill.
- H. 9: This household consists of a widow with three young children. She lives by doing domestic work from house to house and by begging. In the agricultural season she and her eldest daughter are paid day wages for transplantation and harvesting.
- H.10: Fitter at engineering works and cultivator.

Of these only the private tutor, the shopkeeper and the brick-layer were self-employed. The village is almost entirely dependent on the provision of employment by tea gardens, government service and outside entrepreneurs, although there were a few Kayastha businessmen active in the neighbouring town. Many seek jobs and cannot find them. The importance of education as a qualification for employment is generally recognized. All the children go to school and much family pressure is put on them to study and obtain qualifications.

In spite of the dependence of the village on employment, cultivation is an important subsidiary occupation for men of all castes except Kayastha. The Brahman and the Kayastha, as twice-born castes, occupy a special position in respect of cultivation: they cannot plough without losing their caste. It is said that twenty years ago a group of Brahmans in two villages in Sibsagar District decided to undertake the joint ploughing of a field, perhaps alarmed by the current Communist slogan in support of tenants' rights: 'Whose is the plough, his is the land.' Thousands came to watch them. But from that day they were no longer considered Brahman by their caste-fellows and one after the other gave up ploughing. The two Brahman houses in Panbari come from a family of priests. The economic position of the Brahman priesthood has deteriorated in recent years and the sons of priestly families are becoming educated and taking to other occupations. A villager commented that it is usually the dullest member of the family who becomes a priest. The demand for the services of Brahmans has declined with the spread of the new reform sects which oppose the performance of Vedic rites, and the value in real terms of their customary dues has been undermined by inflation. As a result a number of poor priests have been driven to cultivate their fields, in some cases using a horse as less objectionable than bullocks. Of the two Brahman households in the village, one was that of the priest, Lakhinath Sarma, and the other that of his elder brother, Dharmeswar. Dharmeswar was a welder in the neighbouring town earning Rs: 150 a month. Lakhi acted as priest to 60 houses but in his father's time he said they had 200. The two brothers owned between them 4 bigas (about $1\frac{1}{2}$ acres) of land previously given on lease, from which they got enough rice to last for four months. But this year Lakhi decided to cultivate himself. He could not do the ploughing for he would forfeit his caste and lose his clientèle, but

he paid the owner of a buffalo Rs: 60 to plough the land for him and himself carried out all the other work of cultivation. Non-priestly Brahman families usually have extensive holdings which they give on lease.

19 houses in the village claimed Kayastha status. One or two described themselves as Kayastha/Kalita. A number of Kayastha families from Upper India and Bengal are known to have settled in Assam, but it is recognized that most of the Kayasthas in Assam today have been recruited from lower castes. The general opinion of the village was that it is open to any Kalita to become a Kayastha by giving up ploughing. Hence the indeterminate category Kayastha/Kalita. The Kayastha households were the richest families in the village, mainly engaged in clerical work and business. They had besides considerable land holdings, which they leased to cultivators.

In addition to caste, higher education is an obstacle to cultivation. An educated man does not go to the field, neither does his wife. He considers it demeaning and the villagers also regard it as inappropriate.

'Both of my sons are school-teachers. They cannot take part in agriculture... My daughters-in-law do not go out to the field as the village women will laugh at them if they work like ordinary village women. As they are wives of school-teachers, they are not expected to go to the field' (Saikia 1968:42).

'Of course I know how to plough. All my brothers know. Sometimes, if the hired labour does not come in the morning, we may plough a field near the house. Not a distant field. I cannot go down the village road with a plough on my shoulders' (Statement of an educated Chutiya).

There is also a status distinction between cultivating one's own or leased land and working as a wage-earner on someone else's fields. The ordinary village women take an important part in the agricultural process, and transplantation and harvesting are mainly women's work. But only in the poorest families will women provide agricultural labour in return for wages.

There were only three castes in the village with a traditional occupation other than agriculture: the Brahmans, the Kayasthas, and the Duliya Kalitas. Of the two Brahman households, one was still working as a priest and the other had become a welder. The Kayasthas are traditionally scribes and, like the Brahmans, they have profited from the opportunities of higher education and are also active in business. The 19 Kayastha households were all engaged in non-cultivating

occupations as businessmen, contractors, shopkeepers, clerks, teachers, engineers, mechanics, surveyors, doctors, chemists, etc. The Duliya Kalitas represent a typical case of a low caste that has attempted to rise in the hierarchy by abandoning its traditional occupation. This attempt dates from at least the 1880s.

Duliya Kalitas are said originally to have been Jugis and they are recorded in the 1891 Census as one of the five principal subdivisions of that caste. The Report continues: 'They (the Duliyas) derive their name from the fact that they were bearers of the royal litter in the time of the Ahom Rajas, and they now say that the founders of their sept were Kalitas, who intermarried with Katani girls, and who were in consequence degraded. Some few years ago it struck the leaders of their society in the Jorhat division that they might regain the position of their alleged ancestors if they performed the necessary ceremony of purification. With this object in view, they raised a large sum of money ... and in February 1890 a monster purification ceremony was performed. Since then the Duliyas have taken to calling themselves Kalitas, but their claims are recognized by no one except themselves' (Report on the Census of Assam 1891:270). There is no record of when the Duliyas abandoned their traditional occupation. The 1931 Census reports among other changes of social custom that Shudras used 'to carry the brides and grooms in wooden chairs at the time of the celebration of marriage, but now they think it humiliating to do so and the upper classes are modifying their practices in this respect' (Census of India 1931, Vol. III, Assam:207). The groom is usually conveyed by car or bullock-cart today. The Duliya Kalitas in Panbari have dropped the appellation 'Duliya' and describe themselves simply as Kalita, but the other Kalitas do not intermarry or inter-dine with them. The name of the hamlet where they live was changed fifteen to twenty years ago from Jugi cuk to Tamuli cuk. Although they have not succeeded in obtaining recognition as Big Kalitas (bar kalitā), they are now generally ranked in the village above the Ahoms and Chutiyas. The position of this caste is discussed in further detail below.

Land Ownership by Caste.

Land is divided into three classes: (1) kheti or wet rice land; (2) bari or house land; and (3) pharingati or dry land generally used for bamboo.

(1) Rice land.(a) Ownership.

Rice cultivation is a subsidiary occupation. Only 16 houses out of 161 live by cultivation alone. On the other hand most households (59%) own rice land which they either cultivate themselves or give out on lease. The ownership of rice land by caste and the proportion of landed and landless families by caste are given in Tables 2 and 3 below.

Table 2. Panbari: Ownership of Rice Land by Caste

Caste	No. of households	Rice Land owned in bigas	Average holding per household (including landless households) in bigas	Average holding per household (excluding landless households) in bigas
Brahman	2	4	2.0	2.0
Kayastha	18	169	9.4	10.6
Kalita	22	108	4.9	9.0
Keot	44	122	2.8	7.2
Kooch	41	197	4.8	7.6
Duliya Kalita	17	80	4.7	5.3
Chutiya	16	25	1.6	4.2
Ahom	1	5	5.0	5.0
<u>Village:</u>	161	710	4.4	7.5

N.B. 1 acre = 3.025 bigas.

Table 3. Panbari: Proportion of Households owning Rice Land by Caste.

Caste	Households owning rice land	Households without rice land	No. of households
Brahman	100% (2)	-	2
Kayastha	89% (16)	11% (2)	18
Kalita	55% (12)	45% (10)	22
Keot	39% (17)	61% (27)	44
Kooch	63% (26)	37% (15)	41
Duliya Kalita	88% (15)	12% (2)	17
Chutiya	38% (6)	62% (10)	16
Ahom	100% (1)	-	1
<u>Village:</u>	59% (95)	41% (66)	161

Leaving aside the 2 houses of Brahmans and the 2 Ahom households as statistically insignificant, the data on Table 2 show a correlation between land ownership and caste rank with the exception of the Keots. The pattern of land ownership is complicated by the fact that on the west or town side of the village, where most of the Keots and many of the Kalitas have their houses (v. Map 3), most of the rice fields have been converted into housing plots. If allowance is made for proximity to the town, the data on Table 3 again show a broad correlation between caste rank and the proportion of households owning land. The Kalitas, Keots and Kooch are the three highest Shudra castes and the social distinctions between them are not great. The exception here is the Duliya Kalitas, 88% of whom own rice land (the highest proportion in the village except for 89% among the Kayasthas) and whose average holding (including landless) of 4.7 bigas is almost the same as that of the Kalitas (4.9 bigas) and the Kooch (4.8 bigas). The possession of land has been an important factor in their claim to status.

The village figures may be compared with those for the State as a whole. The average holding (excluding landless) in Panbari is 7.5 bigas with a range of 1-27 bigas (1 acre = 3.025 bigas). The average holding in the State is 16 bigas (Goswami 1969:2). 41% of households in Panbari are landless compared with about 16% in the State as a whole (Goswami 1969:1). These figures reflect the sub-urban character of the village. Most holdings, however, in Assam are small. In a study of 5 plains villages carried out by the Agro-Economic Research Centre for North-East India between 1961 and 1963 it was found that no household possessed over 30 acres of land, only 7% of households possessed more than 10 acres and 22% of households had holdings of less than 1 acre (Goswami 1969:6-7). Assam has always been a country of small farmers rather than big landlords, but with increasing population the size of most holdings is now uneconomic.

(b) Tenancy.

The system of tenancy is called ādhi which literally means 'half'. There are two types of tenancy in the village: guchi ādhi (half the sheaves) and guṭi ādhi (half the grain). In both the landlord provides the land only: the tenant provides the plough bullocks, the labour and all the other costs of cultivation. Under guchi ādhi the crop is divided equally at harvest between landlord and tenant except that the

tenant is entitled to some extra bundles of sheaves sufficient to provide seed for the next crop.¹ Under this system the landlord's rent varies with the yield and he shares the risk with the tenant. The landlord, or his representative, usually goes to the field at harvest time to oversee the division. Under guṭi ādhi the tenant contracts to give a fixed weight of threshed paddy to the landlord each year. The agreed amount varies from 3 to 10 puras (1 pura is about 20 lb.) per biga according to the fertility of the soil. The first system is by far the more common, but land owned at a distance from the village is generally leased under the fixed arrangement of guṭi ādhi for the landlord has no check on the yield. Threshed grain is also more convenient to transport.

The proportion of land owner-cultivated and share-cropped is shown on Table 4 below.

Table 4. Panbari: Area and Percentage of Owner-cultivated and Leased Land by Caste.

Area in bigas (1 acre = 3.025 bigas)

Caste	Rice land owned	Owner-cultivated		Leased		Mortgaged	
		Area	%	Area	%	Area	%
Brahman	4	3	75	1	25	-	-
Kayastha	169	-	-	169	100	-	-
Kalita	108	54	50	54	50	-	-
Keot	122	67	55	55	45	-	-
Kooch	197	87	44	108	55	2	1
Duliya Kalita	80	62	78	12	15	6	7
Chutiya	25	16	64	9	36	-	-
Ahom	5	-	-	5	100	-	-
<u>Village</u>	710	289	41	413	58	8	1

Of the 710 bigas of rice land owned by the 161 households of Panbari 289 bigas are cultivated by the owner, 413 bigas are given on lease and 8 bigas are mortgaged.² 211 of the 710 bigas are in distant villages and necessarily leased because the owner is not in a position to cultivate them himself. If land within cultivable distance only is considered, the proportion given on lease is reduced from 58% to 40%. This is still a very high proportion.³ This land was given on lease by 35 households which represent 22% of households in the village.

233 bigas were taken on lease so that the total area cultivated by the villagers is 522 bigas. These 233 bigas are leased by 29 households which represents 18% of households in the village.

The village therefore contains more landlord families than tenant families with a correspondingly high proportion of leased land.⁴ The reasons for this are taken up in the following section.

(c) Landlord and Tenant.

The distinction between landlord and tenant is blurred by the following factors:

(1) Many landlords are also tenants. Goswami comments: 'In many cases even among the actual tillers it is very difficult to distinguish between a landlord and a share cropping tenant. A share cropper on one plot of land may be a landlord of another plot' (Goswami 1963:107). In Panbari 55% of cultivators leasing land also had land of their own.

(2) A man may be a non-cultivator at one period of his life and a cultivator at another. In a household where the only adult male is in full employment and the children are still at school, land is usually given on lease. But when the sons are old enough to help in the fields, the house-owner will often resume cultivation. It is also common for a man to lease his lands during his period of employment and cultivate them himself on retirement. They provide security for his old age.

(3) The distinction between landlord and tenant does not necessarily correspond to the division between rich and poor. Rich houses with more land than they can cultivate unaided may prefer to lease the land on a share-cropping system rather than cultivate with hired labour. But very poor families with only a few bigas of land may also give them on lease because they have not the resources to cultivate the land themselves.⁵

Noren is a poor student owning 6 bigas of land who lives with his mother and younger sister. He cannot afford plough bullocks. He cultivates 1 biga himself using a hoe and gives out the remaining 5 bigas on lease.

Ratneswar cultivated 6 bigas of land till last year. Then one bullock died and he had no money to buy another, so he has given it on lease.

Landlords and tenants do not therefore crystallize as social classes. A man may also take land on lease from someone who is of

lower caste than himself.

The decision to cultivate is chiefly determined by the availability of man-power in the household. The majority of men in the village are in paid employment. One or two manage to combine their jobs with working their fields unaided, but most occupations are too demanding to allow of this and cultivation becomes impracticable unless a man has brothers or sons in the house able to help him.

Purna has 11 bigas of land. He works as an operator of a soda-water machine on Rs: 100 a month and has difficulty in supporting his wife and three young children. His work involves long hours away and he has to give his land on lease.

Bapu Ram is employed as a gardener. He has a wife and three children. For the last four years he has cultivated on lease two plots of land amounting to 10 bigas. Before that, he said, he was unable to cultivate because he was working and his sons were too young to help him.

In joint families one brother may undertake the cultivation while the others take paid jobs. Alternatively the brothers in a joint household may between them provide sufficient surplus labour for cultivation.

Nobin has three younger brothers living with him in the house. One is a fitter, the next is a welder and the youngest is a school-teacher. Nobin himself cultivates 12 bigas on lease and his share of the crop provides enough rice to last the household of 20 for 6 months.

Tankeswar is one of three brothers. He works as a teacher, the second brother is a small shop-keeper and the third brother, though still at school, is now old enough to go to the fields. Between the three they cultivate 11 bigas of their own land and a further 2 bigas on lease so that they have enough rice for the whole year.

By contrast nuclear families with young children are the most likely to give their land on lease.

Panbari, like other villages, also contains rich landlords and poor tenants and the growing shortage of land has worked to the disadvantage of the tenants.

Profulla is employed as a clerk on a Tea Garden on a salary of Rs: 700 per month. His house is made of brick and fitted with electricity. Nearby is the house of a poor cultivator called Golap. For the past twenty years Golap has cultivated 5 bigas of Profulla's land on lease. He now has a job as a supervisor of coolies on Rs: 90 a month, but when his children were young he was unemployed for many years. His daughters did domestic work for Profulla's mother

in return for which she gave them food and clothes. Profulla has helped Golap's family on many occasions but the difference between them is implied in Profulla's remark: 'Personally I have visited their house only once in my life, although it is only 40 yards away.' Golap has asked Profulla not to give his land to anyone else, for it is becoming increasingly difficult to obtain land on lease.

It is said that some landlords require their tenants' wife or daughters to give domestic service as a condition of the lease but it is difficult to obtain particulars of such arrangements. Under the Assam Adhjar Protection and Regulation Act 1948 the tenant became entitled to four-fifths of the crop if he supplied the plough-cattle, and the landlord's share was reduced from one-half to one-fifth. No attempt has been made in the village to implement this Act which runs counter to the economic pressures of land shortage. Many tenants would willingly lease more land on the traditional arrangement of equal division of the crop between landlord and tenant, but the land is not available. The Act also gives a share-cropping tenant the right to continued occupation and cultivation of the land and it is illegal for the landlord to evict him. This too has not been implemented and its only repercussion in the village is that one rich landlord with 27 bigas now changes his tenants every two years. This has caused some hardship.

(d) Rice Supply.

Two main varieties of rice are grown in the village, Sali and Ahu. Under Sali is included Lahi, which has a lower yield but tastes better, and is generally reserved for the preparation of rice cakes (jal-pān) and ritual purposes. Sali seedlings are transplanted from nursery beds in June, July and August and grown in small fields of standing water surrounded by narrow aisles. The crop is harvested in November and December. Ahu is sown broadcast on dry land between March and May and harvested in July and August. There are a great many individual varieties within these categories. The taste, yield and soil conditions suitable to each are well known to the villagers, most of whom grow about eight or ten different varieties.

Both Sali and Ahu can be grown annually on the same land in succession. All cultivators grow a Sali crop and the total area under Sali is 522 bigas. Only 10 households grow Ahu and the area under Ahu cultivation is 34 bigas. Only very poor or very energetic cultivators

are prepared to undertake the work of raising an Ahu crop. The soil is hard and difficult to plough in the dry months, the land must be fenced against the cattle which are by custom set free at this season to roam the fields, and harvesting is done under the blazing summer sun. Ahu paddy is described as red in colour because it is said to be burnt by the sun and it is considered unfit for ritual offerings.

Only a minority of households have enough rice for their needs.

Table 5. Panbari: Household Supply of Rice from Cultivation and Share-cropping.

Households with no rice		Households with rice sufficient for up to 6 months		Households with rice sufficient for whole year		Households with surplus rice	
No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
58	36	43	27	50	31	10	6

In rural villages it is considered shameful to sell land or be short of rice. If a man has to borrow rice from a neighbour, he visits him after dark. But in Panbari rice is bought freely in the market like any other commodity.

Surplus paddy is sold outside the village. Poor villagers sometimes borrow paddy from surplus households which they repay later in paddy or in some cases by providing labour in the fields. No question of payment in money arises between co-villagers.

(2) House Land.

Almost all the villagers, 146 out of 161, own their house plots. 11 households are living on rented plots and 4 destitute households are living free on land provided by relatives. The area of land owned as house-plots is 277 bigas and the average holding per head by caste is as follows:

Brahman	$1\frac{1}{4}$ bigas
Kayastha	$2\frac{1}{2}$
Kalita	2
Keot	$1\frac{1}{4}$
Kooch	$1\frac{1}{4}$
Duliya Kalita	2
Chutiya	$1\frac{1}{4}$
Ahom	3

Housing land fetches a large price in the village and many villagers have sold their plots and moved to outlying villages where they can

purchase substantial holdings with the money. Land in the vicinity of the town is particularly valuable.

The garden area around the house is enriched with cow-dung and used for the cultivation of a wide range of vegetables. Bamboos, areca nut trees, bananas and other fruit-bearing trees enclose the houses and give to Assamese villages their characteristic appearance of verdant groves.

(3) Dry Land.

Dry land (pharingati) is high land suitable for growing dry crops such as mustard. There is little dry land in the village, 49 bigas in all owned by 24 households, and most of it is under bamboo.

The distinction between house land and dry land is in practice fluid and one can be converted into the other by a change in use. Wet rice land is also from time to time converted into house land by raising the level of the soil.

Economic Differentiation.

Households were graded into 5 economic categories, largely on the basis of income, particulars of which proved fairly easy to collect. In the village houses are considered rich or poor chiefly in relation to food, and the categorization can also be viewed in this way.

Very poor	No regular source of income	Regularly short of rice
Poor	Under Rs: 120 per month	Occasionally short of rice
Average	Rs: 120 - Rs: 250 per month	Sufficient rice
Rich	Rs: 250 - Rs: 500 per month	Surplus available for non-essential goods
Very rich	Above Rs: 500 per month	Purchase of necessities an irrelevancy.

The village is well-off by Assamese standards. Poverty and riches, subsistence and surplus, are defined here, as elsewhere, in relation to current expectancies of an acceptable standard of life.

The figures for income relate to an average household of 5 members and were adjusted to take account of the size of household. Although no attempt was made to ascertain total assets or degrees of indebtedness, these entered into the general opinion among the villagers of a household's economic condition and this opinion was also a factor in the classification. The following Table gives a broad picture: it is not likely to be free from errors.

Table 6. Panbari: Economic Differentiation by Caste.

Caste	Very rich %	Rich %	Average %	Poor %	Very poor %
Brahman	-	-	100	-	-
Kayastha	89	-	11	-	-
Kalita	18	27	18	36	-
Keot	14	24	36	14	12
Kooch	20	20	22	27	12
Duliya Kalita	-	12	53	18	18
Chutiya	-	22	28	28	22
Ahom	-	-	-	100	-
<u>Village</u>	21	19	29	21	11

The data indicate a correlation between economic standing and caste rank. The Kayasthas, who rank second to the Brahmans, are by far the wealthiest caste in the village: 89% of Kayastha households fall into the highest category of the very rich. There are few significant differences of wealth between the Kalitas, Keots and Kooches, which corresponds to the absence of marked social and ritual differences between these castes. 53% of the Duliya Kalitas are now solidly established in the middle category. It was said in the village: 'They used to be a low caste, lower than Chutiya. But now they have got land and money. They have become a bit better. So we take tea in their houses.' The Chutiyas are a low caste. Only 22% of Chutiya households are rich or very rich compared with the village average of 40%, and 22% of Chutiya houses are very poor compared with the village average of 11%. The single Ahom household is on the borderline between poor and very poor. The Brahmans do not bear out this trend, but their two households typify the situation of the priesthood rather than that of the caste as a whole. The similarities between the castes are, however, probably more significant than their differences. With the exception of the Kayasthas, all castes contain rich and poor and there is little marked economic differentiation between them.

The villagers have an ambivalent attitude towards the possession of wealth. A rich man who keeps his money to himself and takes no part in village affairs is considered to be proud and is generally

unpopular. It is sometimes said that beggars only visit poor houses because they know they can expect nothing from the rich. The Kayasthas had interests in the town which separated them to some extent from the life of the village. The villagers reacted by questioning the claims of certain families to Kayastha status and eventually the Kayasthas split off from the Name House to form a separate group of their own. On the other hand a rich man who involves himself in the affairs of the village gains influence and authority. The rich are expected to help the poor. When wealth is not shared, it becomes a focus for resentment.

The situation of Panbari, adjacent to an expanding town, gives the village an intermediate character. A generation ago it was composed of cultivators, today the sons of those cultivators are turning to non-agricultural occupations and only 16 out of 161 households live by cultivation alone. Land ownership and, to some extent, caste are losing their traditional importance in the social hierarchy. The most respected men in Panbari are men of education with salaried positions in government or industry whose new-found wealth is evident in their brick-built houses and prosperous life-style. The possession of land, once the chief source of wealth, is now valued mainly as a form of long-term security, which can be held against retirement or used to provide for contingency expenditure such as weddings and education. The opening of new avenues of employment together with the provision of educational opportunities for scheduled and backward classes is leading to significant changes in the distribution of income between castes which are reflected in a re-definition of the social hierarchy. In Panbari, as elsewhere, this has not taken the form of a move from caste to class, but from caste to status group, in which caste rank and land ownership are set alongside new defining criteria of respectability and prestige.

Notes:

1. On fertile land, where the seedlings are planted far apart, 1 bundle of sheaves per biga is usually deducted from the landlord's share; on infertile land, where the seedlings are planted more closely, 2 bundles are deducted.
2. Land is usually mortgaged to raise capital for a major expense such as a wedding or the purchase of plough bullocks or, in poor families, to provide for the needs of the household. The mortgagee cultivates the land and keeps the crop; if the mortgage is not redeemed within the stipulated period, he obtains title to the land.
3. In 1964 a survey was carried out of Chalihagaon, a village in Jorhat subdivision, by the Agro-Economic Research Centre for North-East India. Of the 148 acres owned by the villagers, 86% was owner-cultivated and 14% was given on lease (Borkakoti 1967:52).
4. Share-croppers usually lease a number of plots from different owners.
5. Goswami also noted the tendency of villagers with very small holdings to lease out their land (Goswami 1969:9).

CHAPTER 2

THE SYSTEM OF KINSHIP

The Assamese recognize two categories of kin comprehended in the term mitir-kuṭumba, i.e. affines and agnates. The kuṭumb is usually identified with the agnatic line or house (bangśa) and bangśa connected by marriage becomes affines (mitir) of one another. From the point of view of the individual, however, his matrilateral kin may be his father's affines and the affines of his bangśa, but they lack the sense of distance associated with affinity. He considers his mother's brothers and sisters to belong to his kuṭumb, which is used in this context to mean close cognates including, on the mother's side, the mother's father and mother's mother, if alive, the mother's brothers and sisters (but not their spouses, who are affines), and the mother's brothers' and mother's sisters' children, who are termed elder or younger brother and elder or younger sister in the same way as patrilateral cousins.¹ The first classification is oriented to groups and the second to individuals and corresponds to the distinction made by Evans-Pritchard between 'lineage relations' and 'kin relations' (Evans-Pritchard 1960: 4ff). There are two agnatic groups, the descent group (bangśa) and the family.

The descent group.

The descent group is defined by descent in the male line from a common ancestor within seven generations. Some say the descent group lasts for ever and that no marriage should take place as long as any connection can be traced, but in practice few men can name their great-grandfather. There were 58 descent groups in Panbari with an average depth of four generations. The number of remembered generations by caste is given in Table 7 (see next page).

Only in 8 cases out of 58 was it possible to take the genealogy further back than two generations from the senior living members, i.e. beyond the father's father, and in two of these there was a written genealogy. Again, in only 7 cases out of 58 was the father's father recorded as having siblings.

Table 7. Panbari: Number of Remembered Generations in the Descent Group by Caste.

Caste	Remembered Generations				No. of Descent Groups
	1	2	3	4	
Brahman	1	-	-	-	1
Kayastha	1	2	1	1	5
Kalita	3	7	1	-	11
Keot	4	5	1	3	13
Kooch	8	8	-	-	16
Duliya Kalita	1	3	-	-	4
Chutiya	4	3	-	-	7
Ahom	-	-	1	-	1
<u>Village</u>	22	28	5	3	58

There is a conflict between the idea of the bangsa as a descent group enduring for 7 or 9 generations, or even for ever, and the essentially temporal perception of kinship in practice. Most bangsa consist of a cluster of households whose senior males are related by agnatic descent from a common grandfather. But these households do not see themselves as related through their grandfather, whose name they often recall with difficulty, but because their fathers were brothers. A man does not observe the death anniversary of his father's father. As long as he lives he offers pinḍa to his father and to his mother on the anniversaries of their deaths or holds Name in their honour, but his obligation does not extend further back. For this reason it is difficult appropriately to translate bangsa as 'lineage' with its associated characteristics of a founding ancestor, division into segments and corporate rights and property, none of which are found in the bangsa, and the term is here rendered as 'descent group'.² As each generation dies it carries with it the memory of its immediate forebears. The succeeding generation will recall the father, the father's brothers and the father's father. But they are unlikely to remember the father's father's brothers and the collateral line will lapse. The descent group is therefore constantly in process of division invisible to its

members. On the other hand the idea of the descent group as enduring through time persists and is the basis of the common conception of the 9-person śrāddha (na puruṣar śrāddha) held on the day of marriage. At this śrāddha piṇḍa (rice-cake) is offered to the F, FF, FFF, M, FM, FFM and MF, MFF, MFFF. But the villagers usually say that the 9 persons are the 9 patrilineal ancestors who are being informed that a marriage is to take place in the descent group and their blessing invoked on the union.

The majority of descent groups have a depth of two dead and two living generations. This seems to be true of all castes.

Table 8. Panbari: Depth of Descent Group by Caste
(including living and remembered generations).

Caste	Depth in Generations					No. of Descent Groups
	3	4	5	6	7	
Brahman	-	1	-	-	-	1
Kayastha	-	2	1	2	-	5
Kalita	1	6	3	1	-	11
Keot	1	6	1	2	3	13
Kooch	6	8	2	-	-	16
Duliya Kalita	-	3	1	-	-	4
Chutiya	1	5	1	-	-	7
Ahom	-	-	1	-	-	1
<u>Village</u>	9	31	10	5	3	58

Shallow descent groups of 3 generations generally derive from immigrants into the village, often as sons-in-law-of-the-house (ghararjovāi) and illustrate the lapsing of agnatic ties when not reinforced by residential contiguity. 30 descent groups knew of agnatic kin in other villages, but if those originating in sons-in-law-of-the-house are subtracted from these, the number is reduced to 13. Migration is often the result of a quarrel in the family, which may help to explain why the degree of contact is usually small.

'My husband's father has three younger brothers at village N. (4 miles away). They have not visited for nineteen years.'

'There are six houses of my descent group at village K. (2 miles away). They come sometimes at weddings.'

'My father's younger brother's son migrated to village T. (9 miles away). I have not visited him in twenty-five years.'

The effective descent group tends to be a local group of closely related kin living in adjacent houses within the same hamlet. It varies greatly in size.

Table 9. Panbari: Distribution of local Descent Groups of different Castes by Size.

Caste	No. of Members								
	1-5	6-10	11-15	16-20	21-30	31-40	41-50	51-60	
Brahman	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	1
Kayastha	-	-	3	1	-	-	-	1	5
Kalita	4	1	2	2	2	-	-	-	11
Keot	2	4	1	1	1	2	-	2	13
Kooch	1	7	4	-	1	1	1	1	16
Duliya Kalita	-	-	1	-	2	1	-	-	4
Chutiya	-	3	2	2	-	-	-	-	7
Ahom	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
<u>Village</u>	8	15	14	6	6	4	1	4	58

N.B. The figures in Tables 9 and 10 relate to descent group members in Panbari only and do not include agnatic kin outside the village.

Table 10. Panbari: Distribution of local Descent Groups of different Castes by number of Households.

Caste	No. of Households in Descent Group											
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	
Brahman	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
Kayastha	1	1	2	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	5
Kalita	6	1	2	1	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	11
Keot	5	3	1	-	1	1	-	1	-	-	1	13
Kooch	7	4	2	-	1	1	-	-	1	-	-	16
Duliya Kalita	-	1	1	1	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	4
Chutiya	3	2	1	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	7
Ahom	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
<u>Village</u>	23	13	9	3	2	3	-	2	2	-	1	58

The average size of the local descent group is 17 with a range of 2-58 members and the average number of households in the descent group is 2.8 with a range of 1-11. Most descent groups (36 out of 58) consist of only 1 or 2 households, but large groups of 40 or 50 members with their ramifying house-plots and extensive rice fields dominate the hamlet where they live and tend to have a controlling voice in the affairs of the Name House.

Members of one descent group are identified with one another in that they are believed to share a common substance. This is usually expressed in terms of the ātman (soul). It is said that the soul of three proximate generations is the same so that they share the merit and demerit of one another's actions. It is also believed that when an offering is made to an ancestor, all agnates of his generation obtain the benefit of the offering. Beyond three generations the identity of soul is less but it continues up to 7 and even 14 generations. It is said that a man by his sins can bring 7 generations of his ancestors down from heaven into hell, and there is a curse: 'I will pursue your 14 generations,' i.e. I will pursue the quarrel up to 14 generations or as long as any trace of you remains. The identity of the descent group was explained to me on the analogy of a blanket extending 3 generations backwards from the present and 3 generations forward. On the blanket the individual souls appear like separate particles over a common surface. The ātman is believed to enter into the body of the mother with the seed at the moment of conception: the womb is the container only. It therefore passes exclusively in the male line.

By virtue of their common identity all members of the descent group become ritually impure (cuvā) on a birth or death within the group. The impurity of birth is attached chiefly to the mother and new-born child who are secluded within the house till the Coming Forth (bāj olovā) on the 10th day. The period of impurity ends on the 30th day of birth, when every house in the descent group performs the rite of 'throwing away the cooking pots' (caru pelovā), washes all the clothes of the house in alkaline (khār), and smears the floors with white earth, cowdung and water. Fasting is not required. During the period of impurity no religious rite can be performed so that in large descent groups arranged marriages often have to

be postponed when babies are born.

The impurity of death is of two kinds: the impurity inherent in the corpse and the impurity consequent upon cremation. The impurity of the corpse is transmitted by contagion. To bury a dead body or to attend the cremation ground makes a man impure. If a death occurs within the house, the house and its contents are burnt.³ This type of impurity, transmitted by external contact, is removable by washing. Cremation, on the other hand, precipitates a period of 10 days' impurity in the case of Brahmans and 30 days in the case of non-Brahmans in every household belonging to the descent group of the deceased.⁴ If the body had been buried - which is done in the case of children, suicides and those who suffer an unnatural death - pollution would have attached only to those, related or otherwise, who had contact with the corpse. The internal impurity of cremation rests on the notion of shared bodily substance between agnates whose period of ritual impurity ends only when the spirit of the deceased ceases to be impure.

For the first month after death (in case of non-Brahmans) a man is considered to be an evil spirit called a pret circling above the earth. The purpose of the mortuary rites is to propel the soul upwards through the world of prets (pret lok) immediately above the earth and the world of bhuts (bhut lok) above that till it reaches one of the seven abodes of heaven and joins the company of the ancestors to become a god. This is effected by providing the spirit with the equipment necessary for its new existence. For the first ten days the dead man should be given piṇḍa daily to eat, and again on the first śrāddha held by Brahmans on the 11th and by non-Brahmans on the 30th day, and thereafter monthly for the first year till the conclusion of the sapindīkaran which joins the soul of the deceased to his three patrilineal ancestors. Non-Brahmans rarely perform all these rites. It is usual to offer three piṇḍa at Tilani on the 3rd day of death and seven piṇḍa at Daha. If Tilani is not held, ten piṇḍa are offered at Daha. All these rites, which are given in the name of the pret, are impure and are held on the bank of a river outside the house. The first śrāddha, which non-Brahmans call kāj, is the first mortuary rite which is pure and is held in the kitchen inside the house. Sixteen articles are offered in the

name of the dead. They include a bed, bedding, set of clothes, sandals, jewellery (if a woman), umbrella, fan, looking-glass, comb, stool, utensils, food for a meal, areca nut, pān, lime, tobacco, gold, silver, land and a black cow. (In the case of the land, and usually also of the cow, the nominal value only is given.) Articles that the dead man used and liked during his life, these are offered to him after his death and taken by the Brahman in his name. At the time of offering, mantras are uttered to the effect that: 'I have given you a bed to sleep on, clothes to wear, land to cultivate, etc. Go thy way now that these things have been given you.' The monthly śrāddhas are usually omitted by Shudras and the mortuary rites terminate on the lunar anniversary of the death with the sapīṇḍīkaran (literally 'same-piṇḍa-making'), when the piṇḍa offered to the deceased is mixed with the piṇḍas of his three patrilineal ancestors, thereby connecting them as particles of one body.

The sons of the deceased continue to offer him piṇḍa once a year on the lunar anniversary of his death, a year in earthly time being equivalent to a day in heavenly time. Ancestors, like other gods, are in a general way considered moral agents who can punish their descendants for sins and reward them with blessings. In practice, however, the return of an ancestor is taken as an indication that he is not at rest and requires propitiation:

'My forefathers can harm me if I do not give them piṇḍa to eat. They will come to my compound and demand piṇḍa. If they do not receive them, they bring fever and delirium and other diseases. They may kill or hide buffaloes or cattle. They can send insects to destroy the crops.'

The power of the ancestor to injure the living does not extend beyond members of his descent group, except when the daughter's son inherits and in consequence has an obligation to see that the mortuary rites are performed. Within the descent group he can molest junior kin, but not those senior to him.

The ancestor returns in the shape of a dream. To dream of a deceased member of the descent group, and especially to dream that he is coming to the kitchen to take his meal, indicates that a member of the descent group will die. Śrāddha will be performed and food given to Brahmans who eat it in the name of the dead. Alternatively

devotees are invited to hold Name (devotional songs) and eat cooked sweetmeats (pakā jal-pān). They bless the family and ask the deceased to be satisfied with the food which they eat in his name.

Both the unity and the internal differentiation of the descent group are expressed in the ritual observances during the period of pollution that begins with cremation. As the news of the death spreads through the village, each agnatically related house 'throws away its cooking pots' (caru pelovā) and washes its clothes to remove the immediate pollution of death. This is repeated on the third day before Tilani and on the eve of Kaj. Sons of the deceased - and until recently the widow - shave the head except for a tuft on the crown. The other men shave and cut their hair and nails. With these rites, it is said that the worst of the pollution goes. In the house of the dead no fire is lit in the kitchen for three days. The sons and brothers' sons of the deceased, together with their wives, do not eat during this period and can take water only by going into a pond or river and drinking with the mouth like an animal. On the third day, the Tilani day, neighbours visit the houses of the descent group bringing gifts of rice flour, milk, curd, gur, bananas and other fruits with which the household members break their fast. Fasting is governed by two factors, seniority and propinquity of relationship. The entire descent group is impure for social and ritual purposes during the period of impurity. They cannot eat with others, enter a place of worship or perform a religious rite. Arranged marriages are postponed till the end of the period unless the Nine Person Śrāddha has been performed. In spite of this it is common after a death to hear statements like: 'How can I be impure? I am senior to him.' Just as the pret cannot harm those senior to him in the descent group, so a man does not consider he is diminished by the death of a junior kinsman. Senior agnates do not fast on death. The severest restrictions fall on the first descending generation, that is, on sons and brothers' sons. Grandchildren are considered to be only a little impure and observe a limited fast for a short period. Wives follow the same restrictions of diet as their husbands. There are some variations of local custom, but the following rules are fairly typical:

The widow, younger brothers, unmarried younger sisters, sons, unmarried daughters, and brothers' sons and unmarried daughters take no food or drink before Tilani on the third day. Thereafter they take uncooked jal-pān such as rice flour, milk and fruits at noon; after dusk they eat boiled rice but the following items are forbidden: meat, fish, parboiled rice, mustard oil, buffalo milk, certain varieties of pulse (māṭi and macur), big egg-plant, white egg-plant, red gourd, big banana, spices, turmeric, honey, areca nut, pan and all heating foods. After Daha on the 10th day they eat boiled rice twice daily but none of the foods listed above. Restrictions end after the first śrāddha on the 30th day.

The widower, elder brothers, unmarried elder sisters, sons' sons, sons' unmarried daughters, and brothers' sons' sons and unmarried daughters are not considered very impure. Until Tilani they eat uncooked jal-pān, milk and fruits. Thereafter they take boiled rice twice daily but none of the items prohibited on the list above. After Daha they usually cease to observe restrictions.

The first ascendant generation does not fast except that no meat or fish is eaten in the descent group for the month. Little children are not required to fast.

In the case of Brahmans the period of impurity is shorter and they perform on the fourth day (caturchā) the rites which non-Brahmans perform on the tenth day (dahā). The period of fasting is shortened correspondingly.

The man elected to offer pinḍa, normally the eldest son, cooks his own food apart and eats alone.

Although these prohibitions apply to all members of the descent group, they tend to be observed less strictly by distant classificatory kin.

Ploughing is forbidden for 10 days following a death in the descent group, and for one month in the case of the sons of the deceased. The Naths, or silk-rearers, sell their worms on the death of a parent and do not rear silk for one year. The Kumars, or potters, cease making pots for one month.

The period of impurity ends on the day of the first śrāddha. Early in the morning the women of every house in the descent group 'throw away' the cooking pots (caru pelovā) and carry out the ritual cleansing of the kitchen. They then wash all the clothes of the house. The adult males repair to the house of the dead for the ceremony of purification (prāyaścitta). They bathe in the tank and sit in their wet clothes in a wide circle round a bamboo fire. Each man puts the fingers of his right hand into a vessel of purificatory water and repeats mantras dictated by the Brahman. A little of the water is drunk to purify the inside of the body. At the conclusion

of the ceremony they bathe again and are now considered pure. The Brahman gives to the head of each household a section of bamboo containing purificatory water (śānti pānī) which he takes home with him. The Brahman himself sprinkles this water with tulsi leaves on the walls of every room of the dead man's house and on any articles, such as cushions, which cannot be washed. The household heads return to their respective houses and give a little of the water to each adult member of the household to drink. The men shave and cut their hair and nails to remove the last of their impurity, as though the pollution of death attached to these dying parts of the body. Preparations then begin for the śrāddha which is the first mortuary rite to which no pollution is attached.

The mortuary rites from the placing of fire at the mouth of the corpse (mukh agni) to the conclusion of the sapindīkaran should be performed by the eldest son, failing whom the youngest son of the deceased. If the deceased has no sons, the daughter's son inherits, but there is a strong feeling that pinḍa should be offered by an agnate and the descent group will be exhausted before recourse is made to the daughter's son. According to śāstra the order of those giving pinḍa and the order of succession to property coincide: S, SS, SSS, DS, W, B, BS. The Assamese do not follow this. A brother or brother's son, as an agnate, is always preferred to the daughter's son, although he has no claim on the property. When the daughter's son inherits, he bears the cost of the śrāddha, but pinḍa is given by a member of the descent group who will be given some money for his trouble.

A man died who had no sons but five daughters. His rites were performed by his brother's son. The property was divided into six shares, one for each of the five daughters and one for the brother's son who gave pinḍa.

In the case of those who die without issue, there is no bar of seniority in performing the mortuary rites. A father may perform śrāddha for his son, an elder brother for a younger brother, a husband for his wife. Out of affection they may continue to offer śrāddha annually, but this is not usual.

'My elder brother died in Calcutta. My father was with him at the time. He collected a little bone from the pyre and brought it home. On the 3rd day he performed Tilani and on the 10th day Daha. There were no further rites.'

The giving of piṇḍa is conceived chiefly as a filial obligation:

'First my father bore the weight of my body. Then it went to my mother. This is a debt I must repay.'

'My father and mother are instruments. They gave me light. Through them I am a man now. When they die, I consider it my duty to show respect to the deceased and offer piṇḍa so that they may have rest.'

'Piṇḍas are not given for the benefit of the dead. The dead man must suffer for his sins. We give because it is our duty.'

It is also seen as a connecting link between the generations:

'The sapiṇḍa consisting of myself and my brothers and my father and father's father are considered as one unit. The father is reflected in the son. So I am to support him while alive and give piṇḍa to him when dead and he is to maintain me.'

The filial obligation of marking the lunar anniversary of a parent's death is never, to my knowledge, neglected. Brahmans perform śrāddha to the name of the deceased followed by the singing of devotional songs (nām), but non-Brahmans often omit the śrāddha. In Panbari only a few rich houses hold śrāddha, the remainder simply hold Name. The custom varies in different villages. The descent group, close affines and some neighbouring houses are invited. The cost is usually shared between the sons, even if separated, but if a man has quarrelled with his brothers, he will arrange his own performance.

The holding of Name also confers benefit on the dead. At the conclusion of the Daha ceremony on the 10th day, a big pandal is erected in the compound where men sit round on mats on all four sides and sing Name. To this ceremony the descent group and affines are invited, and members of the Name House according to ability. A rich man invites all the houses and spends many hundreds of rupees, a poor man at least those who attended the cremation ground. Affines come in great numbers at the time of death. They will sleep under the pandal at night if it is too far to return home.

Name is also held in the afternoon of kāj (first śrāddha). To this all members of the descent group, all affines and all houses of the Name House must be invited. The average cost is about Rs: 500.

On the 31st day of death in the case of non-Brahmans and on the 13th day in case of Brahmans a feast is held called 'to eat fish and boiled rice' (māch bhāt khovā), when the descent group eat fish for the first time since the death. Alternatively it is called

'to take company with one's kind' (jnyātāli), from whom the descent group has been segregated during the period of impurity. All members of the descent group, all affines and some neighbouring houses are invited. The first man to eat does so in the name of the dead and it is believed he may die soon afterwards. An old man is usually chosen for this dubious honour.

The unity of the descent group is chiefly evident on ceremonial occasions. All agnatic houses must be invited to weddings and mortuary rites, and agnates within the village to the ceremony held on the fourth or seventh day of a girl's first menstruation (tolani biyā) and to the Name that marks the end of the defilement of birth ('sudhi sakām). They are expected to make a gift at weddings, generally a set of clothes to a girl, and to give a girl money at her tolani biyā which is kept against the expenses of her marriage. At these times close agnates usually assist in the cooking and preparations for the ceremony. At seasonal festivals (bihu) a man must invite all agnatic households in the village to eat rice-cakes (bihu jal-pān). Affines (mitir) are considered affines not only of the individual household with which the marriage has occurred, but of the entire descent group. A girl on marriage bows down before all her husband's senior agnates, offering to each a gift of cloth. At Bihu times she must go round their houses and bow down offering areca nut and pan as respect (mān). She is the daughter-in-law (bovarī) of the descent group. A boy when first married is shown the houses of his affines by his father-in-law, where he bows down before all his wife's senior kin. On subsequent visits to his wife's village, he should visit not only her parents but the other houses of her natal descent group, though this is often neglected: he is the son-in-law (jovāi) of them all.

The bangśa is a closely-knit affective group of neighbouring houses characterized by mutual support and strong feelings of involvement and competition. Men are usually very interested in the affairs of their agnates whether they are on good terms with them or not. The ambivalent nature of feelings towards agnatic kin is expressed in the following saying:

'The bangśa eats one's flesh (i.e. ruins one);
But without a bangśa one's very flesh is left to rot
(i.e. there is no one to perform one's funeral rites).'

The Family.

There are 161 families in Panbari living in 161 households. The population is 996 so that the average size of household is 6.14 with a range of 2-20. Kolenda has suggested a classification of household types in 12 categories for regional comparison (Kolenda 1968: 346-347).⁵ A classification of the households in Panbari by caste on this basis is given in Table 11 (see next page), and the proportion of joint households by caste based on the same classification is given in Table 12.

Table 12. Panbari: Proportion of Joint Households by Caste

Caste	No. of joint households	% of joint households
Brahman	0	0 %
Kayastha	1	6 %
Kalita	4	18 %
Keot	7	16 %
Kooch	8	20 %
Duliya Kalita	1	6 %
Chutiya	2	13 %
Ahom	0	0 %
<u>Village</u>	23	14 %

The data do not suggest that joint families are characteristic of the upper castes. This also seems to be the case in West Bengal (Kolenda 1968:371). There is little difference in the average size of household of different castes.

Table 13. Panbari: Size of Household by Caste.

Caste	No. of households	No. of members	Average size of household	Range
Brahman	2	13	6.5	5 - 8
Kayastha	18	108	6.0	3 -13
Kalita	22	134	6.1	2 -20
Keot	44	271	6.2	2 -13
Kooch	41	277	6.8	2 -15
Duliya Kalita	17	94	5.5	2 - 9
Chutiya	16	97	6.1	2 -12
Ahom	1	2	2.0	-
<u>Village</u>	161	996	6.2	2 -20

Table 11. Panbari: Classification of Household Types by Caste.

Caste	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L
Brahman	50%(1)	-	50%(1)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2
Kayastha	39%(7)	28%(5)	17%(3)	-	6%(1)	-	-	6%(1)	-	-	-	6%(1)
Kalita	55%(12)	18%(4)	9%(2)	-	-	-	-	5%(1)	14%(3)	-	-	22
Keot	43%(19)	16%(7)	16%(7)	-	2%(1)	2%(1)	2%(1)	7%(3)	2%(1)	-	2%(1)	7%(3)
Kooch	37%(15)	17%(7)	24%(10)	-	2%(1)	-	5%(2)	10%(4)	2%(1)	2%(1)	-	41
Duliya Kalita	41%(7)	18%(3)	29%(5)	-	6%(1)	-	-	-	6%(1)	-	-	17
Chutiya	44%(7)	13%(2)	19%(3)	-	6%(1)	-	-	6%(1)	-	6%(1)	-	16
Ahom	-	-	100%(1)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
<u>Village</u>	42%(68)	17%(28)	20%(32)	-	3%(5)	1%(1)	2%(3)	6%(10)	4%(6)	1%(2)	1%(1)	3%(5)

Key: A Nuclear
 B Supplemented nuclear
 C Sub-nuclear
 D Single person
 E Supplemented sub-nuclear
 F Collateral joint
 G Supplemented collateral joint
 H Lineal joint
 I Supplemented lineal joint
 J Lineal collateral joint
 K Supplemented lineal collateral joint
 L Other

N.B. Households consisting of a married couple together with the children of one of them are classed under nuclear families.

The Hindu joint family is usually defined in terms of co-residence, commensality and common property (cf. Karve 1953:10: 'A joint family is a group of people who generally live under one roof, who eat food cooked at one hearth, who hold property in common ...'). Problems arise when these criteria do not coincide. In Assam commensality is seen as the defining criterion of a single family. In every household there is one kitchen and one rice pounder. Division is understood as eating separately. It is sometimes said: 'To eat separately means to be divided.' If there is a quarrel in the house, one brother may not eat for twenty-four hours. But if he decides to eat from a separate kitchen, he is considered to have separated himself from the family. The step is irreversible. It will be followed, in course of time, by the building of a separate dwelling and the division of the land and property. When all members of the family are living in the village, the residential group, the hearth group and the property-owning group are always coincident. When brothers are dispersed for employment, the family continues joint until such time as one of the brothers lays claim to his share of the property, in other words, unless and until partition is effected the family is considered to be joint. As Mayne puts it: 'The joint and undivided family is the normal condition of Hindu society... The presumption therefore is that the members of a Hindu family are living in a state of union unless the contrary is established' (Mayne 1906:332).

Panbari contained a high proportion of dispersed families. The 161 families based in Panbari have a population of 1104 so that the average size of family is 6.86 with a range of 1-28, while the average size of household is 6.14 with a range of 2-20. In 110 cases the household coincided with the family; in 51 cases they were different. When they were different, this was due to the following reasons:

Family members living out for work ⁺	113 cases distributed in 34 households	
Non-family members living in for work ⁺	3	1
Family members living out for education	7	7
Non-family members living in for education	3	2

+N.B. These figures include wives and families.

Children loaned out to relatives	3 cases distributed in	3 households
Hired labourers living in household	6	5
Other	13	9

When a joint family is physically dispersed, its members no longer pool their incomes or have living expenses in common. But the sense of financial obligation remains. A son or brother working away from home is expected to contribute to the needs of the household according to his means. The form of contribution varies from a regular monthly remittance to occasional capital sums to meet major expenses.

Jaya Ram lives with his wife and four youngest children. His eldest son, with his wife and child, lives in Calcutta where he works as an officer in the Air Force. He sends home Rs: 30-50 every month. His second son in the army in Benares and his third son in the army in Sikhim, both unmarried, also send money regularly each month.

Dandi's eldest son is in the army in south India. He comes home on leave once a year when he brings Rs: 500-600.

Someswar's son is an overseer at Gauhati. He sends money home, but not regularly, about Rs: 100 two or three times a year.

Bubai's younger brother works as a cashier at the Apex Bank, Shillong. He does not send money but Bubai cultivates his land and, when he comes, he gives clothes to Bubai's children.

Benudhar, a young man of twenty-seven working at the Post and Telegraph Office, lives alone with his widowed mother. His three elder brothers are married and all working outside the village. One of his younger brothers is away studying and the other is in the Indian Navy at Bombay. Benudhar emphasized that the six brothers constituted a joint family, scattered only for service. He said his brothers were eager to send money home, but he did not want them to send monthly as it would only be spent. If he required money for any purpose, as when his younger sister was married, he asked and they gave. His elder brothers' wives and children came to the village every year and spent several months there. If he were transferred, he said that one of his brothers would return to the village and live with his mother in his place.

This is an example of a family that has remained closely knit in spite of physical dispersion. Paradoxically, it is sometimes the return of a family member to the village that precipitates separation.

Nogen worked as a Tea Garden manager and lived in garden quarters with his family till his retirement, when he came back to his father's house where his elder brother was now living (his father was dead). The two brothers could not get on and a separation was arranged the following year.

The data from Panbari confirm Rao's conclusion from his study of Yadavpur in the environs of Delhi that 'joint household organisation is not incompatible with cash incomes and diverse occupations' (Rao 1968:111). We require, however, to know very much more of the economic arrangements of the joint family under conditions of occupational diversification, preferably in the form of detailed case material. My own field-work was not focussed on the family, but I give below what few data I have on this subject.

All the property of the family is owned by the father who is free to dispose of it as he wishes. If one of his sons separates during his lifetime, he may give this son his share of the property or withhold it at will. The father is also considered the owner of property acquired by the sons out of their earnings and has the right to dispose of it although it may be prudent not to exercise this right arbitrarily.

Padmadhar was working in the town as a government servant and applied for a government loan to build a house. To obtain the loan the house had to be in his name. Padma was still joint with his father and brothers and felt guilty that the house was not registered in the name of his father.

Three years ago Mohan bought a cow. He said that as long as his father lived, it was his father's property.

A father sold the bicycle which his son had purchased out of his earnings. The son complained to the leading men of the Name House. They decided that the father had the right to sell all the property of the house. The son separated soon after.

Sons usually make over their salary to their father except for a small sum kept for cigarettes and other personal expenses. It was not uncommon, however, for a man to say that he did not know exactly how much his son earned. The statement was unlikely to be true but it carried the implication that he did not lay claim to the full amount of his son's earnings. But what he can spare should be given to the family. When sons are working away from home, they are also expected to contribute to the needs of the household according to their capacity and the failure to meet this obligation causes resentment.

'My first job was as a research scholar at Gauhati University on Rs: 300 per month. I got married at that time and it was difficult to manage. Even then I sent money home, about Rs: 50 a month, but they were very dissatisfied. To send Rs: 50 is not much, but I

couldn't afford more. When I was appointed as a Lecturer, my brother Bhubon came to stay with us to study for B.Com. I had quarters at that time so there was no difficulty about accommodation but I had to pay his fees. Then I got this job in Jorhat and again I was in difficulty because I had to send money to maintain Bhubon in Gauhati. Manick, the next brother, also came to Jorhat to study for I.Sc. at the Engineering College and my sister, Saru, came too to take matriculation. Again we had to pay money. Of course Manick had a scholarship but this was paid at the end of term and we regularly gave him Rs: 60-70 a month as he asked. I think in total for four years it took some Rs: 4,000. But there was conflict. Manick and Saru, although they stayed with us, they did not like us very much. We couldn't pay sufficient money to them, so they were not much pleased. Sometimes Manick asked for Rs: 300, but we could give only Rs: 100. Then he went home and complained and they took his side. We didn't like that. Even then, relations were not very bad, but we felt it. My wife always says we have done a lot and they are not satisfied, what can we do? Actually we didn't keep any money in bank or anywhere, we were very sincere, but they thought we were keeping something. Things continued like this for five years. For Saru's marriage I couldn't spend much, but I gave something for furniture and other articles. Later my youngest sister, Aiti, came for study. When Manick and the others went home, they knew my condition, they should have brought rice and vegetables. There are so many things in our garden. But I had to hire a car myself. My wife didn't like it - "Why should you always go and ask for rice. We can manage somehow." My father was impartial, he was very good, he insisted that we never buy rice from the market: "Its quality is no good, besides we have enough rice in the granary, why should you buy?" My mother also, when she was in good mood, she used to take one of the hired labour and pack in rice and vegetables. Later the economic condition of the family improved when Mohan and Manick got jobs, Bhubon also, and the original tension lessened. Even then I was excluded from many things. For Mohan's marriage, for example, they did not consult me. Only when everything had been arranged, I learnt about it... No, my brothers are not jealous of my education. They are proud of that. The only thing is I cannot help according to their needs."

Sons may contribute differentially to the acquisition of property such as the purchase of land or the building of a new house while they are joint, but on division each is entitled to an equal share.

'My father built a pakā house at a cost of Rs: 45,000. Most of it came from sale of paddy and we also took a loan. Mohandra was unmarried and had a free house so for four years he saved some money. All that money was given for the construction of the house, about Rs: 3,500. The other brothers also gave, though less. I didn't give anything because I had no money at that time. Even then they constructed five rooms, one for each of the brothers, and when the house is divided, it will be divided equally between us.'

Probin and Nobin were two brothers in a family of six. They were married to two sisters and lived as sons-in-law-of-the-house

with their wife's father who had no sons. The other four brothers decided to build a new house. Nobin and Probin wanted them to use the money to buy land on which they would later have a claim, as house materials were useless to them in their situation. When the house was built, they refused to visit their brothers for some years but later became reconciled.

Chandra had two brothers. He bought a plot of rice land from his savings, but he put the names of all three brothers on the title deed. He said that when they divided, each would get a third share.

Brothers living together after the death of the father do not ordinarily hand over their income to the eldest brother but contribute in different ways to the expenses of the household.

Six brothers lived together. Five were cultivators and one was a tailor. The two eldest handled the money from sale of paddy. The tailor kept the money he made from sale of clothes in his room. Out of his profits he bought fish from the market, bags of potatoes and pulses. He also supplied all the children of the house with clothes.

In a joint household expenditure from the household budget is made on an equal basis between the brothers. If blankets are purchased, one is purchased for each family. If pullovers are bought for the children, they are bought for all the children. On the other hand, articles purchased by a man out of his earnings are considered his as against his brothers, though not as against his father, and he may take them with him when the family divides.

'The ornaments given to my elder brother's wife at the time of marriage were purchased by the whole family and belong to the whole family. If I claim my share, my elder brother must give. But I would never claim... One year ago I gave my wife a necklace. I told my family: "This is my necklace, purchased by me." The others cannot claim.'

Without tolerance of failings it is said that life in a joint family becomes impossible. The following case history illustrates some typical problems which, in this case, gave rise to division.

Manick was a young man of 24 living with his parents. His father was a cultivator who leased 25 bigas of rice land, divided into 6 plots, from which he obtained enough rice to last the household for 11-12 months of the year. To this he added by occasional earnings from threshing grain, selling vegetables and firewood and driving a bullock cart. The eldest son, Fedua, helped occasionally in cultivation. His mother had arranged a marriage for him three years previously against Manick's advice who visited the girl's family when the marriage was first suggested. He now complained that she was lazy. Manick was the second son. He had passed B.A.

Part 1 and earned about Rs: 75 a month as a private tutor in English. The next son, Lakhi, was qualified as a turner but could not find regular work and also earned about Rs: 60 per month from tutorials. He gave Rs: 40 of this to his mother. The youngest son, Sada, had taken a job in Nowgong as a power pump operator on a salary of Rs: 150 per month, of which he sent home Rs: 80 by money order. The household also included two unmarried daughters and a lodger working in the neighbouring town who was later to 'marry' the elder of the two.

Manick's father was a shy, withdrawn man of 58 with an occasional stammer who had married a woman of decided character 13 years younger than himself. She kept the money of the house, notes in a box buried in the floor and coins in a section of bamboo concealed in the main post, and all the earning members handed their money to her except for Manick who opened a savings account in his own name. But Manick, like the others, contributed to the household expenses. He allowed his elder brother, Fedua, to get cigarettes and biris on his account at the local shop. He bought powder, coconut oil and betel-nut for Fedua's wife and gave her presents of clothes at festival times. His mother and Sada bought her other clothes. When the plough buffalo died, he withdrew Rs: 120 from his savings account and raised a loan of Rs: 400 from a rich villager with whom he was friendly; to this his brothers contributed a further Rs: 110 to raise the cost of a new buffalo. He bore the expenses of a ceremony for his sister when she was ill. In addition, he and his father managed the cultivation between them with some help from Fedua and the women of the house. His younger brothers, Lakhi and Sada, did not go to the field.

Manick also asserted his independence in his choice of wife. He fell in love with a young village girl and visited her regularly in her mother's house. When she became pregnant, he brought her home and she bore him a son, now aged two. His mother did not approve of the match because the girl's family was very poor.

For the past five years Manick's father had ceased giving his earnings to his wife and gave them instead to Manick. This led to a polarization of the family with Manick and his father on one side and the rest of the household on the other. Manick's separation was precipitated by a series of quarrels between himself and Lakhi, with the mother supporting Lakhi. One day Manick wanted to borrow Lakhi's bicycle, but his brother refused so Manick bought himself a new Raleigh bicycle. Lakhi was jealous and offered to exchange his bicycle for Manick's and to give Manick Rs: 100, but Manick replied that he would never give him his bicycle. A week later, when his father was away visiting his married daughter, Lakhi asked Manick for Rs: 50 to buy a watch. Manick replied that he had to borrow money to buy his bicycle and had no money at present. His mother was angry with him for spending money on a bicycle instead of giving it to his brother. Lakhi said that if Manick did not give the money, he should separate. Manick replied it was his father's house. His mother told him to leave, saying she would not give him any more food from her hand. When Manick's father returned next day, Manick said, 'I have not been given any food for twenty-four hours. What shall I do?' His father advised him to take his own food cooked by his wife, adding, 'Your brothers are not your brothers; they are your enemies.' Without his father's permission,

Manick said he would never have separated. Relatives and friends came to suggest a reconciliation, whereupon Manick replied in the traditional phrase: 'A broken bamboo cannot be mended.' Manick had cooked separately and the step was irreversible. Manick's father ate with Manick, an unusual arrangement in these circumstances. It continued for a year.

The family had no rice land, cultivating on lease. They had 6 bigas of house land, inherited from Manick's grandfather. This was later divided north/south between Manick's father and Manick's father's younger brother, Manick's father as the eldest son taking the northern half. When Manick separated, the brothers spent many days ostentatiously measuring and re-measuring the land. Eventually his father made a notional division of the land east/west into 5 equal plots of $\frac{3}{5}$ of a biga, the eldest son being assigned the plot to the east according to custom.

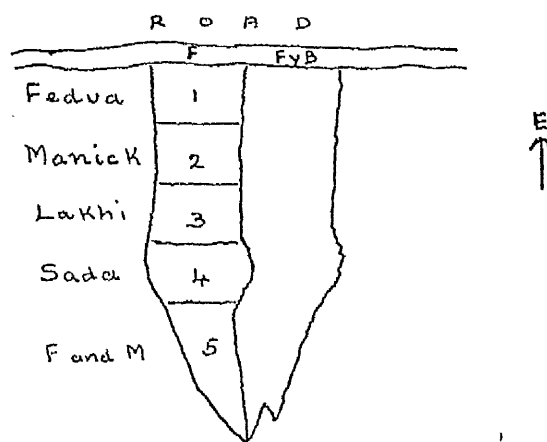


Fig. 1. Division of land between brothers on separation

Plot 1 was reserved for Fedua, plot 2 given to Manick, plots 3 and 4 reserved for Lakhi and Sada. The remaining $\frac{3}{5}$ biga was divided into two equal parts, one for the father and one for the mother. This was to be sold to meet their funeral expenses. If one brother preferred to bear the cost of his father's rites, he would be entitled to his father's plot. If the four brothers contributed jointly, the plot would be divided in four. The same applied to the plot reserved for the mother. The old house was dismantled. Manick built for himself a little house in plot 2, using his share of the materials of the old house. The rest of the family lived together in a new house built towards the back of the land.

Sons inherit, not only rights and property, but two major obligations. The first is the obligation to perform the mortuary rites of the father and mother and thereafter annually to hold a ceremony on the anniversaries of their deaths. The second is to dispose of their sisters in marriage. These obligations survive separation. Separated sons may combine to perform the mortuary rites and to celebrate the anniversaries of their parents' death or each

may perform at will. When land is inherited, these obligations are conceived as a burden on the land.

Mukti and Maghua were two brothers who separated after a bitter quarrel. Their father was dead but their mother was alive. Mukti and his wife lived in one house. Maghua, who was unmarried, lived in another house with his mother and unmarried sister. The family had 6 bigas of rice land which was notionally divided on separation into 3 plots of 2 bigas, one for Mukti, one for Maghua, and the remaining 2 bigas to provide for the mother's mortuary rites and the marriage of their sister. When the mother died, Mukti bore the cost of her rites and took over the land: with the land he assumed the responsibility of paying the expenses of his sister's marriage.

Deben was the youngest of four brothers. The eldest separated 10 years after his father's death and the other three brothers 5 years later. At that time Deben was unmarried so his mother lived with him. The three elder brothers each obtained $8\frac{3}{4}$ bigas of rice land but Deben was given $9\frac{1}{4}$ bigas. When his mother died 15 years later, he paid for her rites.

The general principle of division would appear to be that, after provision is made for the mortuary rites of the parents, the remaining estate is divided on the basis that sons are each entitled to one share and unmarried daughters to a half share. When Manick separated, the eating utensils were divided into 5 shares, one for each of the 4 brothers and $\frac{1}{2}$ share each for the two unmarried daughters to be used as dowry. Manick therefore was given $\frac{1}{5}$ of the household utensils, the rest remaining in common use.

Daughters are born into the house to be given away and, as such, constitute a special category in relation to gifts. A gift made to a daughter belongs to her absolutely, even against the father. Manick's father had borrowed from his daughter Rs: 100 given her by Sada. In the quarrelling at the time of separation, she asked for it back and Manick gave to his father Rs: 100 to repay the loan. The same daughter had some ornaments given to her by her father. It was said that at the time of her marriage she might give them to her younger sister or take them with her as she chose.

The story of Manick's separation illustrates some of the norms governing the economic organisation of the household but this intricate subject requires much detailed study.

- The composition of the family is determined by three factors:
- (1) The demographic factor of birth and death.
 - (2) The rules of residence on marriage. Usually daughters marry

out, daughters-in-law marry in. Alternatively in families without sons, the son-in-law may marry in. There seems to have been no change in these rules, which can be taken as constant.

(3) The time of partition.

It is variations in the third factor that chiefly account for regional differences in the proportion of joint families. Kolenda has classified the time of break-up into three types:

Sons divide soon after marriage	Early
Sons divide at or soon after death of father	Medium
Sons continue together till after marriage of their sons, households headed by first cousins	Late

(Kolenda 1968:391).

In Assam the developmental cycle of the family is based on two limiting factors: firstly, the rule that sons should not separate during the father's lifetime, and secondly, the fact that brothers with married children are never found together in the same household. These factors are made compatible by the short expectancy of life: a man does not live to see the marriage of his grandchildren. In the village only one man had a married grandson; he was said to be 108. The time of break-up in Assam is therefore medium, although sons often continue together for a long period after the death of the father.

When a man has one or no sons, the question of division does not arise. In the village there were 6 cases of sons who had separated during their father's life. None of these were only sons, which suggests that a man separates from his brothers rather than from his father. In all cases the sons were already married and their father gave them their share of the land.

There were 27 sets of brothers whose father was dead. Of these 5 were joint, 19 were separated, and in 3 cases some of the brothers were separate and some joint. Looking at the data in another way, the 27 sets of brothers numbered 87. Of these 50 were living separately, and 37 were living jointly.

Separation may be effected simultaneously by all the brothers, or it may take place in a series of stages, one or more separating at a time while the others continue together. When there are only 2 brothers in the household, the separation of one means the separation of all. This was so in 11 cases out of 21 (in 2 of these only 1

brother was still living). In the remaining 10 cases with 3 or more brothers in the family, all the brothers had separated simultaneously in 2 cases and by stages in 5 cases. (The remaining 3 cases were anomalous. In one, one brother had come to the village at the age of eight to live with a married sister and his brothers in his natal village later divided the land between them. In another, one brother from a landless family came to the village as a son-in-law of the house. In the third, the eldest brother eloped with an Uriya girl and all connection with him was cut off so that he forfeited his claim on the property.) In a further 3 cases, some brothers were still living together while others had separated. A family of 4 brothers also divided while I was in the village into two houses with 2 brothers in each. It is therefore usual for a collateral joint family to resolve itself into smaller units in a series of stages.

The first to separate is not always the eldest son, but a man only separates after marriage and usually when he has a family. A single man does not constitute a viable household and when an unmarried brother is found living apart, it is the result of a decision by his elder brothers to divide. The 5 unmarried brothers living separately were all youngest sons. In 4 cases they were living with their mothers, and in the 5th case, in which both parents were dead, the young man within a year of separation took in as his 'wife' a girl who had borne an illegitimate child to a Brahman who later deserted her. It is usually the period between the marriage of the sons and the marriage of the sons' children that the process of internal differentiation gradually leads to successive divisions.

Data were collected on the family history of the first deceased generation. Informants were children at the time that their father and his brothers had separated and could rarely provide details of age and marital status. There was nothing, however, to suggest that the pattern of separation has changed. Only in 2 cases was it said that brothers had continued undivided till they died in the normal course. One was childless, and the other had two children both of whom died in infancy. The only celibate man in the village was also living with his brother, though now in his fifties.

The developmental cycle of the family is related to two

conflicting principles of family organisation, hierarchy and equality. Hierarchy characterizes daily patterns of authority; equality characterizes rights in property. Seniority within the family is determined by order of birth. Kinship terms distinguish the elder from the younger brother, the elder from the younger sister, and make similar distinctions in respect of the first ascendant generation. Forms of address also express the respect a man owes to his seniors. He addresses all senior kin by a kinship term with the suffix deva meaning 'god', whereas they address him by his personal name. A man can eat the food remains of senior kinsmen, a son from the plate of his father, a younger brother from the plate of his elder brother, but he cannot eat the remains of junior kinsmen which are considered polluting. A girl after her first menstruation becomes impure till the performance of her marriage and no senior person will take food with which she has been in contact. But she can cook for those junior to her and can continue to share a bed with a younger brother or sister. Sons are married in order of seniority, as are daughters, and affinal avoidances are determined by seniority. A married woman covers her head in the presence of all relations senior to her husband, her husband's father, her husband's elder brother, whom she addresses indirectly in the third person, but she does not avoid relations junior to her husband whom she addresses directly in the second person. In the period of impurity following death, the entire descent group is ritually impure but only those junior to the deceased are required to fast. If a man dies within the period of impurity for the death of a senior agnate, the rites for both can be concluded on the 30th day of the first death, for it is said that the senior agnate can assist his junior kinsman to travel with him on the year's journey to the ancestors. But if a senior agnate dies within the period of impurity of a junior kinsman, a full 30 days' mourning must be observed for him. On the same principle a dead man can cause harm to his junior kin who will propitiate his spirit by offerings of food, but he is powerless to affect his senior kinsmen. Distinctions of status between kin are emphasized at seasonal festivals and other ritual occasions when junior kin formally give respect (mān) to their seniors by offering them areca nut and pan on a raised dish and touching the ground with their forehead.

There is a conflict inherent in the order of precedence and authority between brothers as determined by relative age and the absolute equality which they enjoy in respect of rights in property. Division is often precipitated by the suspicion or complaint that one brother is obtaining an unfair share and that all the families are not receiving equal treatment.

There was a rich Chutiya family of six brothers. The oldest separated first. He accused his younger brother's wife of giving her children a better portion of fish than his children when distributing food. The charge was almost certainly trumped up as an excuse, but it is significant that the basis of the complaint was that the children of all the brothers were not being treated equally. The remaining five brothers lived together for many years. One of the events leading up to the final separation was the loss of two halves of some hundred rupee notes (torn in two and kept separately against theft). They never turned up and there was an unspoken suspicion that the brother responsible for keeping the money had misappropriated them for his own use.

Partition is rarely effected without quarrel, each brother watching zealously over the division of the property down to the smallest and most trifling household articles. As the relative value of different plots of land can seldom be agreed, it is customary to divide each field longitudinally into as many plots as there are heirs so that an absolute equality of division is ensured. Failure to agree may lead to litigation. After division it is rare for brothers to apply to one another for financial help. It was said: 'One can approach other people for money and help, but not brothers. It is shameful. Separation is for ever.' Brothers, once the closest of relatives, cease to be obligated to one another. The father is the focal point of family unity, under whose authority the sons combine in an intricate hierarchy of roles based on seniority of status. After his death the hierarchical principle recedes and the relationship between brothers comes increasingly to reflect the equality of rights which each has in respect of property till the household divides into like but separated units. The developmental cycle of the family moves between these two principles.

Notes.

1. Cf. Mayer 1960:170-171. The Assamese usage is similar but not identical. Affines are not included in the kutumb and the word itself is in fact rarely used except with reference to the patrilineal line. The term mitir-kutumba is, however, said to comprehend all kin. When pressed, respondents reply that matrilineal kin are certainly not affines, so they must be kutumb.
2. Madan makes a similar point when he says that he prefers to speak of ties of agnation than of unilineal descent with reference to the joint family (Madan 1962:12).
3. This has been done in several cases to my knowledge.
4. I am indebted to Jonathan Parry for pointing out that death pollution (as̄oc) results from cremation and not from death. Das makes the same point: 'The impurity of death begins the moment the preta is released from the body of the dead man', i.e. when the chief mourner breaks open the skull of the half-cremated body (Das 1977:125).
5. The classification proposed by Kolenda has a number of disadvantages. In the first place, the classification gives equal weight to men and women so that the proposed household types do not correspond to differences of family organization. She defines a supplemented nuclear family as 'a nuclear family plus one or more unmarried, separated, or widowed relatives of the parents, other than their unmarried children' (Kolenda 1968:346). Take a family consisting of F, M, S, SW, SS, SD. Under Kolenda's classification the family becomes supplemented nuclear on the death of the father or the death of the mother. If the father dies, the son becomes head of the household, if adult, and the property passes to his name: to class a household consisting of M, S, SW, SS, SD as supplemented nuclear is not unreasonable. If, on the other hand, the mother dies, the father continues as head of the household and owner of the property with the son's family living under his authority. To classify a household consisting of F, S, SW, SS, SD as supplemented nuclear, thereby reducing the father to the position of a 'supplement', ignores the realities of family organization. This discrepancy arises because Kolenda's classification is based on married couples, whereas the structure of the household is chiefly determined by the relationship between adult males. Secondly, Kolenda restricts the term 'joint family' to a unit that contains two or more related nuclear families. The effect of seeing a joint family as an aggregation of nuclear families is to classify as nuclear many families which would more appropriately be termed joint and hence to under-estimate the proportion of joint families. The houses in Panbari classified as supplemented nuclear or supplemented sub-nuclear (i.e. a fragment of a former nuclear family) include the following examples:

5. (continued)

F,M,S,S,D,FyB,FyBS,FyBD,FyB,FyB,FM	Supplemented nuclear
F,S,S's 3 children from the first W(dead), S's 2 children from the second W(dead)	Supplemented nuclear
F,M,D,D's 5 children,SW,SW's 4 children	Supplemented nuclear
F,M,SW,SD,S	Supplemented nuclear

These households could better be seen as joint or as fragments of formerly joint families, than as varieties of nuclear family. The distinction nuclear/joint is not well-adapted as a basis for classifying the different household types that emerge during the developmental cycle of the Hindu family. The term 'joint family' is now too firmly established in the field to uproot, but there seems a case for restricting the term 'nuclear family' to the context of a nuclear family system (cf. Lévi-Strauss's suggested use of the term 'restricted family' to replace 'nuclear family' in this context (Lévi-Strauss: 1936)).

CHAPTER 3

THE NATURE OF AFFINITY

Affinity is conceived in terms of the translation of women, both physically and ritually, from one descent group to another. Descent groups connected by marriage are affines (mitir) of one another. Affinal ties usually persist for two generations. A son-in-law is required to visit his wife's parents at least three times a year at the seasonal festivals, and his children will know and visit their mother's house where their maternal uncle lives. The tie then lapses: very few men know the natal village of their father's mother. The depth of affinal relationships is not, therefore, great. But as all descent groups to whom a daughter has been given or from whom a daughter-in-law has been taken are considered affines, the range of affinal relationships at any one time is extensive.

Prohibited Degrees.

Marriage is prohibited within the descent group for 7 or 9 generations reckoned by patrilineal descent from a common male ancestor. Marriage is also prohibited with the daughter's line (jīurī bangśa) consisting of kin related by cognatic descent from a common ancestress within 5 generations. In practice, however, marriages take place when the old people can no longer trace any relationship. Only 8 descent groups out of 58 in Panbari had a depth of more than 5 generations and in 41 cases out of the 58 the senior living male did not know his father's mother's village. The largely theoretical prohibition on marriage within 7 degrees on the father's side and 5 degrees on the mother's side coincides with the sapinda relationship conceived in terms of substantive identification as 'being connected by particles of the one body' (Mayne 1906:690). Possession of a common gotra name is also a bar to marriage in that it indicates putative patrilineal descent from a cow-herd in ancient times after whom the gotra takes its name. In practice, however, the gotra system limits the choice of spouse

only in the case of the Brahmans and perhaps a few Kayastha families, as almost all the other castes are members of Kashyap gotra within which marriage is allowed. Non-Brahman castes require a gotra name only for the performance of Vedic rites and if, as often happens, a man does not know his gotra, the priest will assign him to Kashyap. Ritual kinship also acts as a bar to marriage. Fellow initiates (Hari bhakat) acquire a common soul which enables them, even if of different castes, to eat together. They address each other's parents as father (tāvoi) and mother (āmoi). One cannot marry the sister of the other, nor can their children inter-marry. The same prohibitions apply in the case of the friend (sakhi) of the groom and the friend of the bride who are closely associated with the pair in the wedding rites and become identified with them. The groom's Hari bhakat usually acts as his sakhi. The basis of these rules appears to be a belief that marriage should not take place between those who are identified by virtue of sharing a common substance. Identification of this kind is established either by kinship, where the facts of reproduction provide a physical basis for the belief, or by mantra where the magical power of words substitutes for the physical tie.

The Range of Marriage.

Traditionally marriage is an arrangement between the parents of the bride and the parents of the groom. A young man remarked: 'If my father marries me to a log, I must marry it.' Parents look for a suitable match among families of similar economic standing within the same caste who are neither too close nor too distant, proximity being conceived in both social and spatial terms. This results in the disapproval of certain types of marriage which do not fall within the prohibited degrees. In the first place, marriages are not usually arranged within the village. The couple are said to be 'village kinsmen' (gāvasamandhiyā), although the relationship is recognized as purely fictive and carries no ritual bar. When love-matches do occur within the village, the groom's procession usually takes a long and circuitous route to the bride's house. Secondly, marriage between houses already connected by marriage is not considered good. When two brothers marry two sisters, the boy's parents object: 'It is not good to marry again into the same family.'

We will have only one affinal house (mitir) instead of two.' The girl's parents also object: 'We will not give two daughters to one house. To give two daughters to one house is not right.' It is also said that the difference in the status of their husbands will cause quarrels between the sisters. When two brothers exchange two sisters, this is derisively called 'bull-exchange' after the old custom of exchanging bulls before castration.¹ The arrangement is said to lead to friction between the houses as one daughter-in-law carries back the usual complaints against in-laws made by the other daughter-in-law when she visits her parents' house. It is chiefly found in poorer families. For the same reason marriage with adjacent villages is not considered good on the grounds that too many visits lead to interference and quarrels. On the other hand distant villages are also not good because visits become too infrequent. It should be possible to go and return the same day: ideally that is the maximum range of marriage. There is a proverb:

'A girl within a day by road,
A cow within shouting distance.'

(I.e. cows are best bought within the village where they can be retrieved by shouting if they stray back to their former owners; girls are best brought from villages which can be visited on a day's journey.)

To stay overnight conflicts with certain customs. When the married pair pay their first visit to the bride's house eight days after the wedding on the Auspicious Eighth (ath-mangalā), they should not spend the night in the bride's house. If it is too far for them to return the same day, they set out a little way as if on their return journey. Then someone following from the bride's house will set a dish of areca nut and pan before them and entreat them to stay. The pair will turn back and leave again the following morning. On the three seasonal festivals (Bihu) a son-in-law is required to visit his wife's parents. He is also required to eat Bihu rice with his family in the evening or they will take offence. If he has married from a distant village, he will have to postpone visiting his wife's house till the following day. Marriage to a distant village is also inconvenient for the girl's parents who cannot take rice in the house of a married daughter till after the birth of a child. Between 'too near' and 'too far' there is an ideal distance that conduces to the

maintenance of the courteous formal relations considered appropriate between affinal houses.

Marriage Negotiations.

The father of a girl is in possession of a valuable but wasting asset that can only be realized by being given away. Brahman girls were formerly married before puberty or the family was dishonoured.² There is a Sanskrit sloka quoted in support of early marriage to the effect that if a father marries his daughter at the age of eight, he attains the merit of marrying Gauri to Shiva; at the age of nine, of marrying Rohinee to Chandra; at the age of ten, of marrying a girl (kaniyā); at the age or eleven or later, he attains no merit at all. It is also said that according to the sāstra if a girl attains maturity before marriage, seven generations of her ancestors fall into hell. Non-Brahman castes do not practise pre-puberty marriage, but they usually give their daughters in marriage a few years after the ceremony that marks their first menstruation (tolani biyā) and by the age of twenty a girl is considered almost unmarriageable.³ In post-puberty marriages, the bride must perform penance (prāyaścitta). Sons, on the other hand, can be married at almost any age. A father's first obligation is therefore to arrange for the disposal of his daughters and, although sons and daughters are married in order of seniority, priority is given to daughters who may well be married before their elder brothers.⁴

Marriage negotiations are the source of many quarrels and are conducted privately in the early stages to avoid malicious gossip spoiling the chances of a settlement. Preliminary negotiations are usually made through an affine like the mother's brother or a distant agnate, who makes inquiries as to the financial condition of the family, the character and appearance of the girl or boy and other relevant information. If these prove satisfactory a visit is arranged called 'seeing the house' (ghar covā), when the behaviour of the bride or groom is observed. After the marriage has been decided, the groom's father makes the first formal approach to the bride's house called 'to give a dish for the sake of the girl.' The return visit of the bride's father to the groom's house is called 'to go to make the relationship.' Many visits follow over a long period to discuss the

details of the wedding and it is said in the village that a road is worn between the two houses. In some families a betrothal or ring ceremony is held, but this has largely become obsolete. Shortly before the wedding the groom's father makes a final visit to the bride's house called 'to make the arrangements for the wedding.' He places a dish of areca nut and pan before the bride's party and asks formally whether the bride will be given wholly at the expense of her family or if they want any help. The bride's father does not reply himself but his agnates will speak on his behalf. There is a feeling that it is not good to accept help from the groom's house and a well-to-do family will refuse. The ornaments for the bride to be given at joraṅ and the respect (mān) to be provided by the groom's house are also finalized. Sometimes a single cloth is offered as 'respect' to all the bride's relations collectively; in other cases cloth is offered individually to each. Finally the dish is accepted and the areca nut eaten.

There has been a shift in the last generation in the relative positions of the bride's house and the groom's house. Formerly it was said that brides were scarce. The first approach came from the bridegroom's family and it was usual for a money payment of Rs: 20 to Rs: 80 to be made for the body of the bride called 'the gift for the body' (gā-dān). Today it is said that bridegrooms have become scarce. The first approach is often made by the bride's family and gā-dān is obsolete. This reversal seems to be the result of economic differentiation within the caste. The expanding occupational opportunities since Independence, especially for those with higher education, have created a new and highly desirable class of bridegrooms. If a young man passes his M.A. or obtains a government post, his family is likely to receive many written offers of marriage. The scarcity of desirable bridegrooms has led to a believed scarcity of all bridegrooms (cf. Lévi-Strauss's argument that one of the reasons why women always seem to be a scarce commodity is that desirable women are everywhere scarce. Lévi-Strauss 1969:38). As a result the bridegroom's family are often in a position to demand substantial sums in dowry including, in some cases, the cost of education abroad.

Affines usually take a leading part in the arrangement of marriage. They furnish information of suitable matches in their village and

of available spouses among their own affines. There is thus a tendency for marriage to occur with the affines of affines.

Horonath married his elder sister's husband's father's younger sister's daughter.

Kalinath married his father's younger brother's wife's elder sister's daughter.

Sodananda married his father's elder sister's husband's elder brother's daughter.

Fedua's marriage was arranged in the following way. His mother went to Naobisha to attend the funeral of her younger sister. The dead woman's husband's elder sister, who was a widow, had also come from Majuli for the funeral. Fedua's mother said to her that she was looking for a girl for her eldest son and she replied that she had a daughter to marry. Then the dead woman's husband said to Fedua's mother: 'Marry my elder sister's daughter.' Two days after the funeral Fedua's mother returned home. A day or so later the girl's mother came to their house and approached Fedua's younger brother, Manick, saying, 'I have a daughter. If you agree, come to my house next week and see the girl. Manick replied that she should consult his parents. She stayed that night in the house and spoke to Fedua's parents. Next morning she left for Majuli. Five days later Manick was sent to Majuli to see the girl. He stayed with his mother's elder brother's daughter who lived nearby and from there visited the girl's house. He returned with an unfavourable report: he had learnt from his mother's elder brother's daughter that the family was poor, the mother's manners were not good and the girl's older brother did not treat him with proper respect. The idea of the marriage was dropped. Four months later, however, the girl's elder brother came to ask if they agreed to the proposal and, in spite of Manick's objections, the marriage was concluded after a further exchange of visits.

Although many of the usual formalities were omitted from the negotiations for Fedua's marriage, partly because of the long distance between the village and Majuli, it illustrates the function of the affinal network as a channel of communication in the marriage market and the tendency of the network continually to be reinforced by generating new ties of affinity. The newly-formed caste associations also serve a similar function in disseminating news of prospective bridegrooms and fathers with marriageable girls make a point of attending their meetings.

The role of affines in the arrangement of marriage can be seen from the following analysis of 15 current marriages in a single descent group. The descent group is Duliya Kalita by caste. The

marriages discussed are those of the children of five brothers, four of whom are dead.

First brother:

- | | |
|------------------------------|--|
| D. 1 married to village G. | Information from her FyBW's family in village G. |
| D. 2 married to village B. | Information from her MeBD given to village K. adjacent to village B. |
| S. 1 married from village G. | Information from yZ married to village G. |
| S. 2 married from village G. | Eloped with his eBWyz in village G. |

Second brother:

- | | |
|------------------------------|---|
| D. 1 married to village G. | Information from her FeBD married to village G. |
| D. 2 married to village S. | Her FyBW and her HM are sisters. |
| S. 1 married from village R. | Information from FyBW's family in village R. |

Third brother:

- | | |
|----------------------------|--|
| D. 1 married to village S. | Her F knew the groom who was working in the nearby town. |
| D. 2 married to village R. | Information from her FeBSW's family in village R. |

Fourth brother:

- | | |
|------------------------------|--|
| D. 1 married to village D. | Information from the D of another Duliya Kalita in the village married to village D. |
| D. 2 married to village G. | Information from her M's family in village G. |
| D. 3 | Became pregnant by a Chaodung in an adjacent village. Connection with her cut off. |
| S. 1 married from village G. | Information from his M's family in village G. |

Fifth brother:

- | | |
|----------------------------|---|
| D. 1 married to village D. | Information from her FeBD married to village D. |
| D. 2 | Became pregnant by a man in the adjacent village. |

In respect of these 15 marriages information came in one case from a village girl of the same caste given in marriage; the father of the girl was acquainted with the groom in one case; and 2 unions

were irregular. In the remaining 11 cases information was given by the families of girls married into the descent group or by girls of the descent group given in marriage to other villages.

The distribution of the 15 marriages is shown below:

Village G.	6
B.	1
S.	2
R.	2
D.	2
Adjacent villages	2 (irregular).

The data illustrate the tendency for marriage links between villages to be perpetuated through affines.⁵

The Marriage Rites.

The performance of a wedding usually lasts three days and consists of a complex series of rites. These are taken up here only in so far as they relate to three themes:

- (1) The separation of the bride from her natal descent group and her assimilation to that of her husband.
 - (2) Ritual expression of hostility between the two sides.
 - (3) The role of agnates, affines and the Name House.
- (1) The separation of the bride from her natal descent group and her assimilation to that of her husband.

The affinal tie is created by the translation of women from one descent group to another. Marriage also effects a change in the status of a man: he becomes more respected or honourable. It was said: 'Before he is married, my wife's younger brother will take food from my plate. But after marriage he will not, because he has become respectable (mānī) and to some extent equal to me.' Similarly in the case of brothers, a younger brother will cease to take food from an elder brother's plate after marriage. The food is not polluting to him because he is junior to his elder brother; but it will no longer be offered. After marriage a man will also occupy a separate room, usually constructed for him, where he sleeps with his wife. But in many respects his life is not greatly changed. For a girl, on the other hand, marriage entails leaving her natal kin to live among strangers in a distant village as the wife of a man she has probably never seen and under the absolute authority of

her mother-in-law. She leaves behind a sense of loss expressed in the traditional marriage songs:

'Why have you taught your daughter to cook?
 Others will eat of her food...
 The bride's three younger sisters on three spindles
 Weave fine threads for their future husbands.
 The bride's three younger sisters will go to three houses;
 Their mother weeps and wails.
 The bird has brought up a hundred and twenty fledglings
 To adorn the branch of a tree.
 The bride's mother has brought up her daughter
 To be an ornament in the house of another.'

(Barkataki 1967:7, translated)

The effect of the marriage rites is to unite the bride and groom into 'one person' and to translate the bride to the bangśa and gotra of the groom. A Hindu woman can be married only once by the sacred fire. A man, on the other hand, can contract any number of marriages either successively or when his previous wives are alive. But a distinction is made between the first marriage and later unions (some of which may not be proper 'marriages' to avoid expense). Only the first wife is termed dharma patnī (dharma wife) by virtue of the fact that half the dharma of the husband's good actions will belong to her. She is also said to be 'half a man's limbs', the woman being the left side and the man the right side of their united body.

The union of the bride and groom is effected by a change in the ritual status of the bride, who is handed over as a gift by her father to her husband. Severance and exchange are dominant themes of the marriage rites. The first day of marriage is called the day of gifts (joraṅ). When the groom's party arrives by bullock cart - or nowadays by bus -, the women of the bride's house walk slowly down to the gate to meet them. There the groom's mother and the bride's mother exchange a silver areca nut box containing gold, silver and areca nut. The two boxes are passed between them several times; at the end each is left with her own. This exchange is the first rite of the wedding. The joraṅ gifts include gold ornaments, five sets of clothes, coconut oil, vermilion, a comb and a mirror. From this day the bride uses only the clothes, ornaments and toiletries provided by the groom as a mark of her assimilation to his house. The coconut oil is poured onto her head over a silver areca nut

placed on a gold ring, a spot of vermilion is applied to her forehead and parting, the comb is used to comb her hair and she is shown her face in the glass. Then she is adorned with the gold ornaments and dressed in the finest set of clothes provided by the groom, that of white silk, and makes obeisance before the assembled company to receive their blessing. On this occasion the adornment and dressing of the bride is done by the groom's mother, or sometimes by his elder brother's wife, and not by the bride's mother or other women of her house. She has already begun to belong to her husband's family. When she leaves her parents' house two days later, she should by custom leave behind her all her ornaments and clothes and possessions except those given as dowry.

The groom's party also brings at joran two little curd pots tied with cloths of unboiled yarn and two unfurled banana leaves for the ceremonial application of curd to cool the bride and groom; two water pots tied with cloths of unboiled yarn to draw water for the ceremonial bath; two bundles each containing three or five mango leaves for the aspersion of water from the water pots; two areca nuts, two pan leaves and two annas to pay the river for the drawing of the water; two packets of wild turmeric and two packets of black gram to anoint the bride and groom before the ceremonial bath; two bottles of mustard oil to rub on the bodies of the bride and groom; two earthen lamps with two cotton wicks and two blades of thatching grass for the open-sided pot (dunari) which is carried in procession and kept near the bride and groom; two packets of gāthian, a scented root, for the pounding of the gāthian; and two penknives and two silver areca nuts which the bride and groom keep near them as a protection against evil spirits. Before the party left the groom's house, the groom touched all these articles with his right hand. The bride also touches them with her right hand. One of each pair is left in the bride's house, one is taken back to the groom's house. The bride therefore uses ritual paraphernalia touched by the groom and the groom uses ritual paraphernalia touched by the bride. The groom's party also brings rice for the bride's dunari and takes back rice from the bride's house for the groom's dunari. The bride's house sends with them a set of cotton clothes for the bathing of the groom so that both bride and groom are bathed wearing clothes provided

by the house of the other.

At joraṇ a present is sent from the groom to the bride's mother called 'the stomach-burning bundle' (peṭ porā bojā), consisting of fish, black pepper, arum, rice, mustard oil and salt. Three days after giving birth a mother is given black pepper to eat which is believed to dry the veins and remove the pain of childbirth. Now for a second time she is suffering the pain of loss. When she eats the meal provided by the groom it is said that her pain goes and she forgets her daughter.

The ritual separation of the bride from her natal family is effected by the mantras uttered during the fire sacrifice. Marriage is conceived as the 'gift of a girl' (kaniyā dān). Before the fire the girl's father gives to the groom with mantras a series of gifts - water to wash, areca nut and pan, a set of clothes, a gold ring, a dish of food; last of all he gives the bride, tying together the right thumbs of the groom and bride with kuśa grass. With the gift (dān) of the bride, he gives money to the groom as dakṣiṇa for accepting the gift.⁶ The final separation of the bride from her natal kin is represented by the breaking of a ring of kuśa grass. A kuśa ring is placed on a stone between the groom and the bride's father. The priest sprinkles it with water and utters a salutation to her three patrilineal ancestors by name. Then the bride's father takes the ring and should, by custom, break it. But many fathers cannot bring themselves to do this and simply set it aside. This rite breaks the relationship. From this moment no ritual impurity deriving from the girl attaches to her agnates.

If a woman lives with a man in the absence of marriage, she remains a member of her natal descent group. When she dies or gives birth to a child, her natal descent group becomes ritually impure for 11 days in the case of Brahmans and 30 days in the case of non-Brahmans; the descent group of the man is not impure. If, on the other hand, the marriage ceremony has been performed, the link with her natal descent group is severed and, when she dies or gives birth, only her husband's descent group becomes ritually impure.

Mohan had separated from his brothers and built a new house. He arranged to hold a house-warming (ghar lovā) but in the meantime his younger sister gave birth to a dead child. She had contracted a civil marriage which in the village counts as no marriage at all.

Moham commented that if she had been properly married and the kusa ring broken, he would not have been ritually impure. As it was, the house-warming had to be postponed till the period of impurity was over.

It was said: 'Our marriage is a gift. If there is the slightest attachment to the gift, the giver does not attain any dharma. So parents are not to grieve on the death of a married daughter and are not ritually impure.' In practice of course the attachment to the natal house is never extinguished, although it grows less with the years as the bride makes a place for herself in her husband's family. Married daughters return to their mother's house for the birth of their children and maintain close affective ties with their natal kin by a regular inter-change of visits. If they become widowed while their children are still young, they generally prefer to return home than remain with their husband's brothers. A mother does not in fact forget her daughter after eating the 'stomach-burning bundle'. But formerly at least marriage is conceived as the 'gift of a girl' which effects a total ritual separation from her natal kin. The functional value of women in creating affinity rests on the view that they exist in relation to men from whom they obtain the impress of their nature. A girl derives her soul from her father but she does not pass it on to her children. After marriage, when she becomes united with her husband, she receives his soul and half the merit of his good actions. In hypergamous unions she can be raised to the caste of her husband, but in hypogamous unions the husband cannot take the caste of the wife. Women are born for marriage and until recently all women were married, whereas a man can elect to remain celibate. The chief purpose of a wife is to serve her husband and to provide him with children, fertility and barrenness being attributed to women and not to men. A widow is a woman who has outlived her purpose (cf. sati). 'May you always be with husband', 'may you have children', are considered the two most excellent blessings for a woman. It is this view of woman as the blank counter in the game that is the basis of the affinal tie conceived as a change in the substantive identity of woman as she passes from one family to another.

(2) Ritual expressions of hostility.

The two sides united by marriage are opposed to one another in

a number of ritual contexts at the wedding. The dominant theme of the marriage is of a gift freely bestowed but rites are also enacted which indicate that the gift is not given without resentment and that the relationship between the two sides is characterized by rivalry and mistrust. Affinal relationships involve friendship and goodwill on the one hand and hostility and suspicion on the other. The wedding rites express both aspects of this relationship. Afterwards they are bridged by courtesy.

On the evening of the third day the groom sets out to fetch his bride. His father and mother do not attend the wedding and must remain indoors when he leaves. At the moment of departure his mother stands before him with her arms outstretched in the doorway: this is called the 'barring of the door' (duvār dharā). He makes three attempts to pass and finally escapes under her right arm. It is said that in the marriage of her son a mother sees the germ of those divisions which will ultimately lead to the break-up of the family. On the road to the bride's house the bridegroom's party is repeatedly stopped by bands of young men: this is called 'the obstruction of the groom' (darā āgaca). They ask him repeatedly where he is going and demand: 'Give us a thousand rupees', or 'Give us one new paicā', or 'Give us a needle', or 'Give us a banana' (things difficult to find in the middle of the night). The groom's party sets before them areca nut with pan and a rupee on the raised dish as 'respect' (mān); often only the areca nut is accepted. The encounters are usually good-humoured but cases of stabbing have occurred. Sometimes to avoid harassment areca nut with pan and a few rupees are given by the groom's party at joraṇ as 'respect for the cowherds' (garakhīyā mān), which the bride's father gives to the people of his Name House so that they should not obstruct the path of the groom. Formerly, when bridegrooms were said to be plentiful, they were often kept waiting for an hour or two on arrival: 'He has come to take the bride - let him stand.' The lights in the bride's house were put out: 'Why should we spend money for oil? Let them supply their own lights.' The arrival of the groom is the signal for the bride's mother to perform suvāguri tolā. There is considerable variation in the performance of this rite and the meaning attached to it. In some parts water is drawn, in others the mother goes with a procession

of women down the road as if to draw water and then turns back empty-handed. 'For nothing it is done.' It is described as a sort of joke: the groom has arrived and the bride's mother keeps him waiting while she fetches water. 'To perform the svāguri on seeing the face of the groom' is a saying meaning to do things at the last minute. The groom on arrival is pelted so vigorously with auspicious rice that an umbrella or cloth is raised to shield him amid a scene of general confusion. With these rites which express contempt for the groom are interwoven others designed to show him honour and respect. His feet are washed by a girl of the house, usually the bride's younger sister, and the bride's parents come out to welcome him with flowers, incense, light, areca nut, pan, cloth and sweetmeats. These are reverently given as if to a god, for the groom is identified with god during the three days of the ceremony, and he is greeted with the mantra: 'Vishnu, the handsome one, the beautiful, I salute you.'

When the groom's party is settled in the pandal, the women of the two sides exchange impromptu capping songs (jōrā nām).

Bride's party:

'His mother is black, his father is black,
O Ram, this son-in-law is black as night.
In the family of our son-in-law every single one is black,
O Ram, I cannot see in this darkness.'

Groom's party:

'His father opens wide his eyes,
O Ram, with open eyes he stares.
She's ugly as a crow, with dirty hands,
O Ram, look what you've got for a daughter-in-law.'

(Barkataki 1967:113,116, translated).

The women of the bride's party also compose verses ridiculing the ritual friend (sakhi) of the groom and commenting on the appearance of the man who has the embarrassing task of going among the group of seated women to present the customary gifts of cloth as 'respect' for the bride's female agnates. If the comments become unbearable, the man may bow down before the women and offer them areca nut and pan, saying: 'Please do not continue.' Most of the verses are composed impromptu and the women may sing that the tea is weak or remind their host that they have run out of areca nut.

On the night of the wedding the groom does not eat the food of the bride's house, lest the bride's mother or some other female relative should add a potion (āhudi) which would have the effect of making him totally subservient to his wife. It is said that as he leaves his house his mother warns him repeatedly not to take food in the bride's house. Some soft rice, salt and ginger is carried for him by a close friend, with which he breaks his fast. On the Auspicious Eighth (āṭh mangalā) when the married pair pay their first visit to the bride's house, the groom exchanges his plate with that of a friend before eating.

Although in theory marriage is a gift freely bestowed, the bride's house used to specify the ornaments to be give as joraṇ, which in the old days were often a source of quarrel sometimes leading to the break-down of the marriage. The size of the dowry, on the other hand, although it enhanced the prestige of the bride's family, was not a subject of dispute between the two sides. The joraṇ is put on display and examined by the girl's agnates, her affines and the people of the Name House. Formerly inferior gifts were returned with a request for something better in their place. Today, with the scarcity of bridegrooms, the gifts are still examined but all will say they are good. The animosity of the bride's party is often expressed in spontaneous incidents. On the night of the Great Wedding a relation of the groom presents a gift of cloth and areca nut with pan on a raised dish to each of the bride's senior agnates in turn. It is customary to take the areca nut and pan and leave the cloth. Sometimes, to cause mischief, the cloth is taken as well so that the groom's party has to find a whole series of extra cloths. This, too, is rarely done nowadays. Again, if the customary offerings of 'respect' are not given to the girl's relations, they may refuse to continue with the wedding. At the marriage of Ananda's wife's younger brother, the groom's party forgot the 'dress for the mother's brother' (momāi sāj). The bride's party refused to produce the girl. Ananda drove 20 miles to the nearest town where he knocked up some merchants in the middle of the night and purchased the cloth. Eventually the 'dress for the mother's brother' was presented in the early hours of the morning and the marriage continued. Next day Ananda assaulted the mother's brother as he was accompanying the

bride to the groom's house. These two themes, the gift of the bride and the resentment of those who receive the gift, are intertwined in the marriage rites.

(3) The role of agnates, affines and the Name House.

Marriages are arranged in constant consultation with relatives, both agnates and affines, who are expected to help in the selection of the spouse and take part in the negotiations and arrangements for the wedding. Among affines the mother's brother occupies a special place. He generally takes the joran of his sister's son, and at the wedding of her daughter he has the ritual function of sprinkling the dowry and the bride and groom with water from the sacred pot at the instruction of the priest. Without the mother's brother, it is said the marriage cannot take place.⁷ If the bride's mother has several brothers, the eldest or youngest brother performs this rite. In return he is given by the groom's house a set of clothes called the 'dress of the mother's brother' (momāi sāj) with a large bunch of areca nut and pan leaves. He gives to the bride a valuable gift, traditionally a milch cow. The elder sister's husband (bhini) also takes an active role in the marriage arrangements and is expected to contribute to the cost. Before a wedding it is usual to call elder sisters and their husbands to the house for a private discussion about money. One will provide the curd for feeding the guests, another will hire cars to take the groom's party to the girl's house, and so on. In one case the elder sister's husband, who was a rich man, contributed between Rs: 2,000 and 3,000 to provide the gold ornaments for joran. The younger sister's husband may also give, but usually less; he has to offer, whereas the elder sister's husband can be asked. Agnatic houses seldom contribute financially to the cost of marriage, although they assist in other ways.

All agnatic and affinal houses should be invited to a wedding. Agnates, who are usually neighbours, generally attend all the rites. Close affines arrive for joran and stay till the day after the Great Wedding, but all will be expected to attend some part at least of the ceremony. Invitations are made by going from house to house with areca nut and pan except for those in distant villages who may be invited by letter. Failure to invite is a serious slight, as is the failure to attend without good reason. The following case occurred

in a Chutiya family:

'My father and his elder brother quarrelled over a plot of land and there was a court case pending. In spite of this we expected them to invite us for ceremonies. The whole descent group should be invited for joran and also for the ring ceremony. At his daughter's marriage my father's elder brother did not invite our family. To show how grand they were, they invited all the villagers to the ring ceremony, although usually only a few leading houses are invited. All - but not us. At the very last minute my father's elder brother's wife came to the house and invited us to the wedding. Within the descent group it is not enough to say, "Come to our wedding." Details must be discussed, one must say, "Without your help it will be impossible to hold the wedding. I am old (even if active), I cannot work and so on." Then the other will reply, "Why do you worry? We will come and do everything." She gave us no details, just invited us to the marriage in general so my parents decided not to go. On the wedding day my father's elder brother's son's wife's father came to our house and said, "I have heard you are not going. If you do not go, I will not accept any food there. At all the marriages I have seen you cooking. Now you are not there." My parents refused. But later my father said to me, "Go. Otherwise they will tell the affines that they invited us but we did not come." So I went, and my brothers also. The affines commented that my parents were not there. In the next marriage, that of their son, they did not invite us. But when my father became seriously ill, one of them visited our house. So at my sister's marriage three months ago, my parents were softened and invited that house. They came and relations are now back to normal.'

This story shows fairly typical behaviour between kin. Brothers are often on bad terms for a time, especially over disputes about land, when visiting between their houses may cease. But the omission of an invitation on a public occasion like marriage is taken as a serious slight likely to provoke retaliation so that the relationship becomes progressively embittered. On the other hand marriage, and similar ceremonies, also provide an opportunity for resolving family quarrels. Here the opinion of affines acts as an informal sanction on behaviour between agnatic kin, and affines often play a direct role in intervening in these quarrels to effect a reconciliation.

Related houses are expected to bring a gift of at least one article of clothing, but a pair of bell-metal dishes (kahī-bāti) or a sum of money is often given in addition by agnates as a contribution to the dowry. Clothing is presented at the place of the ceremonial bath and called the 'cloth of the bathing' (novani kāpor). At this time female relatives of the bride one after another rub her limbs

with turmeric and black gram as a mark of affection. The same rite is carried out in the groom's house. Women of the descent group take an active part throughout the marriage and assist in the preparation of the food. The bride's elder sisters usually support and console her during the ceremony.

In addition to kin all houses of the Name House are invited to weddings and funerals. Failure to invite these houses means expulsion from the Name House. Correspondingly, a man who wishes to join a Name House usually does so by inviting the member houses to a marriage or funeral in his family.

Golapi did not invite the houses of Panbari Name House to the marriage of her daughter. She was a widow who had already sold most of her land and she said she could not afford it. To feed these houses she would have to buy Rs: 45 worth of soft rice, Rs: 120 of curd and Rs: 40 of gur. She was expelled.

Six Kooch brothers wished to join Bayan Name House. When their father died they invited all the houses of the Name House to his mortuary rites. The houses attended and they were accepted as members.

The same old women take a leading part in organizing marriages in all the houses so that there is a uniformity of rites irrespective of caste. The men of the Name House assemble at noon to sing Name on the day of the Great Marriage after the nāndī mukh śrāddha performed by the groom's father and the bride's father in their respective houses. On that day the people of the Name House come to see the groom from early morning till dusk and must be fed. The feeding of guests is one of the chief costs of marriage. When the groom sets out on the night of the Great Wedding he is accompanied by a party of some fifty to two hundred people who are fed at the bride's house. As the groom's father issues his own invitations, the bride's house never knows in advance the exact number of guests. Agnates and affines eat within the house and are given ākhoi, cirā and other types of jal-pān (sweetmeats). The Name House eat in a pandal erected outside the house and are given soft rice, curd and gur. Every man, woman and child of the Name Houses of both sides should get a share and those who cannot attend the wedding have their portion brought by neighbours. At the fire sacrifice two raised dishes are set down containing great bunches of areca nut and pan

leaves. One is from the groom's side for the bride's Name House and the other is from the bride's side for the groom's Name House. On one occasion the groom's house supplied curd for the Name House of the girl's family which was bad. The people refused to eat it and enforced a fine of Rs: 100 on the groom before they would admit him to the village to take away the girl. Marriage is a matter between local communities as well as groups of kin.

Wife-Givers and Wife-Receivers.

Marriage is arranged within caste. Sometimes young people of different castes elope and these unions may later be regularized by marriage. But the families on both sides will object to the union. In his discussion of marriage Dumont explains endogamy as 'an implication of hierarchy' (Dumont 1970:125) and comments: 'Let us ... posit that endogamy is the result, nowadays general, of the law whereby a caste refuses to take spouses of clearly inferior status, and conversely cannot get spouses of clearly superior status, although it would have no objection' (Dumont 1970:119, my italics). The Assamese material suggests, on the contrary, that both endogamy and hierarchy exist as independent principles. I quote from informants:

'There is objection to marrying into a higher caste as well as into a lower: a good marriage is in one's own caste.'

'A Kumar Kalita eloped with a Kooch girl. He was cast out of the Name House. People are divided into caste and caste as paddy is divided into āhu and sāli.'

The emphasis on endogamy here seems to be linked to a view of castes as separate species. On the other hand, the principle of hierarchy, as Dumont points out, clearly enters into the regulation of marriage: in the event of inter-caste elopements only the spouse of higher caste runs the risk of being cut off by his family and losing his caste. If the man is of higher caste than the woman (termed anuloma or 'with the grain'), it is considered less objectionable than if the woman is of higher caste than the man (termed pratiloma or 'against the grain'). This is explained in terms of the assimilation of a woman to the status of her husband. A man can in theory raise a lower caste wife to his own caste by the ceremony of uddhāraṇi, but a woman who marries below her falls to

the caste of her husband. In situations of scarcity certain small sub-castes of priests will accept brides, but not grooms, from below. The Goswamis, or hereditary gurus, constitute the highest sub-caste of Brahmans in Assam and do not ordinarily inter-marry with other Brahmans. In rare cases a Goswami may marry his son to an ordinary Brahman girl but he will not give his daughter in marriage except to a guru family. A similar situation exists among the Mahantas (Kayastha gurus) in respect of other Kayasthas. A form of hypergamy is also found among some of the 'Brahmans' who serve the lower castes. Barua reports that the Brahmans of Doms (a scheduled caste of fishermen) marry Dom girls. They take them home immediately after marriage and never let them eat food cooked by a Dom which, in their view, raises them to their own caste. But they do not give their daughters to Doms in marriage (Barua 1908). Such cases are, however, exceptional. They relate to the belief that the nature of woman is formed by man and not to a general principle that wife-receivers are superior to wife-givers.

The relationship between the two families united by marriage is asymmetrical rather than hierarchical. The relative equality of standing between the two sides is reflected in the fact that the cost of marrying a daughter is not greatly different from that of marrying a son. At the time of the wedding itself both sides are likely to claim that their expenses have been heavier, and either side may contribute to the costs of the other in case of need. There has, however, been a change in the balance between the two sides. 'When I was married,' said an old woman, 'the boy's side went to the girl's house and bore all the expenses and the marriage was settled in a short time. Nowadays the boy's side does not make the first approach and does not bear the expense because there are many girls available.' The 'gift of the asking' (sodhanī-bhār) and the 'gift for the body' (gā-dān) have become obsolete. A generation ago the groom's house often provided for the feeding of the guests at the bride's house. For example, at the marriage of a Duliya Kalita in Panbari held 43 years ago, 984 lbs. of curd, 240 lbs. of soft rice, gur, 20 x 80 areca nut and pan in proportion are said to have been given to the bride's family on the day before the Great Wedding to feed the houses of the bride's Name House. Today this is a matter of arrangement

between the two families. In Fedua's marriage it was settled that the groom's father and the bride's elder brother should each bear the expenses of feeding the houses of his own Name House. Often the bride's house bears the whole expense and also pays a substantial sum to obtain a bridegroom with good prospects.

The kinship terminology also suggests a relative equality of standing between the two parties. The parents of the bride and the parents of the groom use reciprocal kinship terms, standing to one another as biyoi and biyanī according to sex. In proximate generations a distinction is made between relatives on the father's side and relatives on the mother's side. The father's brothers and sisters are terminologically distinguished from the mother's brothers and sisters, and a brother's child (bhatijā) is distinguished from a sister's child (bhāgin). But this distinction does not persist into the next generation, as might have been expected had there been a hierarchical relationship between wife-givers and wife-receivers. The children of the father's brother, the father's sister, the mother's brother and the mother's sister are all termed elder or younger brother (kakāi, bhāi), or elder or younger sister (bāi, bhanī), according to age. As discussed above, the two sides are often related in some way through a previous marriage because of the tendency for villages to renew marriage links through the interchange of brides.⁸

The shift in the idea of marriage from the gift of a girl to the acquisition of a bridegroom has been accompanied by a corresponding increase in the size of the dowry and other expenses of the bride's house. But the ritual prestations at the wedding continue to reflect the transfer of the bride by her father to her husband's family. Prior to the conclusion of the wedding, when the groom obtains possession of the bride, the main flow of gifts is therefore from the groom's house to the bride's house. On his first visit to the bride's house the groom's father presents a dish of areca nut and pan called 'to give a dish for the sake of the girl' (chovalī nimite śarāi pelovā) or 'to ask for the girl' (chovalī khojā). On his return visit, called 'to go to make the relationship' (samandha karibaloi jovā), the bride's father takes nothing and each member of his party is offered cloth and areca nut with pan as 'respect'. At the wedding itself the chief prestations from the groom's house are as follows:

Joran, consisting chiefly of gold ornaments and 5 sets of clothes for the bride.

'Stomach-burning bundle' for the bride's mother.

'Respect for the guru's house' (guru ghariyā mān), consisting of a long embroidered cloth, a silver rupee and areca nut with pan for the Gosain of the bride's father.

'Opening respect' (kholā mananī) of a very large bunch of areca nut with pan given by the groom on arrival as he bows down before the assembled company.

'Respect' (mān) of cloth and areca nut with pan for the bride's senior male agnates. This is given by a senior relation of the groom to the bride's paternal grandfather and her other male relations in order of seniority; or it may be placed before them collectively. It is customary to take the areca nut and pan, but not the cloth.

'Respect' (mān) of cloth with areca nut and pan for the bride's senior female agnates.

'Respect for bringing out the girl' (chovālī olovā mān), consisting of a silver rupee and areca nut with pan given to the women of the bride's party when it is time for the bride to come out.

'Dress for the giver of the bride' (kaniyā dātar sāj), consisting of a set of clothes given to the bride's father.

'Dress for the mother of the bride' (mākar sāj), consisting of a set of clothes given to the bride's mother.

'Dress for the mother's brother' (momāi sāj), consisting of a set of clothes and a very large bunch of areca nut with pan given to the bride's mother's brother.

'Respect for the people' (rāiḥar mān), consisting of a very large bunch of areca nut with pan given to the houses of the bride's Name House.

'Gift for the body' (gā-dān) of Rs: 80-200 given for the transfer of the girl's body. Obsolete.

After the marriage, when the groom's house is in physical possession of the bride, the flow of gifts is reversed. The bride usually takes a whole suitcase of cloth as 'respect' when she leaves for the groom's house. She bows down before her husband's senior agnates and their wives in turn, offering cloth with cut areca nut in a funnel of pan (thuriyā tāmol) and a few pice on a raised dish, that is, before her husband's father, husband's mother and her husband's father's brothers and their wives; in some families before her husband's elder brothers and their wives also. To her husband's junior relations she also

brings gifts, but these are not given as 'respect' and before them she does not make obeisance. She also gives 'respect' to her husband's affinal house on their first visit to the house after her marriage, that is, to her husband's father's sisters and their husbands, her husband's mother's brothers and their wives, and her husband's elder sisters and their husbands. It is said that a new daughter-in-law is expected to give 'respect'. The position of the husband is different from that of the wife as regards the obligation to offer 'respect'. The husband gives 'respect' to his wife's senior agnates, who are his affines, but he is not required to give 'respect' to the affines of his wife's agnates, such as to his wife's father's sister who, being removed by another descent group, cannot demand 'respect'. The wife, on the other hand, is incorporated into her husband's descent group on marriage and must offer 'respect' to all his senior kin, both agnatic and affinal.

A distinction is made between affines on the daughter's side (jīyārī phālar mitir) and affines on the daughter-in-law's side (bovārī phālar mitir). Parents take a great interest in the families of their married daughters, but these families do not take an equal interest in them. A mother expects her son-in-law to visit her house very frequently, but she does not like her son to visit his wife's house frequently. If he does so, she may rebuke him: 'Why are you going so often? Are you bewitched (āhudi lāgiche)?' The daughter-in-law will resent the preference shown for the family of the daughter. 'After all, I am a daughter married to this house. My mother-in-law should have the courtesy to inquire about my family.' But parents do not like the attachment of their son to his wife's family. If he is earning a salary and is not contributing much to his parent's household, it will be suspected that he is giving money secretly to his wife's house. A married man remarked: 'In all families you find this. Internal enmity is there. Of course, if the daughter-in-law's parents visit, all courtesy is shown. In treatment they do not distinguish between affines on the daughter's side and affines on the daughter-in-law's side, but in mind they keep a difference.'

The parents on the two sides do not visit often unless specifically invited to a wedding or some other ceremony. From the point of view of the boy's parents there is little to draw them to the house of

their daughter-in-law. The girl's parents also visit rarely but for different reasons. They feel it is not for them to go to their daughter's house but for the daughter and her husband to come to them. This is a matter both of status and of concern for their daughter's welfare. Frequent visits are likely to be seen as interference and may lead to complaints by the mother-in-law to the daughter that she is being put to a great deal of trouble on her account cooking and making preparations for the visits of her parents. As the happiness of their daughter depends on the goodwill of the family into which she has been married, her parents are careful to avoid causes for complaint. They also feel that if they visit too frequently, they will not be received with the respect which is their due. They are therefore more likely to send a younger son to the house for news of their daughter than to visit themselves. When they go, they always take gifts so that they should be welcome. When the boy's parents visit, they usually bring nothing.

A son-in-law is required to visit his wife's parents at the three seasonal festivals (bihu). He bows down before his wife's father and wife's mother, offering them 'respect' of areca nut and pan on a raised dish. He also brings presents for his wife's younger brothers and sisters, with whom he is usually very friendly. The wife's younger sister, who is a frequent choice in a second marriage, gives him in return a small cloth which she may have woven herself. For the first few years after marriage he will visit the other houses of the descent group also, but this is soon discontinued.

'My elder sister's husband will come tomorrow. It is Kati Bihu - he must come. He will bow down with areca nut before my father and mother. He never goes to see my father's younger brother and his family next door. He should go, but he never goes.'

The son-in-law returns the same evening to eat Bihu rice with his family. As long as his wife's father and mother are alive, he must visit their house at Bihu. After their death visiting continues for a time and then lapses.

'I will not go to my wife's house on Kati Bihu today. It is more than 30 years since my marriage. My wife's father and mother are dead. I went regularly to that house every Bihu till my wife's mother died 5 years ago.'

A married daughter usually visits her mother's house three or four times a year. She goes there in the fifth month of pregnancy to eat the 'five nectars' (honey, ghee, sugar, milk, curd) and she gives birth to her first child, and usually to one or two subsequent children, in her mother's house. After the death of her parents she continues for some years to visit her brothers but less and less frequently till contact becomes reduced to formal occasions like weddings and funerals.

Affines on the daughter-in-law's side have no obligation to visit at fixed times and they come on the whole less frequently. Nevertheless they may come at Bihu.

'I will go to my wife's father's house today. It is the custom (Kati Bihu). It is not compulsory for my wife's family to visit us. They need not come, but they come. My wife's younger brother is coming tomorrow.'

Alternatively, when the daughter returns from her mother's house she is often accompanied by a younger sibling or an elder brother with his wife and children who stay for a few days. By far the commonest visitor is the wife's younger brother who is usually certain of a welcome. There is a saying:

'I will go to my elder sister's house:
I will eat with both my hands.'

Behaviour between affines is characterized by courtesy. When affines come on a visit, they are always given a bed - even if some family members have to sleep on the floor - and, if possible, duck or fish to eat. In the next generation, the formality of the affinal relationship changes into a cognatic tie. But the distinction between affines on the daughter's side and affines on the daughter-in-law's side is maintained in the different attitudes towards patrilineal and matrilineal kin, the former characterized by authority and respect and the latter by warmth and privileged license.

Notes.

1. There is a belief that a bull should not work for the house in which it was born. In consequence households used to exchange bulls before they were castrated and set to the plough. The custom is no longer observed.
2. Prior to Independence pre-puberty marriage was universal among Brahman girls. When I returned to Assam in 1969 Brahman girls were studying for higher education and their age of marriage was probably the highest of any caste. This has been a complete change.
3. At tolani biyā the girl is considered to be married to a banana tree before which she bows down as if to her husband.
4. Traditionally all girls were given in marriage. Today there are a few women following careers who remain single.
5. In collecting survey data from house to house I inquired into the sources of information leading to marriage. The answers were not always very informative especially in the case of marriages arranged long since, but they suggested that affines often played a significant role in match-making. I therefore inquired more systematically into this point in respect of all marriages in one descent group and the data are presented above. Unfortunately I had not, at that stage, realized that marriages often take place with the affines of affines and I cannot trace these connections for the marriages of this descent group except in the one or two cases where they emerged spontaneously.
6. A gift (dān) is considered to transmit the qualities of the giver. In making a gift therefore, except to an inferior, it is customary to hand over at the same time a sum of money termed dakṣiṇā as compensation for accepting the gift. Gifts to Brahmans are regularly accompanied by dakṣiṇā.
7. In Brahman weddings the mother's brother has no special ritual office.
8. Mayer has made all these points in respect of marriage patterns in the village he studied in Madhya Pradesh - roughly equivalent marriage costs, reciprocal kin terms for cross-cousins, marriage between previously related families and the inter-change of brides between villages (Mayer 1960:234).

CHAPTER 4

THE PATTERN OF MARRIAGE

In this chapter data are presented on 609 marriages contracted by the 58 agnatic descent groups of Panbari. They include all existing and remembered marriages to, from and within the village. The term 'marriage' is here used in the widest sense to mean any type of union between a man and a woman living together in one house, and the terms 'husband' and 'wife' are used for the partners of the union. A girl usually leaves her parents' house at marriage and is taken by her husband to live in his house: this was the case in 581 of the marriages recorded. Of these 306 were of daughters married out, 231 were of daughters-in-law married in, and 38 took place within the village.¹ There is another type of union in which the man moves instead of the girl and becomes a son-in-law-of-the-house (gharar jovāi) living with his wife's parents: 34 unions were of this type. Of these 23 were sons-in-law married in, 5 were of sons married out, and 6 took place within the village.

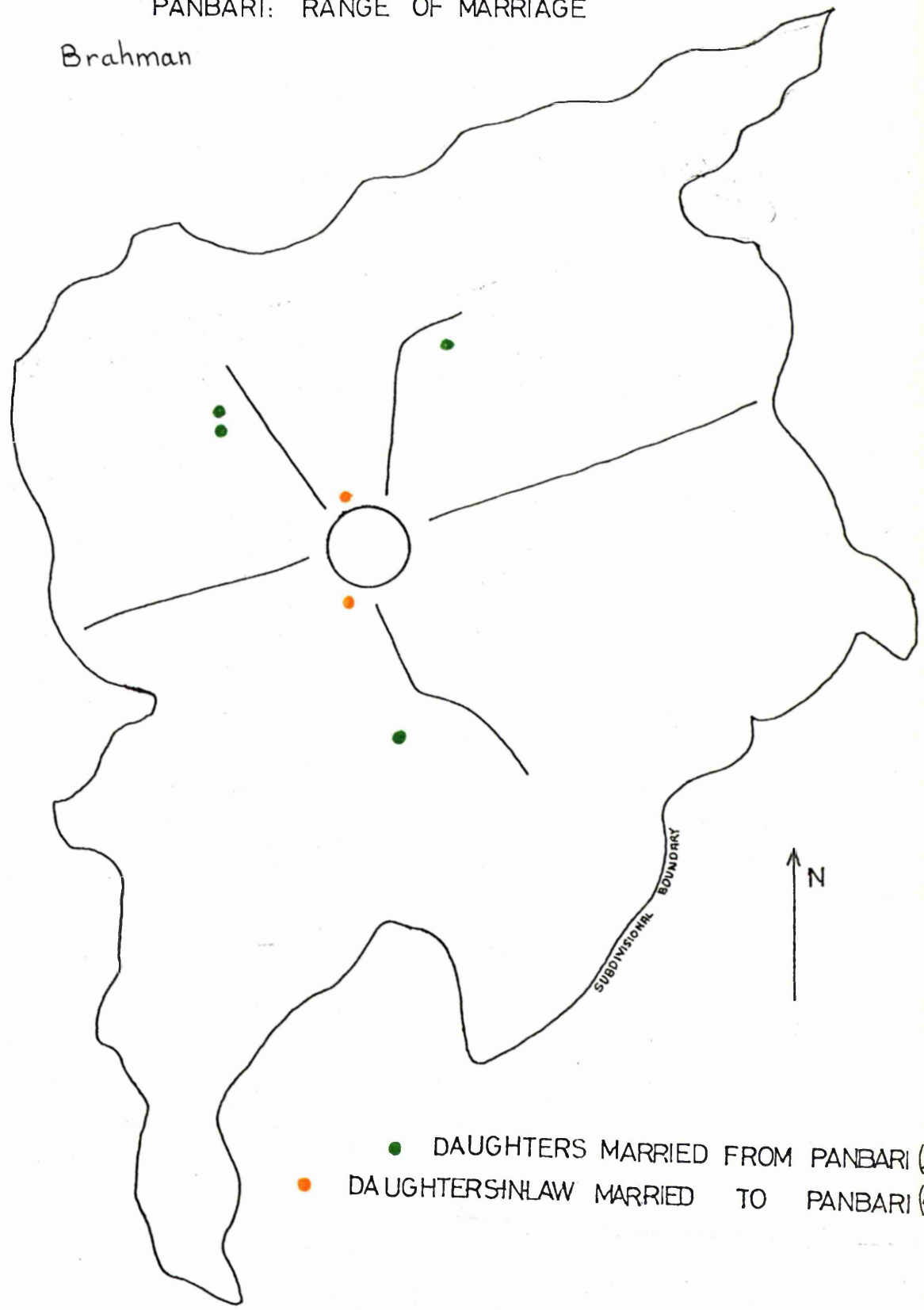
The Range of Marriage.

Marriage is spoken of as the passage of women between villages. It will be asked of a daughter, 'To where have you given her?' or of a daughter-in-law, 'From where have you brought her?' Maps 4 - 11 overleaf show the range of marriage for the 8 castes in Panbari. Marriages outside the subdivision are indicated by arrows outside the rectangle. In the case of inter-caste unions a daughter married out is of the caste of the family that gave her and is shown under that caste; a daughter-in-law married in is not of the same caste as the family to which she goes but, in the case of marriages between villages, she is shown on the map and in Table 14 under the caste of that family in order to illustrate the geographical range of marriages by caste. Marriages within the village appear twice, because one family has given a daughter and another has received a daughter-in-law. Here each family is shown under its own caste. The same procedure

MAP 4 .

PANBARI: RANGE OF MARRIAGE

Brahman

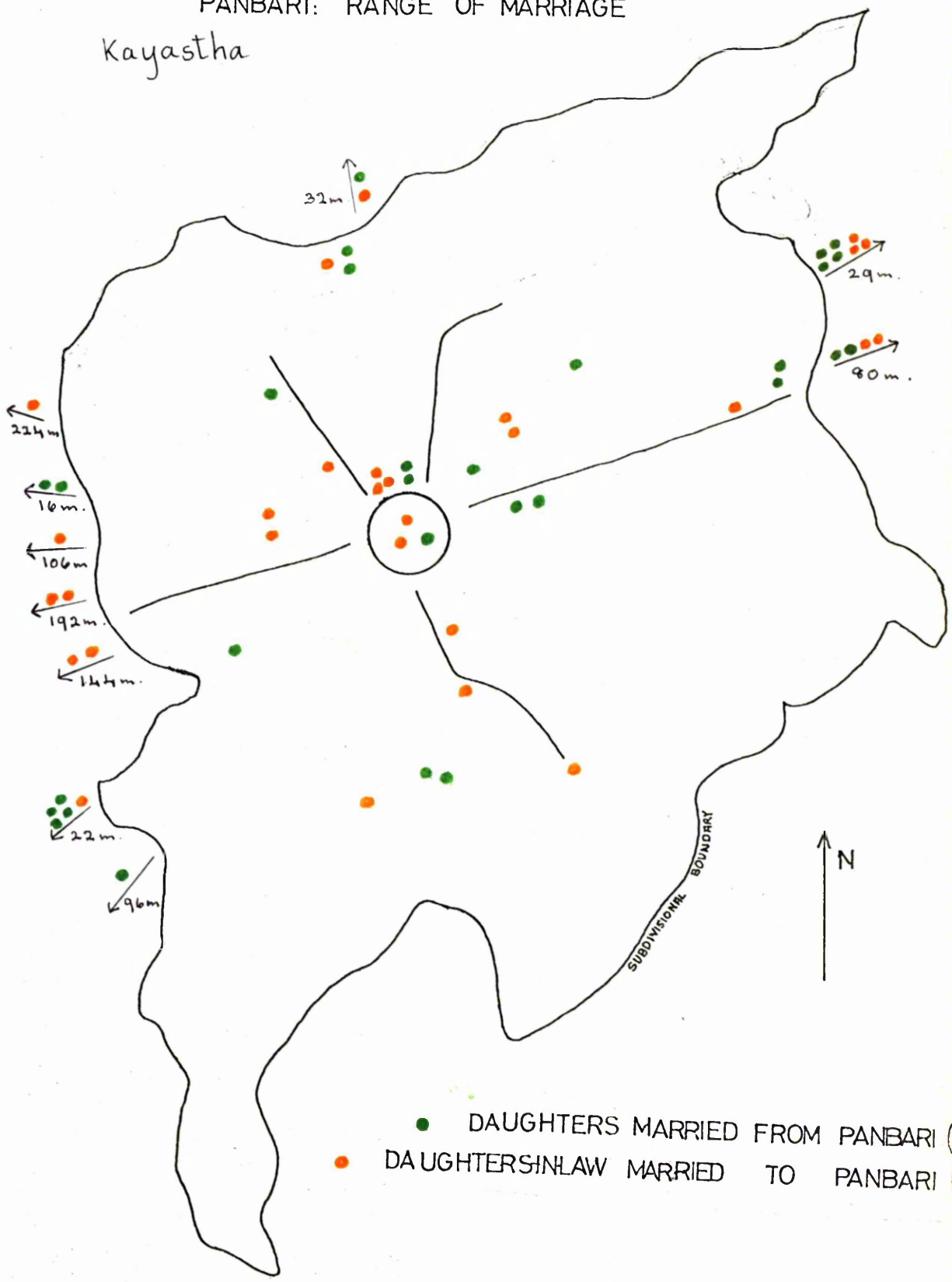


- DAUGHTERS MARRIED FROM PANBARI (2)
- DAUGHTERS-IN-LAW MARRIED TO PANBARI (4)

SCALE 1" = 5 m.

MAP 5 .

PANBARI: RANGE OF MARRIAGE
Kayastha



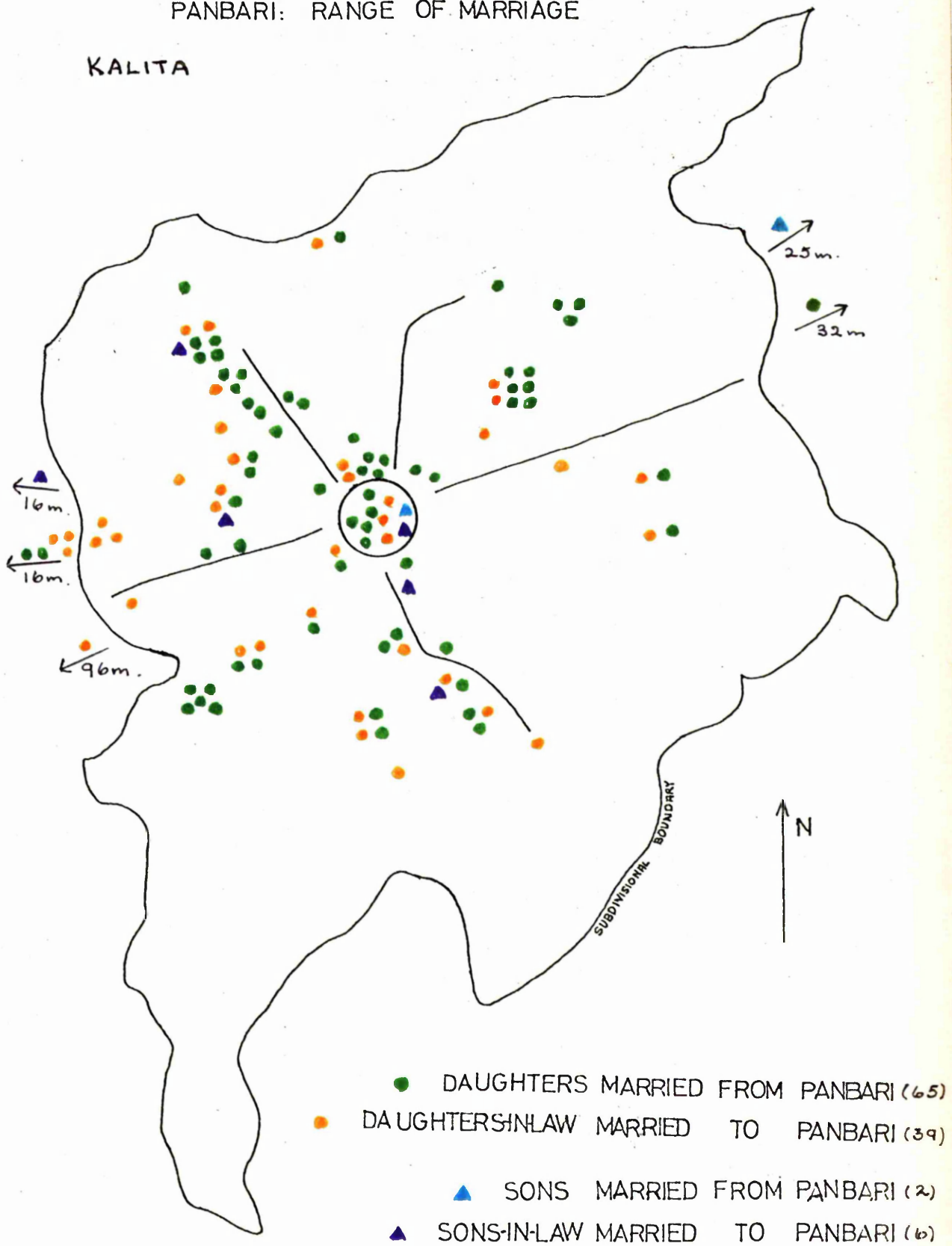
● DAUGHTERS MARRIED FROM PANBARI (29)
● DAUGHTERS IN-LAW MARRIED TO PANBARI (25)

SCALE 1" = 5 m.

MAP 6.

PANBARI: RANGE OF MARRIAGE

KALITA

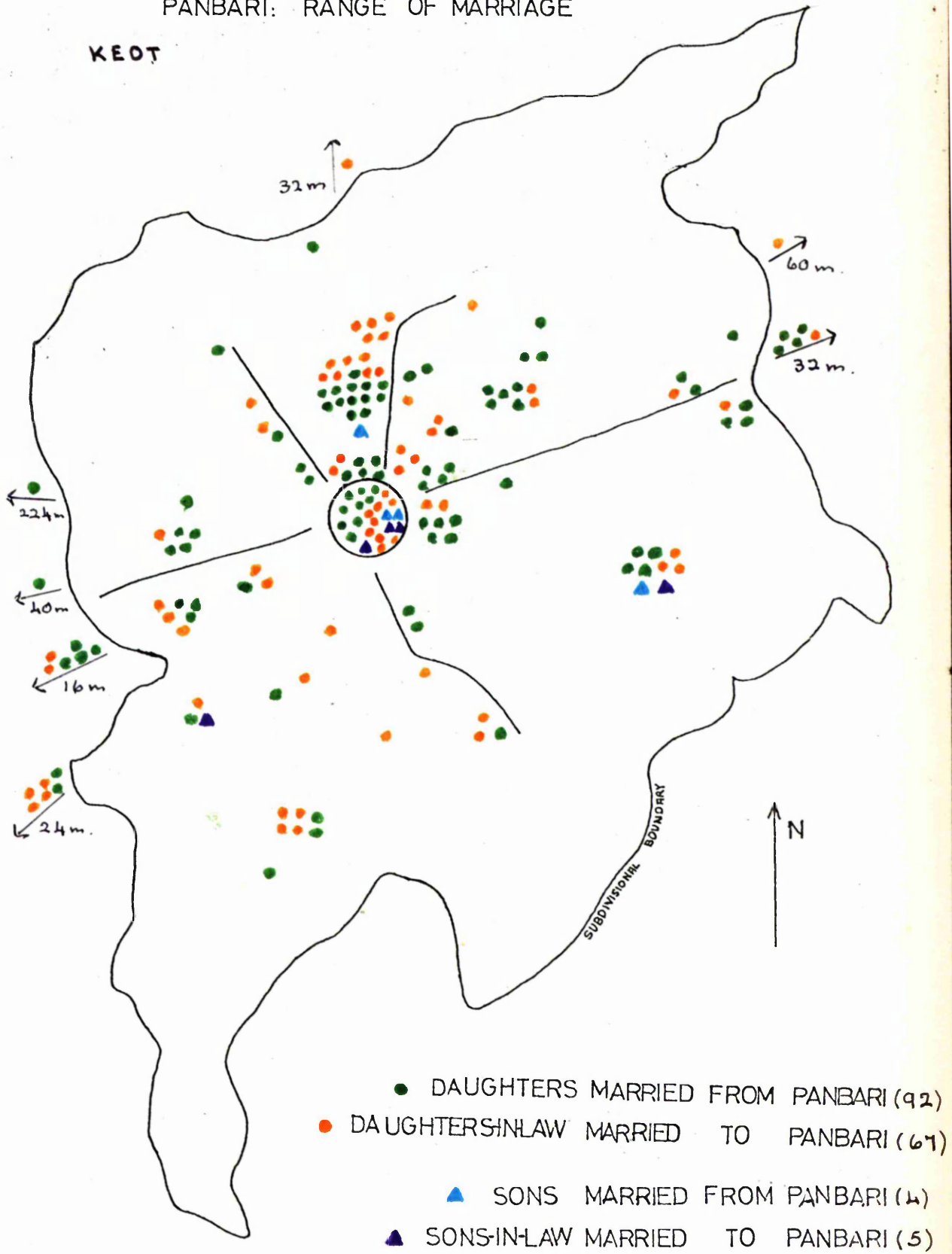


SCALE 1" = 5 m.

MAP 7.

PANBARI: RANGE OF MARRIAGE

KEOT

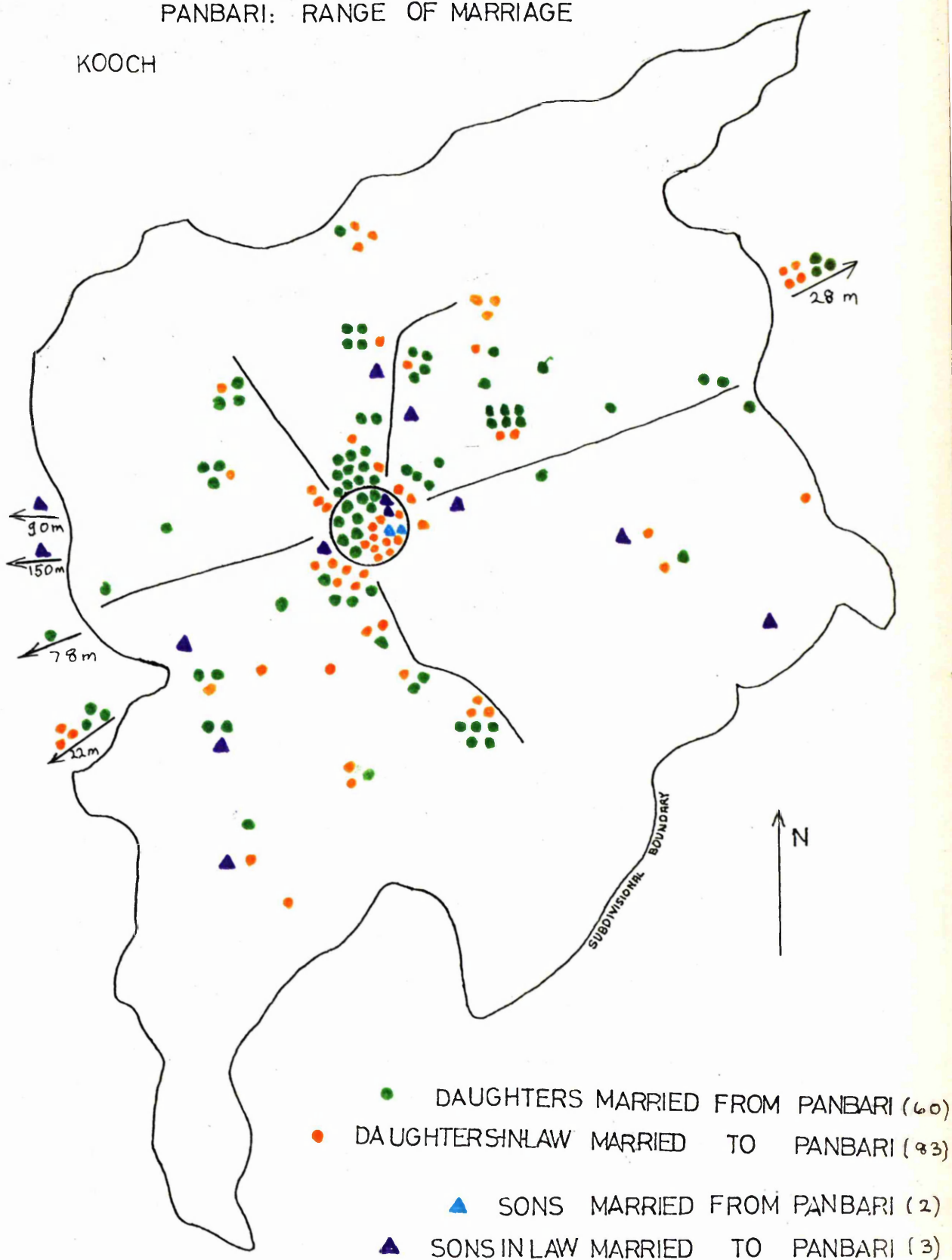


SCALE 1" = 5 m.

MAP 8 .

PANBARI: RANGE OF MARRIAGE

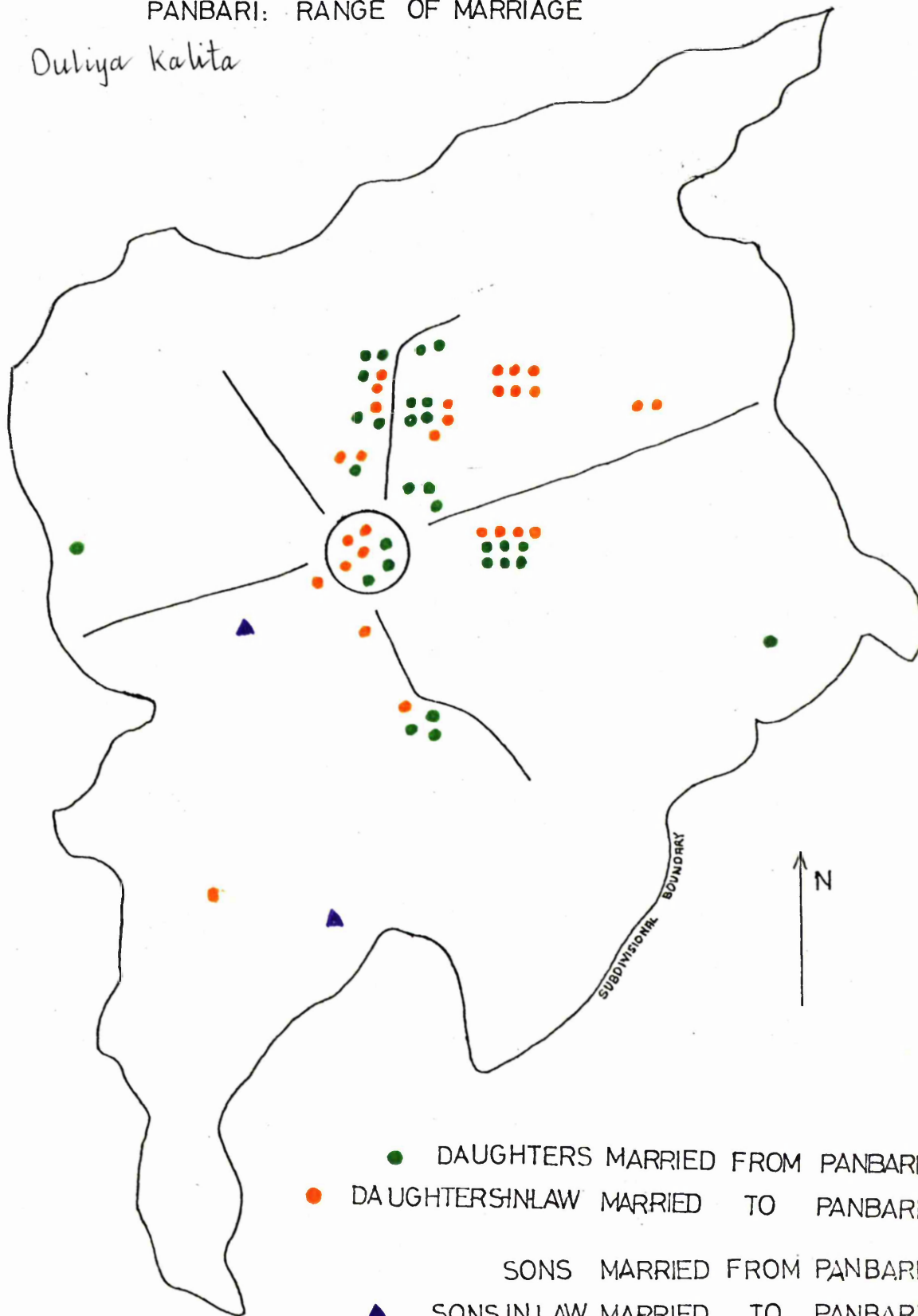
KOOCH



SCALE 1" = 5 m.

MAP 9.

PANBARI: RANGE OF MARRIAGE

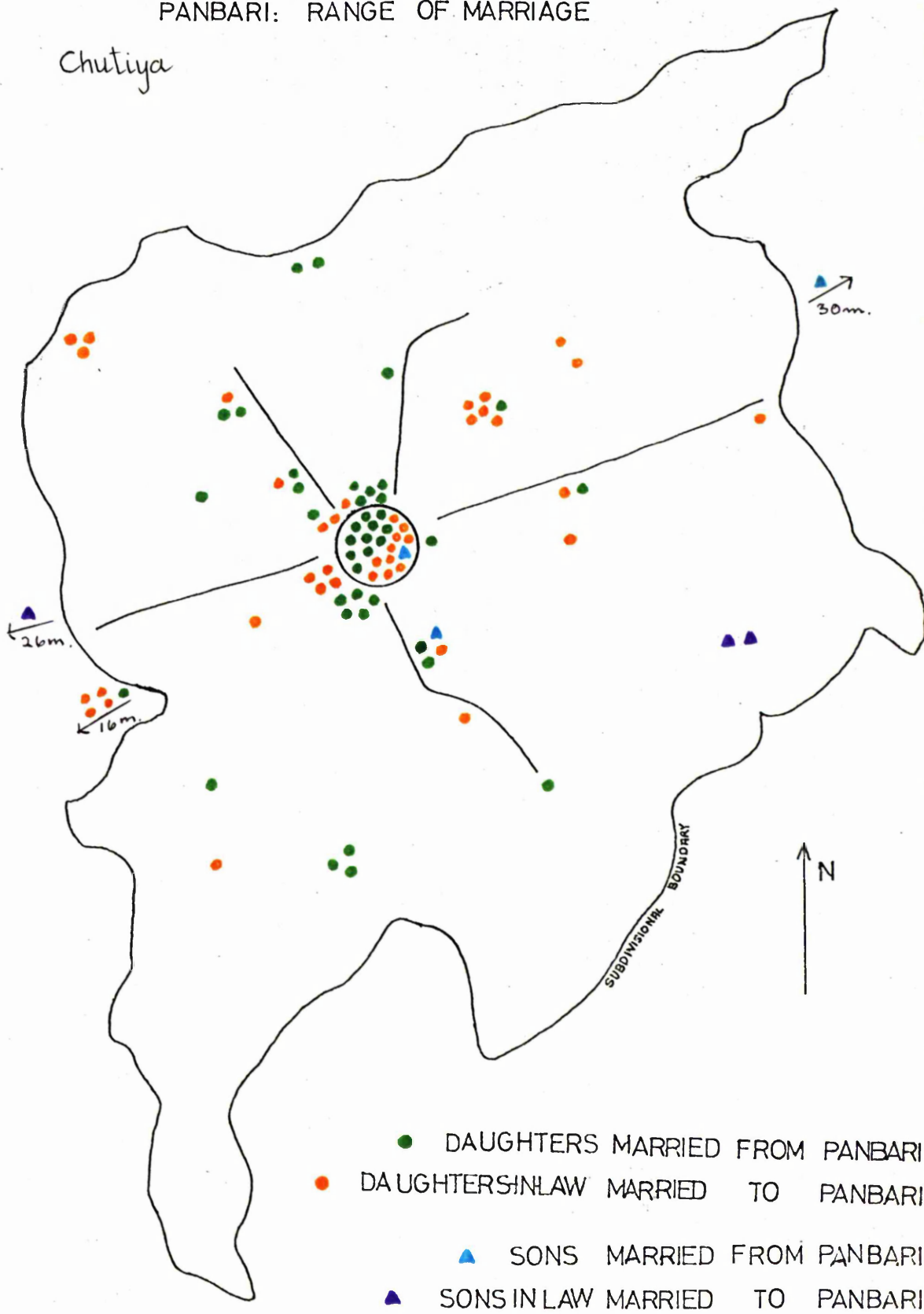
Duliya kalita

SCALE 1" = 5 m.

MAP 10.

PANBARI: RANGE OF MARRIAGE

Chutiya

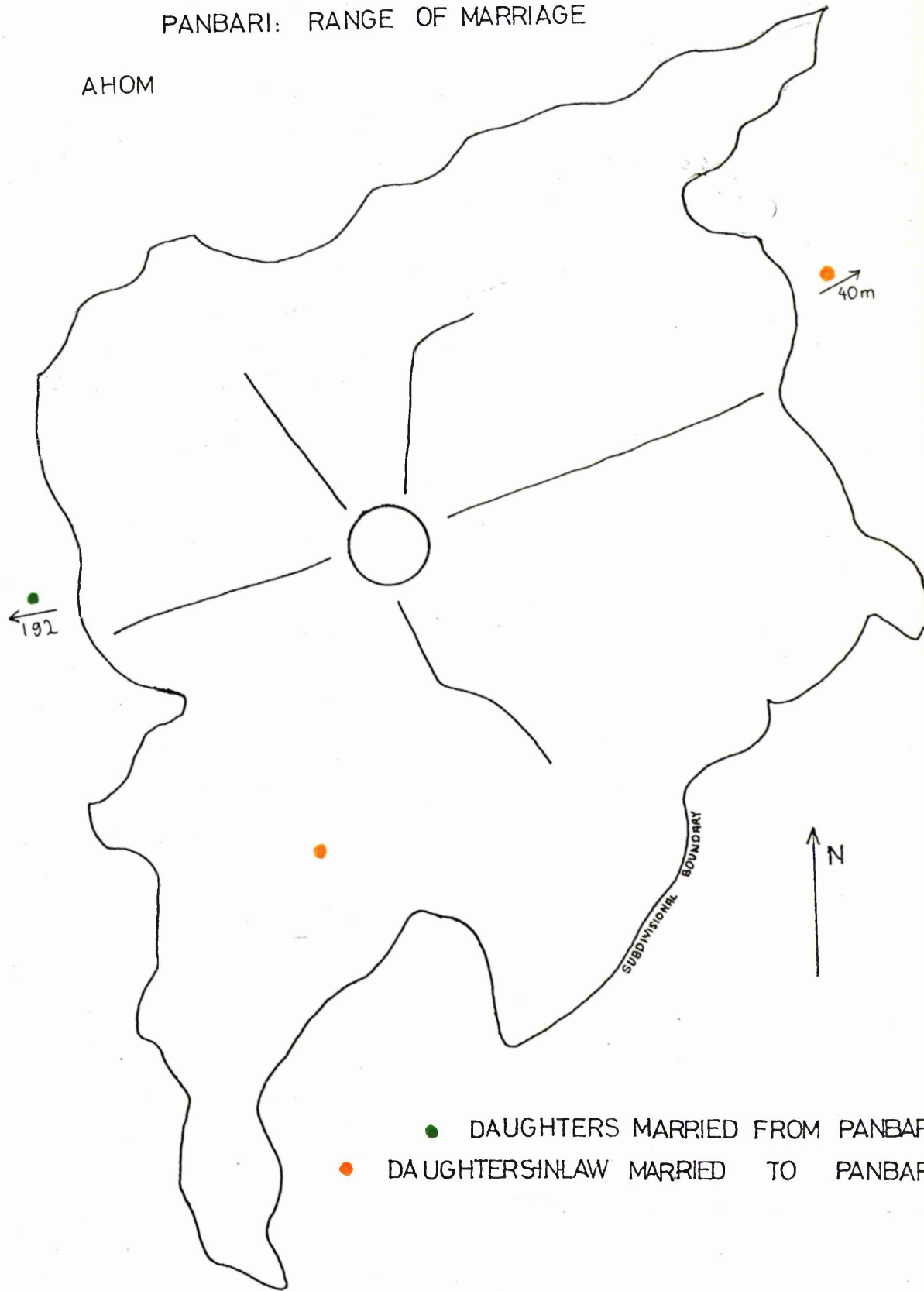


SCALE 1" = 5 m.

MAP 11 .

PANBARI: RANGE OF MARRIAGE

AHOM



- DAUGHTERS MARRIED FROM PANBARI (1)
- DAUGHTERS INLAW MARRIED TO PANBARI (2)

SCALE 1" = 5 m.

has been followed for sons-in-law-of-the-house.

Tables 14 and 15 (pp. 97 and 98) show the range of marriage by caste.

It is apparent from the distribution of marriages as shown on the maps and from Tables 14 and 15 that, for all castes except Kayastha, the great majority of marriages are not only within the subdivision but with villages within a range of 8 miles from Panbari. The Kayastha caste are traditionally said to be scribes but today many of them are engaged in business. Like the Brahmans they are chiefly found in the neighbourhood of towns where they can find occupation for their clerical and entrepreneurial skills. The Kayasthas in Panbari have a much wider range of marriage than the other castes, extending from Goalpara 224 miles to the west to Dibrugarh 80 miles to the east. 48% of the Kayastha marriages were outside the subdivision compared with 11% for Panbari as a whole. 25 of the 58 Kayastha marriages were with towns. The range of affinal connections among the Brahmans probably shows a similar pattern. (The only two Brahman households in the village were those of a poor priest and his brother which are not representative of the caste as a whole.)

Villages connected by affinal links are not thought of as wife-giving and wife-receiving villages. About 40% are connected by reciprocal marriages within the caste.

Table 16: Panbari: Affinal Links with Villages in Subdivision by Caste - Girls.

Caste	No. of marriages within subdivision	No. of villages connected by marriage	% of villages connected by reciprocal marriages
Brahman	6	5	-
Kayastha	31	20	15% (3)
Kalita	99	41	41% (17)
Keot	143	39	44% (17)
Kooch	133	40	48% (19)
Duliya Kalita	60	18	44% (8)
Chutiya	76	27	30% (8)
Ahom	1	1	-

Table 14. Panbari: Range of Marriage by Caste - Girls

Caste	Daughters married from Panbari			Total	Daughters-in-law married to Panbari			Total
	A	B	C		A	B	C	
Brahman	-	100% (4)	-	4	-	100% (2)	-	2
Kayastha	48% (14)	48% (14)	3% (1)	29	45% (13)	48% (14)	7% (2)	29
Kalita	5% (3)	88% (57)	8% (5)	65	10% (4)	82% (32)	8% (3)	39
Keot	13% (12)	77% (71)	10% (9)	92	13% (9)	73% (49)	13% (9)	67
Kooch	8% (7)	81% (67)	11% (9)	83	12% (7)	72% (43)	17% (10)	60
Duliya Kalita	-	90% (26)	10% (3)	29	-	87% (26)	13% (4)	30
Chutiya	2% (1)	71% (29)	27% (11)	41	10% (4)	65% (26)	25% (10)	40
Ahom	100% (1)	-	-	1	50% (1)	50% (1)	-	2
Village:	11% (38)	78% (268)	11% (38)	344	14% (38)	72% (193)	14% (38)	269

A = Outside Subdivision

B = Inside Subdivision

C = Within Panbari

Table 15. Panbari: Range of Marriage by Caste - Sons-in-law-of-the-House

	Sons married from Panbari			Total	Sons-in-law married to Panbari			Total
	A	B	C		A	B	C	
Brahman	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Kayastha	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Kalita	50% (1)	-	50% (1)	2	17% (1)	67% (4)	17% (1)	6
Keot	-	50% (2)	50% (2)	4	-	40% (2)	60% (3)	5
Kooch	-	-	100% (2)	2	15% (2)	69% (9)	15% (2)	13
Duliya Kalita	-	-	-	-	-	100% (2)	-	2
Chutiya	33% (1)	33% (1)	33% (1)	3	33% (1)	67% (2)	-	3
Ahom	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Village:	18% (2)	27% (3)	55% (6)	11	14% (4)	66% (19)	21% (6)	29

A = Outside Subdivision

B = Inside Subdivision

C = Within Panbari

Types of Marriage.

Several types of marriage are recognized:

- (1) 'Bringing-out marriage' (tolani biyā) or 'impure marriage' (cuvā biyā) held on the 7th day of a girl's first menstruation in non-Brahman castes. She is ceremonially bathed and dressed as if a bride while village women sing marriage songs. She then bows down before a banana tree which is considered to be her husband and it is believed that her husband will come from the direction in which it fruits.
- (2) 'Purifying marriage' (śānti biyā) formerly held after a girl's first menstruation in Brahman families. The Great Marriage had already been performed and some terminal rites were held before the girl joined her husband.
- (3) 'Great marriage' (bar biyā). The central rite is the fire sacrifice (hom) which separates a girl from her natal kin and assimilates her to her husband and her husband's kin.
- (4) 'Gift marriage' (joran biyā). The boy's relations bring gifts to the girl's house and her father hands over the girl in the presence of some leading villagers. It is a short and simple ceremony held mainly in poor families who cannot afford the cost of a Great Marriage.
- (5) 'Old marriage' (burhā biyā). A couple who have been living together unmarried may regularize their position by performing the rites of Great Marriage (bar biyā). Such a marriage is called 'old' (burhā).
- (6) Civil marriage conducted by a magistrate. In the eyes of the villagers this is no marriage at all.

Only 'great marriage' and 'old marriage' have the ritual efficacy of translating a girl to her husband's kin. Other unions carry no prestige.

Marriage within the village.

Marriage is properly an arrangement between parents connecting villages a day's journey away. But in fact the frequency of marriage is highest within the village itself (v. maps). In Panbari, as elsewhere, boys and girls fall in love and take matters into their own hands by eloping so that the 58 descent groups of Panbari are connected

by a web of affinal ties. 44 unions occurred within the unit of study, of which 6 were sons-in-law-of-the-house.² These may be broken down as follows:

Table 17: Panbari: Types of Union within Village by Caste.

Caste	Great marriage	Gift marriage	Elope-ment	Unmarried mothers	Sons-in-law of-the-house	
Brahman	-	-	-	-	-	-
Kayastha	-	-	2	-	-	2
Kalita	-	-	6	-	1	7
Keot	4	1	6	-	3	14
Kooch	3	3	5	-	2	13
Duliya Kalita	1	-	3	1	1	5
Chutiya	3	-	9	1	1	14
Ahom	-	-	-	-	-	-
<u>Village:</u>	11	4	31	2	7	55

N.B. The 11 inter-caste unions are entered under both castes.

Most of the marriages within the village returned as 'great marriage' (bar biya) are in respect of couples long since dead whose romantic activities have faded from village memory. A number of these were probably elopements.

Elopements are also common between neighbouring villages. Of the marriages within Panbari and between Panbari and adjacent villages 42% are elopements compared with 11% for all marriages. The high density of marriage in the neighbourhood of the village is chiefly the result of love matches between eloping couples.

Gift marriages (joran biya).

Gift marriages are arranged marriages but without the ceremony and expense of a great marriage. Some senior relations of the groom take the joran gifts to the girl's house where her relations and some leading villagers are assembled. In their presence the girl's father declares that he gives his daughter to the groom. Then they eat areca nut and pan brought by the groom's house and give their blessing to the union. After this the girl is taken to the man's house.

29 cases of gift marriages were recorded. These are shown by caste in the following table:

Table 18: Panbari: Distribution of Recorded Gift Marriages by Caste.

Caste	No. of gift marriages	No. of all marriages
Brahman	-	6
Kayastha	-	57
Kalita	4	109
Keot	8	159
Kooch	10	148
Duliya Kalita	1	59
Chutiya	5	79
Ahom	1	3
<u>Village:</u>	29	620 *

* The 11 inter-caste unions within Panbari are entered under both castes.

9 of the 29 gift marriages occurred in poor families.

Pokhili's father is dead. Her mother is very poor and lives by begging. She was given by gift marriage.

13 were second 'marriages' for women. Young widows rarely remain single for long except in Brahman households. As a woman can be married once only by the sacred fire (hom), subsequent unions are necessarily elopements or gift marriages.

3 were second or third marriages for men. A man who marries more than once is not always willing to incur again the expenses of a great marriage unless he is of a rich family. This number is likely to be an under-estimate.

2 were second marriages for both men and women.

1 was the marriage of a girl to her brother's wife's brother. They fell in love and eloped. The parents arranged a gift marriage.

1 was the case of a girl who could not be married because her mother was alive and unmarried (v. section on Old Marriage pp. 103-5 below).

Elopement.

Elopement is conceived in the village as the abduction of a girl who is carried off forcibly to the young man's house. In fact, however,

the girl makes only a token show of resistance and does not protest loudly enough to rouse her family and neighbours. A young man explained: 'The girl wishes to go but will not go without marriage. So he forces her. This is called kidnap.' The term 'elopement' is used here as a loose category to cover all cases where the girl is already pregnant or is taken to the man's house without the formal consent of the parents.

67 of the 609 marriages were elopements, of which almost half (31) were with a girl living either in the same village or in an adjacent village. Usually she is a close neighbour living in the same hamlet. In some cases the liaison is with the knowledge of the girl's parents, or at least of her mother, who see an advantage in the match.

Mohan fell in love with a village girl called Little Gold. His mother said she would never agree to the marriage as Little Gold's family was poor. Little Gold's father was out all day and Mohan said he did not know of the affair but her mother knew. When Little Gold was one month pregnant, Mohan took her to his house.

The distribution of elopements by caste is shown in the following table:

Table 19: Panbari: Distribution of Recorded Elopements by Caste.

Caste	No. of elopements	No. of all marriages
Brahman	-	6
Kayastha	3	57
Kalita	9	109
Keot	11	159
Kooch	23	148
Duliya Kalita	4	59
Chutiya	25	79
Ahom	1	3
<u>Village:</u>	76	620

N.B. Inter-caste unions within Panbari are entered under both castes. 20 of the 67 elopements were inter-caste and of these 9 took place within Panbari.

The pattern of distribution shows a broad inverse correlation between caste rank and frequency of elopement with the exception of the Duliya Kalitas, among whom the relative absence of irregular unions

is probably the result of their social aspirations as a mobile caste.

The wishes of the children are not consulted in arranged marriages. It is not proper for a son to raise the subject of a prospective match with his father although he may object indirectly through his mother, probably on the general grounds of being too young. If a girl falls in love, she is usually married off as soon as possible to a suitable husband and a village doctor (bej) may be consulted to provide a charm to cure her of her attachment.

Akheswar was a Duliya Kalita whose daughter fell in love with a Chutiya across the road. The couple were intercepted in the act of eloping and the girl brought back to her own house. Her father arranged her marriage within a week. He persuaded the villagers to say nothing of the incident to the groom's house, promising in return to contribute the cost of a pillar to the new Name House which was in course of construction.

Padma's sister fell in love with a young contractor while studying at college in the town. When she returned home, they exchanged some letters. Her parents arranged a marriage for her and consulted a famous bej, as a result of which she is now said to be happily in love with her husband.

For the very poor elopement is often the only method of obtaining a mate, while for those in love it provides a means of circumventing parental choice.

Runee's daughter eloped with Deoram's son. Her grandmother upbraided her as she left, but her mother watched her go in silence. She was a poor widow and often there was not enough to eat in the house. She knew she could not afford to marry her daughter.

Akon's elder sister was married to the village of Gazpuria. Some years later his father made inquiries for a suitable husband for the younger sister and a man came to see her with a view to marriage with his son. But she said she would never marry anyone except her elder sister's husband's brother, Konbap. Eventually her father gave way and a marriage was arranged with Konbap. While visiting his sisters' house in Gazpuria, Akon fell in love with a girl in the neighbourhood. His father refused to agree to the marriage; he had already given two daughters to one house against his will, he would not have three affinal houses in one village. Akon eventually eloped with the girl and brought her home. Seven years later Akon regularized the position by performing 'old marriage', but his father refused to take any part in the ceremony which was held in the house of his elder brother.

Old Marriage (burhā biyā).

Persons living together unmarried are under certain ritual disabilities. At feasts (bhoj) an unmarried man has to sit together with the young boys. He cannot act as Distributor in the Name House.

An unmarried woman (ābiyoi) cannot touch the offering (prasād) after it is put to soak and people will not accept food from her hand except for tea and uncooked jal-pān.

Young couples who elope may at any time regularize their union by holding a marriage ceremony which is called 'old' (burhā) because of its late performance. The girl returns to her mother's house or, if her parents refuse to co-operate, some other house in the village is used as the house of the bride. The full rites of a great wedding (bar biyā) are then carried out. The ceremony cannot be held during pregnancy and children are forbidden to witness the marriage of their parents. Old marriages may be held within a few years of the elopement or of gift marriage - as soon in fact as the money for it can conveniently be found - but it is often postponed till the couple have children of marriageable age.

Jayanti eloped with a man in Gayangaon. Old marriage was performed 25 years later before the marriage of her eldest daughter.

Putu eloped with a young man in the village to whom she bore a son. The young man later sent her back to her mother's house. Shortly afterwards a gift marriage was arranged for her to another villager called Tileswar. More than 20 years later Tileswar and Putu held an old marriage because they wanted to marry a daughter.

The reason for this is that an individual cannot be married by great marriage if he or she has a mother still living who was not married by great marriage.

Golap's father was a Keot by caste. He eloped with a Chutiya girl and was cut off by his family. The two were never married. Golap took a wife by gift marriage. His three older sisters were also married by gift marriage and his younger sister eloped. His father is now dead, but his mother is still alive.

In the case of widows a difficulty arises. If the man survives his wife, it is only necessary for him to call a Brahman and undergo penance (prāyaścitta) before the marriage of a son or daughter. But if the woman survives her husband, she must herself be married by great marriage before her children can be married. She may be fortunate enough to find a widower willing to marry her in name only. The two will not live together after the wedding although she will have to observe ritual impurity on his death. If no bridegroom can be found, the widow will be married to a stone or a tree. In the case of a

substitute husband - a widower, stone, tree - the ceremony is abbreviated and only a few mantras uttered by the fire (hom). But in the case of the actual 'husband', the full rites of great marriage are held.

In old marriage the groom is constantly obstructed on his way to the bride's house by parties of villagers. They demand to know where he is going, they demand Rs: 1,000, they ask his age. Many guests arrive uninvited.

Unmarried mothers.

It is rare to find a woman who has given birth to a child still living in her parent's house. There were only two cases in the village at the time.

A Duliya Kalita girl bore a son by a Chutiya in the village. The little boy is now six years old. The Chutiya promised the Name House that he would marry the girl but he is now working in a Jute Mill in Nowgong and has not yet done so. After the baby was born, the girl's family called a Brahman to give penance (prāyaścitta) and held a ceremony to be restored to caste (uddhārani).

Bhunu is a Duliya Kalita whose daughter gave birth to a child by an Ahom. One night when the Ahom was visiting her house, Bhunu locked him in and called the neighbours to bear witness that he was the child's father. The Ahom became frightened and wrote a confession acknowledging paternity and promising to take the girl with the child to his house. But he did not do so and has since married. Bhunu threatens to take a case against him.

A man denying paternity may be required to swear an oath in the Name House that he is not the father. The oath usually takes the form: 'If I swear falsely, may my body go white'; or 'If I swear falsely, may I die within... (10 days or a month or a year).' I give the following case histories without comment:

Tankeswar swore on the Bhagavat in the Name House that he was not responsible for a girl's pregnancy, saying, 'If I am the man, let my body be white.' His whole body is white now. When he goes out, he covers himself with long sleeves and long trousers. At his daughter's marriage, which was arranged with great difficulty, his son took his place at the fire sacrifice.

Ganesh has white leprosy. His father's father is said to have developed the disease after swearing an oath that he had not made a girl pregnant. His father also had a patch on one side.

Bharat took an oath in the Name House, saying, 'If I am the man, may I die within a year.' Three months later he died.

Inter-caste Unions.

37 cases of inter-caste unions were recorded. In 2 cases the family concerned refused to furnish any further information. The remaining 35 cases are shown on the following table.

Table 20: Panbari: Distribution of Recorded Inter-caste Unions.

		Caste of Girl							
		Kalita	Keot	Kooch	Sonari Kalita	Duliya Kalita	Chutiya	Ahom	Non- Assamese
Caste of Boy	Kayastha	1	-	1	1	-	-	-	-
	Kalita	-	2	-	-	1	1	1	-
	Keot	2	-	2	-	-	2	1	1
	Kooch	2	-	-	-	-	2	-	-
	Duliya Kalita	-	-	-	-	-	2	-	-
	Chutiya	1	1	1	-	1	-	3	-
	Ahom	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-
	Chowdung	-	-	3	-	1	-	-	-
	Non- Assamese	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-

In 14 cases the caste of the girl was higher than that of the man and in 21 cases the caste of the man was higher than that of the girl.

The outcome of a mixed caste union cannot be predicted with certainty. The dominant tendency is for the partner of higher caste to fall to the caste of the lower and for the children also to be considered of the lower caste.

A Kalita woman eloped with a Keot. She was cut off by her family and her three daughters have all been married to Keots.

A Chutiya girl eloped with a Keot. He was cut off by his family and his children all rank as Chutiyas. His son became a son-in-law-of-the-house to a Chutiya family and his son's son eloped with a Chutiya girl.

A Kooch was brought as a son-in-law-of-the-house to a Chutiya girl. The children have all taken Chutiya caste and married Chutiyas.

A Chutiya girl eloped with a Duliya Kalita. Their children have married Chutiyas.

On the other hand, there is also a feeling that caste follows the father. Although this is sometimes explicitly stated, it seems to operate in practice as a tendency for the children to claim the caste of the father if he is of higher caste than the mother.

A Duliya Kalita eloped with a girl whose father was a Keot and whose mother was a Chutiya. Their children rank as Duliya Kalita.

Profulla, a young Kalita, was working as a clerk at High School where he met a Keot girl living in the village whom he took to his house for a few days. She then returned home. The boy's father would not agree to the marriage. Profulla told his father that the girl had threatened: 'If you do not marry me, I will kill myself by jumping from the tree in front of your house.' His father became frightened and gave his consent. Now that she has borne him seven children, no one has a word against her. This is a rich family and the children are considered Kalitas after their father.

The following case illustrates some of the implications of mixed caste unions. Konti was a Kalita who eloped with a Keot girl. He was cut off by his family. They had three children, two sons and a daughter. The daughter was married to a Kooch. The first son married twice, in both cases a Keot girl. The second son, Mukuta, became a son-in-law-of-the-house to a Chutiya girl who bore him two sons. The elder of these sons married a Kooch before his death. The younger son now claims to be of Kalita caste after his father's father, but he has not been able to marry a Kalita: his wife is Keot. Mukuta's second wife was a Kooch who bore him two daughters, both of whom have been married to Keots and one has a daughter also married to a Keot.

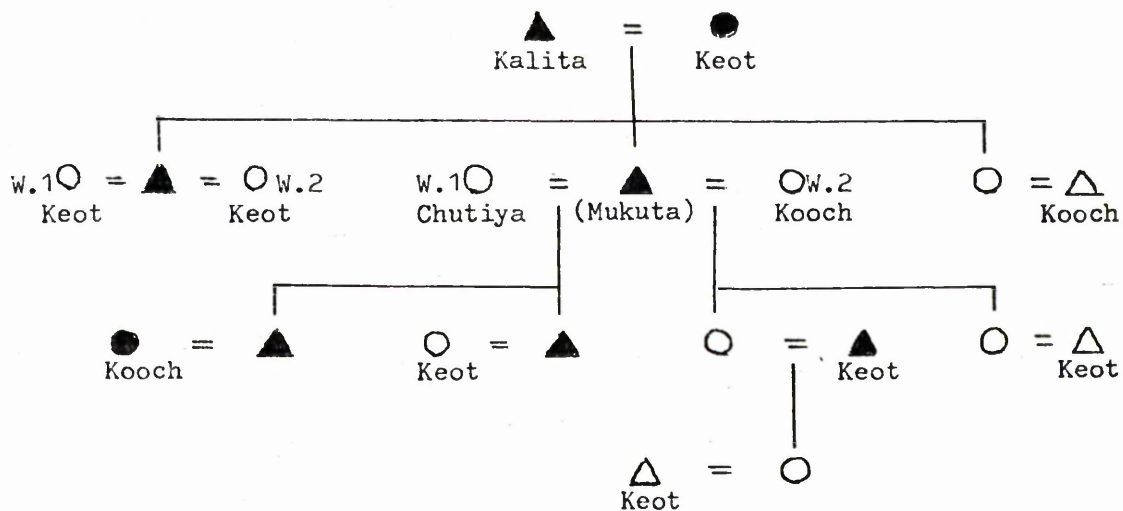


Fig. 2. Marriages of offspring of an inter-caste elopement

The marriages in this family indicate:

- (1) The tendency in mixed-caste unions for the children to take the lower of the two castes. Mukuta was considered a Keot after his mother and not a Kalita after his father.

- (2) The claim to belong to the father's caste if higher. Mukuta's sons by his first wife, a Chutiya, claim to be Kalita and have in fact succeeded in marrying Keot and Kooch. Mukuta's daughters by his second wife, a Kooch, have both been married to Keot after their father and not to Kooch after their mother. Their mother herself claims to be Kalita through marriage to Mukuta whose father was a Kalita.
- (3) The difficulty in arranging the marriages of children of mixed parentage, especially if poor, who marry where they can. Mukuta's younger sister was married to a Kooch, although her father was born a Kalita and her mother was Keot, and his elder son by his first wife (F. Keot, M. Chutiya) married a Kooch girl, while his younger brother was successful in marrying a Keot girl.

The reaction of the family to an inter-caste union varies. A man or girl who elopes with someone of unacceptably low caste or with a non-Hindu will certainly be cut off.

A young Kalita working on a tea garden formed an attachment with an Oriya girl. All connection with him has been cut off.

A Duliya Kalita girl became pregnant by a Chowdung (not completely Hinduized) who took her to his house. She has been cut off.

If, however, the castes are not far removed, the family response varies.

Mohan's FFyBD, a Kalita by caste, married a Keot. Her father cut her off. But Mohan's father continues to receive them in his house.

Two Kooch brothers eloped with two Kalita sisters. The girls' family recognized the relationship.

Jogeswar's father's younger brother, Keot, eloped with a Chutiya girl. His mother performed the 'throwing away of the cooking pots' (*caru pelovā*), saying: 'From today I have no son.' As a result he was disinherited and Jogeswar denied that his father had any brothers.

In the case of an inter-caste union the Name House takes no action provided it eats with both of the castes concerned. The houses of Bayan Name House eat with Kayastha, Kalita, Keot, Kooch and Chutiya. If an elopement occurs between these castes, their ritual status is not affected. But they do not eat with Ahom or Chowdung. When Dimbeswar's son, Kalita by caste, eloped with an Ahom girl, he was not only cut off by his family but turned out of the Name House.³

There have been several cases of affairs with Chowdungs because of the large Chowdung village just south of Panbari. The Chowdungs are said to have been the executioners of the Ahom kings and are not fully Hinduized. Such affairs always lead to expulsion.

Bapuram's younger sister, a Duliya Kalita by caste, became pregnant by a Chowdung. Her mother died of sorrow. Fifteen days after her mother's funeral the Chowdung took her to a hospital in town where she gave birth to a son and he then took mother and son to his home. Every house of Bapuram's descent group performed the 'throwing away of the cooking pots' and underwent penance from a Brahman. They held a ceremony for re-admission to caste (uddhāraṇi) to which they invited the houses of Tamuli Name House and also representatives of Name Houses from six other villages. Affines from all these villages had attended the mortuary rites of Bapuram's mother and eaten in the house while the girl was still there so that they were ritually impure. At least one man came from each Name House and ate the offering in the name of the members. When they had eaten, they ceased to be impure and Bapuram's descent group was restored to caste.

The Brahmans and Mahantas are in a special category as priests. If a man elopes with a Brahman girl, the villagers will not eat with him because it is considered a sin (pāp) to marry from guru class.

A Brahman in a nearby village married a Kalita girl. He became a Kalita and his children are Kalitas. But the Kalitas say they would not like to marry into his family.

A Brahman in another village married a Cachari girl (tribal). He was no longer considered a Brahman. When he died no one would come forward to assist the widow with the cremation and he was buried near the house without rites.

The data on inter-caste unions suggest that it is the social recognition of caste affiliation rather than birth and sexual union which determine caste status. Prevailing opinion is influenced by the wealth and respectability of the family, the position taken by kin and affines and the views of neighbours expressed in a decision of the Name House. The same is true of affinity. The elopement of a couple does not in itself create affinity between their houses. For this to be established, a formal visit between the houses and the acceptance of some gifts is necessary; otherwise, it is said, the houses are not affines (mitir).

Multiple Marriages: Men.

There is in theory no limit to the number of times a man can marry. But in fact most men marry once only and it is rare for a

man to have two wives simultaneously. The frequency of multiple marriages for men is shown by caste in the following table:

Table 21: Panbari: Frequency of Recorded Multiple Marriages among Men by Caste.

	Kalita	Keot	Kooch	Duliya Kalita	Chutiya	
No. of second marriages	5	5	5	1	4	20
No. of third marriages	2	1	-	1	1	5
No. of fourth marriages	-	-	-	-	1	1

N.B. The caste of the man is given in the Table. 4 marriages were inter-caste.

There were 26 cases of multiple marriages among man. 16 men are recorded as having married twice, 3 as having married three times and 1 as having married four times. Of the 26 cases 24 concerned men living in Panbari; in 4 cases they took Panbari girls as second wives and in 20 cases they brought girls from other villages. The remaining 2 cases concerned girls of Panbari who went as second wives to men living outside. There seems no reason for this imbalance and it is probable that when girls were given in secondary unions this was not always mentioned for reasons of prestige.

In multiple marriages the man was a widower in 16 cases; the marriage had broken down, in the sense that the wife had returned to her parent's house, in 5 cases; and in only 4 cases did a man marry again while still living with his first wife. One of these was the case of Bhubu who was a State Transport Driver sleeping alternate nights in Panbari and Nowgong. By his wife in Panbari he has five children. Three years after his marriage he took up with a girl in Nowgong, who lives in her mother's house, and by her he has three children. Bhubu's father said there will be trouble when he retires and brings the Nowgong family to the house. In the other three cases the man 'abducted' his wife's younger sister during his wife's lifetime.

The wife's younger sister (khulsali) has an affectionate joking

relationship with her elder sister's husband (bhīnī). The elder sister's husband does not demand 'respect' (mān) and is usually addressed in the second person singular. There are many proverbs about him:

'O elder sister's husband, you did not come in the days
of our plenty;
I drank the milk of four mice.'

(I.e. Expecting her elder sister's husband, she milked four mice to welcome him.)

'There is a hole in the middle of the handkerchief;
My elder sister's husband has his nose cut at the root.'

(To do a 'nose-cutting act' means to do something shameless.)

'Elder sister's husband,
You have bought a bullock.
The bullock is slow,
The switch is blunt.'

'Do not call me elder sister's husband,
I may marry you one day.'

In 7 of the 26 cases of multiple marriages among men, the wife's younger sister was the second wife. A man in Panbari was stabbed to death by his WyZH who suspected him of trifling with the affections of his wife.

The possession of more than one wife does not carry prestige. Widowers tend to remarry if their first wife died childless or if they have a young family to look after. On the other hand a widower who said he did not marry again because it would make his children unhappy was quoted with approval in the village. If an old man takes a young bride, it is considered scandalous and the family will unite to dissuade him from this stain on the family reputation.

Second marriages are often informal affairs without the expense and ceremony of a great marriage. In 5 cases the wife herself was a widow or from a broken marriage.

The recent legislation on Hindu marriage is understood in the village as meaning that 'a government servant cannot marry more than one wife.'

Multiple Marriages: Women.

A woman marries by great marriage only once in her life. If she is unfortunate enough to become a widow, she should live a life of

pious seclusion wearing no ornaments and eating only cooling foods. A barren woman and a widow are inauspicious. This ideal pattern is realized only among the Brahmans.

'My father's elder sister was married when she was eight. Her husband died before she went to his house. She is now sixty. It is a very sad case. She has been a widow all her life.'

Among the other castes young widows rarely remain single for long. There were only 2 cases of young women living apart from their husbands in Panbari who had not formed a second union. One was that of a woman suffering from a grotesque affliction called 'elephant face' who was returned by her husband four years after marriage together with a baby daughter. The other was that of a woman who quarrelled with her husband and returned with her four children to her mother's house. The number of children probably acted as an obstacle to re-marriage in this case. If a marriage breaks up, it is usually at an early stage when only one or at most two children have been born.

There were 18 cases of 're-marriage' of women. These are shown by caste below.

Table 22: Panbari: Distribution of Recorded Cases of Secondary Unions among Women by Caste.

	Kalita	Keot	Kooch	Duliya Kalita	Chutiya	Ahom	
No. of women twice 'married'	3	6	5	1	3	-	18

N.B. No cases occurred among the Brahmans or Kayasthas.

9 of the 18 cases were 'widows' in the sense that they had previously lived with a man who died and of these 7 had been married by great marriage. 9 were women from broken marriages who had returned to their parents' house. In 12 cases there was at least one child of the first marriage. Sometimes the woman took the child with her to the house of her new husband, sometimes it was left in the care of her parents. Such children often seem to die.

Nitai eloped with a village girl who bore him a child. Nitai died and she returned home. Four years later she was married by

gift marriage to a man of another village. She took the child with her.

Her husband died when she had a little boy of one year. She returned to her father's house and was later married by gift marriage to the nearest town. She left the child in her father's house and when the boy grew up her father gave him land.

She was 'abducted' by a Brahman and bore him two sons. Five years later he sent her away. She returned to her mother's house with the two children, both of whom died. Two years after her return a villager fell in love with her and married her by gift marriage.

There is an opprobrious term (bātālu) for a woman who 'marries' a second time and only uncooked food is accepted from her hand. But the force of the stigma is not such as to prevent women in non-Brahman castes from entering into a second union.

Sons-in-law-of-the-house.

A man living as a dependent in the house of his 'wife's' father is known by the disparaging term of cāponiyā. The girl's father typically has no sons and brings in a man to live with one of his daughters so that he is not left alone in his old age. His descent group dies with him, his daughter's children taking the descent group of their father, and his property passes to his daughter's 'husband'. The title deed to land is usually put in the name of the son-in-law and not in that of the daughter so that the arrangement is considered a sort of adoption. No ceremony is usually performed, though old marriage is sometimes held later when the children attain marriageable age. The man's family are not usually considered affines.

It is difficult to know, especially after the lapse of many years, whether no marriage took place (true cāponiyā), or whether the son-in-law came to live in the house of his wife's father after great marriage.

Bubai lived for five years as an agricultural labourer in the house of Ghee-khowa, whose line is now extinct. He made his daughter pregnant and became a cāponiyā. No ceremony was held.

Ratneswar's wife's father had three daughters and no sons. Ratneswar, at his invitation, went to live with him five years after marrying his second daughter by great marriage. His wife is now dead but Ratneswar has continued living in the house.

At the age of sixteen Kamal went to live in the house of Bhola Neog to help with cultivation. He married Bhola's daughter by great marriage and inherited all his land.

Tankeswar lived as a cāponiyā in Rudai's house for eight years. Then he performed old marriage and moved to a rented house with his wife.

All cases where the man came to live in the house of his father-in-law, whether married or not, have been classed under the general term of 'son-in-law-of-the-house' (gharar jovāi). There are 34 such cases. They are shown by caste (of the son-in-law) in the following table:

Table 23: Panbari: Distribution of Recorded Instances of Sons-in-law-in-the-house by Caste.

	Kalita	Keot	Kooch	Duliya Kalita	Chutiya	Ahom	
Sons-in-law-of-the-house	8	7	14	1	4	-	34

N.B. No cases were recorded for the Brahmans or Kayasthas.
3 cases were inter-caste.

In 6 cases both houses were within Panbari. In 5 cases the man went from Panbari as a cāponiyā to another village. In the remaining 23 cases a man from another village was brought into Panbari as a son-in-law-of-the-house. These figures indicate the unreliability of the data. It is possible to obtain some information on men marrying into the village although their number is probably underestimated, but men marrying out are best forgotten. 2 of the 5 cases recorded came to light because the man quarrelled with the family and returned to the village. (In all types of union that do not carry prestige - elopement, gift marriages, second marriages especially for women, sons-in-law-of-the-house, incest - the figures have not been calculated as percentages of all marriages and should be taken as illustrative rather than exhaustive.)

Although the function of the son-in-law-of-the-house is seen as that of a substitute son in a family of daughters, this was true in only 12 of the 34 cases. In 17 cases the woman had brothers; in 3 cases, where the men married out, I have no information; and the remaining 2 cases were unusual:

Kashiram died leaving a widow and two daughters. He had separated from his elder brother so that the widow was alone in the house. It was arranged that a poor orphan should come to live with her as cāponiyā. She bore him six children.

Tuaram and his wife died leaving an unmarried daughter and three young sons. The children continued to live in the house together under the care of the daughter who was the eldest. Their father's elder brother's son nearby visited the house several nights in the week. Then he arranged that a man should come to live with the daughter as cāponiyā in order to cultivate the land and look after her little brothers.

Families with sons may also bring in a cāponiyā who is expected to work and maintain the household. He is carefully chosen as a loyal and hard-working man, otherwise he would not fit in. Some brothers like a cāponiyā for their sister because he shifts from them the burden of maintaining the household. Others prefer a more prestigious union.

Lakhinath was an orphan. After the death of his parents he went to live with his elder sister married to Nowgong. Jogeswar of Panbari, who is a State Transport driver, met Lakhinath in Nowgong and arranged a match between him and his younger sister. After working for the family for over 20 years he was given a house plot and 2 bigas of rice land by his 'wife's' father where he now lives separately.

The inheritance of a son-in-law-of-the-house is insecure. If his 'wife' has no brothers, he may insist that a great marriage is arranged so that he cannot be discarded. If his 'wife' has brothers, he is dependent on their good-will for a share of his father-in-law's property.

Putul came as cāponiyā to a woman with three brothers. On the death of his father-in-law the land was divided into four equal parts, one for each of the three sons and one for the daughter and her 'husband'. The sons said it was their father's wish.

More often the situation leads to quarrel. If the father fails to provide for his daughter before his death, the son-in-law-of-the-house has only a moral claim and the sons are often reluctant to part with the land.⁴

Incest.

No cases of incest were recorded from the past. One occurred between my two visits to the village:

Padma, a Keot, eloped with his FFeBSD, his classificatory sister. His mother hanged herself shortly afterwards. On that day the house was empty except for Padma's parents as the rest of the family had gone to attend the marriage of Padma's elder sister's second son in a village 6 miles away. Padma's father went to sit outside in the sun to read the newspaper. When he came in half an hour later he found his wife hanging by her shawl from the post over the verandah. The body was buried without rites, as is customary for a suicide. Thirteen days' later Padma's father died of grief. All the houses

of Panbari Name House were ritually polluted through contact with the two houses. The Brahman gave them penance in the Name House and a ceremony was held to rehabilitate the families (uddhāraṇi), the cost of which was borne by the girl's father and Padma's elder brother.

The tragic circumstances of this case illustrate the abhorrence aroused by intercourse within the descent group. In the two other cases which I encountered outside Panbari, the girl was disposed of by being given to a man of lower caste. The following account of a case in a Chutiya village is unusual in that it led to fission of the descent group so that the union was no longer considered as incest.

A boy eloped with a girl of his descent group. They were separated and the girl was given in gift marriage to another villager, but she left him and returned to the first man. The descent group consisted of two branches which were known to be connected but the exact relationship could no longer be traced. For three years the house of the girl and the house of the boy were excluded from the Name House. Then it was decided that the couple should be allowed to continue living together and the descent group divided into two, so that when a birth or death now occurs in one branch the other does not observe impurity. The houses of the girl and boy, and the couple themselves, underwent penance and were re-admitted to the Name House.

The fluid nature of marriage in the village enters into the nature of the caste process. Caste affiliation at the local level is chiefly defined by kinship and affinity, for a man's caste is perceived through recognized agnatic ties and demonstrated in his affinal connections. A man disinherited by his family may be forced to take a position as a son-in-law-of-the-house in a lower caste, in which he becomes absorbed. The socially mobile seek to achieve marriages into higher castes which act as a confirmation of their aspirations. On the other hand, unions with lower castes, if they do not receive social approval, are likely both to sever kinship ties and change caste affiliation.

Notes.

1. The disparity in the number of daughters married out (306) and daughters-in-law married in (231) is too great to be the result of random error. The sub-urban character of the village is associated with a high rate of migration. Although it was possible to collect data on immigrants into the village, data on emigrants out of the village was meagre. The wives of these emigrants, except when they married within the village, would fall into the category of daughters-in-law married in. If we assume an equal sex ratio, there were some 75 families who left the village within the last two or three generations of which I have no record.
2. The houses of Panbari are also connected by ties of affinity resulting from marriage with persons who already have kin in the village. For example, two sisters are given to two houses in Panbari, or a girl in Panbari is given to a man who is the MyBS of another girl given to a house in the village, etc. I have not a complete record of these ramifying ties.
3. In another case of elopement with an Ahom girl, the outcome was different. The young man was allowed to continue attending the Name House, but when any ceremony was held in his house the villagers cooked for themselves.
4. The provisions of the Hindu Succession Act 1956 are not known in the village. There have been a few cases in towns of daughters claiming a share of the property and I am told that these have usually involved a son-in-law-of-the-house.

CHAPTER 5

THE VILLAGE NAME HOUSE.

Assamese Vaishnavism is institutionalized at village level in the Name House system. The Name House is the local community within which its members ordinarily live their lives. In every village there is at least one, and usually several, Name Houses whose members form a 'religious congregation' (Weber 1966:60) consisting of a restricted association of households who combine for the specifically religious purpose of maintaining a local centre of devotional worship. Each lay congregation is autonomous in the management of its affairs and exercises not only religious but also social and jural functions which, in other parts of India, are commonly vested in village or caste councils. There is no village organization except in the rare cases where the whole village belongs to a single Name House and there is no local caste or sub-caste organization except where the Name House is composed of members of a single caste. The Name House is therefore the basic unit of rural society in the greater part of the State.

Originally, it is said, each village had a single Name House but this is exceptional today. Hayley supervised a survey of 15 cadastral villages comprising Charing Rural Panchayat in 1947; of these only 1 had a single Name House and the remaining 14 villages contained 40 Name Houses (Hayley 1963: 123). The proliferation of Name Houses has come about as a result of fission. In the absence of strong vertical ties based either on the jajmani system or on landlord-tenant relationships (v. pp. 17, 25-27 above) there are few countervailing tendencies to prevent quarrels from leading to division. When this occurs, it is usually along caste lines. Weber comments: 'In India the religious caste taboo rendered difficult the rise, or limited the importance, of any soteriological congregational religion', although he considered this factor to be of more significance in the city than in the village (Weber 1966: 97). In Assam caste avoidances have not prevented the emergence of

MAP 12.

PANBARI: LOCATION OF HOUSEHOLDS BY NAME HOUSE



SCALE 6" = 1m

NORTH →

congregational communities but they are of major significance both in determining the complexion of the congregation and in limiting its range of membership.

Villages may be multi-caste or single caste. The majority of Name Houses are single caste. Of the 30 Name Houses outside Panbari in the Sibsagar District of which I have particulars, 8 were multi-caste and 22 were single caste. The tendency towards caste exclusiveness is greatest at the lower end of the hierarchy. The exterior and lower castes - Kaibarta, Nath, Sut Kalita, Duliya Kalita, Kumar Kalita, Ahom, Chutiya, etc. - prefer to establish Name Houses of their own rather than suffer the disabilities of association with higher castes who may not admit them into the body of the Name House. In the middle range of the hierarchy, however, there are many multi-caste Name Houses. This is the case in Panbari.

The village of Panbari is divided into five religious congregations owning four Name Houses. Three of these - Panbari Name House, Bayan Name House and Tamuli Name House - are of long standing. The other two congregations - the Harijanis and the Thirteen-day People - are adherents of reform movements which originated in Assam in the 1930s. The Harijanis movement started in Panbari in the early 1960s and the Thirteen-day movement in 1967. The Harijanis are collecting funds to build a Name House but so far only a small room has been constructed. The Thirteen-day People seceded recently from Panbari Name House which they continue to use for their meetings but at different times from the other members, a common temporary arrangement in such cases. These two groups are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 12. The location of the four Name Houses with their member households is shown on Map 12. The membership by caste of the five congregations is given in Table 24 (see next page).

Originally, it is said, there was only one Name House in the village, the Panbari Name House in Gayan hamlet. Sometime about 1900 a number of households left to form the Bayan Name House. No one now remembers the reason why they separated. As a result, however, of the division, Panbari Name House now has 40 Keot houses and 1 Kooch house whereas Bayan Name House has 39 Kooch houses and no Keot houses. The single Kooch household in Panbari Name House is a new-comer to the village who bought land in the vicinity of the Name

Table 24. Panbari: Household Membership by Caste of the Five Religious Congregations.

Caste	Panbari Name House	Bayan Name House	Tamuli Name House	Hari-janiyas	13-day People	
Brahman	2					2
Kayastha	1				17	18
Bar Kalita	8	14				22
Keot	40		(1)		3	44
Kooch	1	39		1		41
Duliya Kalita			14	3		17
Chutiya	1	8	(1)	6		16
Ahom			1			1
	53	61	15+(2)	10	20	161

N.B. The two households in brackets attend Tamuli Name House occasionally on invitation but are too poor to pay the contribution required of members.

House in 1946 as he was working in the town as a government employee. Further, Bayan Name House has 8 Chutiya houses and Panbari Name House has 1 Chutiya house. The single Chutiya household in Panbari Name House derives from a Chutiya girl brought in to work as a domestic servant in a rich family after Bayan Name House divided. Although the events leading up to the division have been forgotten, it is clear that the Kooches and the Chutiyas seceded in caste blocks.

Tamuli Name House was founded in 1919 by the secession from Panbari Name House of 4 Duliya Kalita houses which have now grown by natural increase to 16. It is said in the village that they separated after a quarrel over caste. The history of this sub-caste of Kalitas in Jorhat subdivision has been discussed above. According to the 1891 Census they were one of the five principal subdivisions of Jugis in the Brahmaputra Valley (namely, the Sappelas or snake-charmers, the Palupohas or rearers of a particular kind of silkworm, the Duliya or palki-bearers, the Katanis who are weavers of silk and sometimes also of cotton thread, and the Thiyapotas who were so called because they buried their dead in a standing position). The Duliya section of the caste had recently taken to calling themselves

Kalitas but, the report continues, 'their claims are recognized by no one except themselves' (Report on the Census of Assam, 1881:270). A leading Keot of Panbari Name House said that in his father's time they did not accept any food in a Duliya Kalita house. Conflicts over their claim to Kalita status apparently led to their secession to build a new Name House for themselves. Today they are generally ranked above Chutiya and Ahom and all castes, except Brahmans, accept tea and uncooked food in their houses. The fact that they admitted to Tamuli Name House in 1969 a young Ahom living in the neighbouring village across the road is probably to be interpreted in terms of the freedom associated with confidence in their improved status. Panbari Name House and Bayan Name House do not associate with Ahoms. Two houses in Tamuli hamlet attend the Name House occasionally on invitation. One is that of a Chutiya youth living with his widowed mother and the other is that of a destitute Keot widow. Both are too poor to pay regular contributions.

All the Kayastha houses in the village, with one exception, have seceded from Panbari Name House to become Thirteen-day during the past two years. The Thirteen-day people are a reformed sect who observe 13 days' ritual impurity after death instead of the 30 days formerly observed by all non-Brahman castes. Śāstric authority is cited to the effect that Brahmans should observe 10 days' ritual impurity after death, Kshatriyas 12 days and Shudras one month. The adoption of 12 days signifies for the Kayasthas an assertion of Kshatriya status. As the majority of Kayasthas in the village are socially mobile families whose claim to be Kayastha is not yet firmly established, the formation of this splinter group is chiefly to be seen in terms of caste aspirations. The Harijaniyas are the most extreme of the new sects and advocate the abolition of caste restrictions on dining and marriage. In Panbari, as elsewhere, they are drawn chiefly from the lower castes. Divisions of the Name House would therefore appear, in one way or other, to arise from issues concerning caste.

The conduct of devotional worship, which is usually referred to as Name, is described in Chapter 6. The smallest Name requires a Name Leader to make the invocation and lead the hymns and a Distributor to make the offering. In a private house these are arranged by the host for the occasion. In the Name House there are a number of permanent officials chosen from among respected persons

noted for their piety who are appointed unanimously by the members and hold office for life. The appointment is considered an honour and entitles the holder to certain marks of 'respect' (mān), such as a square mat made from fine reed as a seat and a section of banana leaf with the corners cut off (termed 'respect leaf') on which is placed his share of the offering. The following officials are usually found in the Name House:

Name Leader (nām lagovā) who leads the hymns. The office requires knowledge of esoteric mantras used in the preparation of the offering and in the invocation. These are imparted by the Gosain.

Scripture Reader (pāthak) who reads the Bhagavat and other scriptures.

Drummer and cymbal-player (bāyan-gāyan) who play and sing at important Names and provide the orchestra at religious dramas. The group is led by the Drummer who is versed in the esoteric meaning of his art.

Distributor (bilaniyār or deurī) who distributes the offering. He is usually chosen from the highest, or one of the highest, castes in the Name House so that there can be no objection to accepting food from his hand and is required to be scrupulous in his way of life. The office is, however, considered demeaning in some areas and may be refused by a rich man.

Treasurer (dhān bhārālī) who collects the subscriptions.

Name House Keeper (nāmghariyā), responsible for washing the floor of the Name House in the morning and lighting the lamps and incense before the thāpanā containing the sacred scripture in the evening. It is the only paid office in the Name House and is usually given to a poor man. In some Name Houses these duties are performed by each household in rotation.

Panbari Name House with 53 houses has 5 officials, although others help when required. It is a measure of the dominant position of the Keots in the Name House that they are all of Keot caste. All except the Treasurer have taken bhajan (a higher grade of initiation imported by the Gosain).

Bayan Name House with 61 houses has 11 officials, including 3 Name Leaders and 4 Distributors. Of these 6 are Kalita, 4 are Kooch and 1 is Chutiya. The 6 Kalitas include 3 of the 4 Distributors. The Chutiya has a minor office and assists the Treasurer in the collection of subscriptions. All except the Chutiya have taken bhajan.

Tamuli Name House with 15 houses has 4 officials, all Duliya Kalita by caste. All except the Treasurer have taken bhajan. The Name House Keeper is a destitute widow who is exempt from subscription

and given Rs: 3 a month.

Status in the Name House is based on age and piety. Status in the village is based on wealth and influence. The most respected men in the village are rich men in a position to assist their neighbours, but the upper seats in the Name House are occupied by old men noted for their religious devotion and the offering is distributed first to them. A true bhakat (devotee) is said to be recognized by his non-attachment and his single-minded concentration on God.

A story is told in the village of a man of Teok whose son was wanted for theft. When the police questioned him, he replied: 'It is true, my son stole the money but I will not go into court to give evidence against him.' By this statement it was known that the man was a bhakat for he would not tell a lie even to save his son.

Mohan was holding a small ceremony (sakām) to cure his sister of persistent headaches. He invited three bhakats from a village 5 miles away because, he said, there were no true bhakats in Panbari. He explained: 'When an ordinary man sings Name, he thinks, "How is my wife, how are my children, how are my crops?" But a true bhakat thinks only of God and the purpose of the sakām will be fulfilled.'

Dedication to the path of devotion, even when pursued exclusively for its own sake, earns an exemplary reputation for piety rewarded by an elevated status in everyday life. This channel of advancement is particularly valuable for a poor man.

Nilo was an orphan who came to Panbari over forty years ago to live with his father's elder brother's son. He has no land and works today as a wage labourer. He took bhajan (higher initiation) and became a Distributor in Panbari Name House which he attends regularly, wearing on his head the chaplet given him by the Gosain. It was said of him: 'He is poor but popular in the village and other places because he is a bhakat and beats the wooden clappers.'

Runee is a widow without sons. She lives in a poor house on some unused land belonging to a rich man and is supported by her daughter's husband who came to live with her before her daughter died. Runee has taken bhajan and is orthodox in her observances. She washes not only the kitchen but the floor of every room in the house daily and she is careful never to eat cooked food except when prepared by those who, like herself, have taken bhajan. She is invited to participate in many sakāms in Panbari and surrounding villages where the food she receives is a welcome supplement to her diet. She is especially skilled in leading Mother Name (āī nām) sung to sufferers from the various types of pox which are considered to be visitations of the Mother Goddess. Although cut off from her natal family because of an inter-caste marriage, she leads an active social and religious life.

The status of a bhakat, although open to an individual of any caste, does not influence caste rank with its associated disabilities. Dhaniram Das Bar Medhi of Bezgaon was a bhakat and a bar medhi of Auniati satra. He had spent many years on pilgrimage to the sacred shrines of India and was now almost completely withdrawn from worldly affairs. All men respected his piety but he was by caste an untouchable Fisherman and no one of clean caste would take tea in his house.

Men and women assemble separately in the Name House once a week to read the Bhagavat and sing Name. The day of the weekly service varies according to Name House; the men gather in the evening, the women in the afternoon of another day. The congregation on these occasions is usually small and only areca nut and pan is offered. Besides this, in Panbari Name House women hold Name every afternoon in the holy month of Bhada (August-September) when Krishna was born and men read the Bhagavat from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. In Bayan Name House men read Shankaradeva's Kīrttan every evening in Kati (October-November). The largest congregations are seen on the Bihus or seasonal festivals and on the main anniversaries of the Vaishnava calendar.

Bahag Bihu, Kati Bihu and Magh Bihu fall on the last day of Chot (March-April), Ahin (September-October) and Puh (December-January) respectively. On these days every household carries out the ritual cleansing of the kitchen termed the 'throwing away of the cooking pots' (caru pelovā) and washes all the clothes of the house, thus severing the connection between dead time past and living time to come. At the midday meal it is forbidden to eat boiled rice. Junior kin make 'Bihu obeisance' (bihu sevā) before those senior to them and agnates are invited to eat seasonal cakes prepared from rice flour (bihu jal-pān). Affines come on visits 'to eat the Bihu' and, in particular, a son-in-law is under an obligation to visit his wife's parents. Each Bihu has its special character. Bahag Bihu is called the 'joyous Bihu' (rangāli bihu) and marks the beginning of the Assamese year and the onset of the cultivating season. The celebrations, which last seven days, include many fertility rites. Kati Bihu is called the 'hungry Bihu' (kangāli bihu) because it falls in a time of scarcity. Cultivators visit their fields to inspect the paddy which traditionally comes out in ear on this day. Magh Bihu, held

after the harvest, is called the 'abundant Bihu' (bhogāli bihu) and celebrated by the burning of tall ricks erected among the paddy stubble. Special services are held by the Name House on the occasion of Bihu, attended by all houses, when particular efficacy is attached to the blessing of the congregation. If a man has an unfulfilled wish, he offers areca nut, pan and some money on a raised dish to the congregation and bows down while the Name Leader pronounces a blessing that he may have issue, be cured of an illness, pass an examination, etc., or simply that what he desires in his mind may come to pass. The congregation endorse the blessing with the customary intonation of 'O Hari, O Ram'.

At Bahag Bihu the Name House usually organizes a hucharī party. Hucharī is a jerking dance performed by young men to the accompaniment of erotic songs and the playing of drum, cymbals and a pipe of reed or horn. It is said that in the old days girls also took part but this is no longer the case except among tribal peoples like the Miris. The upper castes do not participate and hucharī parties are not organized in upper caste Name Houses. The dance is opened in the house of a respected man and the party then visits each house of the Name House in turn. The household members make an offering of money and cloth to the dancers and bow down to receive the blessing uttered on their behalf in some such words as these:

'In ancient times Brahma, Vishnu and Rudra went away, leaving behind them three forms of worship - the three Bihus with their three seasonal moods. Therefore all the people have come here to praise Hari and have made merry with song and dance. It has not been possible to receive the people in the manner that is their due. Anyhow, the household has made obeisance before them and given according to their means. In recognition of this obeisance, keep safe the master of the house, grant him prosperity and long life and preserve him from ill-luck and misfortune, fevers and pains. Remove disagreements, ill-will and quarrels from this house, fix their minds on righteousness and may wealth, paddy, cattle and buffaloes make this the abode of Lakshmi. May God preserve them' (Goswami: 38, freely translated).

The party then goes round adjoining areas to collect money. Hucharī is ended on the seventh and last day of Bihu at a big tree. It is said that the dancers draw all the misfortune and disease for the coming year out of the houses they visit and lay it on that tree which, it is believed, will die. As the Bihu nears its end, outside

villages often refuse admission to the party in case the misfortune is left with them. The money collected may be spent on a feast at huchari sabāh or used to buy salt for the houses of the Name House or paid into the Name House fund. In Tamuli Name House it was kept to finance the construction of the new Name House. The cloth collected is usually divided between the members of the party.

At Magh Bihu each Name House erects a number of tall ricks in the fields by a river or tank. These are called meji. The tallest rick, which may reach 30 feet or more, is made of faggots of wood piled between four areca trees and called the 'big meji' or the 'old man'. Round about are scattered one or two dozen other meji of varying height made of paddy stubble on a conical bamboo framework. One of these is called the 'old woman'. A small meji house of paddy stubble is constructed as a kitchen. Here a feast is cooked after dusk on the eve of Bihu for the men of the Name House who sit round a fire in the open fields. The children then set light to the mejis shouting, 'Hurrah for Hari, hurrah for Ram', beside the blazing columns. After this Name is sung for some hours followed by the distribution of the offering. At cock crow a portion of the offering is placed under the 'big meji' by the little boys after taking bath. They then set fire to the pile. Each man bathes, changes his clothes and, throwing an offering of areca nut and pan into the fire, bows down while the boys shout in blessing, 'Hurrah for Ram, hurrah for Hari'. At this time the power to grant wishes is invested in the children and many bow down promising to give them a feast at Magh Bihu the following year if their wish is fulfilled:

'This young man has sat the M.E. examination. If he passes he will give a feast next year.'

'He has lost his looking glass. If the thief is found, he will give a feast.'

A girl afflicted with a disease brings a basket of parched rice. The boys bless her: 'From today may the disease leave the girl. Hurrah for Ram, hurrah for Hari'.

After the big meji falls, the meji house is burnt. Sweet potato, arum and chunga bhāt (barā rice cooked in a section of bamboo) are roasted in the ashes: it is said that if one does not eat these at the Bihu, one will be re-born as a pig. The same day straw is tied round the trunks of fruit-bearing trees so that the fruit should

stay on the tree and not go away, and also across the door of the granary. In the coming month of Magh, the first after the harvest, no one enters his granary. It is said, 'If a man touches his granary in Magh, he eats like a tiger.' The contribution for Magh Bihu is about Rs: 2 per household plus a fixed amount of wood, bamboo, rice and potato.

On Kati Bihu the cultivator visits his fields to inspect the crop which is said to come out in ear on this day. Every house plants on a raised bed of earth in the courtyard a little basil plant as an emblem of Krishna. At dusk Name is held by the plant and the prasād distributed to the members of the house. Seven lights are usually lit: under the basil, by either side of the door, in the cow-shed, beside the granary, in the kitchen and in the rice fields. These should be lit every evening for the month of Kati. The kitchen is ritually cleansed, the floors of the house smeared with cow-dung and white earth, 'respect' (mān) is offered to senior kin and affines exchange visits as on the other Bihus, but the celebrations are on a small scale owing to the general scarcity. Name is held in the Name House and a blessing uttered for the welfare of the crops.

The Name Houses in Panbari observe the following Vaishnava festivals:

Anniversary of Madhavadeva's death (Mādhavadevar tithi) held on the 5th day of the dark half of the moon in the month of Bhada (August-September).

Birthday of Krishna (janmāṣṭami) held on the 8th day of the dark half of the moon in the month of Bhada.

Anniversary of Shankaradeva's death (Śaṅkaradevar tithi) held on the 2nd day of the bright half of the moon in the month of Bhada.

Birthday of Shankaradeva (Śaṅkaradevar janma tithi) held on the 10th day of the bright half of the moon in the month of Ahin (September-October).

(Shankaradeva was the founder of Assamese Vaishnavism and Madhavadeva was his disciple and successor.)

The following blessing is appropriate to the anniversary of Shankaradeva's death. In the case of other gurus, the form is broadly similar.

'The blessed Shankara is like a wishing tree
For the devotees of Hari.
Truly he, and he alone, is
Our supreme guru.

'Today with songs of Hari we have celebrated the anniversary of the death of the great saint Sri Sri Shankaradeva. On this anniversary a great multitude of religious preceptors and devotees of all kinds have worshipped at shrines and satras and other sacred gatherings. We too, unworthy as we are, have offered our homage according to ancient custom on this great festival of our guru's death. Krishna, the son of Doivaki, has come as Shankara: he has been incarnated. Such as they know no births or deaths...

'You have been incarnated as our guru in order to show us that by singing of your attributes we can find a path to deliver us from the world. Now you have gone to Vaikuntha, leaving behind a simple form of worship for the devotees of Hari. So we have all bowed down with a cloth on our neck and offered one areca nut, a pan leaf, a little packet of money, a few pice to expiate our faults, an offering of pulse, a wick and a light. With this, lord of Vaikuntha, great guru, may you be pleased and have mercy on us' (Goswami: 26-27, freely translated).

The subscriptions for festivals are fixed by the members and collected from house to house by the Treasurer. They are usually about Rs: 2 per household except for the birthday of Shankaradeva when they vary from Rs: 3 to Rs: 5 according to Name House. The celebration of Shankaradeva's birthday lasts two or three days and has become a national festival. Reading from the Bhagavat and the singing of Name begins in the Name House about 5 a.m. and continues almost without interruption till dusk. The Bhagavat itself may be carried in procession through the village on the head of a bhakat followed by drummers and cymbal players. Each house that it passes comes out to bow down before the sacred book and makes an offering of money. This was done by the Harijanias in 1969. In addition to the religious celebrations public meetings are held all over Assam at which leading politicians and other prominent men make speeches in honour of Shankaradeva as the father of the Assamese nation.

Each Name House also holds annually a Great Assembly (bar sabāh), usually followed by the performance of a religious drama at night, to which it invites members of other Name Houses. Affines come on visits at these times in order to see the drama. A Gosain in the neighbourhood is invited to act as Name Leader, and the guests are received as bhakats coming in the form of God. The three Name Houses in Panbari all hold their Great Assembly in the month of Jeth (May-June), Panbari Name house four days before the full moon, Tamuli Name House either two or three days before the full moon and Bayan Name House on the day of the full moon. Panbari Name House invites

the whole of Bayan Name House and three or four leading members of Tamuli Name House; Bayan Name House invites the whole of Panbari Name House and three or four members of Tamuli Name House; and Tamuli Name House in 1969 invited six leading members of Panbari Name House and five leading members of Bayan Name House. The pattern of invitations indicates that old quarrels between the three Name Houses have now healed. No social relationships are, however, permitted with the 13-day people or the Harijanis where division has been recent and the issues still controversial. It is in general commoner to find Name Houses in different villages linked by reciprocal invitations than Name Houses within the village.

The Name House also sits to hear complaints and try offences. All adult males of member households are free to attend and decisions are reached unanimously. The Name House takes cognizance chiefly of ritual offences and of actions involving ritual impurity which might pass to its members. It is forbidden to plough with bullocks on the day of the bright moon, the day of the dark moon, the eleventh day of the bright lunar fortnight, the eleventh day of the dark lunar fortnight, the last day of the month, the three days of Ambuvaci when the earth is in menses, and on all festival days. If a man is seen ploughing on these days, he will be required to pay a fine placed on a raised dish with some areca nut and pan and to bow down before the congregation in the Name House with his forehead on the ground. Fines are usually trifling, ranging from a few annas to a few rupees according to the gravity of the offence, but their payment indicates acknowledgment of the fault and submission to the congregation. The sanction for decisions is expulsion.

The attitude of the Name House to inter-caste unions has been discussed in Chapter 4. If the Name House eats with both of the castes involved, the ritual status of its members is not affected and no action is taken. But in the case of a liaison with a member of a caste from which the Name House does not accept food, the offender is expelled. The existence of a large Chaodung village west of Panbari led to four cases of affairs between Chaodungs and Panbari girls who were cut off by their families and expelled from the Name House. The other cases concerned Ahoms and tea-garden labour. Incest also leads to expulsion. If the families concerned have

eaten with the offender since the affair started, they are required to undergo prāyaścitta and give a feast to the Name House (uddhāraṇi) before re-admission. If a man makes a girl pregnant, he is expected to marry her. If he denies paternity, he will be required to take an oath on the Bhagavat in the Name House: 'If I swear falsely, may I die within one month, or in a year'; or, 'If I swear falsely, may my body become white.' The three cases of white leprosy in the village were attributed to a false oath in a pregnancy case.

Disputes between kin may be referred to the Name House for settlement. This often occurs when a joint family divides and is unable to agree on the division of the property.

Akheswar, Taneswar and Romeswar were three brothers owning 8 bigas of land. Taneswar died when his only son, Dambaru, was four years old. Dambaru later found work as a clerk on a tea garden and made no claim to his father's land. For ten years he did not visit the village. Then one day he came and asked for his share. Akheswar was willing but Romeswar refused. Dambaru called a meeting of the Name House to discuss the matter. Romeswar objected on the grounds that Dambaru had not visited the village for many years and had not paid any share of the land revenue. The Name House said that the land was full of bamboo and firewood which had been used by Akheswar and Romeswar who should therefore pay the revenue. They decided that Dambaru should get a third share and the land was divided accordingly.

Two cases were brought before Bayan Name House during my visit in 1969. The first concerned a dispute over land.

Rudreswar, Bhadeswar and Tileswar were three brothers whose father died when Tileswar was seven years old. The brothers separated soon afterwards. At the division of the property Rudreswar and Bhadeswar each took 2 bigas of house land and gave 1 biga to their little brother. When Tileswar grew up, he asked for his full share. Bhadeswar gave him his part, but Rudreswar refused. Rudreswar was married to a very strong-minded woman, described in the village as 'just like a man', and there was a bitter quarrel between Tileswar and Rudreswar's wife. As a result relations between the two houses were cut off. They no longer invite one another to Bihu rice and the affines of one house do not visit the other. Rudreswar's wife filed a case in court asserting that Tileswar had assaulted her and her child. It was said in the village that this was a false case. Tileswar also filed a case claiming his share of the land. Both cases were pending. Rudreswar made a statement in court saying that he had been excluded from the Name House because of the affair and had been required to give a feast before re-admission at a cost of Rs: 1,500. He claimed another Rs. 4,000 in legal expenses. Tileswar then asked for a meeting of the Name House to be called. He repeated the statement Rudreswar made in court and asked the meeting, 'Is the statement

true or false?' The people replied it was false. They appointed three leading men as witnesses and told Tileswar that he should advise his lawyer that they would testify in court that Rudreswar's statement was untrue. In fact relations with Rudreswar's house had been cut off for about a month because his wife had rebuked him publicly in the Name House. This conduct was considered inappropriate especially as Rudreswar was the Distributor and the people 'left' him, i.e. he was excluded from the Name House. Three or four weeks later he and his wife performed penance (prāyaścitta) and submitted themselves to the people, paying a fine of Rs: 5. They promised not to quarrel in future.

The second case concerned a dispute over caste.

Bhola was a Kooch who had already been in trouble with the Name House for attending a Name held by the Harijanias, one of the reformed sects in the village. He cultivated 20 bigas on ādhi and had run out of seedlings for transplantation. He approached Lakhi, a rich villager who cultivated with hired labour and had a bed of seedlings left over after completing his transplantation. The same morning, however, Lakhi had promised his seedlings to a poor Kalita living nearby and he refused Bhola. That evening Bhola went to the Name House where the parts were being distributed for a religious drama. He had been drinking and abused the Kalita caste for its arrogance. A Kalita nearby retorted whereupon Bhola struck him. Next morning Bhola went to an influential member of the Name House and said he had been drinking heavily the night before and asked to be excused because he did not know what he was doing. But the Kalita he assaulted had in the meantime asked for a meeting of the Name House to be convened. It met two days later and fined Bhola for disorderly conduct. He replied that he had been drunk but he refused to pay the fine. He added: 'I will never pay the fine to the congregation and today I leave the Name House never to return in my life or the lives of my children.' Bhola then joined the Harijhanias.

The Name House, as a social group, attends all major rites de passage of its members. To weddings, to the first śrāddha ceremony at the conclusion of the mortuary rites and to the ceremony marking a girl's first menstruation, a man invites his agnates, his affines and all members of his Name House by going from house to house in person with a gift of areca nuts and pan. Name is sung at the house on these occasions. If he holds a ceremony such as pāl nām or bar sabāh, he must again invite the entire Name House. Except when a feast is given, the food provided for the Name House is soft rice, curd and gur. Tea is usually served as well and other items at will. The poorest family is required to invite every house in the Name House to these ceremonies, although it may provide only areca nut, pan and prasād. Failure to invite means expulsion.

Kanti's sons complained that they had been slighted by the Distributor at a śrāddha ceremony when he removed the sweetmeats set before them saying it was intended only for old men and not for boys. They took this as a public insult and complained to the Name House but their complaint was not taken up. As a result when Kanti married his eldest daughter he did not invite the Name House to the wedding. From that day his membership ceased.

Kanti's mother died five years later. Kanti and his younger brother, who were separated, shared the cost of the mortuary rites. At that time the younger brother was still a member of Panbari Name House. Kanti said to him: 'I have no wish to invite the houses of Panbari Name House. If you invite them, you must bear the cost yourself.' His younger brother did not invite the Name House. They were offended and cast him out.

When there are many guests, the Name House assists in the preparations. E.g., at the tolani biyā (first menstruation ceremony) of Lakhi's daughter, the villagers erected the pandal, a rich man lent C.I. sheets for the roof and the young girls helped in the grinding of wheat flour for luci and ruṭī. To less important ceremonies such as the Purifying Ceremony (śuddhi sakām) held a month after birth, the eating of the first fruits (na khovā), housewarming (ghar lovā), the annual memorial service for a deceased parent and other sakām, a few neighbouring houses are invited to hold a Name and give their blessing.

The Name House also combines in acts of charity towards its poorer members.

Kehe was a poor carpenter supporting a household of fifteen. He fell and injured his leg which troubled him for many months, so he offered a dish of prasād in the Name House, vowing to hold a religious drama (bhāona) if he recovered. Kanti's leg healed but he had no money to hold a drama. Again he fell and injured his leg. Two years later he opened a performance of a play by Shankaraveda in Bayan Name House. The members distributed the parts and began rehearsal. The actors were responsible for hiring their own costumes but Kehe provided the offering which, together with tea and refreshments for the cast, cost about Rs: 200. Everyone helped him because he was poor. Some gave sugar cane from their gardens, others areca nuts or bananas and his ritual friend (sakhi) contributed Rs: 100 and some paddy for making sweetmeats. A group of young men erected the pandal. The day following the drama Kehe gave a feast for the actors and the following day a small feast for those who had helped him to fulfill his vow.

Runee was a poor widow without sons. Her two elder daughters were married but she had no money to marry the third. She said to

the family of the prospective bridegroom, 'I can give you my daughter and the courtyard for the wedding: that is all.' The Name House decided to undertake the arrangements. Some houses gave clothes or gold ornaments for the bride and others brass dishes or furniture for the dowry. They erected the pandal and provided the food both for themselves and for the bridegroom's party. Everyone enjoyed the wedding.

Jetuki was a landless widow living with her daughter, a plain girl with a squint and no prospects, on a plot of land lent by her husband's younger brother where the members of Tamuli Name House had built her a house. Jetuki's husband married three times and by his first wife he had a son called Rudra, now married with a family. Although Rudra inherited his father's land, he did nothing to help his stepmother who lived mainly by begging. Jetuki's house was now in a dilapidated condition. The Tamuli Name House brought pressure to bear on Rudra who reluctantly agreed to allow a room to be built onto his house for the use of Jetuki and her daughter. Every house in the Name House contributed Rs: 3 to buy materials and thatch for the roof. Some gave bamboos free. By combining in this way to provide for Jetuki, they made it difficult for Rudra to evade his obligations.

The Name House is organized on the principle of equality between members. Each house contributes equally to the cost of construction, both in money and in labour. A poor house may be given time to pay, but it must contribute its share. Tamuli Name House was in course of being re-built in brick because the old building of bamboo and thatch had been blown down by a storm. Rs: 500 was collected by a hucharī party at Bahag Bihu and used to buy materials. Every adult male was required to work on the Name House on Sundays, on pain of a fine of Rs: 4. Later, when more materials were required, money was raised by a household levy. The Name House building is owned in common by all its members. If a group later secedes, it has a claim on a share of the materials and quarrels often arise over the C.I. sheets used for the roof. On the same principle contributions for the celebration of festivals are assessed per household irrespective of wealth. Officials are appointed by the members sitting as a body and are responsible to them for the conduct of their office. Although senior and influential men usually take a leading part in discussion, authority is vested in the membership as a whole and decisions are spoken of as the decision of 'the people' (raĪj).

The Name House system in Panbari has certain features which derive from the location of the village on the outskirts of a large town. Bayan Name House elects in the first week of April each year

a President, Vice-President, Secretary, Assistant Secretary, Treasurer and a committee of 12 members to hear disputes and manage the affairs of the Name House. This system is now in its twenty-fifth year. The members are, however, all elected unanimously and, despite its modern dress, the Name House continues to function in traditional manner. Some houses of Panbari Name House have also joined the Shankar Mandir, a Name House in the town, where they tend to spend more time than in Panbari Name House itself. A villager commented disapprovingly that he did not go to the Shankar Mandir because he had his own Name House and, having found God in one place, he had no time to go and look for him in another. A number of houses in the village have never joined a Name House. One is that of a man whose father committed suicide, which may have been an inhibiting factor. Another is that of a clerk who spent his working life in tea garden quarters; on retirement to the village he did not join the Name House and later became a Harijaniya. The cadastral village also contains, especially on the east side, many newcomers who have bought land in order to be near their work in the town. Such men find it possible to live in the village without being part of it because the Name Houses in Panbari are not communities encapsulating the life of their members. Almost all the men work outside the village and many families have non-resident members employed in other parts of the State. Because one villager does not depend on another for his livelihood, the village lacks a marked political structure, resembling in this the atomistic character of a quarter of the town. Associated with the new occupational pattern is the tendency towards a more dispersed affinal network, although this is evident at present chiefly among the Kayasthas. The strength of community ties in Panbari probably derives from the fact that in the previous generation the village was wholly agricultural. As mobility and diversification of occupations increasingly affect rural areas, there is likely to be a shift from a situation in which the Name House is the village community to one in which the Name House caters chiefly for the religious needs of the villagers who are economically and socially part of a wider and more dispersed network.

CHAPTER 6

DEVOTIONAL WORSHIP

The practice of devotion, like other action, should be pursued without desire for its end. The Assamese classify devotion into two types: (1) devotion as phalarūpā (fruit) which is nikām (without desire), i.e. it is pursued as an end in itself; and (2) devotion as sādhana-rūpā (means) which is sakām (with desire), i.e. it is instrumental to salvation. The practice of devotion for its own sake alone is considered the higher form of devotion.

Devotional worship is conceived as a form of sevā (obeisance, service): bhagavatāt sevā, gurur prati sevā, bhakatsakalar prati sevā, namat sevā, etc. True sevā is disinterested in that it is performed not as a means to an end but for the sake of the service itself. If the motive for seva is to obtain worldly benefit or even spiritual advancement, it ceases to be true sevā.¹ The Assamese, however, recognize that because of human frailty, devotion is not always - indeed not usually - undertaken for its own sake (nikām) but to gain a specific end (sakām), and they use the general term sakām-nikām for these performances. The morning, afternoon and evening services (nām-prasaṅga) at satras and the celebration of Vaishnava festivals in satras and Name Houses are nikām, but performances in private houses are almost invariably sakām. The man at whose instigation the sakām takes place and who pays for the offering is called the sakāmī and it is to him that the benefits of the performance accrue.

Performances of this kind (sakām) are held for a great variety of purposes: to ensure success in the harvest, to prevent pots being broken in the firing, to attract a good catch of fish, to effect a safe delivery, to remove the baleful effects of birth or death at an inauspicious time, to appease the spirit of an ancestor, to pass an examination, to obtain a job, to cure sickness in the family, to mark the anniversary of a parent's death and at all rites de passage. The host invites to his house a number of devotees, ranging from a few neighbours to the entire membership of the Name House, who chant

hymns, partake of the offering and utter blessings that the purpose of the rite be fulfilled. In some cases, especially protracted illness, it is usual to make a vow promising to give an offering or hold a feast for the devotees, provided that the sick man recovers. Occasionally the host does not reveal his purpose, and the blessing takes the form that what he desires in his mind may come to pass.

The Vaishnavas conceive of heaven (vaikunṭha) as an abode in the celestial regions above the world where Krishna sits surrounded by the company of his chosen devotees singing hymns to his praise. The purpose of worship is to recreate that situation here, namely to induce Krishna and his heavenly company to descend from their abode and take temporary residence in the bodies of the congregation. The Leader of the Name (nām lagovā) is installed as Krishna, the other devotees become invested with the heavenly host and the ingredients of the offering are transformed from the produce of this world into the articles of Krishna's granary. In a literal sense the aim is to create a heaven on earth. The place where the service is to be held is purified by smearing the ground with white earth, cow-dung and water and the congregation attend in a ritually pure state after bathing and putting on clean clothes. The Name Leader is required to fast beforehand. For worship, as for eating, a man wears three pieces of cloth, but no shirt. The Name Leader begins by establishing the thāpanā. Thāpanā literally means 'placing' and refers to the placing or invocation of Krishna into a sacred book, which is either the Bhagavat or one of the works written by the founding fathers of the sect which are in the main free translations from the Bhagavat (Kirttan, Ghosa, Daham, Bhakti-ratnavali and Guna-mala are the most popular). In Name Houses the scripture is a manuscript written on incense bark, in ordinary houses it is a book or paperback from the bazaar. The Name Leader squats on the ground facing east and places before him on the tip of a banana leaf a bell-metal dish on a raised leg (śarāi), touching the base in salutation. He then takes up the book in his right hand, wraps it in a cloth and places it on the śarāi. The śarāi, which contains the book, represents the devotee who contains Krishna; a cloth is used because god is said to be too dazzling to be seen unveiled by human eyes. As

he places the book on its stand, he utters a secret mantra which has the effect of causing Krishna to take up residence (stithi) in the book. (The Sri Shankaradeva Sangha, which has recently published a version of the esoteric mantras, recommends 'Om: I salute in the Bhagavat the god Basu', repeated four times.) The stand with its book now becomes a thāpanā, that is, an object inhabited by Krishna. It is said: 'In the thāpanā is god.' Thereafter no one should cross before it till the conclusion of the service. If it is necessary to do so, it is done stooping with the right hand pointing towards the ground. Near the base of the thāpanā the Name Leader places a dish of incense, a light of ghee or mustard oil, and a few annas with some uncut areca nuts on a pan leaf called the 'penalty offering' (danda arccanā), to which I return later. All articles offered are placed on a section of banana leaf to avoid contact with the earth and covered with another section; the tip of the leaf (āgali pāt) is considered specially respectful. He now proceeds to the preparation of the offering.

The offering consists of raw ingredients, whitish in colour as appropriate to Vishnu and, with the exception of ginger, are 'cooling'.² Ginger is said to be added because of its digestive properties. The ingredients are washed and prepared beforehand by the Distributor. They consist of a fine variety of lāhī rice, two varieties of pulse (but and magu), bananas, pan leaves twisted into a funnel containing cut areca nut, segments of lime, coconut, ginger and salt and other fruits in season. The Distributor softens the rice and pulse by soaking them for a few hours in cold water.

The rationale of the offering is said to be based on the following lines of Shankaradeva, freely translated from the Bhagavat:

'If there is nothing in the world except Krishna
I always worship Krishna with things full of Krishna;
Seeing me Manu and all virtuous men
Worship Hari with things in the form of Hari.'

According to this view the phenomenal world is a manifestation of god and has no reality apart from him. He who makes the offering, the god to whom the offering is made, and the offering itself, exist only as his aspects. The realization of this identity is effected in the offering through mantras. The Name Leader squats on the ground

before the thāpanā surrounded by the ingredients of the offering as washed and prepared by the Distributor, the rice in a basket or bowl on his right and the pulses on his left. He places on a banana leaf before (i.e. to the west of) the thāpanā a raised bell-metal dish (śarāi), touching the base in salutation. In the bottom of the dish he puts a banana leaf. He then takes up four handfuls of rice followed by four handfuls of pulse - or two of rice and two of pulse alternately - and places them in the dish, uttering a mantra with each handful. The mound is then carefully patted for it is inauspicious for a grain to fall on the ground. The other ingredients are also used in fours (or multiples of four), that is, four bananas on the four sides, four funnels of pan and areca nut between the bananas, eight slices of coconut between the two, four segments of lime between the funnels and other fruits as available. As each ingredient is placed on the dish, he utters consecutively the mantras - nām, guru, deva, bhakat - one for each piece or handful. On the pinnacle he puts a pinch of salt, and on the salt ginger. The whole is covered with a banana leaf cut into an octagonal shape, which also has esoteric significance. There are minor differences of procedure according to the guru who imparted the instructions. By these mantras it is believed that each ingredient of the offering is converted into the four realities (cāri-vastu) which together constitute devotion. After completing his preparations, the Name Leader rises and walks backwards, dusting the ground before him with a banana leaf to remove the tread of his footsteps. The congregation has by now assembled and is seated on the three sides, the senior and respected men occupying the upper places near the thāpanā, and the performance begins.

According to Vaishnava teaching the most efficacious methods of cultivating the state of devotion are the acts of listening to (śravap) and of chanting (kīrttan) the names of god especially in the company of devotees (sat saṅga). Vaishnava devotional works, composed by the founders of the sect (Shankaradeva, Madhavadeva, Damodaradeva, etc.) are used today as sacred texts. In the words of the text, which recount the qualities of god, god himself is believed to inhere: 'the word reciting the qualities of Brahman, is as Brahman himself.' Selections from these works, which are in the main free translations and compilations of the Bhagavata Purana and other Sanskrit works

rendered into homely Assamese verse, are chanted during worship by the congregation. This part of the service is called nām (name) or nām-prasaṅga (the good company of name).

Every Name has four parts:

- (1) bar gīt
- (2) ghosā
- (3) kīrttan
- (4) upadesa.

Bar gīt (great songs) are devotional lyrics of which 240 are attributed to Shankaradeva and Madhavadeva. They are sung in unison by drummers and cymbal players to the accompaniment of stylized rhythmic movements. At least one should be played at the opening of the service as an invocation to Krishna to leave Vaikuntha.³ Below is an example of a lyric written by Shankaradeva in rhyming couplets:

Chorus:

'The scholar does not see the straightest path,
Nor does the performer of a million sacrifices
attain Hari.
Both fall down to earth ever and anon.'

Verse:

'All rites and rituals
All pilgrimages to Gaya and Kasi
Made round the years,
All yogas done and rhetoric learnt
Only cloud the vision.
There is no salvation without bhakti.
The name of Rama is
The blessedest thing on earth.
That is the highest knowledge.
In the age of Kali,
Hari's name is the Supreme religion
The scriptures and the lore
Do not enable one,
To know Hari.
Sayeth the servant of Krishna:
Human life is short and difficult to get (again).
Forget, therefore, the vanity of learning and rites,
And worship the feet of Hari
In your inmost soul.'

(Shankaradeva: Bargīt 13, quoted and translated by Barua 1960:62-3).

At the end of the Bargit the Name Leader takes his seat on a mat in the centre of the hall facing the thāpanā. He places the palms of his hands together and mentally utters the invocation (arccanā) which constrains Krishna, who is described as obedient to his devotee (bhakatār baśya), to leave Vaikuntha and become present in their midst.

This consists of the secret name of god revealed to him by his guru. As a result of the invocation, the whole of Vaikuntha is translated to the place of worship. Krishna becomes present in the person of the Name Leader, the devotees who dwell in Vaikuntha descend to inhabit the devotees in the congregation. It is said: 'Krishna cannot leave devotee and devotee cannot leave Krishna. Krishna and devotee have one and the same body. Where there is devotee, Krishna always stays there.' The identity during the Name of Krishna and his devotees, of the Name Leader and the congregation is expressed in a verbal idiom. First the Name Leader sings a verse and then the congregation repeat it after him. When he says, 'O Ram', they respond, 'O Ram', and when he says, 'O Hari', they respond, 'O Hari'. At that time they are said to share a common body. But at the conclusion of the Name Krishna returns to Vaikuntha. In the concluding blessings, accordingly, when the Name Leader says, 'O Ram', the congregation responds, 'O Hari'. This symbolizes the beginning of the parting. From the invocation till the end of the Name, no one must rise from his seat: to do so is equivalent to driving Krishna away and breaks the mystical union between god and devotees.

The Name Leader opens the Name by repeating softly three times each of the opening three lines of Madhavadeva's Nām Chanda:

'Krishna Rama Krishna Rama
Krishna, Krishna, Rama jaya jaya Rama
Krishna Hari Rama Hari Rama Rama Rama.'

As he comes to the last line for the third time he raises his voice and the congregation sing the fourth line with him:

'Ananta, Achyuta, Sanatana, Narayana, Prana.'

He then sings a few stanzas from one of the more well-known passages of Madhavadeva's Nām Ghosā. The congregation know these by heart and sing them with him, marking the rhythm by clapping their hands. Each verse is sung four times in four different melodies (rāga), at first slow and sweet accelerating to a rapid and agitated tempo at the close.

'Within the heart is a store of Name, it issues by
the mouth;
The Name of Ram crushes sin as the ox treads out corn.'

The Name of Hari triumphs over sin
 And seats itself on high above all other religions
 (dharma).

The bliss of Hari's Name is greater than the joys
 of liberation;
 It is the friend of the devotee and goes where Hari
 goes.

Hari takes pleasure in the greatness of his Name.
 Who takes his Name, Hari becomes his: this is the
 great secret.

The devotee abides with Hari meditating on his
 qualities and Name;
 With the feet of Hari locked in his heart, thus
 speaks his servant, Madhava.'

(Madhavadeva: Nām Ghōṣa, 993-7)

At this point - or sometimes after Kīrttan - the Name Leader makes the offering (arpanā). The wording is not fixed but follows a traditional pattern. The following example is appropriate to the anniversary of Madhavadeva's death (tithi):

'Today is the anniversary of the ascension of a Mahapurusa. To mark this occasion at the feet of God we have placed a thing of Vaikuntha: an offering of pulse, areca nut and pan leaf, a light on a stand, a penalty for faults (arihanā) and other things to the best of our ability. So doing we seek shelter in thee. In this if we have made any mistakes, wipe them all away. Be pleased to accept these articles as if from your own granary in Vaikuntha. This is our prayer at your feet, O Great One.'

Thereupon Krishna (here identified with Madhavadeva) is considered to become present (stithi) in the offering. He purifies it (śuci kara), accepts it (grahan kara) and eats it. It thus becomes the residue of his food and is transubstantiated as prasād, the 'favour' of god.

The Name Leader now opens Name from Shankaradeva's Kīrttan. He sings the chorus from one of the songs, which the congregation repeat after him. This is done twice. Then he sings the verses of the song and at the end of each verse the congregation repeat the chorus. As before, every verse is sung four times in four melodies of increasing tempo. It is not permitted to sing more than two complete songs from Kīrttan: additional songs are broken off unfinished.

Chorus:

'Lord Gopal Kripal is my deliverance,
 I am drowning in the ocean of the world.'

Verse:

'Listen attentively and concentrate on Hari.
 There is a sacred place called Vaikuntha
 With rows and rows of palaces
 Studded with emeralds and diamonds.
 The sun and moon shine so brightly
 It is difficult to know night from day.
 There are beautiful lakes with clear water
 Blooming with water lilies and the fragrant lotus.
 On the water play flocks of geese
 As they feed on the roots of the lotus.
 Rare flowers blossom in the gentle breezes.
 The sparrows twitter sweetly.
 The bees sing songs of Hari,
 At the sound of which the Vaishnavas are pleased...'

(From Shankaradeva: Kīrttan,
 freely translated)

Name concludes with sāmarani ghōṣa (finishing chorus) the verses of which consist of the names of god without verbal connections. First the Name Leader sings again the first three lines of nām chanda (v. p.141 above), repeating them many times with the devotees. They then sing some more verses of his choice:

'Murari Madhuripu Raghava O Rama Raghupati
 Rama Rama Rama Hari Rama Rama Rama
 Rama Rama Rama Narayana jaya Narayana.'

(Madhavadeva: Nām Chanda, 866)

The Name Leader now says, 'O Hari': the congregation respond, 'O Ram'. The Name Leader says, 'O Ram': the congregation respond, 'O Hari'. This is the end of the Name. (On ceremonial occasions such as the three tithis and pāl nām, jai diya (giving of jai), consisting of shouts of 'jai Hari, jai Ram, jai Narayan', is uttered before the concluding responses.)

The Name Leader removes his mat and makes obeisance with his forehead on the ground for the aparādh bhanjan (fault breaking):

'Verily in the Name have been hundreds of thousands of mistakes. We are not fit to perform Name of Vaikuntha. Therefore, O Hari thing, by accepting the Name as your own, may you destroy our countless faults.'

The congregation endorse the utterance with 'O Hari, O Ram'.

The Name Leader rises. On the south side of the hall the Reader is seated on a mat facing north before a wooden stand (thogā) with

Shankaradeva's Kīrttan. Before the sacred text is placed a light and a dish of incense. The Reader chants some passages from Kīrttan, at the conclusion of which he utters a verse of religious instruction (upadesa) from Shankaradeva's Daham (a rendering of the tenth book of the Bhagavat). For example:

'Spreading over the sands of the Jumna,
The gopis begin to shout Krishna:
That shout reached the sky.
Let all present in the company
Shout Hari Hari.
May fire burn our sins.'

The congregation endorse the utterance with 'O Hari, O Ram'. This concludes the reading (pāt sāmaraṇi). The Reader then removes his mat and bows down on the ground for the 'fault breaking'.

The Name Leader utters the blessing (āsīrbād). The following example is used at the offering of New Rice:

'At the beginning of cultivation we, the devotees of Hari, taking a handful of seed, vowed to give first to guru, devotees, guests and at god's feet and after that to support our rotten bodies, our fathers, mothers, wives, sons and friends. So saying we proceeded with cultivation. We have fallen into error, we are great sinners, we have not done as we should have done. All the same, new rice has been offered at your feet. Make all our faults faultless and accept the offering as your own. In future grant us increase in all respects, from one make a thousand, fill our granaries with inexhaustible wealth and make them the abode of great Lakshmi. May God be pleased and look with mercy upon us' (Goswami: 36-7, freely translated).

The congregation endorse the blessing by intoning 'O Hari, O Ram'. It is the assent of the devotees, termed the 'thunderclap of Hari' (Hari dhanī), which alone is believed to make the blessing effective.

The Name Leader usually utters several blessings. If the performance is held for an individual purpose (sakām), the giver of the sakām, the sakāmī, sets down before the company a big dish of areca nut and pan before Name begins and bows down while the purpose of the rite is declared (sevā jānani) and a blessing uttered for its fulfillment. This blessing is repeated by the Name Leader at the end as the sakāmī again makes obeisance. The last blessing is always in the name of the guru:

'Guru is Brahma, guru is Vishnu, guru is Maheshwar, guru is the whole world. May guru deva be pleased with his disciples and look kindly upon them and their families.'

At the conclusion of the service the offering is distributed. The Distributor first covers his mouth and nose with a cloth. He dismantles the thāpanā by removing the sacred book from its stand: this symbolizes the departure of Krishna who has finished eating. Members of the congregation are now free to cross the room. He removes the cover from the offering and returns each article to the basket from which it was taken, the four bananas to the basket with bananas, the eight slices of coconut to the basket with coconut, and so forth. The rice and pulses are placed in a big brass bowl containing the remainder of the rice, pulses and salt, and the whole is mixed thoroughly together. As a result of this contact the virtue of the sanctified food passes into all the food which becomes prasād. The Distributor then arranges portions of the prasād on sections of banana leaves and distributes them to the congregation, starting with the senior respected men seated near the thāpanā and then continuing down the line. Portions should be offered and accepted with both hands. As a mark of respect, the Distributor moves each leaf a little toward the person to whom it is assigned (prasādar pāt diyā). Consistent with the principle that all devotees are one and the same, all portions should be alike. No one eats till all are served. Prasād must be entirely consumed and never thrown away. If not eaten immediately, it is taken home. The prasād of major festivals is sometimes kept for years, a little being taken after bath at the conclusion of a period of ritual pollution. When the distribution is complete, the Distributor bows down and the Name Leader utters the 'fault-breaking' on his behalf.

The nām prasaṅga described above is the simplest and most common type of Name. Prasaṅga literally means 'good company' and is used to refer to gatherings of devotees assembled for worship. Nām prasaṅga has come to mean the chanting of devotional songs with their attendant rites. In satras variations are made in the prasaṅga according to whether the service is held in the morning, afternoon or evening. More elaborate types of Name include:

Rājahuvā nām (people's name), usually performed at bar sabāh (great gathering). This is held annually in Name Houses when the members of another Name House are invited as guests, and sometimes by wealthy individuals. The Name may be of two types: hirā nām, which is accompanied by cymbals or, more commonly, uthā nām, in which the

Name Leader conducts the songs walking up and down. There is a complete recitation of the 1001 verses of Madhavadeva's Nām Ghoṣa. The performance lasts throughout the night.

Pāl nām (turn name), so called because parties of devotees take turns so that the performance is continuous. This is considered the purest of all types of Name. Satras hold pāl nām annually for the welfare of their disciples, usually in the holy month of Bhadra when Krishna was born. Ideally it should be begun on the first day of a month and continue without intromission to the end of the month. In individual houses it is usually concluded in a day and a night and next day there is a feast of cooked rice (bhoj).

Certain families inherit a tradition of performing Bar Sabāh or Pāl Nām annually. It is sometimes discontinued because of the cost, but any ensuing misfortune to the family will be attributed to this:

'We have been doing this since my grandfather's time. After I retired I gave up for three years owing to want of money. Then one of my sons died. So I resumed.'

The main cost is the feeding of guests. In a Pal Nam held in 1971 by a wealthy Chutiya family in Chokial village, some 600 guests were invited, excluding kin and affines, and 1,400 banana leaves were collected for the offering and the feast. Such performances carry great prestige.

For the Assamese devotional worship is seen as the actualization of the state of devotion (bhakti). In the early hours of the morning during a Bar Sabah when the atmosphere had reached a climax of emotional intensity, a devotee remarked: 'We should be like this always. But we poor devotees, tomorrow we must return to cultivation, so we can only hold Name occasionally.' The drowsiness of children in the Name House is attributed to the fact that: 'Name has this intrinsic quality that it concentrates the mind on Krishna and makes it forget outward enjoyment.' In the performance of Name, which is seen as devotion actualized, the four parts (cāri vastu) of devotion are held to be present. The god, Krishna, is invoked into the thāpanā; the devotees are present in the congregation; the songs consist of chanting the names of god; and the guru acts as Name Leader. To Pal Nam, Bar Sabah and other major ceremonies a Gosain is always invited. At smaller ceremonies, when the Gosain is not physically present, the idea of the guru is incorporated into the service, part of the money given in the arihaṇa is kept for the guru and the Name Leader substitutes

for his person. In the same way, the offering is seen as devotion substantialized and each of its ingredients is converted by mantras into nām, deva, guru, bhakat, or the four parts of devotion.

The significance of the offering has recently been analysed by Babb in terms of a hierarchical relationship between god and man evidenced by the fact that the worshippers eat 'the polluted refuse of the god with all its hierarchical implications' (Babb 1970: 297; 1975:57). Babb argues that the prestation of food to the deity is a payment for past or future favours. At the same time, he says, a gift if unrequired debases the recipient so that reciprocity in some form must be incorporated in the ritual sequence in order to affirm the superior status of the god. This is effected by a counterprestation in the form of prasād. He points out that the food given to the god is superior food prepared under stringent conditions of purity, whereas the food received back by the worshippers consists of inferior and polluted leftovers. The eating of these leftovers as prasād restores the equilibrium that has been disturbed by the initial prestation so that, he says, 'the god has received payment with honor, and thereby the proper hierarchy has been maintained' (Babb 1975:57). He concludes: 'An asymmetrical transaction in food, then, lies at the heart of puja (in which he includes sevā or devotional worship, v. Babb 1975:37-39), a transaction both expressive and supportive of hierarchical distance between the divine and the human' (Babb 1975:57). The rest of his analysis is concerned with the sense of common identity among the participants that results from sharing the prasād, when caste divisions are temporarily suspended, 'reduced', as he puts it, 'to relative insignificance by the overwhelming inclusiveness of the hierarchical opposition between the mundane and the divine' (Babb 1957:60).

This interpretation is misconceived in two respects. In the first place, it relies on a theory of gift-exchange derived from Mauss which is not applicable in the Hindu context, where the act of giving is seen as a completed act involving no counter-prestation. It is emphasized in Assam that a man's qualities pass in his gift. Disciples are believed to transfer their sins to their guru by the payment of annual dues and a guru who does nothing to improve their spiritual condition is likened to a simul tree on which the disciples

drop their sins as vultures drop their excrement. Should the recipient of a gift later make a return to the donor, its connection with the original gift is denied on the grounds that, even if a man returns a gift tenfold he cannot rid himself of the qualities he accepted with the first gift. The Hindu gift passes from inferior to superior. A pure gift is unsolicited by the recipient and given by the donor, not to evoke a counter-prestation, but for the sake of the giving itself. In this it resembles sevā.

In the second place, devotional worship is not about rank, and the idiom of inter-caste food transactions is not an appropriate model to understand it. Between men, who are subject to defilement, food transactions are governed by considerations of ritual impurity. According to Assamese notions, soaking, together with cutting open, husking and grinding, are classed as degrees of cooking in that they soften the food internally or open it to the outside so that the qualities of those who touch it pass into the food. The ingredients of the offering are cut into slices by the Distributor and the grain and pulses are softened by soaking them beforehand for a few hours in cold water. This makes the offering in some degree permeable to contagion. The guru, scrupulous in his food observances, will not accept prasād prepared by a distributor of a caste below Kalita, the highest Shudra caste in Assam, and no man of clean caste will partake of the offering in company with an Untouchable. Krishna, on the other hand, being a god, is not subject to ritual impurity and such considerations are not applicable to him. He is believed not only to accept and eat the offering of all true devotees, including Untouchables, but also to have expressed a desire to eat the food remains of his devotees:

'Nothing is superior to the food left by the devotee.
I myself, O Arjuna, feel a craving to eat the
remains of my devotee's food.'

(Quoted by Neog 1963:11)

In general, caste and other hierarchical distinctions are foreign to the spirit of bhakti, which should not be pursued instrumentally as a means of gaining divine favour, but for the sake of devotion itself.⁴ 'Those who want power worship śakti. But we devotees, we do not seek to be powerful. We seek to serve God.' The nature

of devotional worship is approached here through the 'penalty offering' (daṇḍa arccanā or arihaṇā) mentioned above, consisting of a few annas with areca nut and pan placed on a banana leaf before the thāpanā.

The performance of Name aims to create a heaven on earth. This in the nature of things cannot be done perfectly, for the efforts of ordinary human beings necessarily fall far short of the divine model, and the 'penalty offering' is given in expiation of the gap between aspiration and performance. It is a token sum which underlines the 'token' value of all offerings to god. Those who take a leading part in the service - the host or sakāmī who gives the Name, the Name Leader, the Reader and the Distributor of the offering - are required on the completion of their office to make an eight-point obeisance with the forehead on the ground while a prayer is uttered on their behalf in apology for their errors in performance: this is called the 'fault-breaking' (aparādh bhānjan). At the same time Krishna is expected to accept the offering in spite of its imperfections and, by making it his own, to invest it with the qualities of Vaikuntha:

'In the manner that the materials of Vaikuntha should have been offered, in that manner it has not been possible to make the offering...'

'Destroy all our faults and shortcomings; be pleased to consider the articles of the offering as if from the granary of Vaikuntha and to accept it as your own.'

'In this many faults have occurred... Make these faults faultless, wipe away the hundreds of shortcomings, be pleased to take this offering and say it is your own. Being then satisfied with your own qualities, may you show us kindness, O Lord.'

(Goswami: 29, 10, 29, freely translated; italics mine)

The assimilation of the human to the divine carries, on the human side, a sense of humility - 'O Gobinda, I know not how to greet you, I know not how to say farewell, I know nothing of worship' - which has its counterpart in the concept of indulgence or divine grace - 'May god remove our faults and accept the offering as his own.' The transubstantiation effected in the offering by this creative exchange can be expressed in terms of a commensal mode.

Through the offering the devotee enters into a commensal relationship with god. The offering is at once mental and material,

consisting of an emotional attitude, termed devotion, which is held to be pleasing to god and which is conveyed in songs and certain material substances which are themselves converted by mantras into the four parts of devotion and act as the vehicle of this state of mind. Worship is an offering to Krishna by the devotee of his devotion to him. The distinguishing quality of Krishna is believed to be his love for his devotees - it is commonly said that Krishna is our greatest friend - and his accessibility to them. It is expected that Krishna will take this offering and eat it, thereby making it into part of himself. The effect of its sojourn in Krishna is that Krishna makes good the deficiencies in human devotion by investing them with divine qualities so that the prasād re-introjected by the devotee is the product of the commensal mating within Krishna of god and the devotee. This is explicit in the words of the offering when Krishna is asked to accept the article as if from his own granary in Vaikuntha and thus to be satisfied with his own qualities. To change for the moment to a money analogy, the offering of the devotee represents token coinage which does not possess the intrinsic value for which it is current, the prasād of Krishna is this same coinage which has been given in at the bank in exchange for gold.

The commensal model is also used in relation to Name. The names of God are described as a nectarine juice and can be regarded as a form of verbal food which is provided by Krishna for his devotees. 'Drink ye, drink ye, drink ye the ambrosial sweetness of Hari's name' (Nām Ghoṣā 70⁴). Worship is based on the belief that a man participates in the nature of the god he worships: 'If I worship Krishna, I become Krishna; if I worship a demon, I become a demon.' Bhakti itself is said to derive from the Sanskrit bhaj, meaning divide or share. The alimentary process appears to be used as a primary model of communication, both in relation to gods and in intercourse between men. The development of this theme is outside the scope of the thesis, but the significance of food in social relations is taken up again in chapter 8.

Notes.

1. Adrian Mayer has elaborated the implications of this distinction in relation to public service in his paper, 'Public service and individual merit in a town of central India' (Mayer, in press).
2. The Assamese categorize food as 'heating' and 'cooling'. Heating foods are held to raise the temperature of the blood and excite the passions and are offered to female goddesses embodying the śakti of Shiva. Cooling foods, which lower the temperature of the blood and calm the mind, are offered to Vishnu.
3. Bargit are popular in satras but are usually omitted elsewhere except on special celebrations.
4. Cf. Bhagavata Purana, x, 31-19: 'Let your worship always be done without desire for receiving anything in return; then I will always remain your debtor.'

CHAPTER 7.

THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF BHAKTI: THE SATRA SYSTEM.

The permanent organization of the devotional movement in Assam takes two forms: one is that of the village Name House and the other is the satra system. A satra consists of a guru and the disciples initiated by him. Every Assamese Vaishnava prior to marriage journeys to his satra to take initiation from the Gosain who imparts to him the esoteric mantras of the sect. Thereafter he is required to live the life of a disciple who has dedicated himself to god and to support the satra by the payment of annual dues. There are estimated to be some 650 satras in the Assam Valley. The head of the satra, who is termed the satrādhikār ('owner of the satra'), or Gosain ('god'), traces his spiritual genealogy by hereditary succession or by the link of initiation through his predecessors in office to the founder of his satra, and thence to the founder of his sub-sect who was one of the disciples initiated by Shankaradeva, a Mahapurusa and incarnation of Vishnu (according to the Mahapurusiya version of events). The lives of Shankaradeva and his immediate followers are recorded in an extensive biographical literature, which is said to date from the early half of the seventeenth century. The first four biographies, though not always in agreement, are held to be largely authoritative, while progressively less reliance is placed on the later works of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, by which time it had become an act of piety to model the career of the master on the episodes of Krishna's life as recounted in the Bhagavata Purana (Neog 1965: 16). Another source of variation derives from the division of the movement soon after Shankaradeva's death into rival sects which favoured different versions of events designed to legitimize particular lines of apostolic succession. The main facts of his life are, however, generally taken to be as follows:

Shankaradeva was born in 1449 A.D. at Alipukhuri near Bardowa in the present Nowgong District of Assam. He came of an influential high-caste family, but he was not a Brahman. At the age of 35 he

set out on his first pilgrimage of twelve years during which he received illumination at the Jagannath temple of Puri. Soon after his return he obtained a copy of the Bhagavata Purana with Sridhara's commentary which he translated into Assamese.¹ Shankara now began to preach his new faith and many people were converted to the cult of bhakti. The growing movement incurred the hostility of the Brahman priesthood who complained against him before the Ahom kings and Shankara was forced to flee from place to place to avoid persecution. He finally found refuge near Barpeta in the Kooch kingdom of Narnarayana where he died in 1569 A.D. after a long life of 118 years, 10 months and a few days. He married twice and had three sons and two daughters. Shankaradeva is venerated today among Assamese Vaishnavas not only as the founder of their faith and an incarnation of Vishnu but as the originator of all that is peculiarly Assamese in their social organization and culture and hence, in a sense, as the father of the Assamese nation.²

In Shankaradeva's lifetime, meetings of the faithful were usually held in the open or under the shade of trees and devotees who had given up their livelihood to propagate the new faith were dependent on alms and voluntary contributions for their support (Sarma 1966: 107; Neog 1963:312). After his death it became necessary to organize the movement on a more permanent footing. This was achieved through the establishment of centres of worship called satras.

The satra institution is discussed here under the following heads: (a) the concept of the guru; (b) the system of initiation; (c) the organization and revenues of the satra; (d) relations between satras - the division into sub-sects; and (e) the satras and the reform sects.

The Guru

Shankaradeva is quoted as saying: 'He who has not taken a guru, cannot enter into my religion.' The first rite of initiation into a satra must be carried out by the satrādhikār who represents in his person one of the original founders of the movement to whom he is linked by a line of succession recorded in the family book of his satra.

'My disciples receive from me as guru. But I have my guru and there is the guru of my guru. This goes back to Jadavananda who is the founder of this satra. He was the eldest of the five sons of Kamaladeva, the only son of Gopal Ata, who was one of the 12 leading disciples initiated by Madhavadeva (Shankaradeva's disciple and successor).'

The link between successive gurus is considered to be one of substantive identity:

'I will conceive that Krishna entered into Shankaradeva, Shankaradeva into Madhavadeva, Madhavadeva into Thakur, and Thakur into the founder of my satra. The founder enters into the guru who initiated me (upakārī guru) and he into my body.'

The rule of succession to the office of adhikār varies. In satras where the satrādhikār marries, the office passes from father to son, or in some cases from elder brother to younger brother. In satras where the satrādhikār is celibate, a boy from a Gosain family is given to the satra at a young age and trained as the intended adhikār. Thus the present adhikārs of Auniati, Dakhinpat and Garamur all come from the Kuruwabahi family. A sign is said to occur at the birth of a future adhikār. In Barpeta and one or two satras in western Assam the adhikār is chosen by the bhakats.³ The successor-designate is called the 'young adhikār' (dekā adhikār). When the satrādhikār feels his death approaching he calls the young adhikār to him and places on his head the chaplet (ḍhop) of office. After the conclusion of the mortuary rites a formal investiture is held in which the new adhikār is confirmed in his office by a number of fellow satrādhikārs and accepted by his disciples. It is said that succession was originally determined by merit and that the hereditary principle developed later (Neog 1965:335). Today all satrādhikārs come from satra families.

The spiritual pre-eminence of the guru is expressed in the fact that he cannot take food cooked by another because there exists no one of equal status to him, but when he cooks all will eat. The remains of his food are called prasād, a term used for an offering made to god, and are sought by those suffering from disease on account of their magical qualities. The adhikārs of famous satras, who are in theory almost totally withdrawn from worldly affairs, cannot be touched and do not set foot on the ground outside the satra precincts. When they go out on tour with their retinue to visit their disciples in the cold weather, they travel by boat or are carried in litters to camps specially built for them by the villagers and cloths are spread on the ground before them as they walk.⁴

The satrādhikār is received by the laity as the living embodiment of God. It is customary to invite a satrādhikār from a nearby satra to preside at important functions in village Name Houses. At his

approach drummers and cymbal-players bow down and salute him with the music of the 'guru's prelude' (gurughāt). He stands on a low stool while his feet are washed. A raised vessel containing incense (dhūp), light (dīp), uncut areca nut (goṭa tāmol), pān leaves and some money are placed before him as respect (mān). He is then escorted to his seat. The blessing contains some such words as these:

'In this company a thing of paradise (i.e. God) has appeared in the form of the guru, who shows living things the path to salvation. We have fallen far short of receiving him in the manner that is his due. Only we crave at his feet that he may grant us a place in the company of his own servants (i.e. in heaven) and so save us' (Goswami:⁴, my translation).

At the conclusion of the ceremony the leading men bow down before him again apologising for the trouble they have caused him and escort him some way back. For at that time he comes in the form of God (īśvarar rūp).

Gosains in consequence maintain two kinds of links with the laity. One is through the rite of initiation by which individual disciples, usually widely scattered throughout the State, are attached to their respective gurus. The other derives from the occasional offices which a Gosain performs on invitation for Name Houses or individuals living in the vicinity of the satra. The latter can be illustrated from Panbari.

The sacred book representing Krishna permanently installed in the thāpanā of the Name House must be established by a Gosain. In the three Name Houses of Panbari, the scriptures were Shankaradeva's Kīrttan, Shankaradeva's Guṇa-mālā and Madhavadeva's Nām-ghoṣa, which were established either by the Gosain of Dhapkata satra 4 miles away or by the Baga Gosain of Letugram satra 2 miles away. It was discovered in 1969 that the Guṇa-mālā in Panbari Name House (established by the Baga Gosain of Letugram satra) had been eaten by rats and the Dhapkata Gosain was invited to establish a new one. A feast was held in the Name House afterwards cooked by the Gosain. It is also necessary to invite a Gosain to act as Name Leader at Turn Name (pāl nām) and at Great Assembly (bar saḥāb) whether given in a Name House or in a private house. At feasts a known and respected Gosain is usually asked to cook as all will accept food

from his hand and no one causes offence by cooking at a separate kitchen. These invitations provide an important source of supplementary income for the Gosains of smaller satras. If the guests are not satisfied, it is considered that the purpose of the Name is lost, the host losing all his labour, and much must be given to satisfy a Gosain.

'When the Gosain arrived for Turn Name, he stood on a stool and we washed his feet. Light, incense, and areca nut with pan were offered him. The whole family bowed down to receive his blessing. At that time he is considered as God. Only rich houses invite a Gosain because if he is dissatisfied, the whole performance is meaningless. For Turn Name one dhutī and a cloth are compulsory. When he left we bowed down again and gave him Rs: 17 and a share of food, uncooked, for every member of his family at a cost of about Rs: 40. The Gosain never used to accept invitations for Name when the satra was richer. Now they are poor and for the last fifteen years they will go to houses when invited.'

The position of the Gosain has certain elements of ambiguity. He is greeted in a manner appropriate to an embodiment of God and by his presence does honour to the host, but the host at the same time is his patron who contributes to his livelihood.⁵ Gifts to a Gosain are considered a form of respect (mān) accepted as a favour to the donor and it would be inappropriate for the Gosain to show any interest in the articles set before him. But in fact he values the articles, not only for themselves, but because they provide a measure of his reputation. A Gosain's 'honour' consists in his reputation for sanctity. Although he can safeguard his sanctity by scrupulous care in his way of life and more particularly in his eating habits, his reputation exists outside himself and is evidenced by the deference with which he is publicly received and the value of the gifts offered to him. The ambiguity of his position makes him sensitive to slights and he is careful to avoid situations which might diminish his dignity. Although villagers living near to a satra often attend satra festivals, bringing gifts in kind or coin, the Gosain cannot enforce their co-operation. When he presides over a function in the village Name House he does so on the invitation of its members who can invite any suitable Gosain in the neighbourhood and, if their usual Gosain is engaged elsewhere, they invite another. The village Name House is an autonomous unit not subject to the authority of the gurus.

Initiation

The first initiation is called śaraṇ which literally means 'shelter'. Every male Vaishnava is required to take śaraṇ before marriage. In theory he is free to become a disciple of any satra he chooses but in fact he is almost always initiated into his father's satra so that satra membership, originally determined by individual choice, is now a matter of hereditary status. The idea, however, of choice remains: as the deity who is the subject of devotion is one's chosen god (ista devatā), so the guru is one's chosen guru (ista guru).

The content of initiation is secret. The guru imparts to the initiate the mysteries of the cult through esoteric mantras which he swears never to reveal. Initiation usually takes place in the satra Name House before an image or scripture representing Krishna to whom the initiate dedicates himself and all his possessions. He fasts prior to the rite, bathes and puts on two pieces of ritually pure clothing. The guru sits on a mat, the initiate on the ground, symbolizing their unequal status.

During initiation the disciple is instructed to consider his guru as the representative (murti) of the founders of the sect, and through them of Krishna. The guru says: 'The ātmān of Hari and Har (i.e. God and devotee) are the same' (Hari Har ātmā abhin). Therefore through the mediation of the guru the devotee becomes identified with God.

The main rite of initiation consists of an oath of surrender to the four principles (cāri-vastu) which together constitute bhakti and form the core of the religion: guru (religious preceptor), deva (god), nām (name), bhakat (devotee). Their inter-relation was explained by a Gosain as follows:

'The initiate is to promise four things. But we say our religion is one śaraṇ (ekśaraṇa). How can we say four things? You should believe in guru because through him you reach God. Shankara has said that the guru is none other than God. God and guru are one, different only in body. God - there is only one God. He is within your heart, you are not to seek him elsewhere. Other gods are his creatures, they derive from him. They are like servants to do his work. It is no use serving the servants, you must serve God. Do not bow down your head to any other god except Krishna. But God is inseparable from his Name. Name and Hari (i.e. God) are one and the same. By uttering the names of God and by remembering them in your heart you come to know God. A devotee has no attachment to the world, he always remembers God,

he is without enmity, he sees all things as equal. God is always to be found in the company of his devotees. The true devotee contains Name, he becomes Name itself. He can show to others the God that is within him. By his example he does the function of a guru. So guru, deva, nām, all are contained in bhakat. He is the embodiment of them all.'

The initiate surrenders himself to each of the four principles in turn, taking a few steps and saying three times, 'I take shelter in guru', 'I take shelter in God', 'I take shelter in Name', 'I take shelter in the devotee'.

After initiation the disciple is expected to lead a life in which his daily actions assume significance through dedication to God. The guru instructs him in the conduct of life proper to a Vaishnava and imparts to him a set of mantras which convert the ordinary routine of daily life into a series of religious acts. He must rise before dawn with the name of God on his lips. He should place his right foot first on the ground. Before easing himself he utters a mantra of apology to the earth and cleans himself afterwards in the prescribed manner with soil and water. Then he takes his bath, after which he repeats four times the four secret names of god (Rama-Krishna-Narayana-Hari) - termed 'the worship of name' (nāma sevā), and the secret name of his guru as a form of Krishna - termed 'the worship of the guru' (guru sevā). The proper method of bathing, dressing, praying and eating are set out in detail by the guru together with the mantras appropriate to these acts. Whatever a disciple does, he does in the name of God. In this way he delivers the things of this world to God while continuing to live in the world.

The effect of initiation is to separate the disciple from the uninitiated. If a man who has not taken initiation (aśaraṇīyā) prepares food, an initiated man (śaraṇīyā) will not accept cooked food from him, only uncooked food and tea, because his spiritual condition has been changed by the act of initiation.

During initiation the guru addresses the initiate: 'From today I am your only guru'. It is said that initiation is taken once only and a man cannot change gurus in his lifetime. Occasionally, however, cases occur.⁶ Before second initiation a man must shave his hair, throw away his cooking pots (caru pelovā) and wash all his clothing

to sever the mystical connection between him and his guru. The rite of initiation is believed to create an identification between guru and disciple such that their ātman becomes the same. It is said: 'A guru and his disciple have one ātman'. The tie is sometimes conceptualized in terms of ritual kinship - a man, his father and his father's father also have one ātman - and the disciple is spoken of as the son (putra) of his guru. On the death of the satrādhikār he becomes ritually impure for one day and must bathe. A man usually takes initiation with a companion termed his Hari bhakat (devotee in Hari). They need not be of the same caste. The two are considered to be ritual brothers and to have the same ātman. The wife of one must treat the other as if he were her husband: she cannot utter his name - in Assam a wife never utters her husband's name - and makes obeisance before him as to her husband. The children of one should respect the other as their own father: they address him as tāvoi and his wife as āmoi. When one dies, the other is ritually impure for three days and their children cannot marry. Fellow-initiates can eat together, whatever their caste, so that the tie of ritual kinship here overcomes caste distinctions.

Traditionally every Vaishnava takes śaraṇ. Some proceed when they are elderly to more advanced stages of initiation. These are usually said to be seven in number, but they do not appear always to be regularly systematized. The laity makes for practical purposes a division between śaraṇīyā and bhajanīyā. Śaraṇīyā have taken the first stage of initiation (śaraṇ) only. Bhajanīyā have advanced to the next grade, termed bhajan. Bhajanīyā are required to be very circumspect in the conduct of their lives. They bath at least twice daily and have a prayer room in their house for daily worship. As a man only accepts cooked food from those who have taken equal mantra to himself, bhajanīyā usually form a separate group at village ceremonies distinguished by the fact that they are given uncooked food (kecā jal-pān) while the rest of the guests are eating various fried sweetmeats (pakā jal-pān). Such men are termed bhakats. Although the term bhakat may be applied to any devotee, its commonest use is to distinguish men of spiritual pre-eminence who have advanced to higher grades of initiation.

The distinction between śaraṇ and bhajan was explained to me

as follows:

'Śaraṇ means 'shelter'. By surrendering himself to God and taking shelter in God a man can escape the mischief done by māyā. Bhajan is to think of God seated within oneself. Such mantra or name is uttered which, by association of thought, will get the work of God merged in one's own work. Suppose I am eating rice. I think: "God is giving me this rice" - that is śaraṇ. But when I take as Krishna himself - that becomes bhajan. When I take bath, I say, "Hari Narayan." Hari literally means "he who removes." Hari removes the sins of the world. By uttering Hari, God is brought into my body and, as Hari, I remove the dirt from my body. All mantras are yogas that join the actions of the individual to the actions of God' (statement of a leader of a reformed sect).

'It is taught at bhajan that before eating, especially rice, the eater is to take a little in his hand, close his eyes and think some such thought: "O paramātmā," - addressing his own soul - "please accept this offering of your servant. With this anna (i.e. rice) be you pleased." When we eat, we eat as Brahman, as God' (statement of a satrādhikār).

In bhajan the guru explains the identity between the macrocosm of the universe and the microcosm of the body, the names of the different gods residing in the different bodily centres, the nature of the mind and the creation of the world. Ultimately the advanced disciple is to learn and memorize the names of the heavenly host in Vaikuntha, i.e. the six devotees, twelve leading disciples of Shankaradeva, twelve attendants and one hundred and twenty disciples who attended Shankara during his lifetime.

Investiture with a rosary (mālā) is part of the higher grades of initiation in certain satras. Of this there are two types: the hand rosary (kar-mālā) usually of 25 beads, and the neck rosary (kantha-mālā) usually of 101 beads. They are generally made of tulsi wood. The telling of the beads (japa) consists of uttering the names of god as imparted by the guru. Certain complicated calculations are involved.

Women are initiated after marriage into the satra of their husband. Some call the rite śaraṇ, but others say a woman does not take śaraṇ and call it 'approaching the guru' (guru mukhīyā) or 'obeisance to the Gosain' (gosāin sevā) or 'learning the words' (kathā śikā) or 'taking the mantra' (mantra lovā): The husband is usually present. After her first menstruation a girl becomes impure and no senior person will accept food with which she has been in contact. From then till the time of her marriage she is termed 'unmarried'

(ābiyoi). After initiation her husband's senior relatives may take food prepared by her without objection although it is unlikely to be accepted by her father-in-law or mother-in-law. Men taking higher grades of initiation usually arrange for their wives to do so too so that they can continue to cook for them.

At the time of taking initiation a gift is made to the guru consisting of uncut areca nut, pan leaves, some silver rupees and an article of clothing presented on a raised dish (śarāi). The amount is not fixed and varies with the means of the initiate.

The organization and revenue of the satra

At the centre of the satra is the Name House which consists of a large hall supported by two rows of pillars. The east side opens into the manikūt ('house of jewels') where the sacred book representing Krishna is installed on a tiered wooden throne (thāpanā) and the satra images and other paraphernalia are kept. Traditionally the pillars were made of wood and the roof covered with thatch, but today Name Houses are usually built of brick with corrugated iron roofs. These more permanent structures withstand the storms and carry greater prestige. The atmosphere inside the great hall is one of simplicity and peace.

In the quadrangle surrounding the Name House are four rows (hāti) of huts for the accommodation of the celibate bhakats (kevaliyā bhakat) who have renounced the world. The house of the satrādhikār is on the east side near to the great store houses for rice, money, gur, salt, areca nut, etc. contributed by the disciples. The satra is surrounded by a palisade with a gate house in the east wall. Round about stretch the lands of the satra.

There are perhaps twenty rich satras in Assam that would fit this description. The majority of satras are poor and daily becoming poorer. They consist of the house of the Gosain, a Name House and a few acres of land. There is no system of resident bhakats.

Satra bhakats are usually gifted as children. In some families there is a tradition that one child in every generation is offered to the satra. It is also common for a childless couple to vow their first-born son to the satra. Children usually go to the satra about the age of seven. Celibate bhakats live within the satra precincts

and devote themselves exclusively to religious matters. They wear their long hair tied in a knot at the nape of the neck. Bhakats who are married by the Gosain and have families live outside and cultivate the satra lands. A man who feels himself unsuited to the life may be given permission to return to his village. The number of resident bhakats is declining. Dalton records that he found 157 monks in Barpeta satra in 1851 (Dalton 1851:595). When I visited Bardowa satra in 1971 there were 20. Five houses in Panbari were connected with a satra through a link of this kind:

Dharmeswar is a rich Kayastha who is a disciple of Bar Elengi satra. His father's younger brother's son is a celibate bhakat who was given to the Gosain at the age of ten or twelve. Dharmeswar said children were given to the satra either by childless couples in fulfillment of a vow, or sometimes if a child became seriously ill, his parents promised that if he recovered they would give him to the Gosain. He does not know the reason in this case.

Bidu is a poor Kalita who is a disciple of Bengena-ati satra. For some years after his birth his parents had no children. They promised to give their next child to the Gosain. They had another son soon afterwards who went to the satra as a child and was later married by the Gosain. He and his wife became very ill and Bidu took them to hospital in the town where they died. They left three children, two boys of eight and five and a girl of six years. The younger boy was taken in by Bidu's FFyBSS living in Panbari but he died a year later. The other two children were returned to the satra. The boy died and the girl was later married from the satra by the Gosain.

Haren is a rich Keot who is a disciple of Kamalabari satra. There is a tradition in his family to give one child every generation to the satra. His FFeB, his FyB and his own yB were given to the Gosain as children. His youngest brother has a son whom he will give soon.

Tiluram, a Keot, was given as a child to Auniati satra where he spent many years. The life did not suit him and eventually the Gosain sent him back to his village where he married and had four children. He is known in the village as Tilu Bhakat.

Benu's father died before he was born and his mother died when he was nine. His father had been a bhakat in Garamur satra. The Gosain gave him at the age of ten to Tilock, a well-to-do Kooch from Panbari on a visit to the satra. At that time Tilock had no sons so he adopted Benu and married him in his house.

The satra derives its income from two main sources: (1) satra land, and (2) dues of disciples.

Satra land. The majority of satras are in possession of revenue-free (lakherāj) or half-revenue (nisf-kherāj) land settled on them

by the Ahom kings. These grants were usually made in the name of the satra image who owns all the lands and possessions of the satra, the adhikār being the trustee only. They are let to cultivators whose rents, often largely paid in kind, provide a store for the upkeep of the satra and the feeding of its many visitors. The District Gazetteer of Sibsagar District gives the amount of revenue-free land belonging to four of the leading satras in the District as follows:

Garamur	331 acres
Dakhinpat	7939 acres
Auniati	9322 acres
Kamalabari	6485 acres

(Assam District Gazetteers, Sibsagar District 1967:104-110).

But the holdings of most satras are extremely modest.

Under The Assam State Acquisition of Lands belonging to Religious or Charitable Institution of Public Nature Act 1959, satra lands above a ceiling of 50 acres were compulsorily acquired by government. Over one hundred satras are said to have been affected. In the case of private individuals whose land was acquired under The Assam Fixation of Ceilings on Land Holdings Act 1956, the landlord was given compensation of about 20 times the annual land revenue in government bonds maturing in 15-20 years time, i.e. the compensation was negligible. But the satras were more favourably treated. The value of the rents received by the satra from its tenants was calculated and from this was deducted the cost to the satra of their collection. The balance is paid to the satrādhikār annually in perpetuity.

The changed position of the satras is illustrated by the following account:

'My satra had 320 bigas (about 107 acres) cultivated by my disciples. I paid the land revenue. The land was not given on ādhi (i.e. crop-sharing, the cultivator taking $\frac{1}{2}$ share, the landlord $\frac{1}{2}$ share). They gave to the adhikār whatever he needed at the New Eating (na khovā) and all other satra celebrations. In my childhood we never purchased rice or vegetables, only kerosene oil, mustard oil and salt. Now that system has gone. I have kept 20 bigas. The rest I have given to my disciples. These 20 bigas are cultivated by some poor disciples who give what they can.'

Dues of disciples. After initiation a disciple is required to pay annual dues (kar) to the satra. The expected amount varies, but

about Rs: 1 and 1 pūrā (28 lb.) of paddy is fairly typical. These dues, if regularly paid, provide a fixed and permanent source of revenue. The Gosain is also entitled on the death of a disciple to the most valuable of the articles offered in the name of the dead at the first śrāddha ceremony, generally a bell-metal dish (kāhī or baṭi). On the marriage of the daughter of a disciple, he is presented with the 'respect for the guru's house' (guru gharīyā mān), consisting of a long embroidered cloth costing about Rs. 12, a silver rupee and areca nut with pan given by the groom to the guru of the bride. The cultivator promises to the satra the first fruits of the harvest for the New Eating (na khovā) and the fisherman usually gives to the satra the first catch of the season. In addition to the payment of dues disciples bring gifts to the satra when they attend the celebration of festivals. There is no fixed amount: the principle is that each should give as much as he can. In some areas there is a custom of dividing the offering of coins made at every performance of Name and keeping one share for the guru, the effect of which is automatically to obtain the guru's blessing on the performance. A common basis of division is one-third for the guru (guru gharīyā arihaṇa), one-third for the village Name House, and one-third for invited devotees. Only a few pice are involved. Satras also raise voluntary contributions (barangani) from time to time for particular purposes. Lately a number of satras in Majuli island were damaged by flood and very considerable sums have been raised from disciples for their reconstruction. Initiation is a further source of revenue.

Without the support and interest of the disciples the satra cannot thrive. The disciples of a satra do not form a compact territorial unit but are widely scattered throughout the state. Satras themselves have shifted their location from time to time, especially during the Burmese invasions, and disciples may also migrate to other villages. As the guru-disciple tie is now in practice hereditary, satra membership cross-cuts territorial divisions, almost every village containing disciples of several satras.

The 161 houses in Panbari belong to 17 different satras. These are shown by Name House in Table 25 below.

Table 25. Panbari: Distribution of houses in each Name House by satra.

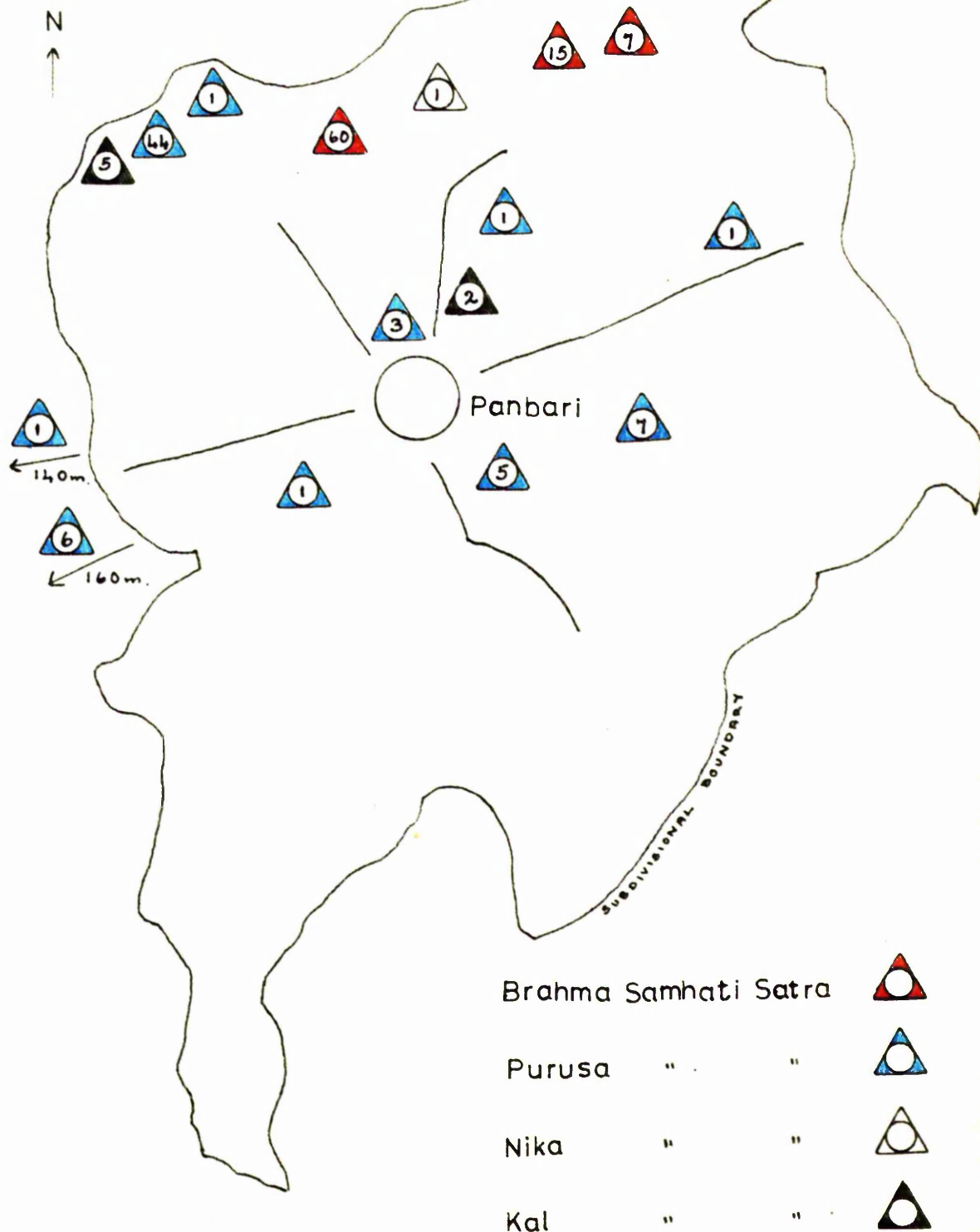
<u>Satra</u>	<u>Name House</u>					
	Tamuli	Bayan	Panbari	13-day	Harijaniya	
Auniati	2	29	12	6+(6)	(5)	60
Balipariya			1			1
Bar-Elengi				(1)		1
Bengena-ati	14	10	14	1+(2)	(3)	44
Bhotmaric			4		(2)	6
Bougaon		1				1
Dakhinpat	1	10	1	(3)		15
Dighali			7			7
Garamur		2	5			7
Kamalabari				1		1
Karatipar			5			5
Letugram (Dergaon)		1				1
Letugram (Garamur)		2	3			5
Letugram (Sharbhai- banda)		3				3
Madarguri		1				1
Patiyari		2				2
Ceca			1			1
<u>Total:</u>	17	61	53	20	10	161

N.B. Numbers in brackets indicate either that connection with the satra has been severed, as in the case of the Harijaniyas, or that no adult member of the household has taken initiation, as among the 13-day people.

The location of 16 of these satras in relation to Panbari is shown on Map 13. One man gave his satra as Bougaon, Sibsagar (I have been unable to trace this.) 128 of the 161 houses belong to satras in Majuli Island a day's journey away. One man, whose family had been disciples of Auniati satra in Majuli, took initiation in the nearby satra of Dighali because of its proximity. This was the only

PANBARI: RANGE OF SATRA AFFILIATION

Scale: 1" = 5m.



The figures indicate no. of disciples in Panbari.

case in the village where the hereditary link had been broken. Today, however, as Gosains take to more lucrative occupations, many small satras have ceased to exist and their disciples generally become attached to satras in the locality where their sons take initiation.

The wide scatter of disciples presents problems for the collection of dues. The disciples cannot be relied upon to visit the satra regularly so that the satra must go out to its disciples. This is done through a network of satra officials in the villages.

The large satras are managed through a number of resident officials appointed by the Gosain (store-keepers, priest, cooks, distributors, heralds, name leaders, readers, musicians, etc.). In each of the four major satras of Auniati, Dakhinpat, Garamur and Kuruwabahi, the number of officials is said to exceed one hundred (Sarma 1966:112). The Raj Medhi is responsible for maintaining contact between the satra and the disciples. He travels to the villages in his circle where he stays for a few days in the village Name House. Sometimes he comes every year, sometimes every few years. During his visit he gives instruction in the higher stages of initiation and collects dues, either directly from the disciples or through satra officials in the village.

The satra is represented in the village by a number of officials, bar medhi, medhi, bharālī, pācani, mukhtiyār, appointed by the satrādhikār from among the leading disciples. In practice they are selected by the villagers and confirmed by the Gosain. In Namdang Kumargaon, a potter village in Sibsagar Subdivision, the Kumar Name House contained 50 houses in 1950 distributed among 5 satras. For each satra there was one Bar Medhi, one assistant Medhi and one Mukhtiyar, responsible for collecting the satra dues and making arrangements for the visits of the Gosain. Most of the satrādhikārs came every two to three years, the Bar Elengi Gosain every seven or eight years. The Bar Medhi of Bar Elengi satra took about Rs: 40-50 annually from the 15 houses belonging to the satra, which he kept pending its collection from the satra. The system is rarely found in such a complete form today.

In Panbari there are no satra officials charged with the management of satra affairs and dues are usually paid only when the Gosain, or some other representative of the satra, comes to the village in

person.

'There are no regular dues. Every year the Raj Medhi of Auniati satra comes to the Name House for ten or twelve days and gives bhajan. When he comes I give Rs: 5. I have not visited the satra since taking initiation' (disciple of Auniati satra).

'When we go to the satra, we give rice and money, not every year' (disciple of Garamur satra).

'When the Gosain comes, we give as much as we can' (disciple of Letugram satra).

'The dues are Rs: 1 and 1 pūrā (about 28 lb.) of paddy a year. I give Rs: 3 altogether instead of paddy. The Raj Medhi comes every six or seven years to collect the dues. It is difficult for him to carry back the paddy so we usually give money' (disciple of Dakhinpat satra).

'Dues were formerly 4 annas per head. I have not given since 1963. The Gosain never comes' (disciple of Bhotmaric satra).

In villages where a satra has numerous disciples dues are usually collected annually, but if there are only a few disciples belonging to the satra in the locality dues are accumulated for some years before collection. There were three satras with more than seven houses in Panbari: Auniati with 60 houses, Bengena-ati with 44 houses and Dakhinpat with 15 houses. The Raj Medhi of Auniati visited Bayan Name House every year, the Pacani of Bengena-ati visited Tamuli Name House every year and the Raj Medhi of Dakhinpat visited Bayan Name House every six or seven years. In smaller satras without resident bhakats the Gosain himself must tour to collect the dues. This is a troublesome business. But unless a positive approach is made to the disciples, they do not contribute.

Satras come into being by two methods: (a) by the establishment of new satras, and (b) by the fission of existing satras. The first method was general in the early period of active proselytization. The rapid spread of the Vaishnava movement led to intermittent periods of persecution by the Ahom kings alarmed by the pretensions of the gurus and the claims of their disciples to exemption from compulsory service. This reached its height in the reign of Gadadhar Singha (1681-1696) who confiscated the property of the satras and mutilated or put to death many leading Gosains. But his successors sought to control the satras by bringing them under royal patronage and during the reigns of Rudra Singha (1696-1714) and Sib Singha (1714-1744) most of the satras are said to have been founded. The expansion of

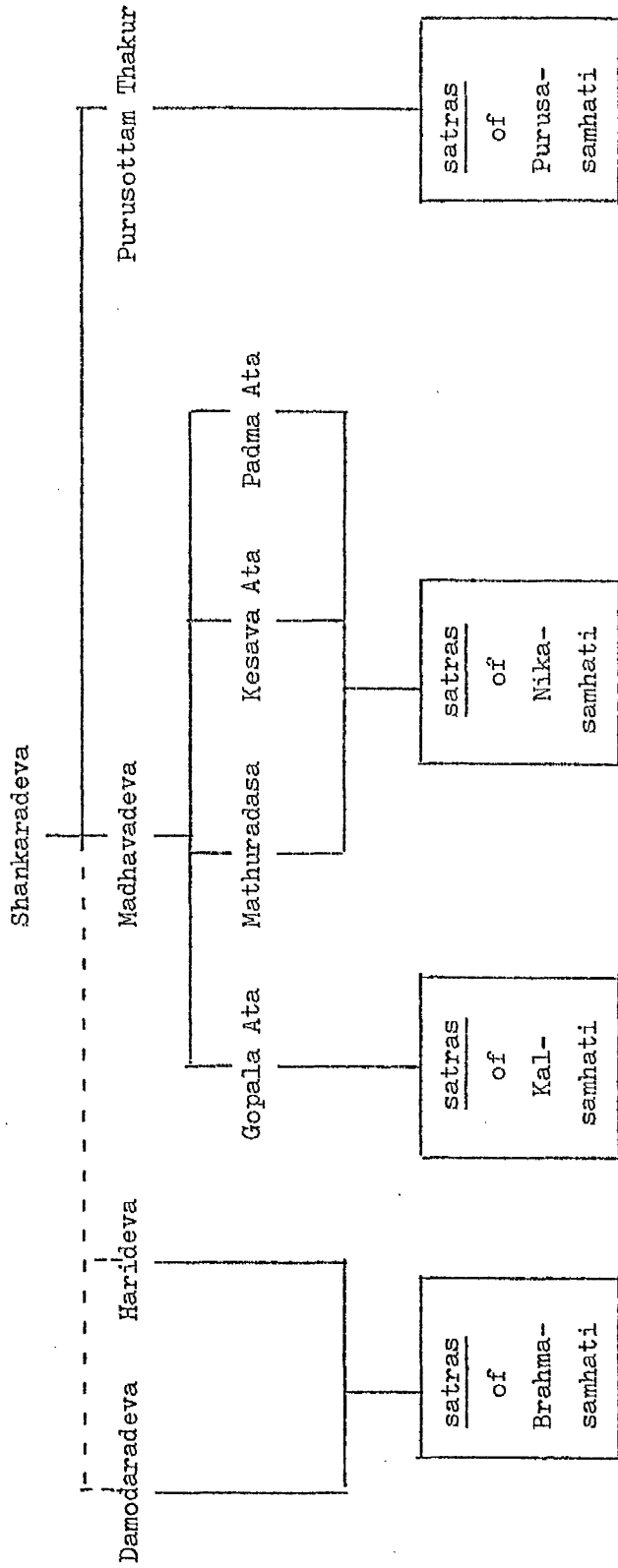
the movement appears to have reached its limit by the close of the 18th century when proselytization virtually ceased. Today branch satras are occasionally established to accommodate tribal peoples who become converted to Hinduism by taking initiation as disciples. Most of the newly-founded Goalpara satras are of this kind. The process is not widespread in other districts.

The fission of existing satras is usually the result of an internal quarrel. Any member of a Gosain family may secede to found a branch elsewhere, which will be in effect an independent satra bearing the same name. The disciples will divide between the two branches. With the decay of the satra system in the 20th century many Gosains are being forced to take to other occupations as the dues of their disciples are no longer sufficient to maintain them. There is in consequence little motive for fission today.

Satras are usually named after the place where they were first established, which was often on the banks of a river for ease of communication. During the Burmese invasion the satras were sacked and the Gosains fled. Some returned under British rule to restore their original satras but many re-established them in another place. The old name was retained, under which they were listed on the king's register and granted revenue-free land. As a result the names have largely lost their geographical significance.

The division into sub-sects.

The satras are divided into four groups or sub-sects termed saṁhati or saṁghati, namely, Brahma-samhati, Nika-samhati, Purusa-samhati and Kal-samhati. These divisions are said to have arisen as a result of the disputes following Shankaradeva's death. The Brahma-samhati consists of satras deriving from Damodaradeva and Harideva; the Purusa-samhati of satras deriving from the descendants of Shankaradeva; the Nika-samhati of satras deriving from Madhavadeva and his celibate associates; and the Kal-samhati of satras deriving from Gopal Ata. Each satrādhikār traces his affiliation by an unbroken line of succession through his predecessors in office to the founder of his satra, who in turn is traced back through the link of initiation to the originator of one of the four saṁhatis. The satras of Assam can therefore be set out on a genealogical chart (v. Fig. 3 overleaf).



N.B. The followers of Damodaradeva and Harideva deny that they took initiation from Shankaradeva.

Fig. 3. Relations between Founders of the Sub-sects.

Shankaradeva appointed as his successor his favourite disciple, Madhavadeva. According to the Mahapurusiya version of events, Damodaradeva, another leading disciple of Shankaradeva, refused to accept the accession of Madhavadeva because Damodara was a Brahman and Madhava was a Shudra. The two quarrelled and Damodaradeva seceded from the movement with his followers. According to the same version Harideva, another Brahman disciple of Shankaradeva, active in lower Assam, seceded on the same grounds. The followers and biographers of Damodaradeva, on the other hand, claim for him an independent status and uniformly deny that he was initiated by Shankaradeva. Some say that he was initiated by Caitanyadeva of Bengal, others by Vasudeva Vipra of Orissa, both of whom were Brahmans.⁷ The followers of Harideva also deny that he was initiated by Shankaradeva. The first schism in the movement apparently centred on the problems involved in Brahmans accepting a non-Brahman as their guru. Satras tracing affiliation to Damodaradeva and Harideva form the Brahma-samhati. In these satras the majority of the adhikārs today are Brahman and it is commonly - though incorrectly - believed that all the adhikārs are Brahman. The most influential satras of this group are Auniati, Dakhinpat, Garamur and Kuruwabahi (sometimes called the four satras). Kuruwabahi satra was founded by Vamshigopaladeva who was initiated by Damodaradeva. Auniati, Dakhinpat and Garamur trace their affiliation to Niranjandeva, Vanamalideva and Jayaharideva respectively, three of the leading disciples of Vamshigopaladeva. The satras of this Sambati were generously patronized by the Ahom kings with grants of land and serfs (pāik) and are the most prosperous in Assam. Of the four 'realities' (vasu) of the Vaishnava faith, namely, deva, guru, bhakat, nām, they emphasize deva or god whom they claim to understand better than the other Samhatis.

Madhavadeva did not appoint a successor. The story is told that on the eve of his death his followers approached him and asked him to name his successor. He replied that he could find no one worthy of the office, but that he left behind him his book Nāmaghosā and that those who sought might find him there. Three men claimed to be the rightful successors: Mathuradasa alias Budha Ata, a disciple of Madhavadeva and the adhikār of Barpeta satra; Gopala Ata, another leading disciple of Madhavadeva; and Purusottam Thakur, the oldest

grandson of Shankaradeva. These rival claims proved the points of fission of Nika, Kala and Purusa Samhati respectively.

The satras of Nika-samhati elevate Madhavadeva as the guru of the movement in contradistinction to Purusa-samhati which encourages an exclusive allegiance to Shankaradeva. It is said that a dispute on this point arose between Mathuradasa Budha Ata and Shankaradeva's grandson. Mathuradasa argued that Shankara was an incarnation (avatār) and therefore Madhava was the first guru. In Barpeta satra the death anniversary (tithi) of Madhavadeva is celebrated for ten days and that of Shankara for seven days (Neog 1965:345). The grandsons of Shankaradeva on the other hand proclaimed Shankaradeva as the only guru:

'Know it for certain that Shankaradeva is the only guru. There can be no other guru beside him' (quoted by Sarma 1966:91-92).

They consider that other adhikārs are to be seen simply as representatives of Shankaradeva.

The two sub-sects also differ in the value they attach to the link of initiation as opposed to the hereditary principle. Madhavadeva was celibate. He gathered round himself a coterie of celibate disciples living a pure life who formed the nucleus of Nika-samhati. In this Samhati the society of bhakats is the principal authority. In Barpeta satra they can make and unmake their guru. I was told by an adhikār:

'The devotees, every devotee, is considered pure in our religion. He is God in human form. The true devotee is devoid of all worldly attachment and devoted solely to the service of God. Madhava said that Shankaradeva loved his devotees more than his sons. He appointed Madhava as his successor in preference to his own sons.'

Contrary to this Purusa-samhati stresses the hereditary principle. Purusottam Thakur, Shankaradeva's grandson, attributed this statement to Shankaradeva in his Na-ghosā: 'Know my grandson is my hope.' The story is told that Purusottam used to crawl on Shankaradeva's lap with muddy hands and feet. His mother pulled him off. Then Shankaradeva said: 'Why are you scolding this child? All my hopes are centred on this child.' The same adhikār commented:

'They say: Shankaradeva said this. So we are superior. We are the heirs of Shankaradeva. Madhavadeva was only regent during

the childhood of Shankaradeva's grandsons." The descendants of Shankaradeva through the female line founded five or six satras including Bardowa. They have great superiority complex and pose as the descendants of Shankaradeva. On the anniversary of his death they give pinda in his name.'

The distinguishing characteristic of the satras of Nika-samhati is their emphasis on celibacy and their pre-occupation with ritual purity. They have a saying: 'As much as you make your body clean outside, so much will you be clean within.' They engage in elaborate purificatory procedures and even wash the firewood from the jungle before burning it on the fire. Amongst them all worldly things are considered impure for a bhakat renouncing the world. But others say that as there is Brahman in all animate and inanimate things, these bhakats are separating themselves from Brahman and not drawing near to him. Barpeta satra in Kamrup district founded by Mathuradasa and Kamalabari satra in Majuli founded by Padma Ata are the most influential satras of this sub-sect. Nika-samhati is the smallest of the Samhatis, both as regards the number of satras and of disciples.

Purusa-samhati consists of the satras tracing affiliation to the descendants of Shankaradeva. It is said that Shankaradeva's grandsons, Purusottama Thakur and Caturbhuja Thakur, appointed 12 leading disciples, 6 Brahman and 6 non-Brahman. They all established satras. Those deriving from Purusottamm Thakur, the elder grandson, are called the Big Twelve and those deriving from Caturbhuja Thakur, the younger grandson, are called the Little Twelve. Caturbhuja's wife, Kanakalata, also appointed 12 disciples who founded 12 satras. Purusottama married three times and Caturbhuja married four times. Neither had surviving sons, but their sons-in-law were treated as adopted sons and to them are traced a number of important satras including Bardowa. Purusa-samhati contains the largest number of satras and the sub-sect exercises great influence because of the numerical strength of the adhikārs. But the number of disciples is not great in proportion so that many of the adhikārs are poor. They have made a profession of accepting invitations to performances of Name in village Name Houses and in individual households, for which they are given cloth, money and raw foodstuffs. Of the four 'realities' they give supremacy to Name and will not perform any social or religious function without Nām Kīrttan (the singing of

Name). The satras of Purusa-samhati have a degree of uniformity in custom and rites not found in the satras of other Samhatis because of the cementing influence of Bardowa. They claim pre-eminence on the grounds of retaining the original features of Shankara's family teachings.

Kal-samhati consists of the satras tracing affiliation to Gopala Ata who they believe was nominated by Madhavadeva as his successor. It has proselytized largely among the tribal peoples and lower castes and is set apart from the other Samhatis by its rigidity of attitude and by certain variations in ritual. Until recently it is said there was no intermarriage between disciples of the Gopala Ata sect and those of other Samhatis. The leading satras of this group are Dihing satra founded by Bar Yadumani, a disciple of Gopala Ata, and Mayamara satra founded by Aniruddha, another disciple of Gopala Ata said to be the grandson or maternal nephew of Shankaradeva.⁸ The Mayamariyas rose in rebellion against the Ahom king and six out of eight lakhs of their disciples are said to have been massacred. Most of the satras, including Dihing, supported the king. As a result the Mayamara satra still occupies an isolated position. There is little inter-dining and inter-marriage between disciples of Mayamara and other satras of Kal-samhati, and until recently the Mayamariya gurus were sometimes compelled to marry from their own disciples.

Kal-samhati is distinguished by certain variations in ritual listed below. Although these are not followed everywhere, some degree of variation is apparently to be found in most satras of the sub-sect. There is besides a widespread belief that the customs of Kal-samhati are different.

The initiate shaves his head before initiation.

The initiate is required to fast the night before taking initiation (elsewhere he fasts on the day of initiation only).

The sacred book representing Krishna (thāpanā) is established at the north end of the Name House (elsewhere to the east).

At Name (nām) Krishna is not invoked into a sacred book for purposes of worship, i.e. no thāpanā is established.

No light is offered at Name. The offering of light, indispensable in other Samhatis, is described as 'that-which-enables-us-to-see' (nidarśak) Krishna. But the Gopal Ata sect say that knowledge lies within.

The offering (prasād) is not made to God but set down for the devotees. It is placed on a banana leaf or in a basket and not on a raised bell-metal dish (śarāi).

Bananas used in the offering do not have their ends cut off.

The preparation of sweetmeats (mithoi) differs from that followed elsewhere.

The bhakats do not endorse the blessing by saying 'O Hari, O Ram' but by reciting some verses from the Bhagavat.

The bhakats sit in two rows facing each other (not on three sides of the Name House) so that when they bow down to God they are at the same time bowing down to one another. It is said: 'In Kal-samhati the bhakats are the God.'

The music of drum (khoḷ) and cymbals (tāl) is different.

Women are not initiated. The rationale of this is that a woman regards her husband as her god and is therefore incapable of the exclusive attachment to the guru required of the devotee.

Of the four 'realities' (vastu) the satras of Kal-samhati emphasize the guru, and the worship of images is forbidden on the grounds that the guru in his person represents to the devotees the living embodiment (murti) of god.

Although the divisions in the bhakti movement originated in disputes as to the succession, the resulting alignments reflect more fundamental differences. The degree of Brahmanization is greatest among the satras of Brahma-samhati which contain the largest proportion of Brahman disciples. The adhikārs are also, with a few exceptions, Brahman. Caste distinctions between disciples in respect of seating and commensality are carefully maintained in the satra Name Houses. The worship of images is permitted and the richer satras employ a Brahman priest for the daily worship of the satra image with Vedic rites. There is little interdiction on the worship of other gods and disciples are not usually discouraged from attending the Durga Puja and similar festivals.

The satras of Kal-samhati, on the other hand, draw their membership largely from the scheduled and lower castes although they, too, include Brahmans, Kaysathas, Kalitas and Keots among their disciples. Most of the adhikārs are Kayastha although a number of these were originally from lower castes and have assumed Kayastha status.⁹ The satras adopt a strict monotheistic position and condemn the worship of deities other than Krishna. Images are in some cases

necessary because grants of revenue-free land were given in the name of the image, but they are not worshipped. An adhikār of Kal-samhati remarked: 'I have an image, but I do not pay much attention to it.'

Purusa-samhati maintains an intermediate position as regards the observance of caste distinctions, the worship of deities other than Krishna and the question of image worship. In general they neither forbid nor encourage the worship of other gods to avoid dissension. Where the satra image is worshipped, this is done by a simple offering. The satrādhikārs are both Goswami (Brahman) and Mahanta (Kayastha). The satras of Nika-samhati have little interest in these matters, being almost entirely preoccupied with the maintenance of ritual purity.

The Samhatis exist only as categories and each satra is autonomous in the regulation of its affairs. In practice the guru is chiefly constrained, not by relations with other satras, but by the opinions of his disciples on whose contributions he is dependent for the upkeep of the satra and for his livelihood. In these days he attempts to maintain a balance between the pressure of lower caste disciples for the removal of caste discrimination and the risk of alienating his higher caste disciples if he accedes to these demands. It is said that variations between the Samhatis have decreased over time, especially in the case of satras of the Gopal Ata sect which at one time stood so far apart from the others that they were referred to as 'the satras that have gone west' (i.e. astray, heaven lying to the east).¹⁰ If this is the case, it is probably a reflection of the degree of Sanskritization of the lower castes prior to Independence who came increasingly to use Brahman priests as they were assimilated to the traditional order. In 1971 I visited Puranimati satra near Jorhat, the main branch of the famous Mayamara satra. The principal Name House had been blown down in a storm and a new one was in course of construction. In the meantime all the disciples were using the other Name House which was ordinarily reserved for the Kaibarttas (fishermen) who are a scheduled caste. At Name they sat together and ate the raw offering (prasād), but at feasts of cooked rice (bhoj) the Kaibarttas did not sit with the others. The new Name House was to be for the use of clean castes only and some of the Kaibarttas were objecting to this arrangement.

Caste distinctions in varying degrees have entered into the organization of all satras.

The office of the guru has provided an avenue of caste mobility for a number of Gosains:

'Dihial Goswami's forefather was a Kaibartta although he claims to be Kayastha. The first satrādhikār of Barpeta was Mathuradasa Ata from the Candal community (scheduled caste). Next was Narayanadasa Ata who was a weaver. The Puranimati satrādhikār was originally Maran (tribal), now called Kayastha. Sesa, Katani, Budbari and Chaliha satras have Kaibartta adhikārs who are called Kayastha today. Now all the non-Brahman adhikārs call themselves Kayastha, but originally it was not so' (statement of a Mahanta).

Another Gosain put the matter this way:

'Shankaradeva created as gurus a Mussulman, a Garo (tribal) a Kaibartta (scheduled caste) and a Naga (tribal). No one now claims to be descended from these.'

At village level little distinction is made between the satras of the four Samhatis, with the exception sometimes of Mayamara satra, and their disciples combine freely in the Name House. The 161 houses of Panbari are disciples of 17 satras. Of these 3 (Auniati, Dakhinpat and Garamur) with 82 houses are of Brahma-samhati, 10 (Balipariya, Bar Elengi, Bhotmaric, Dighali, 3 branches of Letugram, Madarguri and Ceca) with 70 houses are of Purusa-samhati, and 2 (Karatipar and Patiyari) with 7 houses are of Kal-samhati (I have been unable to trace Bougaon). The distribution in another village might be quite different.

Outside the main fold of the Vaishnava movement are a few small esoteric sects practising rites of reversal and other Tantric practices. The 'night-eating' (rāti-khovā) sect wear red clothes, worship female devotees and partake ritually of alcohol and other forbidden food. The 'bible on the basket' (karaniputhiyā) sect also meet at night. The 'areca nut not-eating' (tāmol na-khovā) sect do not eat areca nut outside the house or without taking a bath. The adherents of these sects are very few.

The satras and the reform sects.

The satras are the traditional repositories of Shankaradeva's religion. The Gosains base their legitimacy on a line of succession through which his teachings have been passed down through the

generations. From their point of view Vishnu was incarnated as Shankaradeva who manifests himself in successive gurus down to the present time so that the knowledge produced in the guru is divine knowledge. Recently, however, there has arisen within Assamese Vaishnavism a reform movement which challenges the traditional interpretation of Shankaradeva's teachings, as they have come to be understood in the satras, and seeks to eliminate the office of the guru in the transmission of religious knowledge by appealing directly across time to the authority of the written text. Assamese Vaishnavism inspired an extensive body of devotional works, mainly in the form of translations and compilations of the Bhagavata Purana and other scriptures, and Shankara alone is credited with some twenty-seven extant works including translations of seven of the twelve books of the Bhagavata and five religious dramas. As the texts do not speak on all matters with a clear voice, they can be used to support very different opinions as to the content of Shankaradeva's message. In the view of the reform sects the original message has been corrupted by the gurus in the course of transmission so that their teaching no longer corresponds to the religion of the founder. As the reform movement gained ground, the satras attempted to unify themselves in the face of this challenge by forming in 1944 a Satra Association (satra sangha) which published a monthly journal giving an authoritative interpretation of the śāstras which, it was hoped, would achieve some degree of uniformity in the practices of different satras. After one or two issues the journal was discontinued. The association still meets annually, but to little effect. The relationship of the reform sects with the satras is taken up in greater detail in Part II, but their general impact has been to hasten the decline of an institution which is seen as increasingly irrelevant to modern life.

'Most of our village belong to Elengi satra. Once it was rich, now it is poor. Very few give dues (kar). In the old days they gave not only money, but rice, vegetables, fish. Now the Gosain no longer insists that they pay their dues. The economic condition of the satra is bad. The family has had to go to the field - not to plough, they use spades. At times of difficulty they approach some people, old people, and say, "You see our condition." The old people give, but not the young people' (statement of a Chutiya).

'We used to have 200 families nearby. Now we have only 20 families giving full co-operation. We can no longer hold big functions. I have to contribute to the satra from my earnings and so has the Gosain'(member of Bholaguri satra).

'My grandfather was a satrādhikār. The satra has packed up, it exists only as a postal address. The disciples have become richer than the satrādhikār. My father knows nothing of religious matters and is a chicken-eating Mahanta' (member of Norova satra).

'I sit here in the town. Practically I do nothing. The satrādhikār was bound to feed resident bhakats and disciples coming to visit the satra. This ends because the satrādhikār has no income. The satra system is a rotten and decaying business' (statement of a satrādhikār).

Notes

1. The story is told of how Shankaradeva came by the Bhagavata Purana, an event considered of central importance in his life. One Jagadisha Mishra was instructed by Vishnu in a dream to read the Bhagavata before Shankaradeva. He journeyed from Puri to Kamarupa where he read the whole work aloud in the presence of Shankaradeva in a long recital lasting several days at the conclusion of which he died.

Dimbeswar Neog takes a different view of this event and argues that Shankara began his teaching before receiving the Bhagavat and before going on pilgrimage. The effect of this interpretation is to establish the independent status of Shankaradeva and of Assamese Vaishnavism. '... there is absolutely no room for imagining that he ever came under the influence of anybody during his travels' (Neog 1963:16). The Assamese are particularly sensitive to the suggestion that Assamese Vaishnavism is an off-shoot of the Caitanya school of Bengal.

2. Cf. Bishnuram Medhi, formerly Chief Minister of Assam, writing in 1963: '... any one who cares to know Assam and her people soon discovers that everything that we call Assamese is rooted in the soil that was prepared more than five centuries ago by this Great Saint and Savant Sreemanta Shankar Deva' (Neog 1963:iv).
3. Barpeta satra is said to have been founded by Madhavadeva who left it in charge of Mathuradasa. At his death he made over charge to all resident disciples of the satra. A system of election was introduced following a High Court case on the deposition of the satrādhikār who had sold and misused the satra property.
4. When I was a child of four, the adhikār of Auniati satra paid a visit to my father who was at that time Deputy Commissioner of Sibsagar District. I remember that a carpet was ordered from Calcutta for the occasion and laid on the stairs of the house just before his arrival so that no foot had trodden on it before his.
5. A similar ambiguity attaches to the Brahman priest. The fees of the priest consist of gifts (dān) accompanied by a payment of money called dakṣiṇā which is given him as a recompense for accepting the gifts - and hence something of the qualities - of an inferior. But in fact the priest is employed by his clients and the 'gifts' constitute his livelihood.
6. Some men of similar political views to those of the late satrādhikār of Garamur were re-initiated by him.
7. When I visited Dakhinpat satra in 1947 I was handed a printed leaflet in which it was written that the satra derived from Damodaradeva who was initiated by Caitanyādeva of Bengal. The

words, 'who was initiated by Caitanyadeva of Bengal', had been crossed out. The Assamese in general are not sympathetic towards the Bengalis by whom they have felt exploited in the past and they have fought a long campaign to win for their language and their culture an independent status. The choice here was between an Assamese Shudra (Shankaradeva) and a Bengali Brahman (Caitanyadeva). Neither was satisfactory. Vasudeva Vipra of Orissa, said to be a later thought, is unobjectionable on both counts: he is a Brahman and he is not a Bengali.

8. This information was supplied by the adhikār of Puranimati satra, Jorhat.
9. All satrādhikārs wear the sacred thread, but in some Mayamariya satras there is no ceremony of investiture with Vedic rites (laguṇ diyā) and the thread is assumed without formality.
10. The estrangement of the Mayamara satra is reflected in a story told of its origin. A disciple of Shankaradeva called Aniruddhadeva, stole a book from Shankaradeva and ran away. Shankaradeva was angry and the two separated.

CHAPTER 8

THE LANGUAGE OF FOOD

In this chapter I conclude the presentation of the ethnographic data with a description of Assamese beliefs and practices relating to food which provides an idiom for the expression of all social relationships previously described (family, agnatic descent, affinity, caste, sectarian divisions and Name House affiliation). The significance of the commensal hierarchy in the caste system is widely recognised and food transactions are usually regarded as the clearest and most intelligible language in which ritual status is expressed. Apart, however, from the recent work of Khare (1976), little attention has so far been paid to ideas regarding the properties of food itself which form the rationale of these practices. In what follows I give a brief account of Assamese beliefs regarding both the physical and psychical qualities associated with food as a basis for understanding its use in social relations.

The staple is rice. Failure of the main rice crop means hunger whereas a good harvest is followed by general relaxation and plenty in the months ahead. Everything therefore associated with rice is invested with strong positive feelings. Preferred fields are those that stretch before the house (olāi māti) so that the cultivator can look out on the growing crop. The granary is situated to the front of the house because, it is said, a man should see his store of rice first thing on getting up in the morning. The first bunch of paddy seedlings is ceremonially transplanted from its nursery bed with a prayer for the safety of the crop (gach lagovā), and the first and last handfuls of paddy to be harvested are ceremonially installed in the granary with a prayer to Mother Lakshmi that she should take up her abode there and never leave them (āg ān, Lakhimī ān). Rice, as the staple food, is seen as the source of life and the abode of Lakshmi, goddess of wealth. If a man defaecates on standing rice, it is believed that Lakshmi will be angry and leave the field. On Kati Bihu, the day when the paddy traditionally comes

out in ear, the cultivator must walk round all his fields otherwise Lakshmi will be offended: 'What, is he dead that he does not come?' If the rules of ritual purity are not observed in the kitchen, it is said that Lakshmi will go away. Mother Lakshmi lives in the kitchen, the granary, the cowshed, the fields and the box where money is kept. On all Bihus, and especially Kati Bihu, a light is lit in these places. Lakshmi also dwells in the daughters of the house. When the bride leaves with the groom on the morning after the wedding, she walks out backwards, otherwise it is said she takes Lakshmi with her. She also sprinkles rice on the house, the granary and the cowshed so that Lakshmi may stay there.

Boiled rice (bhāt) is not only the staple food, but is regarded as the only food, as food itself, and hence as life which is dependent on food (anna). 'To exhaust one's rice' is a synonym for dying. All foods other than boiled rice and the dishes eaten with it are classed as 'water' (jal-pān). The cooking and eating of rice are surrounded by ritual prohibitions, and the acceptance of boiled rice prepared by another is considered a significant act, implying intimacy and respect. This attitude is illustrated by the following story told me by a young man of Panbari:

'When my maternal grandmother died, at that time my eldest sister was not yet married, it was two years after the ceremony that marked her first menstruation. (A girl at this stage of life is considered impure and cannot ordinarily cook for others.) My grandmother invited my elder sister to her house and asked her to cook boiled rice (bhāt). She said she wanted to eat rice cooked by my elder sister before she died. My sister cooked for her and she died six days later.'

The identity of the joint family as a unit centres on the single kitchen and the single pounder (dhenkī) for husking paddy. It was said: 'In one household there is one rice pounder. Only one. Two pounders mean two families. At one time there were 28 members in our family. But only one rice pounder.' Division of the family is effected by cooking separately, that is to say, to be separated is understood as cooking separately. When a death occurs, no fire is lit in the kitchen for twenty-four hours and at the conclusion of the period of mourning every house in the descent group carries out a ritual purification of the kitchen. This rite is termed the 'throwing away of the cooking pots' (caru pelovā). Earthen vessels

are broken and other pots purified by being burnt on the fire. The effect of the rite is to sever the connection with the dead man. To dream that a dead relative is coming to take his meal in the kitchen portends sickness or death in the family and his spirit will be offered food vicariously either through a Brahman or by inviting some bhakats who eat in his name. The 'throwing away of the cooking pots' may also be carried out to cut off connection with a living relative. The performer says: 'From today I have no brother, daughter, son,' as the case may be. To wash a man out of the kitchen is a symbolic enactment of his death.

Differential status between kin is expressed by the fact that a man can eat the remains of food of those senior to him, a younger brother from his elder brother's plate, a son from the plate of his father or mother or any senior relative. The food remains of the father, in particular, are described as prasād (an offering made to god which is considered the residue of his food). Senior kin, on the other hand, cannot eat food left by junior kinsmen for they contain the qualities associated with inferior status. In respect of them these remains are ritually impure (cuvā). The relative status of men and women is expressed in the fact that the women eat after the men, a wife from the plate of her husband.

The importance of food in relation to status derives from its psychic qualities. The opposition between physical and mental, mind and body, is no part of Assamese thought. Physical beauty indicates a mental state in that it is a manifestation of moral character, and all the Assamese saints, following Krishna, are credited with outstanding beauty of appearance and athletic prowess. By the process of digestion a man makes the food he eats part of himself. He comes therefore, in a sense, to be his food. 'According to the quality of his food,' it was said, 'the eater possesses his mind. His habits and character become as his food.' Restrictions on the consumption of certain types of food derive therefore chiefly from their mental effects. These are believed to operate through their action on the blood.

Hot and Cold Foods.

All foods are credited with the property of either heating or

cooling the blood. Those that heat the blood are called 'hot' (garam); those that cool the blood are called 'cold' (cecā). This effect is experienced soon after eating and a man feels hot or cold accordingly. There is therefore a seasonal preference for certain types of food. But the importance of this distinction lies chiefly in the belief that blood is a distillation from food which influences the character and disposition of the mind. Hot foods, through the blood, increase sexual desire and rouse the passions. Cool foods calm the mind. A Gosain commented: 'Always to keep the blood cool. The whole of our food system is to keep the blood cool so that the mind may be pure. That is why the bhakats eat little so as not to be excited. We have learnt from experience that food reacts upon us mentally and creates certain propensities.'

Foods are divided into the three classical categories of sāttvik (conducive to goodness), rājasik (conducive to passion) and tāmasik (conducive to darkness and sloth) on the basis of the mental effects they induce. In general milk and milk products, rice, fruits, most vegetables, certain pulses (magu and but) and other cooling foods are sāttvik, that is, they have the property of inducing virtue and saintly habits; fish, meat, eggs, buffalo milk, onion, garlic, spices, certain pulses (māti and macur), honey and other hot foods are rājasik, that is, they excite the system; alcohol, beef, pork, chillie and other very heating foods together with stale food are tāmasik, that is, they tend to brutalize the character.

This hierarchy of food was formerly associated with the hierarchy of castes which were divided into the same categories. Today with the recent changes in the position of the lower castes, this model is no longer openly used. But the association between caste rank and diet still obtains. The Ahoms, for example, are said to rank as a low caste because some of them eat pork. The Chutiyas until recently ate chicken. A Brahman observed: 'A Brahman eats sāttvik food. Once when I was younger, I wanted to eat pigeon. My grandfather said, 'No, it is tāmasik, rājasik. We are people of sāttvik class, we must take sāttvik food.'"

Bhakats on taking higher initiation give up duck's eggs and meat (with the exception of deer which, being sāttvik, is permitted). They do not eat onion or garlic. They avoid all hot foods which

might unsettle their mind and turn it to worldly affairs and eat only cooling foods which conduce to virtue and detachment.

The terms, 'hot' and 'cold', are also used of character. To describe a youth as 'hot' signifies that he is excited and quarrelsome, whereas to say he is 'cold' is to praise his moderation and restraint.

Food as a Vehicle of Contagion.

The cooking of food is believed to open the food to qualities from the outside imparted by contact. In accepting cooked food a man not only assimilates the intrinsic properties of the food, but also the qualities of the man who prepared it. 'If I eat food cooked by a thief', it was said, 'I become a thief.' The acceptance or refusal of cooked food therefore implies a statement as to the relative status of donor and recipient. A bhakat will not accept certain categories of cooked food, and especially boiled rice, from those who have not, like himself, been initiated into bhajan, and a caste will not eat boiled rice in the houses of castes it considers lower than itself. Before accepting cooked food, many factors have to be taken into consideration: the caste of the cook, his degree of initiation, the character and reputation of the guru who initiated him, his knowledge of the esoteric cooking mantras, his scrupulosity in bathing and observing the rules of ritual purity, his moral and spiritual condition and his state of mind while cooking. All these will be discussed before the food is accepted. Because the qualities of the cook are transmitted in the food he prepares, the man invited to do the cooking for a public gathering must be at least spiritually equivalent if not superior to those for whom he cooks. His caste cannot be lower than that of any guest present. If the gathering includes bhakats, he himself must be a bhakat. Generally on these occasions a Gosain is invited to cook so that disputes between castes do not arise. But all may not approve the Gosain and it is not uncommon to find a few bhakats cooking their own food separately. Care in these matters is considered indispensable to safeguard the mind from corruption. Hence the comment made of a well-known religious preacher: 'So-and-so may be a persuasive speaker. But he takes tea here and there, so his mind cannot be pure.'

Food is of two kinds: raw (kecā) and cooked (pakā).¹ Whole raw food is not subject to contamination. A Brahman or Gosain can purchase a fish in the market from a Kaibartta, i.e. a scheduled caste fisherman, without being polluted. Some Gosains will accept a piece of raw cut fish from their disciples, others will not. Clean castes can eat areca nut in scheduled caste houses provided they are given the whole nut to cut themselves. Uncut areca nut is always offered to a Gosain. Similarly, raw fruit and vegetables can be purchased from men of any caste, but if they are cut into portions for sale, some will not buy. The cutting of raw food is the first stage in opening it to contamination.

The degree to which cooking makes food permeable to impurity varies according to the method by which it is prepared. Prepared foods are divided into three classes:

- (1) Boiled rice (bhāt) and the dishes eaten with boiled rice.
- (2) All other foods except prasād, which are categorized as jal-pan, literally 'water-drinking'.
- (3) The offering (prasād). With the offering are classed sweetmeats made into balls (mithoi) and rice cooked in milk (payas) which generally accompany the main offering.

These three classes are discussed in reverse order below.

The offering (prasād).

The preparation of the offering has been described in chapter 6. In order to make the raw rice and pulses edible, they are softened by soaking in cold water for a few hours beforehand. The offering is raw (kecā) because it has not been heated on the fire, but the softening of the grain by soaking makes it permeable in some degree. Soaked ingredients cannot be offered to the satra: the Gosain will not accept them. Untouchables, formerly at least, were not admitted into the Name House to eat the offering with clean castes. Although soaked foods transmit very little impurity and can be accepted from any man of clean caste, it is customary to choose the distributor from one of the highest castes in the Name House. In the three Name Houses in Panbari, the Bayan Name House with a membership of Kalita, Kooch and Chutiya had three Kalita and one Kooch distributor; the Panbari Name House with a membership chiefly of Kalita and Keot (plus 2 Brahman houses, 1 Kayastha house, 1 Kooch house and 1 Chutiya

house) had three Keot distributors; and the Tamuli Name House with a membership of Duliya Kalita and Ahom had a Duliya Kalita distributor. Distributors are required to be circumspect where they eat so that there can be no objection to accepting the offering from their hand. They would not take tea from me. In a nearby Name House in the adjacent village of Gayangaon the distributor was a Chutiya, which is one of the lower of the clean castes. One family in the Name House was Kalita. The Chutiya went about boasting that a Kalita had accepted the offering from his hand. The Kalita left the Name House. In satras the distributor is usually of Kalita caste. Most Gosains will not accept an offering prepared by a caste lower than Kalita. If a Gosain is invited to a Name House of lower castes, he will take with him a Kalita disciple or a junior member of his family to prepare the offering. One dish will be prepared for the Gosain, another for the congregation. The Gosain takes the first dish, the second is mixed with the remainder of the ingredients and distributed to the congregation. Today with the changing position of the lower castes, the exclusiveness of the Gosain is often a cause for resentment.

Jal-pān.

Jal-pān is divided into two categories: raw (kecā) which is not generally regarded as cuvā (ritually impure), and cooked (pakā) which is cuvā. In a strict sense, the term cuvā means 'ritually impure', but it is regularly used in many contexts to mean 'capable of communicating impurity.' E.g. 'Boiled rice (bhāt) is cuvā' is a very common statement; or 'Flat rice (cirā) is cuvā: bhakats will not accept it'; or 'Parched rice (ākhoi) is not cuvā: it can be taken during fast.' In this section the word cuvā is to be understood in this sense.

Jal-pān is always prepared in the fire room (juī sāl) and not in the kitchen where rice is boiled. If they were cooked in the same place, the contamination inherent in boiled rice would pass to the jal-pān and no one would take tea or jal-pān in that house.

The degree to which jal-pān can transmit impurity varies according to its method of preparation. The preparation of nine common varieties of jal-pān is described below.²

Soft rice (komal cāul).

Prepared from barā, cakovā and some other soft varieties of

lāhī paddy. The paddy is boiled in large vessels in the courtyard over a very hot fire and spread on mats in the sun to dry. It is then husked in the rice pounder (ḍhenki) and winnowed. This is par-boiled rice (ukhovā cāul). The rice is soaked in cold water for an hour or two till soft and then strained and eaten with milk or curd and gur. Soft rice is the standard food provided for the Name House at social functions.

Soft rice is classed as uncooked jal-pān and is not cuvā. But the Gosain will not accept soft rice, only the curd and gur, because it has undergone two processes which open it to contamination: it is made from paddy that has been boiled, and the rice has been soaked in water. A few orthodox bhakats may also consider soft rice cuvā, but in general it is accepted by almost all bhakats from anyone of clean caste. It is said to be raw because the paddy is boiled, not the rice. The husk would appear to provide a protective shell against contagion in the same way as the skin or rind of raw fruit and vegetables.

Uncooked rice flour (kecā pithā).

Prepared from almost all varieties of paddy. The rice is soaked in cold water for an hour, then strained and crushed to a fine powder in the rice pounder. It is eaten with bananas, gur and milk, and also used as the basis of numerous types of rice cakes (piṭha).

Kecā piṭhā is uncooked jal-pān and can be taken during fast because it has not been heated at any stage of preparation. It is considered not cuvā or very little cuvā, but a bhakat will not accept cakes made from rice flour prepared by unmarried nubile girls because the rice is soaked in water. A girl from the time of her first menstruation till her marriage is considered impure: she cannot touch the ingredients of the offering after they have been put to soak or prepare keca piṭha for bhakats. A Chutiya commented:

'The old people take this very seriously. In our houses rice flour is usually prepared by unmarried girls. Their father will not eat. Generally the mother prepares separately for him and keeps some for bhakats. Suppose a bhakat is coming. The mother may have no rice flour. Her daughters will say, "Take from ours, what is the harm?" But the mother will reply it is a sin (pāp) and prepare some more herself.'

Cooked rice flour (pithaguri).

Prepared from almost all varieties of paddy, but lāhī tastes best. The rice is soaked in cold water for an hour, then strained and crushed to a fine powder in the rice pounder. It is then roasted in a dry pan over a low heat till slightly red in colour. It is eaten mixed with hot or cold milk, gur or sugar and bananas, or sometimes with milk and salt.

Rice flour prepared in this way is cooked jal-pān and is cuvā. It cannot be eaten during fast because it has been heated on the fire. Bhakats will not eat it unless prepared by bhakats.

Rice flour (both pithāguri and sāndahguri which is similar to pithāguri but more cuvā because prepared from par-boiled rice) is not offered to affines and distinguished guests. They should be given ākhoi or cirā, which are considered superior.

Flat rice (cirā).

Prepared from mālbhog, barā, cakovā, āmpakhi, jahā and some other varieties of lāhī. The paddy is soaked in cold water for three to four days, then strained and roasted in a dry pan. While still warm it is pounded in the rice pounder to flatten the grains and then winnowed to remove the husk.

Flat rice is cooked jal-pān and is cuvā. Bhakats will not accept it unless prepared by bhakats. But it can be taken during fast. - hence its name of 'fasting flat rice' (baratīyā cirā). It is less cuvā than cooked rice flour (piṭhāguri) because the paddy is heated, not the rice.

Boiled flat rice (phuṭ-diyā cirā).

The preparation is as for flat rice except that the paddy is first boiled for half an hour instead of soaking in cold water. It is then strained and roasted in a dry pan as before. 'Phuṭ-phuṭ' are the bubbles of boiling - hence its name.

Boiled flat rice is cooked jal-pān and is cuvā. It cannot be eaten during fast. In the case of 'fasting flat rice' the paddy is roasted nearly dry, but in the case of boiled flat rice the paddy is boiled in water on the fire. The latter is more cuvā.

Parched rice (ākhoi).

Prepared from barā, āmpakhi, cakovā, mālbhog, jahā and some other varieties of lāhī. Paddy is cooked in a pan of sand over a very hot fire till the grains swell and burst out as 'flowers'. It is then sieved to remove the sand.

Parched rice is classed as uncooked jal-pān and is not cuvā. It is acceptable to bhakats where flat rice is not. In the preparation of flat rice the paddy goes through the additional process of soaking and it is still moist when roasted, whereas parched rice is not soaked and is roasted dry. In addition, in the case of parched rice the individual grains are not broken, whereas in flat rice some grains are broken. Parched rice is described as 'flower-like' (phul vastu) and, as such, not cuvā.

Circular rice cakes (ghilā pithā).

Usually prepared from barā which keeps soft longer, but can be made from any kind of paddy. Uncooked rice flour is kneaded with water and gur or salt and rolled out into a dough. The dough is fashioned between the palms of the hands into small flat circular cakes which are then fried in mustard oil or ghee. Sometimes a filling of sesame and gur is put into the middle of the cakes before frying.

Circular rice cakes are cooked jal-pān and are cuvā. If fried in ghee they are less cuvā than if fried in mustard oil because ghee, being a product of the cow, is pure (pavitra).

All fried rice cakes, of which there is a great variety, are classed as cooked jal-pān.

Luci and Ruṭī.

Luci is made from wheat flour (ātā or maidā). The flour is mixed with water and a pinch of salt and kneaded to a soft dough. The dough is then made into balls which are rolled out on a flat board and fried in ghee or mustard oil. Luci is common.

The preparation of ruṭī is similar to that of luci but ruṭī is cooked on a dry metal sheet. It is not often made.

Luci and ruṭī are usually classed as uncooked jal-pān and therefore not cuvā because they are made from wheat flour and not from rice, but some place them in an intermediate position between raw and cooked jal-pān. Most bhakats accept lucī and ruṭī.

Coconut balls (nārikal lāru).

A little wheat flour is roasted in a dry pan. Milk and sugar are brought to the boil in another pan and the heated wheat flour stirred in till the mixture thickens. Ground coconut is added. While still warm, it is fashioned into balls between the palms of the hands.

Coconut balls are classed as uncooked jal-pān and are not cuvā. Both milk and sugar are exceptions to the rule that food becomes cuvā when cooked.

The purpose of cooking food is to make it digestible and cooking itself can be seen as a form of anticipatory digestion in which the decomposition of raw foodstuffs is effected chiefly by the use of two agents, fire and water. Some varieties of rice become soft enough to eat after being soaked for a few hours in cold water. Rice prepared in this way is classed as 'raw' because it has not been heated on the fire, but the softening action of the water makes it in some degree permeable and hence unacceptable by the high standards of the Gosain. Rice heated on the fire is 'cooked' and hence cuvā, but

a distinction is made between cooking dry and cooking wet. Cakes prepared from flour heated while moist are more cuvā than cakes prepared from flour roasted dry because cooking in water is considered to make the flour internally softer. This can be illustrated from the recipes given above.

Flat rice is more cuvā than parched rice. Both are made by heating paddy on the fire. But whereas parched rice is roasted dry in sand, flat rice is prepared by soaking the paddy first in water and roasting it while still moist.

Boiled flat rice is made from paddy boiled in water. Flat rice is made from paddy soaked in cold water. The first is more cuvā. Two reasons are given for this: firstly, it has been boiled while flat rice is only soaked; and secondly, it is roasted with a high moisture content from boiling while flat rice is only a little damp from soaking.

Rice cakes are also considered more or less cuvā according to whether they are heated with their protective husk as paddy, or husked in the form of rice, or broken down as flour, each being a further stage in the opening of the rice to the decomposing action of fire. This is seen in the following examples:

Soft rice is not cuvā although boiled in the course of preparation because it is made from paddy boiled in the husk.

Parched rice is not cuvā because the whole grains of paddy are roasted in hot sand.

Flat rice is more cuvā than parched rice because the grains of paddy are pounded flat while still warm and sometimes broken. It is less cuvā than cooked rice flour because the paddy is heated, not the rice.

Cooked rice flour is cuvā where soft rice is not cuvā because, although both are heated on the fire, soft rice is boiled in the husk while rice flour is roasted after being ground to a powder.

The varieties of jal-pān are classed as more or less cuvā according to the degree that they are rendered pervious in the course of preparation. Cooking not only breaks down food into a form capable of absorption by the body, it also lays it open to outside influences of moral and spiritual significance. If all methods of preparation that tend to the decomposition of raw food are classed under the general term of cooking, it would be true to say that food becomes cuvā in proportion as it is cooked. There are two types of exception to this rule:

Firstly, sweet things (gur, sugar, honey) do not become cuvā when heated. 'Gur,' it was said, 'is prepared on the fire but it is not cuvā even if made by a Muslim.' Coconut balls (v. p. 191 above), which are prepared by adding powdered coconut to boiling milk and sugar, are classed as uncooked jal-pān although the sugar is boiled. Sweet things are excepted because they preserve food and are therefore a kind of anti-cooking. Their action is opposite to the natural process of ripening which leads to decay and to the cultural process of cooking which by softening and breaking down the food also hastens its decomposition.

Secondly, milk, curd and ghee do not become cuvā when heated because, being products of the cow, they are sacred (pavitra) and always pure.³ In spite of this they are considered to be susceptible to impurity in a minor degree. The Gosain will not buy milk from a Muslim or accept curd from boiled milk. Boiled milk is not offered in pūjā or used to wash the feet of satra images, and curd from boiled milk is not offered to god or used in panchāmrit: for these purposes boiled milk is said to be less pure. Some people also place sesame in this category and class sesame balls (tilar lāru), which are prepared from sesame and gur, as uncooked jal-pān although the sesame is heated in the course of preparation.

Luci and rutī are exceptions because, being made from wheat flour and not from rice, they scarcely count as proper food.

Boiled rice (bhāt).

Anna, which literally means 'food', is valued as the source of life and identified with god (Brahma). It is used exclusively with reference to boiled rice (bhāt). 'Anna,' it was said, 'is our life (prāṇ). Life is called "life depending on anna" (anna prāṇ jīva). As we sometimes say anna is god (Brahma), so we think anna is our life. Boiled rice is our life.' The eating of boiled rice is considered a religious act and its preparation is carried out according to elaborate rules of ritual purity.

Boiled rice is cooked in the kitchen. The term Great Room (bar ghar) is used by some to mean the main sleeping room and by others the kitchen. The kitchen is also called pāk ghar and rāndhani ghar. It is usually built adjacent to the main sleeping room, from which it is separated by a narrow gulley, and it is always at the back of

the house. The walls and floors are plastered with mud and the roof is thatched. Even in the case of brick houses with corrugated iron roofs, it is usual to construct a kitchen in traditional style so that the ritual smearing of the floor after meals can be duly carried out. There are no windows because, it is said, a passer-by might affect the food with evil mantra (ku mantra).

The kitchen is divided into two parts: the cooking place (ākhalār caru) and the dining-room (majiyā ghar). The term 'kitchen' (pāk ghar) is used in many contexts for the cooking place alone and the dining-room is referred to as the 'fire room' (juī sāl) or the tea room (cāh ghar) by virtue of the fire that is kept burning there so that tea can be made during the day without the purification necessary for entry into the cooking place. I have adopted this usage here. Boiled rice is cooked twice daily in the kitchen, i.e. the cooking place, at noon and at night before retiring. Tea and jal-pān are taken in the fire room in the early morning and again in the afternoon. Jal-pān is never prepared in the kitchen to avoid contact with vessels used for boiled rice.

The kitchen, i.e. ākhalār caru, is marked off, usually by a narrow ridge of earth, which is crossed only after bathing and changing into ritually pure (dhuti) clothes. Outsiders do not enter the kitchen. Women of the descent group or visiting affines may occasionally go to the kitchen but even then they sit outside and ask, 'What are you cooking?' Cooking is done on three clods of earth or three stones (ūdhan) driven into the ground or, more commonly, on a rectangular stove of earth (cōkā) about six inches high. This is placed against the north, or sometimes the east, wall. The south is avoided because of its association with the dead. There is a rhyme:

'To the north the kitchen,
To the south the cowshed,
To the east the granary,
To the west the duck cage.'

The pounder for husking paddy (dhenkī) is also placed north/south with the stone pounder to the north. In every kitchen there are two, and only two, cooking places or 'mouths', as they are called, provided by the six (2 X 3) udhān or two cōkā. The larger one on the left is

called the rice pot (bhātar caru), the smaller one on the right is called the vegetable pot (sākar caru).⁴ It is said that in the old days before the introduction of pulses the Assamese ate only vegetables (sāk) with their rice - hence the name. Today it is usual to eat two dishes with rice, one consisting of pulse and things that go with pulses like lao, the other of brinjal or tomato or fish, etc. These are cooked successively on the right of the stove. Three cooking pots are therefore required, one for the rice and two for the curries, which are called respectively the rice pot (bhātar caru), the vegetable pot (sākar caru) or curry pot (angar caru), and the frying pot (bhajār caru). Collectively they are called the rice pots.

Cooking pots are made of clay (māti caru), or brass (tō), or of cast iron (kerāhi). Kerāhi are imported into the State and said to be a recent introduction, although in general use today. The cooking pots should not be taken outside the kitchen and are cleaned inside after the meal by scouring with ashes and sand on a twist of paddy straw. Four times a year, at the three Bihus or seasonal festivals and on the fourth day of Ambuvaci when the earth is considered to be in menses, the cooking pots are taken outside and the kitchen ritually cleansed. This rite is also carried out at the conclusion of the period of impurity following a birth or death, to cut off connection with a relative and to remove the impurity resulting from a cow or dog straying into the kitchen. Clay pots are broken and thrown away because, being porous, the contamination enters into the pot and once used they cannot be purified. Cast iron pots are also cleaned by burning, but they are not considered pure for ritual purposes because water left standing in the pot becomes discoloured, indicating that some impurity has come out of the pot. Visiting Gosains and bhakats must therefore be provided with a brass tō for cooking. If a tō is not available, a new pan will be purchased from the bazaar. The impurity of different types of cooking pots is governed by similar principles to the impurity of food. If the pot is porous so that outside contamination can enter into it, it is cuvā like food that has been made soft and permeable by the heat of the fire. But if it has a hard and resistant surface like brass, impurities can be removed from the surface by burning. On the same principle

stone and iron implements do not become cuva and surface impurities are removed by washing.

Each cooking pot has a lid of wood or brass and its own spoon. The spoons for the curry pots should not be used for stirring or serving the rice, especially if they have been in contact with fish. When not on the fire the pots are stood on rings of twisted cane on either side of the stove, one on the left for the rice and two on the right for the curries. Near to the stove there is usually a low earth platform for salt, an alkaline preparation called khār and other condiments in constant use such as turmeric, ginger, bay, sugar, chillie, nutmeg, coriander, fenugreek and black pepper. Alternatively these may be kept with the kitchen utensils on a bamboo or wooden platform (ākhalar cāng) high up on the wall. The water pots are placed in a corner. There is a separate broom for sweeping the kitchen, not used outside. If touched by someone other than the cook, it is thrown away.

No one enters the kitchen in the morning without bathing. The passage of night makes the body stale (bāhī).⁵ This term is applied to rice cooked the day before and kept overnight (paitā bhāt), to the mouth not washed in the morning (bāhī mukh), to the courtyard not swept in the morning (bāhī cōtāl), to clothes worn during the night and to flowers, with the exception of the lotus and the basil, which have been plucked the day before. Anything stale is unfit for ritual purposes. The women of the house rise before daybreak and ease themselves under the bamboos at the back of the compound. Then they wash their feet, hands and mouth. After this they sweep the courtyard and the floor of the house which is then smeared with white earth, cowdung and water. The cows are fed and milked. They they go to bathe. The men rise after the women for Lakshmi does not favour a man who sets foot on a stale floor. They ease themselves and bathe. Bhakats then go to the prayer room (gosāin ghar) and sing hymns. In the meantime the women have made tea and jal-pān for breakfast in the tea room. The women eat after the men have finished.

Frequency of bathing varies with the degree of initiation. A man who has not been initiated may take tea in the morning without bathing, but he will bath and change his clothes before his midday meal of boiled rice. Those who have been initiated (śaraṇīyā)

usually bathe once daily before their morning tea. If they have occasion to ease themselves again or if they touch something that is polluting (cuṡā), they must bathe and change again before eating boiled rice. Those who have taken higher degrees of initiation (bhajanīyā) bathe three times a day: before morning tea, before midday rice and before evening rice. Women bathe in the early morning. They will not ordinarily bathe again unless they enter the refuse dump at the back of the courtyard or ease themselves, or touch a bed, or come in contact with something polluting like the broom used for sweeping the outside courtyard. But a woman who has taken bhajan will bathe a second time before entering the kitchen to cook the evening meal. Women who stay at home all day are not likely to come in contact with pollution, but a man who goes out should bathe on his return before eating. A young Kalita remarked: 'When my elder sister's husband's father visits us, he comes by bus. On his arrival, he bathes and changes his clothes. Then he drinks tea. He is a bhakat. When he goes to market or to any place, he changes his clothes and bathes and changes his clothes again before eating.'

Ritually pure clothes are termed dhuti. Dhuti cloth, as is sometimes pointed out, is not necessarily clean. A garment dipped in water and dried becomes ritually pure (dhuti) although it may not be clean (cāphā). When a man goes to bathe, he takes with him a washed set of clothes. He bathes, takes off the clothes he is wearing and puts on the clean set. He then washes the clothes he has taken off and returns to the house. The clothes he is wearing are ritually pure and can be used for worship, for entry into the kitchen and for eating. In orthodox families the clothes worn during eating, termed dhuti kāpor, are kept separate, the men's in one place, the women's in another. They are put on before eating rice and taken off and put away immediately afterwards so that they do not become polluted and can be worn again without washing. Bhakats prefer dhuti kāpor made out of the coarse ends of mulberry silk which is considered especially pure. They can sometimes be seen walking along the river bank in the early morning carrying their ritually pure clothes on the end of a stick to avoid touching them before bath. These pretensions of excessive piety cause amusement among the villagers. But for those who are more particular, even a stick

is not enough. For eating, as for worship, a man wears two pieces of cloth (dhutī and gāmocā), but no shirt.

In preparing rice the cook puts three handfuls of washed rice in a pan of boiling water, uttering a secret mantra with each handful. The remainder of the rice is then emptied into the pan and boiled without salt till cooked. The cooked rice is strained and transferred into bell-metal dishes for serving. The cooking pot cannot be brought into the dining-room because, if accidentally touched by someone during his meal, it would become cuvā and could not again be taken into the kitchen. At Bihu times barā rice, which is very sticky, is eaten steamed in a section of bamboo over a pot of boiling water. Boiled rice and steamed rice are both equally cuvā.

Vegetable dishes become cuvā when prepared in the kitchen through proximity to the cooked rice. If boiled in plain unsalted water in the fire room, they are said to be scarcely cuvā. Pulses are boiled till soft and then salt, turmeric and mustard oil are added, or some onion may be fried in mustard oil and added to the dish. The addition of salt and oil makes the pulse cuvā. A man's parents do not usually accept food cooked by his wife until she has been initiated by the Gosain into the cooking mantras, but they may accept boiled vegetables without salt or oil.

Budhar's wife had not taken the mantras. His parents were old. They allowed her to boil the pulse in the fire room to help them; then her mother-in-law carried the pot into the kitchen and herself added the salt, turmeric and mustard oil. (Turmeric does not affect the impurity of food, but it is always added at the end of the cooking.)

The addition of salt makes food a little cuvā, the addition of oil makes it very cuvā. In some areas the daughter-in-law can add salt, but not oil.

Rajani's wife had not taken the cooking mantras. His parents were bhajaniyā. When they came to the town to visit him, a separate cooking place was arranged for them. They were old and had difficulty in managing alone. His wife cooked pulse and added the salt and turmeric. They then took the pot to their own kitchen and added the mustard oil.

Salt is an alkaline (khār). All alkalines have the property of softening food; it is said they are 'cutting' (cokā) and can eat up anything. Their action is therefore similar to that of cooking. If salt or any khār substance is put with raw fish, the fish becomes

cuvā. Fish and oil cannot be carried together from market; the oil must be given to another man. Those who are not very particular may carry them in different hands. There is also a prohibition on carrying fish and salt together, but this is less strict.⁶

Dishes eaten with rice are usually fried (bhāji) or braised (tarkāri). Fish and meat are fried first in cooking and most vegetables also. But fish and meat, whether boiled, fried, braised, roasted on embers, cooked with or without salt or oil, are always equally cuvā. Boiled rice, fish and meat cannot be cooked outside the kitchen. If they were cooked outside, it is said the stove where they were cooked would have to be thrown away, and the burnt ashes and waste of the fire also. The whole room would then be ritually cleansed. Other foods can be cooked outside the kitchen without causing pollution.

The eating of boiled rice is carried out according to rules designed to prevent impurities entering the rice and hence the body of the eater. If a man who had touched someone of low caste were to eat rice without bathing, the condition of being lower caste would pass into the rice at his touch. If he attended the cremation ground and ate without bathing, the impurity of death would enter his body. A man therefore bathes and changes into ritually pure clothes before eating. At a family meal the men sit on low wooden stools in the dining-room; on the ground before each is a flat round bell-metal dish (kāhī) and a small bowl (bāṭi). The cook serves the senior male first. If she is his daughter-in-law, she may touch the ground before him with her forehead. Then she serves the other members of the household, usually in order of seniority. While the men are eating, she avoids making contact with them and is careful not to brush against them with her clothes or touch their plates with the serving spoon. The remains of food are cuvā and if this impurity were transferred to her she could not re-enter the kitchen without washing. In his home a man gets up when he has finished, but at feasts (bhoj) no one can rise till all have finished eating. When a man rises, the rice left on his plate becomes cuvā and in the presence of impurity no one will go on eating. During a meal the orthodox maintain some connection with the food, often by keeping the left hand on the plate, so that the process of eating should not

be interrupted and the food on the plate cannot be considered remains. A little food should be left at the end; otherwise, it is said, Lakshmi will be offended. When they have finished the men wash their hands and mouth and chew areca nut which is said to cleanse the mouth from the impurity left by the rice: hence its name of 'cuvā breaking' (cuvā bhāngā). The women eat after the men, a wife in the dish of her husband. The cook throws the remains of food into the refuse dump (cuvā pātoni) at the back of the house, standing a little distance off, and cleans the pots and dishes by scouring them with sand and ashes. She then smears the floor of the kitchen with white earth, water and cow-dung to remove all traces of food.

The remains of boiled rice are not called rice but called cuvā. They are in a sense the prototype of impurity, impurity itself, and excite deep feelings of concern and aversion. If a man trips and accidentally touches the remains of rice, he feels uneasy and bathes. This aversion arises, in my view, from the fact that the cooking of food is conceived on the model of the digestive system.

The term pāk means both 'the art of cooking' and 'the process of digestion'. Pācak means both a 'cook' and a 'digestive agent'. Agni means both 'fire' and 'the power of digestion', sometimes also called 'the fire of the belly'. The digestive process is considered to soften and decompose food by the action of the digestive juices and the digestive fire till it becomes a liquid capable of absorption into the blood in the same way as soaking and heating on the fire softens and breaks down the food ready for eating. Digestion can be considered a form of internal cooking, or cooking a form of anticipatory and external digestion. Blood is often described as a distillation from the good part of food. It was said: 'Blood only comes from that portion of food which is good. Suppose milk is impure. When you churn it, you get butter only from the good portions of milk, not the impurities. Again when the milk is boiled, the impurities are burnt out and you get ghee. Blood is like ghee.' The unused and unusable waste is expelled as excrement. A similar division is found in respect of food. The rice that is boiled and eaten is considered to be god (Brahma). 'Boiled rice,' it was said, 'is so valuable and so important for our life that it is considered as a god.' The uneaten and unused residue is cuvā. The remains of

rice in relation to cooking therefore occupy the same position as the waste of the body in relation to the digestive process. Both in a sense are dead food. Other bodily excretions, hair-clippings, nail-parings, when separated from the body, become dead and, as the body is built on food, they are also said to be dead food.

The word kecā means both 'unripe' and 'uncooked'. The word 'pakā' means both 'ripe' and 'cooked'. Jāh is used to mean both 'digested' and 'rotten'. Paripakka means 'thoroughly ripe or cooked' and paripāk means 'thoroughly digested'. It seems that three models are here associated: the natural model in which food passes from raw to ripe to rotten; the cultural model in which food passes from raw to cooked to stale (inedible) or waste (uneaten); and the digestive model in which food passes from undigested to digested to excrement.

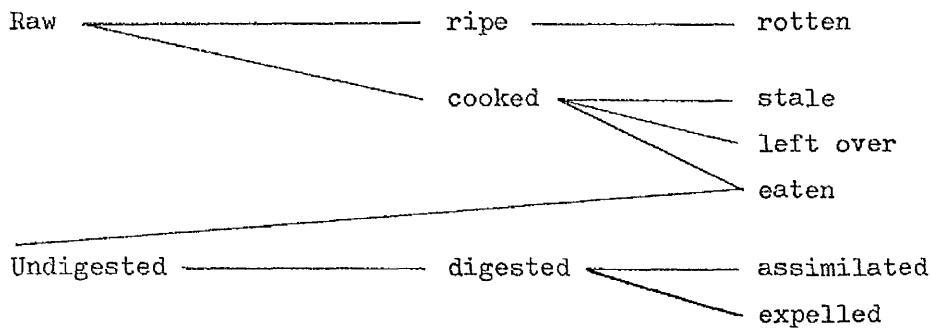


Fig. 4. Models of Food Transformation

Rotten food, stale food, food remains and excrement are cuvā. They represent 'life-food' (anna) which has passed to a state of death. The development of these points is outside the present subject.

The Heat of Sex.

The purity of food is also affected by sexual maturity. A boy up to the age of ten or twelve and a girl before her first menstruation is not open to contagion and cannot be cuvā. The clothes of a child can become cuvā but not his person. Suppose a woman is preparing breakfast in the fire room in the early morning and wants something from the kitchen. She cannot go into the kitchen herself with a stale (bāhī) body without bathing, but she may ask a young child to take off his clothes and fetch what she wants. I remember asking a

carpenter if I could see his tools which he kept in his prayer room. He could not enter the room because of a recent death in the family and asked his little son of seven to undress and fetch them.

Bhajanīyā do not accept food prepared by śaraṇīyā but are often assisted in cooking by a young child, especially when they are old.

Ganesh's parents were bhajanīyā. When they came to town to visit him, his wife was unable to cook for them because she had not been initiated into the cooking mantras, so he engaged a young boy temporarily as a servant for his parents.

Nanda's mother was an old lady about seventy-five. She was bhajanīyā and did not eat food cooked by her daughter-in-law. As a rule she cooked only once a day in the morning and kept some rice for her evening meal. When she was ill, her food was prepared by Nanda's sister's daughter who had not yet attained puberty.

Arrangements of this kind are common. A girl from her first menstruation till her marriage is considered to be cuvā. She cannot enter the kitchen or fetch water for cooking rice. If a girl is living with a man without the performance of great marriage, the villagers will only accept tea and uncooked jal-pān in her house.

Manick eloped with his wife and had not yet been able to afford the expense of a marriage ceremony. His mother would accept soft rice (komal cāul) prepared by his wife but not flat rice (cirā) or rice flour (pithāguri).

Sex is associated with heat. The blood of young men and nubile girls is described as 'hot' and the blood of old people as 'cold'. Sexual intercourse is believed to make the blood very hot. Before the advent of sexual heat the bodies of children are impervious to impurity: they do not share in the ritual impurity consequent upon a birth or death in the family, they can enter the kitchen without bathing, they can even cook for bhakats. It seems that sexual heat 'cooks' the body internally and opens it to impurities in the same way as the heat of fire makes cooked food pervious.⁷

The Sacralization of Food.

The significance of boiled rice is imparted to those who take bhajan in the form of esoteric mantras to be used during its preparation. These mantras are not given in the first initiation (śaraṇ). Food cooked without mantra is said to be 'like the grass to the cattle, it satisfies the body but not the hunger of the soul.' Bhajanīyā cannot therefore take food from śaraṇīyā because it has not been cooked with

the appropriate mental attitude. For a bhakat, food cooked without understanding of its significance as imparted through the mantras is said to be not food but excrement.

The mantras are esoteric. They are known to vary from Gosain to Gosain. A bhakat therefore is cautious in accepting food from bhakats of a satra other than his own. The gist of the mantras has been explained to me and I have been told a few of the mantras themselves by Gosains who have helped me in my work. As the Sremanta Shankar Sangha has now published a recommended version of cooking mantras, I do not feel that in discussing them here I am abusing a confidence.

Cooking mantras are based on an identification between the microcosm of the individual and the macrocosm of the universe. The effect of the mantras is to convert the articles used in cooking - the fire, the pot, the lid, the water, the ladle, the rice itself - into different gods who are conceived as different aspects of Brahman. 'By mantra,' it was said, 'the cooking things are made into the whole universe.' This may be termed the process of universalization: an act which from one point of view is ordinary, commonplace, particular to the individual is, from another focus, endowed with cosmic proportions. In yogic terms the mantras have the effect of joining the soul of the individual (jīva ātmā) with the universal soul (param ātmā).

It was explained: 'You have eaten rice. You have not eaten. Brahman (i.e. God) has eaten. He has produced, he has eaten and he himself is the rice.' Instruction in these mysteries is given to the initiate in the form of a mantra which he is required to learn by heart. This is part of the mantra:

'Food (anna) is the pure śakti of param brahma,
That food is Brahma.
That food-Brahma has saved the world.
Things necessary for the cooking of food, these too
are Brahma.
Fire, water, rice, this too is Brahma.
Who cooks and offers, he too is Brahma.
All who receive, they too are Brahma, fire of Brahma...
Nothing is more sacred than the food which has saved
the world.'

The mantra continues that by placing food-Brahma in Brahma, by creating Brahma within Brahma and giving to living beings in the

form of Brahma, Brahma obtains satisfaction.

The transformation of the articles used in cooking into aspects of Brahma and of the boiled rice into Brahma himself is effected by the mental utterances of mantras or equivalences revealed by the Gosain. The three clods of earth (udhān) supporting the cooking pot are Brahma, Vishnu, Rudra; the cooking pot is the bhakat; the ladle is the guru; the lid is great dharma; the ring of cane supporting the cooking pot is the snake Ananta who supports the world; and so forth. Another version, used in different satras, equates the rice with prakṛti, the water with puruṣ, the fire with the guru, and food (anna) which results from the union of rice, fire and water with God. There are mantras for washing the hands, washing the rice (Madhava-Madhusudan), putting the rice in the water (Krishna Narayana), taking the pot off the fire (Basudeva Gobinda), for the stove (Brahma, Vishnu, Rudra), the ladle (citta, mind), the lid (guru), the pot stand (veda) and the fire (Ram nām). The cook serves the rice saying 'Purusottama Ram' or 'Param puruṣ'. It is accepted saying, 'I salute Sri Vishnu' and eaten saying 'Krishna', i.e. the eater eats as Krishna.⁸

This identification of the paraphernalia of cooking with cosmic phenomena, termed in Assamese carccani, is not effected simply by the mechanical utterances of mantras but rather by the mental attitude of the cook. 'The cook,' a Gosain explained, 'is to consider the fire as one part of Brahma, the rice, water, the very pot, spoon and the cover, all are to be considered different aspects of Brahma. The cook herself is param brahman (the highest god). When she thinks the param brahman in her has cooked it, the very thought enters in the rice so that it becomes param brahman.' The eater mentally offers this food-brahman to brahman and eats the rice as if it were the residue in God's plate. 'We offer anna brahman to the brahman. We consider that God has taken it. What is left is for me.' It is not that the mantras create an identification between human and divine. The identity exists, but it is through the mantras that the individual comes to realise it. To eat without knowledge is a physiological act, but for a man of understanding it is a religious experience in a sacred world.

'We think that hunger is not the point. The soul of the eater is God (param ātmā). The food is offered to him only, not eaten by the man.'

'Boiled rice cooked without the proper mantras and attitude of mind is called "food of female beast". I take rice not as food but as Brahman. If I do not think like this, I am eating excrement.'

The Role of Food in Social Relations.

Two main factors govern the rules connected with the acceptance of food: the position of a man's caste in the hierarchy and his degree of initiation within the sect. A man's spiritual condition alters when he is initiated and is further modified by the esoteric knowledge revealed to him by the Gosain. There are in consequence restrictions on the acceptance of food between the sectarian divisions of Gosain, bhakat or bhajanīyā (advanced initiate), śaraṇīyā (initiate) and aśaraṇīyā (uninitiated).

The Gosain occupies a unique spiritual position. As he has no peer, no one can cook for him. Most Gosains will not eat rice cooked by their wives although a Gosain may, if he wishes, initiate his wife into his religious knowledge so that she can prepare food for him. This was done by one Gosain to my knowledge when suffering from a terminal illness. A Mahanta said: 'I do not eat boiled rice unless I cook it myself. But I have eaten rice cooked by my wife, my wife's mother and my guru's wife (his step-mother). My sister, who has taken bhajan, does not cook rice for me out of respect, but I eat cooked jal-pān with her and her relations.' When invited to preside at a Name House, he may take tea and prasād (the uncooked offering) if the distributor is an advanced bhakat of high caste. In theory he can accept the food of other Gosains but in practice he does not do so. Gosains do not accept soft rice (komal cāul), only the curd and gur, or cut areca nut, or curd from boiled milk or milk purchased from a non-Hindu. A brass pot must be provided for them to cook for the ordinary cast iron kerāhi cannot be purified. They observe fasts strictly. 'The day before yesterday,' a Mahanta remarked, 'was the eleventh day of the bright moon. I took only bananas and milk. I should fast altogether, but being old I cannot manage.' Some Gosains are less particular than others. Tiluram, who belonged to the Bayan Name House, invited a Gosain to a ceremony in his house, given in fulfilment of a vow at the time of his daughter's illness. The Gosain drank tea and I was told he accepted tea in all the houses roundabout. But many Gosains take nothing

but whole areca nut which they cut themselves. Care in these matters indicates their high status and is part of their religious outlook. A Mahanta remarked: 'I do not take food from anyone else, even from hand of Brahman.'

Bhakats are also noted for their exclusiveness in relation to food, for their reputation for piety is seen chiefly in their eating habits. At initiation into bhajan they are instructed to give up meat (except deer), eggs and heating foods which unsettle the contemplative mind, and not to accept cooked foods except from those who have attained an equal degree of initiation.

A group of Kaibarttas were holding a feast to improve their catch. Four men did not eat: they were bhajanīyā. One commented that the feast was cooked by young men and his guru had told him that he should only eat from those who had taken equal mantra.

Bhakats do not accept food from a Gosain other than their own, unless he is known and approved. Some Gosains in Kal-samhati keep duck; their food will not be acceptable. At feasts it is not uncommon to see a Gosain cooking for the assembly and a few bhakats cooking separately in another place.

At the feast held on the 31st day of the death of Thaneswar's mother, the Charingia Gosain cooked and all castes ate together except for one old woman. She was a bhakat and of a different guru.

In the absence of a Gosain there may be as many kitchens as there are bhakats of different satras.

A Kooch held a Name followed by a feast to which he invited affines and guests from several surrounding villages. A Kooch bhakat cooked at one kitchen, from which about forty Keot and Kooch ate. Two or three bhakats said they could not take food from this kitchen. Then it was discovered that they had the same guru as the cook so they ate. Two further kitchens were established for bhakats of two other satras.

Bhajanīyā do not eat boiled rice cooked by śaraniyā.

Nanda's mother was a widow of 75 who had taken bhajan. She preferred to cook for herself once a day and eat cold rice at night rather than accept food prepared by her daughter-in-law.

Aita, a poor widow who had taken bhajan, broke her right arm while I was in the village and was unable to cook. Her household was an unusual one. She had no sons and had married one of her daughters to a man who came to live with them as a son-in-law-of-the-house. This daughter died after giving birth to a girl. The

household at this time consisted of Aita, her daughter's husband and her daughter's daughter who, as an unmarried nubile girl, was considered impure for cooking purposes. For some days Aita subsisted on fruit and milk. Then her son-in-law cycled to the nearest satra and was initiated into bhajan so that he could cook rice for his mother-in-law.

Bhajaniya do not accept cooked jal-pān prepared by śaraṇiya. The fluid nature of the distinction between raw and cooked jal-pān has already been discussed: each bhakat draws this dividing line where he thinks fit. Different food is often provided for guests at ceremonies according to whether they are bhajaniyā or śaraṇiyā.

At the ceremony held on the first menstruation of Lakhi's daughter, the food prepared for guests included soft rice, curd, gur, luci, bhaji (vegetables fried in ghee) and a variety of cooked rice cakes. The women who had taken bhajan sat in a group apart and were offered only the soft rice, curd and gur.

A visiting bhakat who does not accept the food of the house is called a 'pot and stick bhakat' (ṭō khuti marā bhakat) by virtue of the brass pot and three sticks provided for him to cook his own meal.

Young men observe few food restrictions prior to initiation (śaraṇ). But when they become initiates (śaraṇiyā), they do not accept boiled rice or cooked jal-pān from those who have not taken initiation (aśaraṇiya). As no instruction in cooking mantras is given at the first initiation, śaraṇiyā usually eat food cooked by Gosains and bhakats of other satras.

The restrictions on food that derive from the caste hierarchy operate in addition to those that derive from spiritual status within the sect so that every man is governed by two sets of standards. He cannot take cooked food from those of higher caste if they have not attained the same degree of initiation and he cannot take cooked food even from advanced initiates if they are of lower caste.

Bholaram Das Bar Medhi, Koibartta by caste, was a bhakat and a bar medhi of Auniati satra. He devoted himself exclusively to religious matters and had been on pilgrimage all over India. But no man of clean caste would take tea in his house.

Mohan Neog was bhajaniyā, Kooch by caste. He said: 'Keot is a higher caste than Kooch but I do not eat in the houses of Keots. But if the Keot is bhajaniyā and of the same guru, I will eat.'

The only exception to this rule is the case of Brahman disciples of a Kayastha, i.e. non-Brahman, Gosain. Most of them accept rice

cooked by their own guru, though not by other non-Brahman Gosains.

These two standards do not operate independently. The principle of caste has been incorporated into the organization of the sect so that the maintenance of caste distinctions is considered part of the duties of an initiate. A Kalita youth observed:

'Those who have not taken initiation may eat from different caste and different guru. I eat from Chutiyas, even in Ahom houses (two lower castes). But when I take initiation, the Gosain will give me advice. After that I will not be able to eat from Ahoms and Chutiyas, I will never do so. I should not take cooked jal-pān from Keot and Kooch (castes just below Kalita) but I may take.'

The same young man invited some Keot bhakats to a ceremony held to cure his sister of a long-standing illness. The bhakats cooked rice which he ate. But his father and mother, who had taken śaran, would not eat rice cooked by Keots even if bhakats. His mother cooked and his father ate her food. Bhajanīyā are required to observe caste restrictions strictly. In Panbari Keot and Kooch, two castes not greatly different in rank, often ate cooked rice in each other's houses. But in case of bhajanīyā, Kooch ate from Keot but not Keot from Kooch, for Kooch is a lower caste.

At feasts in the satra Name House the Gosain cooks. He himself sits apart to eat. Bhajanīyā are careful not to touch anyone while eating, especially of lower caste. Śaraṇīyā do not bother. The congregation sits ranked by caste with the highest caste at the top or east end of the Name House and the lowest caste at the bottom.⁹ Scheduled castes are not admitted to feasts. These arrangements are a source of resentment nowadays among the lower castes who attack the traditional outlook of the Gosains.

In a branch of Elengi satra near Titabar the Chutiyas, who occupy the lowest rank in the Name house, protested to the satrādhikār but he would not agree to the disciples eating together irrespective of caste.

The members of Tamuli Name House in Panbari are all disciples of Bengenati satra. A satra official (pācanī) comes every year to collect the satra dues. He is a Kalita bhakāt. Tamuli Name House is composed of Duliya Kalitas who are attempting to raise their caste status to that of Kalita. The pācanī refused to accept water carried by them. They were offended and threatened not to pay any dues if he persisted in his refusal. Then the pācanī agreed, but he would not take cut areca nut or soft rice or tea from their hands. He cooked his own food and ate on banana leaves, rejecting their plates.

The commensal hierarchy of castes in Panbari is given in Tables 26, 27 and 28 below.¹⁰ The tables require qualification in two respects. Firstly, they relate to the public behaviour of castes at social functions 'when the people sit', as it is called in the village, and therefore indicate an agreed view of a local caste group as to its proper position in relation to other castes. In practice individuals often relax these rules on informal visits. The Duliya Kalitas accept only uncooked jal-pān in Kalita houses at public functions, but privately some of them take cooked jal-pān and one of them takes boiled rice. The mother of the Brahman priest who serves the village says she eats rice and cooked jal-pān in Brahman houses only, but she has been known to accept cooked jal-pān from Kalitas though not from lower castes. Young men are particularly lax in these matters. Secondly, the data of the tables refer exclusively to those who have taken first initiation. Before initiation young men eat cooked food in the houses of all clean castes, and bhajanīyā who have advanced to higher stages of initiation refuse cooked food from higher castes unless they too are bhakats. These factors are disregarded in the tables which present an artificial picture of commensal rules by isolating the single factor of caste. In fact both caste and sectarian status are considered in every case.

The position of the Brahmans deserve special mention. There are two Brahman households in Panbari, one is the priest who serves most houses in the village and the other is his elder brother. Feasts in Panbari are usually cooked by Kayastha Gosains. To these the Brahmans are not invited to avoid the awkwardness of a refusal. At the feast held in the Panbari Name House after the establishment of a new thāpanā a Kayastha Gosain cooked. Neither the Brahman priest nor his brother attended. If the priest were to eat boiled rice in a non-Brahman house, the villagers would consider he had forfeited his caste and no longer employ him. Brahmans, like Gosains, are said to be of guru class and their exclusiveness, though sometimes resented, is considered appropriate to their office.

The lack of symmetry in Tables 26 and 27 is due to the anomalous position of the Duliya Kalitas as a mobile caste of disputed rank. The villagers say that previously they were Katoni (cutters of wood for making drums), now they claim to be Kalita, better than Kalita, and refuse rice and cooked jal-pān in Kalita houses. The Kalitas also refuse to accept cooked food from them. One Kalita remarked that he might eat cooked jal-pān in a Chutiya house but not from Kumar Kalitas (potters) or Duliya Kalitas although these castes rank above Chutiya. The villagers said that Kalita and Duliya Kalita hate one another. The attempt of the Duliya Kalitas to raise the status of their caste has met with a limited success which is reflected in commensal rules. In their fathers' time the villagers say they ate nothing in these houses, but today they accept uncooked jal-pān and tea because 'we do not wish to offend them'.

Five families in the village, distributed in eighteen households, claimed to be Kayastha. They were well-to-do families engaged in clerical work and small businesses in the neighbouring town and did not cultivate. None of them wore the sacred thread, though most claimed that their fathers did so. Some gave their caste as Kayastha/Kalita, adding that it was open to any Kalita to become a Kayastha by giving up cultivation. The villagers, although not challenging this principle, were not satisfied as to the antecedents of the families, one of whom were three-generation immigrants from Bengal, and pointed out that the marriages they had contracted (with Sonari or Goldsmith Kalita, Kooch, Keot) did not substantiate their claim. One 'Kayastha' house contained four daughters aged 34, 27, 26 and 24 for whom their father had not yet found suitable bridegrooms, preferring to keep them unmarried rather than give them to men of lower caste. The 'Kayastha' families did not eat cooked food in Kalita or Keot houses of Panbari Name House - although they were said to do so 'secretly' - because it would have compromised their caste claim. But the neighbouring Kalitas and Keots did not eat cooked food in their houses either, because the 'Kayasthas', with a few exceptions, had not taken initiation. They said they were too busy; some added they meant to be initiated before they died. One old woman had taken bhajan and from her the villagers accepted cooked jal-pān, but in almost all the other houses, including that of a

man of 78 who had not yet been initiated, they ate only uncooked jal-pān and tea. The 'Kayasthas' did not eat in lower caste houses for reasons of caste and the lower castes did not eat in their houses because of the sectarian division between the initiated and the uninitiated.

The single Ahom house is a member of the Tumuli Name House composed otherwise entirely of Duliya Kalita. The other two Name Houses do not accept any food from Ahoms. Two cases occurred of elopement with an Ahom girl. In the first case the young man was cut off by his family and cast out of the Name House. In the second case the man was allowed to remain a member of the Name House but, when any ceremony is held in his house, the guests prepare the food themselves.

No one in the village would take anything, even water, in the house of a Kaibartta. It was said that although a Kaibartta may be spiritually advanced, the fact of his birth in a scheduled caste showed he had 'chronic actions' in him from previous births so that he would not be able to cook with the correct attitude.

The members of one Name House look upon themselves as a commensal group. It is common to hear expressions like: 'He is one of us, is he not? He eats with us.' The capacity to provide at least uncooked jal-pān and tea is a pre-requisite of membership because all houses of the Name House have to be invited to major rites de passage. This limits the range of castes that can co-exist in a single Name House. On the other hand the unity of the Name House as a ritual congregation leads to the neglect of caste in seating arrangements within the Name House. Neither at the distribution of the uncooked offering nor on the occasion of feasts are the congregation ranked or divided by caste. Those who occupy the most honourable seats at the upper end may be of any caste in the Name House; they are elderly men respected for their piety.

The acceptance of food has so far been discussed in relation to two factors only: the caste hierarchy and sectarian divisions. Other factors include: the mutual opposition or repulsion of caste groups (described by Bouglé); the reaction formation characteristic of lower castes; relative seniority of kin; distance between affines; and personal considerations. The customs relating to the eating of

food between kin and affines are not developed further here. The other factors are taken up briefly below.

Dumont has laid great emphasis on the principle of hierarchy in the caste system, arguing that the separation of castes, identified by Bouglé as one of the three distinguishing principles of caste, is derived from the hierarchical opposition of the pure and the impure (Dumont 1970:43). But he also says: 'It is not claimed that separation, or even "repulsion", may not be present somewhere, even perhaps as an independent factor' (Dumont 1970:300). The rules of the commensal hierarchy outlined above are clearly based on the notion of hierarchy, but at the same time the existence of separation as an independent principle is indicated by the following statements:

'A bhakat does not take food from different caste, even if higher and of the same satra.'

'Young men eat boiled rice anywhere, except in Kaibartta houses. But old men, whether bhajanīyā or not, do not take cooked food with other castes.'

'Caste by caste they are separated; how can we eat?'

The last of these statements, made by an old woman, carries the ring of castes as distinct species. This way of looking at caste groups seems to co-exist with the dominant hierarchical view.

By 'reaction formation' is meant the tendency of lower castes to react to the refusal of higher castes to accept their food by closing in on themselves and rejecting in turn food cooked by higher castes. This mechanism has developed furthest among the Kaibarttas who do not as a rule accept soft rice or tea from other castes except from their Gosain. A Brahman of a most respectable family told me that when his father, who was a mauzadar living near Puranimati satra which has many Kaibartta disciples, gave even a banana to a Kaibartta, the Kaibartta would go down to the tank and wash the banana before eating it. A similar tendency is now developing among the lower castes generally as a protest against their inferior status. I give as an illustration of this development an interpretation made by a Chutiya of the cooking arrangements at two feasts, the second of which was given in his house. A feast (bhoj) is the term used for the eating of boiled rice at a public gathering; it does not imply a multiplicity of dishes. A new kitchen is always created for a

feast. Brass utensils are used for cooking and the food is served on banana leaves. No one starts till all are served and no one rises till all have finished.

The first feast was given by a Kooch after a Nām Govā. There were three kitchens. A Kooch bhakat cooked at the first kitchen: from this Kooch and Keot ate, about 40 people. A Kalita bhakat cooked at the second kitchen: from this he and another Kalita bhakat ate. A Chutiya bhakat cooked at the third kitchen: from this three Chutiyas ate. Had a Gosain been present, he would have cooked and all the castes would have eaten together, provided they thought well of the Gosain.

The Chutiya commented as follows: 'The Keot and Kooch ate from the first kitchen because they think they are of about the same status. In another village they might cook separately. The Chutiyas cooked by themselves because they resent the fact that they are not allowed to touch the food. The Kalita argues: "We are both bhajanīyā and belong to the same guru. So there should be no objection to taking food prepared by us." The Chutiya replies: "If you think that our religious status is the same, our guru is the same, then why can't you accept the food cooked by me?" Of course, nothing is said. The Kalita will not offer to cook food for Chutiya. In fact, it has become usual for Chutiyas to cook separately. If a Kalita cooks for us, it will be highly objectionable. Why should we accept from Kalita?... Of course, there is a difference. If a Chutiya accepts food from a Kalita, his rāij (i.e. Name House) will not object. But if Kalita ate from Chutiya, there will be objection' (i.e. for the Kalita it is a matter of impurity, for the Chutiya one of status).

The second feast was held after Pal Nām given by a wealthy Chutiya family in an all-Chutiya village. There were about 700 guests. The Gosain invited for Pal Nām was unable to cook for so many and some Chutiya bhakats in the village cooked instead at one kitchen. From this the people of the village ate, about 600, together with a Mahanta, a Kalita and some men of other castes, none of whom had taken bhajan, and three daughters' husbands with their relations. The Chutiya, who was the son of the host, commented: 'Some of them were of different satras. Two were bhakats, but they cook in the same kitchen. They have no objection. When there is objection, then only they cook separately.'

From the second kitchen the host's wife's brother and his relations and some of his co-villagers ate. They were of a different satra and there might be difference of mantra in cooking.

From the third kitchen the host's son's wife's father and his relations and co-villagers ate, about 21 people. The Chutiya commented: 'New relations and a different satra. They may accept afterwards. They may also not accept. Because our mother's brother (who ate from the second kitchen) is known to us a long time and he did not accept. My father does not take food from my wife's father. My wife's father is not bhajanīyā. But even if he were, my father would not necessarily accept. Some mutual understanding is necessary. It may happen that they pass their whole lives without eating in one another's houses.'

Three Kalita bhakats were invited. The Gosain and these bhakats were given a ration (sidha) to cook at home. 'If they had cooked separately, people would have said to the host: "Why have you arranged like this? You can give them a ration and they will cook in their own houses." They would have attributed it to caste superiority. But in the case of my mother's brother and my younger brother's wife's father, they cooked separately because of difference in mantra. No question of caste. This arouses little antagonism. The people may say, "Oh, he is a very big bhakat, he is cooking separately," but they will talk among themselves and not complain to the host. If there is a quarrel at Nām, the host loses all his labour.'

The growing reluctance of the lower castes to acquiesce in the inferiority implied by the acceptance of cooked food could result in castes turning inwards to form closed commensal groups. This appears to be the position in south India. But it is likely that a general relaxation of observances concerned with ritual impurity will overtake any development of this kind.

Food transactions are determined by a number of factors which can be isolated at the analytic level but may combine differently on the ground in each case. They cannot therefore be predicted on the basis of a set of rules. E.g. In one Name House composed of Kalita, Keot and Kooch, the Keot and Kooch did not eat from Kalita: at feasts each caste cooked separately in the absence of a Gosain. But in Bayan Name House when a feast was held for the actors after a religious drama, two Kalita bhakats cooked and Kalita, Kooch and Chutiya all ate together. The difference probably lies in the particular history of caste relations within the two Name Houses. Again, in the feast after Pal Nām described above, three sons-in-law accepted food, the wife's brother cooked separately, and it was not known what the son's wife's father would do in future. Even a single caste village does not necessarily inter-dine. If a quarrel leads to division, the two Name Houses are not likely to eat together for many years as a mark of their separate identity. In Panbari two groups have seceded on religious grounds, the 13-day people from the Panbari Name House and the Harijanias from the Tamuli Name House. The other villagers do not eat in their houses.

The Panbari Name House passed a resolution forbidding its members to eat with the 13-day people. One of the 13-day people invited Pakhili to the marriage of his daughter. She attended the ceremony and ate food in the house. She is now considered to belong to the 13-day people and the Panbari Name House has severed connection with her.

In this context the significance of food transactions is not associated with relative status in the caste hierarchy but with distinctions between groups of a like order. Those who eat together are considered to be one people (rāij) who assert their common identity in the giving and taking of food. To understand the significance of food among the Assamese is not therefore to master a complex of technical procedures and ritual restrictions, but to learn the nuances of a language in which spirituality, status differentials, identity and difference, amity and conflict find their variable expression.

Notes.

1. The Assamese use of kecā and pakā to mean 'raw' and 'cooked' is distinct from usage elsewhere, where kaccā refers to inferior food boiled in water and pakkā to superior food fried in ghee.
2. These recipes were collected in the field. A collection of Assamese recipes is to be found in Rāndhanī bā rāndhan prañālī by Srimati Dhanadakumari Saikiyani.
3. The relation of the sacred to the concepts of purity and pollution has been raised by Das and Uberoi (1971). There seem to be two methods for the removal of impurity; the action of the one is mechanistic and of the other absorptive. Impurity itself may be external or internal to the object. External impurity can be conceived on the analogy of a film adhering to the surface and removable by washing away or burning off. This method is efficacious in the case of objects with a hard exterior like stone and iron implements and for the body polluted by contact with an impure substance or the touch of a man of lower caste. Porous objects, such as clay vessels, cannot be ritually cleansed by this means because the impurity has penetrated inside and they are discarded after use. Similarly the eating of forbidden foods or a birth or death within the descent group sharing a common bodily substance results in internal impurity which cannot be reached by washing and for which burning is inappropriate. The committing of certain sins is also believed to produce a psychophysical condition pervading the body. In these cases where mechanistic transfer is unavailable, recourse is made to the sacred and the individual undergoes penance (prāyaścitta). The Brahman invokes into a vessel of water the seven sacred rivers and five gods beginning with Ganesh. To this he adds the five products of the cow (panchagabya). This is now purificatory water (śānti pānī, literally 'peace water'). The man undergoing penance sits with the fingers of his right hand in the water and utters mantras at the instruction of the Brahman who then sprinkles him with the purificatory water saying, 'Peace, peace, peace'. He drinks a little of the water to cleanse the inside of his body. Purificatory water, which contains the power of the gods and of the sacred cow, purifies but does not itself become impure. Its action may be considered as absorbing the impurity (on the model of the digestive system) or as 'containing' the impurity (on the model of the container and contained). On the same principle bathing at certain holy places of pilgrimage (tīrtha) is held to remove great sins (cf. Vena who was warned not to bathe in the Sthānu Tirtha because his sins were so great that it would be destroyed but was finally released at the Gospada Tirtha which alone had the power to contain his burden of evil). At the affective level the intervention of the sacred is characterized by pity: it provides a quality capable of encompassing or neutralizing impurity which, in its absence, would spread to pervade all objects in the system.

4. Caru literally means 'earthen pot' but, by extension, is used for the place where the meal is cooked.
5. The term bāhī is derived from bās meaning 'smell'.
6. I have at this stage no explanation of why the addition of oil is considered to make food cuvā. I have only made a beginning in the analysis of Assamese beliefs concerning the properties of food and I present in this chapter only those conclusions of which I am reasonably confident.
7. The role of fire as an agent of transformation is also evident in relation to the burning of the dead. If the body is buried (which is done in the case of young children, suicides, victims of unnatural death and of certain diseases) the descent group is ritually impure for three days only. If the body is burnt, the period of impurity is a month for non-Brahman castes. But only the souls of those whose bodies are burnt can undergo the metamorphosis which enables them to attain heaven and join the ancestors. The soul of a man who remains unburnt becomes a malevolent spirit (bhut) attached to the earth who may trouble his kinsfolk.
8. This is one version of the mantras used but there is considerable variation from Gosain to Gosain.
9. The division by caste is less orderly than suggested by this account. Only elderly disciples are ranked by caste; young men sit down at the back anywhere.
10. The term 'commensal hierarchy' has passed into common use. But, as Dumont has pointed out, it is not with whom one eats but from whom one eats that is significant (Dumont 1970:142).

READER'S NAME
CRAWFORD

DATE
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2/10/81

PART TWO

ASTE AND SECT

11522

CHAPTER 9

ASSAMESE CASTES IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The term caste has so far been used as if it were a category that did not need further explanation. Anthropologists have been extremely interested in the working of the caste system, which has been taken as the defining characteristic of Hindu society, and they have devised a number of models distinguishing its major aspects. In the course of examining the ethnography on Assamese castes, it became apparent that certain features of the material could not be subsumed under any of the models currently used to guide research. In this unsatisfactory situation it seemed best to set out the available data on caste in Assam in an attempt to understand the nature of the institution in this State.

The nature of a caste system cannot, in my view, be understood from a village study of the inter-relations between local castes or sub-castes. It requires an approach that is more comprehensive in two ways: firstly, the number, ordering and segmentation of castes must be established in some broad form for an entire regional unit before the significance of local variants can be appreciated and, secondly, the working of the system can only emerge from a historical study of its changes over time. Anthropological studies of caste in India have tended to be both small-scale and synchronic. Associated with this approach is a model of caste as a system of closed status groups functionally differentiated by the division of labour and ranked in a fixed hierarchy according to their ritual purity. The many examples of social mobility that early anthropologists encountered in fact in the field they tended to explain, or explain away, as responses to the new economic changes introduced by British rule. This a-historical view of social change rested on a false dichotomy between 'traditional' society, seen as unchanging, and 'modern' society, in which all the forces of change were located. Recently it has been recognized that social mobility and re-arrangement have always been a feature of caste (cf. Silverberg 1968) - it can indeed be wondered

how else the system could have survived - but the image of a fixed and rigid system, of limited mobility characteristic of groups rather than individuals, and of castes as closed groups has persisted. It can be doubted whether any of these assumptions would be current if the study of caste had been approached from a broader historical standpoint.

I was led to reconsider the nature of the caste process in Assam from data on social mobility in Panbari. Two castes in Panbari had an ambiguous rank, the Duliya Kalita and the Kayastha. The history of the Duliya Kalitas has been described above and is recapitulated briefly below. They were in origin a subdivision of a low caste termed Katani, Jugi or Nath, which is described in the 1881 Census in the following terms:

'It seems doubtful how far the Katani or Jugi caste should be classed among Hindus. The genuine Jugi is said to eat all manner of meat, to live without a Goshain, and to bury his dead. Their name Nath suggests some connection with the gipsy caste of Hindustan, as does also the nickname hâp khoa or hâp mel, signifying snake-charmers, applied to them in contempt or incivility. It seems not unlikely that they may be remnants of some degraded non-Aryan race. The great majority, however, though admittedly akin to the non-Hindu or original Jugi, have enrolled themselves among Hindu castes by the name of Katani, which means spinners or reelers of thread'

(Report on the Census of Assam 1881: 95).¹

The strength of this tendency is evidenced by a comparison of the returns by district for the Brahmaputra Valley in 1872 and 1881. Omitting Goalpara where all Katanis were called in 1881 as Jugi (the Bengali name for the caste), the returns for the five remaining districts in 1872 showed 20,996 Jugis and 31,187 Katanis compared with 7,353 Jugis and 59,847 Katanis in 1881. The caste has therefore been attempting to improve its status for at least a hundred years.

The Duliya is first specifically mentioned in the Census of 1891 as one of the five principal subdivisions of the Jugis, namely, the Sapmelas, or snake-charmers; the Palupohas, or rearers of silk-worm; the Duliya, or palki-bearers; the Katanis, or weavers; and the Thiyapotas, who bury their dead upright. The Report continues:

'Of these, the Katanis and the Duliya are the chief subdivisions now remaining. The Katanis are generally supposed to be more completely Hinduised, but the social pretensions of the Duliya have of late exceeded those of the Katanis. They derive their name from the fact

that they were bearers of the royal litter in the time of the Ahom Rajas, and they now say that the founders of their sept were Kalitas, who intermarried with Katani girls, and who were in consequence degraded.

'Some few years ago it struck the leaders of their society in the Jorhat subdivision that they might regain the position of their alleged ancestors if they performed the necessary ceremony of purification. With this object in view, they raised a large sum of money, and invited the Katanis to join them. The latter, however, refused, but the Duliya nevertheless persisted in their idea, and in February 1890 a monster purification ceremony was performed. Since then the Duliya have taken to calling themselves Kalitas, but their claims are recognised by no one except themselves' (R.C.A.1891:270).

The Duliya subdivision of the Jugi caste was returned in 1891 in Sibsagar District only, where their number was 874.

The 1901 Census comments on the contempt in which the Nathas were held by the pure sudra castes and gives a further instance of an attempt by the caste to improve its status:

'A short time ago the Jugis in Barpeta, at the instigation of a Brahman priest, assumed the sacred thread, and declared themselves to be Bhadrak. It was suggested to them that they should prove their good position by requiring their priest to marry a Jugi girl; but the Brahman, as soon as this proposal was made to him, fled, and the pretensions of the Jugis received a crushing blow. The net result of the movement is that they are now forbidden to enter the namghar at all, though formerly they were allowed into the outer room' (R.C.A. 1901:131)

By 1921 the Jugis had succeeded in being tabulated as Yogis and had Hinduized their marriage rites and discarded widow re-marriage. In Upper Assam they objected to the inclusion in former years of the Sarmelas or snake-charmers and Duliya or palki-bearers in Jugis (R.C.A. 1921:147).

The 1931 Census contains an Appendix on the depressed and backward classes of Assam written by the Census Commissioner for Assam, C.S. Mullan. He discusses in some detail the position of the Nathas. In most areas their water was not accepted, but they were admitted into the exterior portion (tip) of the Name House, whereas the exterior castes were completely excluded. Mullan concludes:

'The truth about the Nathas and the Suts appears to be that they are "superior exterior castes" who are moving upwards and it seems quite possible that within the next ten years (vide my definition of exterior castes) they may acquire further social privileges and become generally recognised as "interior" castes.

'The Suts and Naths do not themselves desire to be classed as depressed or exterior and in fact strongly object to it.

'Hence I have not classed the Naths and Suts of the Assam Valley as exterior castes. If, however, these castes ever felt that by not being so classed, they were being deprived of an advantage which they otherwise would have gained I would have no hesitation in classifying them as exterior' (R.C.A. 1931:213).

From the Census data it seems that in 1921 the Duliya were an inferior section of Jugis or Naths who objected to their inclusion in their own number, and in 1931 the status of the Jugis was such that the Census Commissioner was indifferent as to whether they should properly be classed as an interior or an exterior caste. Their position is still low and they are served by priests differentiated as 'Brahmans' out of the caste. The Duliya in Panbari separated from Panbari Name House in 1919, at which time no one accepted water or uncooked food from their hands. 50 years later they had raised their position in general estimation above the Ahoms and Chutiyas, they were invited to bar sabāh at both Panbari Name House and Bayan Name House, they were served by the same Brahman priest who attended most of the other households in the village, and all castes except Brahman accepted tea and uncooked jal-pan in their houses. They changed the name of their hamlet from Jugi to Tamuli and have long since given up their traditional occupation of palki-bearer to purchase land and become prosperous cultivators. They have severed all association with the Jugis or Naths and describe themselves as Kalita. The rest of the village usually refer to them as Duliya Kalita and to the other Kalitas in the village as Kalita or Great Kalita.

The Duliya Kalita case is typical of the many recorded instances of successful caste mobility throughout India. Their change of status was accompanied by the abandonment of their traditional servile occupation, a myth of origin, a change of name and the acquisition of land, wealth and respectability. There is no reason to suppose that the Duliya Kalitas of Panbari were not direct descendants of the 874 Duliya censused in Sibsagar in 1891 who carried out a purification ceremony to raise themselves to the level of Kalita. In other words, the sub-caste has remained closed and mobility has been effected as a group.

The case of the Kayasthas is different. There are 18 Kayastha households in Panbari divided into 5 descent groups. They all live

on the town side of the village (v. Map 3) where they are engaged in business or various clerical occupations and are rich and prosperous by village standards.

The first descent group consisting of 2 houses claimed to be descended from a Bengali Kayastha brought by the Ahom kings into Assam two generations ago to become the first businessman in the town. They said their grandfather and father wore a sacred thread, although they did not. The villagers were sceptical of their claim: 'They come from Bengal and we do not know them - they say they are Kayastha.' 'If he is a Kayastha or Kalita, why did he marry a Kooch and why did his father marry a Keot?' One house had four unmarried girls who attained their first menstruation 26, 13, 12 and 10 years ago respectively. Their father had been unable to find suitable bridegrooms and preferred to keep them unmarried rather than compromise his claim to Kayastha status. The other house had three unmarried girls, the eldest over 40, in a similar position.

The second descent group of 3 houses derived from a tea garden clerk who settled here on retirement. His wife was said not to be a Kayastha and village opinion was undecided as to whether the family was Kayastha or not.

The third descent group of 9 houses was not popular in the village and their claim to Kayastha rank was contemptuously rejected. 'His eldest son married a Goldsmith Kalita by Great Marriage. How are they Kayastha? They are lower than Chutiya or Kooch or Keot.'

The fourth descent group consisted of 3 houses of prosperous businessmen. Their claim to Kayastha rank was not accepted. 'His mother was a Goldsmith Kalita. How is he Kayastha?'

The fifth descent group consisted of the single house of a retired salesman whose three elder brothers had been disinherited for inter-caste marriage.

The peculiarity of the Kayastha case lay in this. One woman interviewed gave her caste as Kayastha/Kalita and on inquiry in the village I found that it was the general opinion that it was open to any Kalita to become a Kayastha by giving up cultivation. The transition was validated by affinal connections and in particular by the marriage of daughters (cf. case 1 above). The villagers were for a number of reasons at odds with these particular families and disinclined to acquiesce in their claims. But from the data it is clear that individual mobile families of Great Kalita or even lower caste, especially if they come from another locality, can obtain entry into the Kayastha caste. The Kayasthas are the writer caste of Bengal. The Census Commissioner for Assam at the 1931 Census comments: 'There are a

certain number of genuine Brahmaputra Valley Kayasthas, though I am inclined to think that the considerable proportion of the so-called Kaiets are only Kalitas who have risen in the world' (R.C.A. 1931:132). The Census returns support the view that the caste has largely been created by infiltration from below. The percentage increase of those enumerated as Kayasthas in the five eastern districts of Assam in the four decennia between 1891 and 1931 is 8 per cent, 13 per cent, 22 per cent and 44 per cent. In the 1931 Census the total number of Kayasthas enumerated in these districts was 31,333 (the total for the entire valley including Goalpara district was 36,123).

A consideration of these two cases raised a question as to the nature of the caste system in Assam. If the majority of Assamese castes were modelled, not on the Duliya Kalitas, but on the Kayasthas, i.e. if they were open and not closed groups, what implications would this have for the working of the system? To my regret this question did not occur to me in the field where I studied castes as closed groups in accordance with current anthropological assumptions and explained, or explained away, the Kayastha material on the grounds that, as there were few 'real Kayasthas' in Assam, the caste was probably exceptional in nature.² In this chapter I attempt to explore the caste process in Assam in historical perspective using in the main Gait's 'History of Assam' and data taken from the Census. The attempt is clearly at a preliminary stage but it serves to indicate the possibilities of this approach and the conclusions to which it tends.

The Brahmaputra Valley of Assam constitutes a distinct regional unit within which the different indigenous castes are related to form a system. The valley has an area of some 27,000 square miles and, except on the extreme west where a narrow neck of land connects the State with West Bengal, it is entirely surrounded by hill tracts inhabited by tribal peoples with their own languages and culture. The population of the valley at the 1971 Census was 12,456,477, but this figure includes plains tribals, Assamese Muslims and a large immigrant population including tea garden labour, Mymensinghi settlers, Marwaris, Sikh, Biharis and numerous other people working as traders or labourers. Among the States of India, Assam has the largest proportion of persons born outside the State and outbreaks of xenophobia

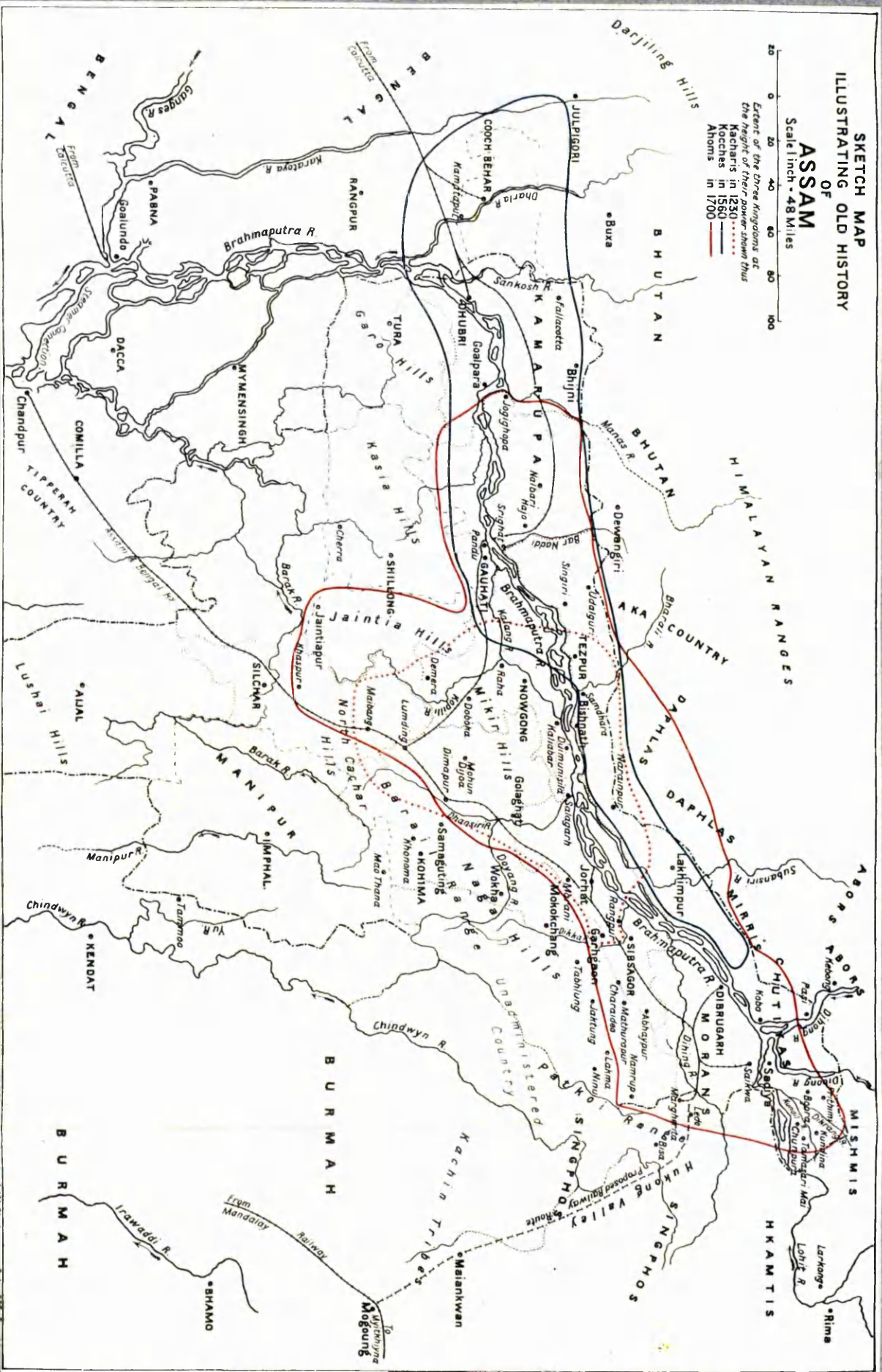
among the Assamese (anti-Muslim disturbances, anti-Marwari disturbances, anti-Bengali riots, etc.) are largely to be attributed to the fact that they now find themselves a minority, although the largest minority, in their own State.³

Little is known of the early history of Assam although there are numerous references in the Mahabharata and in Puranas and Tantras to a great kingdom called Kamarupa extending over Assam, Eastern Bengal and Bhutan with its capital near the famous temple of Kamakhya outside Gauhati. The first authentic information regarding this kingdom is given by the Chinese pilgrim Hiuén Tsiang who visited India in the first half of the seventh century. He describes the people as of small stature with dark yellow complexions, an indication of their Mongolian origin. The king at that time was a Hindu and a patron of learning, although to what extent the common people had come under the influence of Hinduism is uncertain (Gait 1906:22-25). The only sources for the next 500 years are six sets of copper plates and one rock inscription recording land grants made by the kings to Brahmans. There appear to have been four dynasties during this period. The first two, the dynasty of Sala Stambha succeeded by that of Pralambha, are described as mlecchas or non-Hindu and the names of the kings suggest that they were aborigines who were later converted to Hinduism. All the dynasties were fitted out by the Brahmans with appropriate genealogies, in most cases connecting them with Narak, the legendary founder of the kingdom (Gait 1906:27-33). The last of these plates is dated about 1142. The earliest connected account of the country begins almost a century later with the Ahom invasion of 1228 A.D., for the Ahoms were the first rulers to maintain chronicles of the main events of their reign. From their records it seems that when they entered Assam from northern Burma, a line of Chutiya kings ruled the country east of the Subansiri and Disang. Further west there was a Kachari kingdom on the south bank of the Brahmaputra, which probably extended halfway across the Nowgong district. West of the Kacharis on the south bank, and of the Chutiyas on the north, were a number of petty chiefs called Bhiuyas (Gait 1906:36). Thence the ancient kingdom of Kamarupa, then called Kamata, extended to the Karatoya and was ruled by the Klen kings (Gait 1906:41) till it passed under the Koches at the beginning of the 16th century (v. Map 14, p.227).

SKETCH MAP OF ASSAM

Scale 1 inch = 48 Miles

Extent of the Three Kingdoms at
 the height of their power shown thus
 Kochas in 1230
 Kochas in 1560
 Ahoms in 1700



Reproduced from Shakspeare 1914

The rulers of all these kingdoms became converts to Hinduism. Gait gives the following account of the conversion of the Khen, Kooch, Kachari and Ahom kings:

Khen. 'It is said that the founder of the dynasty was a cowherd whose master, a Brahman, is said to have foretold that he would become king, and helped him to overthrow the last degenerate descendant of the Pal family. On ascending the throne he embraced the Hindu religion, assumed the name Niladhvaj and made his old master his chief mantri or minister. He is reputed to have imported many Brahmans from Mithila' (Gait 1906:42).

Kooch. 'The progenitor of the Koch kings was a Mech or Koch - it is not certain which - named Haria Mandal... He married, it is said, two sisters named Hira and Jira, the daughters of one Haju, by whom he had two sons, namely, Bisu the son of Hira, and Sisu the son of Jira... Bisu was a man of unusual enterprise and courage, and he soon forced his way to the front... He rose to power about 1515 A.D.

'As usual in such cases, the Brahmans soon sought him out. They discovered that his tribesmen were Kshatriyas who had thrown away their sacred threads when fleeing before the wrath of Parasuram, the son of the Brahman ascetic Jamadagni, while Bisu himself was declared to be the son, not of the humble Haria Mandal, but of the God Siva who, assuming Haria's form, had had intercourse with his wife Hira, herself an incarnation of Siva's wife Parvati. Bisu assumed the name of Bisva Singh, and his brother Sisu became Sib Singh, while many of his followers discarded their old tribal designation and called themselves Rajbansis.

'Bisva Singh now became a great patron of Hinduism. He worshipped Siva and Durga, and gave gifts to the disciples of Vishnu and also to the priests and astrologers. He revived the worship of Kamakhya, re-built her temple on the Nilachal hill near Gauhati, and imported numerous Brahmans from Kanauj, Benares and other centres of learning' (Gait 1906:46-7).

Kachari. '... in 1790, the formal act of conversion took place: the raja, Krishna Chandra, and his brother, Govind Chandra, entered the body of a copper effigy of a cow. On emerging from it, they were proclaimed to be Hindus of the Kshatriya caste, and a genealogy of a hundred generations, reaching to Bhim, the hero of the Mahabharat, was composed for them by the Brahmans' (Gait 1906:251).

Ahom. 'His (Rudra Singh's) Hindu proclivities increased as he grew older, and he at last decided formally to embrace that religion and become an orthodox Hindu. This involved the ceremony known as "taking the Smaran": the neophyte prostrates himself before the Guru, who teaches him a secret text, or mantra, and takes him under his spiritual protection. Rudra Singh could not bear the thought of humbling himself in this way before a mere subject, however saintly. He therefore sent to Bengal and summoned Krishnaram Bhattacharjya, a famous Mahant of the Sakta sect who lived at Malipota, near Santipur in the Nadia district. The Mahant was at first unwilling to come, but consented on being promised the care of the temple of Kamakhya, on the Nilachal hill, just below Gauhati. When he arrived the king changed his mind and refused to become his disciple, and the priest departed again in high dudgeon. At this moment a severe earthquake occurred which shattered several temples; and

Rudra Singh interpreting the phenomenon as an indication that the Mahant was a real favourite of the Gods, hastened to recall him. He still hesitated to take the decisive step, but satisfied the Mahant by ordering his sons and the Brahmans of his entourage to accept him as their Guru...

'When Rudra Singh died, his eldest son Sib Singh, who was with him at Gauhati, at once proceeded to Rangpur where he ascended the throne...

'Sib Singh was completely under the influence of Brahman priests and astrologers; and in 1722 he was so alarmed by their prediction that his rule would shortly come to an end, that he ... made many and lavish presents for the support of temples and of Brahmans...

'Thanks to his support, Hinduism became the predominant religion, and the Ahoms who persisted in holding to their old beliefs and tribal customs came to be regarded as a separate and degraded class' (Gait 1906:176-8).

These examples indicate the close relationship between the Brahmans and the ruling dynasty. The kings depended on the Brahmans for legitimation and the Brahmans depended on the kings for land and patronage. According to the 1881 Census Brahmans are among the oldest of the Hindu settlers in the valley and penetrated to the further north-eastern corner under the Hindu and Chutiya dynasties which preceded the Ahom invasion. In Lower Assam several immigrations of Brahmans are known to have taken place at the behest of the Klen, Kooch and Ahom kings. The majority of Brahmans in the State today assert their descent from these settlers, but it is worth noting that the name must have been more widely appropriated, for about 1640 the Ahom king restricted the name of Brahman to eight colonies in different parts of Upper Assam. Brahmans today constitute only 6% of the Hindu population and are concentrated in the districts of Kamrup and Sibsagar which were formerly in the vicinity of royal courts.

Although we know from Hiuen Tsiang that the chief ruler of Assam in 640 A.D. was a Hindu who claimed to be a Kshatriya and there is evidence of the conversion of many subsequent dynasties, the progress of Hinduization in the past was apparently slow and intermittent and there are still in the Brahmaputra valley many tribes outside Hinduism and others in process of conversion. Gait explains this as follows:

'The reason seems to be that in early days the number of Hindu settlers and adventurers was small, and they confined their attention to the king and his chief nobles, from whom alone they had anything to gain. They would convert them, admit the nobles to Kshatriya rank and invent for the king a noble descent, using, as will be seen,

the same materials over and over again, and then enjoy as their reward lucrative posts at court and lands granted to them by their proselytes. They would not interfere with the tribal religious rites, as to do so would call forth the active animosity of the native priests, nor would they trouble about the beliefs of the common people, who would continue to hold to their old religious notions. If the dynasty lasted long enough, the influence of Hindu ideas would gradually filter down to them and they would follow the example of their betters, as has now actually happened in the case of the Ahoms. But before this could come to pass, the dynasty would ordinarily be overthrown; the downfallen survivors of the old aristocracy would become merged in some Hindu caste, such as the Kalita, and Hinduism would sink into insignificance until, in course of time, its priests should succeed in inducing the new rulers to accept their ministrations' (Gait 1906:9).

The history of Assam has therefore provided, and continues to provide, a rich body of material on the processes by which tribes become castes. The chief agents of proselytization today are the Gosains. With the exception of the well-known Parbati Gosain and the Na and Nati Gosains in Kamrup, the great majority of these are Vaishnava. According to the District Gazeteers of Assam, 1905, 80% of the Hindus in the Assam Valley are Vaishnavites (Sarma 1966:190). The Gosains in fact multiplied with their disciples and the growth of branch satras throughout the Brahmaputra Valley in the period between 1650 and 1800 can be taken to indicate the rapid progress of proselytization. Although some converts were attracted from other Hindu sects, the majority must have been tribal peoples. Today initiation by the guru is the first step in the gradual transformation of a tribe into a caste. The process is described in a number of Census reports:

'The Miris, like other wild tribes, are distinguished by the Assamese into bhakatia and abhakatia, according as they are or are not followers of a Goshain... Their connection with Goshain, however, is rather temporal than spiritual. It is worth their while to secure him as their friend by presents of a few annas yearly and a portion of mustard and pulse according to each man's means and inclination: but they have no Brahmins, nor do they adore any idol. In some places, however, I found that they had been prevailed on to leave off buffalo's flesh' (R.C.A. 1881:87-8).

'In the Brahmaputra Valley it is hard to say when the new converts definitely became Hindus, especially as many of them cling to their old habits of eating and drinking. I remember meeting some Miris in the east of Darrang, who told me that they continued to eat fowls and to drink liquor, though they had come under the tutelage of a Gossain, but were careful to avoid these infringements of his precepts in his presence: when I questioned them as to why they became bhakats of a Hindu Gossain if they did not obey him in matters of food and drink,

they said that they were strangers in a strange land, and unless they made some arrangement with the gods of the place or their representative, there was no knowing what evils might befall them; hence they placed themselves under the care of the Gossain and paid him his annual fee in order to be on the safe side. No doubt in a few generations these people will have attained recognition as orthodox Hindus, but it is impossible to define the border line which they must cross. Amongst such people as these the missionary efforts of the Vaishnava Gossains of the Brahmaputra Valley have been very successful...' (R.C.A. 1911:41).

The proportion of the population following a tribal religion in the Brahmaputra Valley declined steadily from about 1 in 5 in 1891 to just under 1 in 7 in 1921. In absolute numbers they were over half a million in 1921 (R.C.A. 1931:198). The tribal origin of the majority of Assamese castes is preserved in caste names - Kooch, Chutiya, Ahom, etc. Tribes do not enter the caste system at the bottom of the hierarchy, i.e. they do not rank with the untouchables, but as low Shudra castes or sub-castes whose position is ultimately determined by their life-style and the length of their conversion to Hinduism.

The 1901 Census contains a table showing the main indigenous castes of the Brahmaputra Valley in ranked order. They are called into 3 groups: (1) Twice-born castes who wear the sacred thread; (2) Good castes from whose hands Brahmans usually take water; and (3) Castes from whose hands Brahmans do not usually take water. I have extracted from group (3) the exterior castes to form a fourth group.⁴ The relative size of each group is shown in fig.5 below:

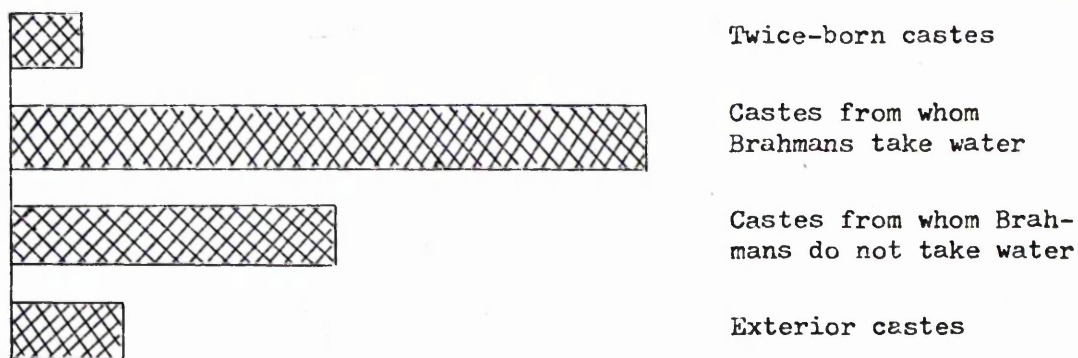


Fig. 5. Bar-chart showing relative strength of caste groups in Assam.

Source: R.C.A. 1901:153.

The shape of this chart has not changed greatly since 1901. It indicates the main features of the distribution of castes in Assam, namely, that the majority of castes (84.4%) are Shudras (55.2% being respectable castes from whom Brahmans take water and 29.1% Shudras from whom Brahmans do not take water); there is a small proportion (9.8%) of exterior castes (Hira, Kaibartta, Brittial-Bania, Namasudra); and a still smaller proportion (5.8%) of twice-born castes (Brahmans and Ganaks). The proportion of exterior castes is not only small as compared with the position elsewhere, but the disabilities attached to their status are less severe. The nature of caste in Assam is undoubtedly in part a function of the agrarian class structure. Three-quarters of the population are engaged wholly in agriculture, generally working small holdings of about four acres (Goswami 1963:49,50). The concentration of holdings (0.37) is the lowest of all Indian States (Goswami 1963:50-51) so that a class of wealthy landlords has not developed. Hired labourers form only 11% of the population (Goswami 1963:48). As a result the exterior castes in Assam are not landless labourers employed as agricultural workers on estates owned by the upper castes, but for the most part independent fishermen or small artisans often owning or cultivating in addition a little land. In the absence of a jajmani system they are separately organized in their own communities. The relatively egalitarian class structure of the State has done much to contain the development of the hierarchical principle and to narrow the social distance between castes.

The composition of four Shudra castes is analysed in greater detail below.

Kalita.

The origin of the Kalita caste is obscure. The author of the Fathiyah i 'Ibriyah, who accompanied Mir Jumlah throughout his expedition to Assam, furnishes an account of the country in 1662, in which he says that the ancient inhabitants of the country round the Ahom capital of Garhgaon belonged to two nations, the Ahom and the Kalita. 'The Kalitas are described as in every way superior to the Ahoms, except where fatigues are to be undergone and in warlike expeditions' (Gait 1906:138-9). Hamilton, in his 'Account of Assam', compiled in 1807-1814, says of the Kalitas:

'The Kalitas, many of whom are settled in the Ranggapur district, belonging to the company, are also a numerous tribe in Assam proper. Those who can read are called Kayasthas, and are the religious guides for most of the others, and for many of the Koch. The others follow all manner of trades and occupations. They intermarry with the Koch, and are accused of being a great deal too easy towards their wives, many of whom cannot resist temptation. They speak the language of Bengal, and have nearly the same customs with the pure Hindus of that country, only they are still more strict in eating and drinking. They are considered by the Brahmans of that country as pure Sudras. Their features are less strongly marked as being of Chinese origin, than those of the Koch' (Hamilton 1940:53-4).

He says later that numerous Kalitas were engaged as blacksmiths, goldsmiths, coppersmiths, carpenters, garlandmakers and barbers, and that the price of a Kalita male slave was Rs: 50, or twice the price of a Koch (Hamilton 1940:60,63-4).

The general view of the Census Commissioners in Assam has been that the term was probably used originally to denote all Aryan immigrants into Assam other than the Brahmans (R.C.A. 1891:93; R.C.A.1901:183; R.C.A.1911:132).

From the earliest Census reports two features of the Kalita caste were noted. Firstly, that the caste occupies an undisputed rank as the highest of the Shudra castes native to the Assam Valley, and secondly, that a number of artisan castes attach the term Kalita to their names, although they are not permitted to eat or marry with the agriculturalists (R.C.A. 1881:93-4).

The 1891 Census gives the numerical strength of the different Kalita sub-castes as follows:

Big Kalita	47,388
Little Kalita	6,522
Potter Kalita	4,081
Florist Kalita	505
Dancing Kalita	2,602
Barber Kalita	2,137
Unspecified	159,371
	<u>222,606</u>

(R.C.A. 1891:211)

According to the Census Report some assert that the artisan sub-divisions are not true Kalitas at all, others say they are true Kalitas who have degraded themselves by taking to the occupations which their names denote. Gait inclines to the latter view but adds: 'it seems

not unlikely that persons of other castes have also gained admission to these lower grades' (R.C.A. 1891:211). He also draws attention to the general efforts of other castes, such as Duliya Kalita, Big Kewat, to obtain recognition as Kalita. The term 'small Kalita' is often used instead of an occupational name.

In the 1901 Census Report the subdivisions of the caste are further discussed:

'Two explanations are given of the origin of the Saru Kalita, - one that he is the offspring of persons who for three generations back have not been united by the 'hom' ceremony, the other that he is the child of a Bar Kalita and a Kewat woman. Whether the Barkalita can intermarry with, and eat kachchi with the Saru Kalita seems open to question, and the practice apparently varies in different districts; but there seems to be no doubt that the functional subdivisions of the caste are debarred from the privilege of close intercourse with the Bar Kalita... All these functional groups are to some extent looked down upon, probably because followers of these professions, who were not true Kalitas, have occasionally succeeded in obtaining admission within their ranks...' (R.C.A. 1901:133)

The 1911 Census Commissioner writes:

'The Bar Kalitas, who have a functional sub-caste in the Sonari Kalitas, are said to be the real Kalitas; and the Saru or little Kalitas are supposed to have been Kewats originally. The latter division often marry daughters of the Bar Kalitas, who however refuse to reciprocate the compliment or to eat with the inferior branch, though they have no objection to taking jalpan at their houses. Inter-marriage between the Sonaris and the Bar Kalitas is permissible, but is looked down on by the latter. The functional sub-castes, Kumar, Bez or Napit, Mali and Nat Kalita are endogamous and are not recognised as belonging to the caste by the Bar Kalitas.' (R.C.A. 1911:122)

It is evident that opinions as to inter-marriage between Kalita sub-castes vary in the Census Reports. In general Census data as regards marriage are not highly reliable because they fail to make a distinction between the fact that inter-marriage often takes place, usually as a result of elopement, and the norm of caste or sub-caste endogamy. An arranged marriage between a Great Kalita and a Small Kalita would in the normal course indicate that the latter had become recognised as a Great Kalita and accepted as a member of that caste.

Great Kalitas are the highest Shudra caste in Assam, ranking only below Brahman, Ganak and Kayastha. They provide the agricultural core of the Kalita caste. The functional sub-divisions of the caste may derive from Kalitas who have adopted these professions and we know from Hamilton that in the beginning of the 19th century the Kalitas, though

not apparently at that time internally differentiated, were widely engaged in artisan occupations. Alternatively they may derive from lower caste artisans, who styled themselves Kalita, and most of the Census Commissioners are of opinion that this was true at any rate of some members of the sub-castes. Whatever may have been the original position, the second view has more relevance today.

Gait in the 1891 Census comments that just as in the Surma Valley aspirant castes claim to rank as Kayastha, so in the Brahmaputra Valley they endeavour to obtain recognition as Kalitas so that the caste is reinforced by admissions from outside. The Kalita caste has acted as a refuge for other castes seeking to improve their status by adopting the prestigious title of Kalita, a tendency which contributes to the internal differentiation of the caste. The case of the Duliya Kalitas described above is one example of this. In the vicinity of Panbari there were groups of Borias or Suts who described themselves as Sut Kalita, a development that has occurred in recent years. In Kamrup I am told that mobile Chutiyas also pass into the Kalita caste. The Census Commissioners vary as to whether inter-marriage between the functional sub-castes is permitted, but they all agree that Great Kalitas do not intermarry with them, denying their right to be called Kalita. This is also confirmed by the Panbari material. As long as the sub-castes of Small Kalitas are engaged in artisan occupations, they are unlikely to be able to form marriage connections with the Great Kalita, but many are part-time agriculturalists and, once engaged exclusively in agriculture, there seems little reason why a well-to-do family or group of families should not succeed in time in obtaining recognition as Great Kalita. The Duliya Kalitas in Panbari certainly had this aspiration, evidenced by the tendency to conceal marriages contracted with villages such as Duliagaon which by its name indicated the status of its inhabitants.

Keot

The term Kewat or Keot is said to be a corruption of Kaibartha, the name of a caste numbering more than two million in Bengal, and mentioned in the Laws of Manu as fishermen by occupation. In Lower Assam the Keots are divided into two main endogamous groups, hālovā and jālovā Keots, or agriculturalists and fishermen, the former being held superior to the latter (R.C.A. 1881:94), and also into a number

of small artisan sub-castes such as Washerman, Barber, Florist, Dancer, Mat-maker and Oil-presser (R.C.A. 1911:122). In Upper Assam all Keots are agriculturalists and the caste is undifferentiated. A Brahman will accept water from a hālovā Keot who ranks immediately below a Great Kalita, but the functional sub-divisions occupy a rank much below the main caste and are not served by good Brahmans.

The origin of the Keot sub-castes is not discussed in the Census Reports. As the caste was traditionally associated with fishing, it is possible that the agricultural section differentiated itself by a change of occupation (cf. the distinction today between 'fish-killing' and 'fish-not-killing' Kaibarttas). As in the case of the Kalitas, the artisan sub-castes are either Keots who have become artisans or they originate in other artisan castes who styled themselves Keot. The second view gains some support from the explanation given in the 1891 Census for the markedly greater increase in Keots than in the rest of the native born population: 'it may perhaps be inferred that the caste is being recruited to a small extent from others which are socially inferior to it' (R.C.A. 1891:208).

There has been some difficulty in the enumeration of the Keots or Kaibarttas. The names were originally interchangeable, at any rate in Kamrup (R.C.A. 1901:132), but from 1901 a tendency is reported among the Nadiyals or Doms (an untouchable fishing caste) to assume the name Kaibartta. The Jaliya Kaibarttas marked the difference between themselves and the Nadiyals by declining to sell fish except on the river bank and abstaining from the use of the gho-kota net (R.C.A. 1901:132). In the 1911 Census it is said that the Nadiyals were in increasing numbers returning themselves as Kaibartta with the result that this name fell into disfavour among the Keots (R.C.A. 1911:116) and the total number of those enumerated as Kaibarttas declined (ibid.:126). By 1921 this process among the Keots would seem to have been complete: the number of Kaibarttas increased fourfold over the dicennium as the Nadiyals and Doms gave up their old titles in favour of Kaibartta (R.C.A. 1921:145). By 1931 the term Kaibartta was used as synonymous with Nadiyal, Jaliya or Dom to indicate an untouchable caste (R.C.A. 1931:211). The process probably indicates the declining status of a caste name rather than any significant change in the relative position of

the castes themselves.

Kooch

Kooch is the principal caste in the Brahmaputra Valley into which tribal converts are eventually absorbed. In the Extracts from District Reports, Appendix A of the Report of the 1881 Census, the Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup makes the following observations regarding the Kooch:

'In respect of the Kochs I would point out that the term has very much the same meaning as Shaikh among Muhammadens in Upper India, that is, it is used to include converts from non-Hindu tribes to Hinduism. It does not immediately include all converts. When a Kachari takes 'saran', i.e. discards certain of his old habits and adopts Hindu usages, he becomes a 'Saraniya', and after some generations his descendants, especially if well-to-do, can, in at least parts of Kamrup, become Kochs.

'In the north-west of the district I gathered that Madhahis, a longer-settled branch of Kacharis, as may be known from their other appellation of Grami, or old residents in villages, may become Kochs at once; and from cases I have had among the Mikirs in the south-east of the district it would seem that a Mikir can become a Koch directly...

'There may, of course, be people who are Koch by descent, i.e. the name may have originally been a clan-denomination, but it can no longer be taken in this signification, - certainly not for the great mass of the Koch in Kamrup' (R.C.A. 1881: 162).

The 1891 Census Report also recognizes the function of the Koch caste in the assimilation of tribal peoples:

'The name in Assam is no longer that of a tribe, but rather of a Hindu caste, into which all converts to Hinduism from the different tribes, - Kachari, Garo, Lalung, Mikir, &c., - are admitted on conversion' (R.C.A. 1891: 213).

'The terms applied to the converts in different districts vary. In most places the first stage is that of the Sarania. Another name for an early stage of conversion is Madahi, in which, as the name implies, the convert still retains his old freedom in the matter of drinking and eating. Above the Madahi rank the Heremia, or Saru Koch, who have begun to submit to restrictions in this respect, and are supposed to abstain from intoxicating liquors. This subdivision is also called Phairi in Nowgong. At the top of the list stand the Kamtali or Bar Koch, who in outward appearance at least are ceremonially pure Hindus. They are generally supposed to conform entirely to Hindu precepts, and to refrain alike from strong drinks and from eating pork and fowls. Whether this "purity" exists in fact as well as theory is doubtful... A Kamtali Koch may not marry the daughter of a Saru Koch, but will give his own daughter (for sufficient consideration) to a member of that sub-caste. In such cases, however, the girl is degraded to the rank of her husband' (ibid.: 51)

retain their tribal names and are not assimilated into the Koch caste (R.C.A. 1891:215).

The various subdivisions of the caste are described in the 1901 Census as stages 'through which the family of a convert passes in successive generations' until it reaches the status of Great Koch. Thereafter it may, if fortunate, rise through the ranks of Keot and Kalita to become Kayastha (R.C.A. 1901:135,117).

Chutiya

The Chutiya kingdom formerly extended over the present districts of Sibsagar and southern Lakhimpur as far as Sadiya. It was finally overthrown by the Ahoms in 1500 A.D. and from the fact that the name of the defeated king was Dhir Narayan it can be inferred that the ruling dynasty at least was Hinduized by this date (R.C.A. 1881:75). The Chutiyas numbered 96,000 at the 1921 Census and are concentrated chiefly in Sibsagar District. They are divided into four classes, Hindu, Ahom, Borahi and Deori. The first two have been Hindu for generations, the Borahi is in process of conversion and the Deori are largely tribal. The Ahom Chutiya, as the name suggests, intermarried in former times with the Ahoms (Gait 1906:39) and nominally ranks lower than the Hindu Chutiya who was the first to be converted, but there is no bar to inter-marriage or commensality between the two groups. The Borahi still eats pig (borā) and is a separate sub-caste. The Deoris, who were formerly the priests of the Chutiyas, have until recently resisted conversion and retain their native language and religion, propitiating aspects of mother goddesses with offerings of pig and fowl (R.C.A. 1881:76). Today they are largely Hinduized. The strength of the four main subdivisions of the Chutiyas in 1891 is shown in Table 30 below:

Table 30: Strength of the four main subdivisions of the Chutiyas, 1891.

Hindu	27,109
Ahom	12,225
Borahi	92
Deori	2,991
	<u>43,420</u>

Source: R.C.A. 1891:233.

In addition to the Ahom-Chutiya, there are disciples of the Mayamara Gosain who describe themselves today as Moran-Chutiya or

The method of conversion by the Gosains is described in some detail by the Officiating Deputy Commissioner of Nowgong in respect of the Lalungs, Kacharis and Mikirs of the district. The tribal people are frequently lectured upon the purity of the Hindu religion and the ease with which they can acquire salvation and a position in Hindu society if they give up their habits of eating pork and other forbidden foods and drinking strong liquor and conform to Hindu usages. When after some time they show some inclination to becoming Hindu, the Gosain gives them the option of simply taking śaraṇ and remaining free in their eating habits (this is the status of the śaraṇiyā Koch) or of becoming perfect Hindus (saru Koch). If they decide on complete conversion to Hinduism, they undergo prāyaścitta (atonement) at a cost of Rs: 5 to 20 according to circumstance and receive śaraṇ bhajan from the Gosain. They are required to change all former utensils of cooking and eating and also their dwelling house. They are then admitted to Hindu society as saru Koch and, provided they continue to abjure forbidden food and liquor, they become in the third generation 'as good as any Hindu of the Koch caste' (R.C.A. 1891:225).

The strength of some of the Koch subdivisions is shown in the following table:

Table 29: Strength of subdivisions of the Koch caste, 1891

Bar (big)	71,944
Saru (small)	27,842
Heremia	3,614
Sarania (initiated)	26,248
Madani (liquor drinking)	18,430
	<u>148,078</u>

Source: R.C.A. 1891:216.

The total number of Koch of all kinds enumerated in 1891 was 252,723, of which 103,770 simply described themselves as Koch. Of those who mentioned their sub-caste, less than half (71,944) were established members, and the remainder (76,134) were in various stages of conversion. It was estimated in the Census that in the previous ten years the number of new Koch converts in Kamrup, Darrang and Nowgong districts was 10,816, 10,137 and 3,934 respectively. The figure is lower in Upper Assam where converts to Hinduism often

Matak-Chutiya. It would appear that although the majority of converts in Lower Assam pass into the Kooch caste, in Upper Assam the Chutiyas and Ahoms are also open to infiltration from below. In 1961 the Agro-Economic Research Centre for North East India carried out a survey of Morangaon, a village in Jorhat subdivision inhabited by 43 households of Morans (a Bodo people, now Hinduized). Of these 41 said they were Chutiya and 2 said they were Ahom (Saha 1963:7).

The mixed character of Assamese tribes was noted by Gait who, in discussing philological and ethnographical evidence as a basis for historical reconstruction, makes the following observation: 'There is, however, this difference, that whereas now, the caste system, to a great extent, preserves a distinct physical type, the earlier philological changes were accompanied by racial fusion' (Gait 1906:2). It is doubtful, however, if there are many Assamese castes to which this observation can be applied without qualification. On the contrary, the available material suggests that the process by which vanquished tribes adopted the language, life-style and ultimately the identity of their conquerors, is continuing in much the same way, although in a different idiom, after their adoption of caste.

* * *

From a cursory survey of these few examples it would seem that caste in Assam is to be understood as an extremely fluid process which does not correspond in a number of respects with the current anthropological model. Some of its distinguishing characteristics can be summarized as follows:

(1) The varna categories are difficult to apply, although Assam is not alone in this. There are no Assamese Vaishyas. The Kayasthas, who are traditionally scribes, sometimes wear the sacred thread and from time to time claim to be Kshatriya. But it is often said that the Kayasthas are really Shudras, a reference to the fact that most members of the caste derive from socially mobile Kalitas. The Ahoms, who were the rulers of the State before its annexation by the British, now rank low in the hierarchy and Brahmans do not accept water from their hands. With the possible exception, therefore, of the Kayasthas, the clean castes are classed as either Brahmans or Shudras. But the term Shudra seems inapt when applied indiscriminately to the entire

immigrant settlers, as they claim, or whether a number of them derived from Brahmans created out of the indigenous population (v. p.229 above).

* * *

The current anthropological model of caste as a rigid system of closed status groups is not consistent with the caste process as it has developed in Assam. It is possible to dismiss the implications of the Assamese material on the grounds that Assam, like Nepal, is situated on the margins of Hindu civilization and therefore likely to be atypical in nature. This may be the case, but without further historical studies of regional systems it is an assumption that lacks the support of evidence.

This brief account of the nature and development of Assamese castes is largely exploratory in nature. A fuller and more systematic study of the Census reports would be useful in two ways: firstly, it would provide historical material on the evolution of the caste system in Assam and, secondly, it would give us some insight into the perception by the British administration of the nature of caste and of Hindu society. The second of these is clearly outside the scope of this thesis, but used as a historical source the comments of the Census Commissioners on the nature of caste in Assam appear to provide a useful corrective to many current views.

The implications of this material for the relations between caste and sect in Assam can be summarized as follows:

- (1) Caste membership is determined by birth but is not immutable. Satra affiliation, in theory a matter of individual choice, has in practice become determined by agnatic inheritance and outlives the passage of its adherents through the caste hierarchy. One reason for this is the absence of the hierarchical principle in the organization of the sect. Satras are autonomous units which cannot be ranked in respect of one another and no Gosain will give precedence to another Gosain. There is therefore no inducement of higher status to encourage a move from one guru to another. Paradoxically it is the exclusiveness of caste in theory that leads to its openness in practice to infiltration from below, while the openness of the sect has resulted in a fixed body of permanent adherents only augmented, in some cases,

non-Brahman population (excluding untouchables) and used to include some of the most prestigious Assamese castes. Although varna categories are in use by castes seeking to improve their status (the Ganaks style themselves Daibagya Brahman, the Kayasthas claim to be Kshatriya, the descendants of the Ahom nobility wish to be called Daityakul Kshatriya, etc.), there is not in Assam a good fit between the jātis and the varna model.

(2) The distinction between caste and sub-caste is not the same as represented elsewhere, where from the outside the caste usually appears as an undifferentiated block while from the inside it is seen as divided into sub-castes. (It was on this basis that Bêteille analysed the relationship between castes and sub-castes on the analogy of a segmentary lineage system: cf. Bêteille 1965). This is not true of Assam. The Kalita caste, for example, is subdivided into Great Kalita, who are agriculturalists, and a number of endogamous functional divisions such as Potter Kalita, Goldsmith Kalita, Blacksmith Kalita, Barber Kalita, etc. No one either inside or outside the caste would accord these functional sub-castes the same status as the Great Kalitas. The Kooch caste is divided into Great Kooch and a number of lower divisions ranked according to certain attributional criteria and the length of their conversion to Hinduism. These again are clearly distinguished by outsiders: Brahmans accept water from Great Kooch but not from other sub-castes. The Keots in Lower Assam are divided into agriculturalists (hālovā Keot) and fishermen (jālovā Keot). The first are a respectable clean caste, the second almost on a par with an untouchable Dom. Because of the very different status that may exist between subdivisions of the caste, other castes often intervene in the hierarchy between the subdivisions. E.g. In Panbari the Keots and Kooches were ranked below the Great Kalita but above the Duliya Kalita. The same is true of the subdivisions of the Keot and Koch castes.

(3) The majority of castes are racial, rather than occupational, in origin. These include the Kalita, Keot and Kaibartta, Koch, Rajbansi, Ahom, Chutiya, Boria, Nadiyal and Chandal which account for 83% of the indigenous Hindu population (R.C.A. 1901:116). A number of castes, notably the Kalita, contain endogamous sub-castes differentiated on

the basis of occupation and the nature of one's calling is here, as elsewhere, relevant in determining status. The Brahmans, Ganaks and Kayasthas do not plough with oxen, although they can perform other agricultural operations without losing caste. Below these rank the agricultural castes and below them the artisan castes. At the bottom of the scale are those whose occupation involves the taking of life for profit (e.g. the silk-rearer, fisherman) or the handling of polluted substances (e.g. the selling of wine, an occupation formerly pursued by the Shakas). Occupation cannot, however, explain the distinctions between the many castes engaged in agriculture (Kalita, Keot, Bar Koch, Ahom, Chutiya, etc.) nor is it sufficient to account for the difference in rank between the Kumar Kalita and the Hira who are both potters, and the Jaliya Kewat and the Nadiyal who are both fishermen. The large tribal population still in various stages of conversion and the absence of the jajmani system probably account for the minor role played by occupational specialisation in the caste order. In addition, a number of functional castes, common elsewhere, are not indigenous to Assam because of the greater self-sufficiency of individual households. Ordure is not cleaned by professional sweepers, each man washes his own clothes and shaves and cuts his own hair (except among Brahmans) and can catch fish for household consumption though not for sale. As functional sub-castes tend to live separately in their own communities, the amount of inter-action in the village on the basis of caste for the exchange of goods and services is small. This factor, as has already been noted, contributes to the marked tendency towards fission in the village Name House.

(4) The degree of segmentation is unusually low and in the majority of cases stops at the first order, that is, at the level of caste and sub-caste. There are no endogamous sections among the Brahmans or Kayasthas (with the exception of satra families). The variables associated with different levels of caste segmentation have not, to my knowledge, been studied.

(5) Mullan, in an Appendix on 'The Depressed and Backward Classes of Assam' in the 1931 Census, writes:

'... the word "depressed" is not, in my opinion, suitable as a description of the status of any caste in Assam. "Depressed" as used in India in connection with caste has come to be associated

particularly with persons belonging to certain castes in Madras who are unapproachable, whose touch necessitates immediate purification and who are not allowed to read in the schools along with the other boys.

'There is, I am glad to say, no such degree of depression in Assam; an unapproachable caste is unknown here and boys of all castes are freely admitted into all schools and colleges. Nor are there any difficulties worth mentioning as regards the drawing of water by all castes from public "tanks" and wells.

'Hence I would be loath to apply to any caste in this province an adjective which has come to connote an extreme state of degradation' (R.C.A. 1931:209).

He coined the term 'Hindu exterior castes' to denote those 'beyond the social pale of Hindu society' and, after local enquiry in each district, placed only four indigenous castes in the Assam Valley definitely in this category. Their numbers in round thousands were given as follows:

Kaibartta	119,000
Brittial-Bania	14,000
Hira	17,000
Namasudra	31,000
	<hr/>
	181,000

The proportion of Hindu exterior castes in the Valley ranged from 1.8% in Goalpara District to 8.4% in Nowgong District.

These castes were classed as exterior on the basis of a number of criteria. Their water was not accepted. They were not admitted into any part of the Name Houses of higher castes (whereas the Jugis and Suts, whose water was also not accepted, were admitted into the tup and in some areas into the body of the Name House although not into the manikut). They were traditionally associated with a degrading occupation or the traditional origin of the caste had a bar sinister (Kaibarttas and Namasudras are fishermen and boatmen, Hiras are said to be a section of Namasudras who became potters, Brittial-Banias according to tradition are the offspring of Brahman widows and lower caste men). Contact with them led to the necessity of taking bath, at least formerly. Mullan points out that although these castes were so deficient in education and wealth or so looked down upon that they encountered particular barriers to mobility, it was possible in the course of time for an exterior caste to become 'interior'. The Naths and Suts, formerly exterior, are now in a marginal position.

In spite, however, of the relatively favourable position of untouchable castes in Assam, the idea of untouchability remains:

'The Kaibarttas have a low origin. The blood is bad. Shankaradeva uplifted them but he could not make them equal to other castes. Debauchery is greatest among these people' (statement of a Gosain).

'Some of my Kaibartta disciples are very devout. I have seen. But they have chronic actions in them from a previous birth, so there is objection to taking food from them' (statement of a Gosain).

No member of a clean caste will accept water or cut areca nut in an untouchable house. He will buy fish or sun-dried rice from an untouchable in the market but he will not buy parboiled rice. In orthodox families children used to change their clothes on return from school in case they had brushed against a boy of untouchable caste. Dislike and avoidance of these castes is often rationalized by reference to an unfavourable stereotype of the untouchable as licentious, quarrelsome and lazy.

The untouchable castes are, however, highly Sanskritized. Stack, writing as long ago as 1881, observes:

'The Assamese Dom is usually a fisherman. Though of an inferior caste, he is not regarded, as in Upper India, with contempt and aversion, nor does he perform any menial and disagreeable offices. On the contrary, the Dom usually pretends to an exceptional degree of ceremonial purity. A Dom cooly, for instance, will object to carry a load to which fowls are attached, while the large section of Doms who are Mahapurushi, - that is, who are disciples of some religious institution which traces its origin to the reformer Sankar, - carry their punctiliousness so far as to refuse to eat, except in clothes specially reserved for that purpose, or still wet from the bath' (R.C.A. 1881:95).

I spent some months among a Kaibartta community in Sibsagar District in 1948 and found little in their way of life to set them apart from the clean castes. The fact that Brahmans refuse to act as their priests has not prevented them from adopting Brahmanical rites as they have differentiated a class of varna Brahmans out of their own caste. These now style themselves by Brahman names such as Sarma and claim to be Brahman. The Kaibarttas in general are devout Vaishnavas and scrupulous in their eating habits. They have reacted to the refusal of other castes to accept their food by refusing in turn to accept food from them.

The concepts of purity and impurity, as represented in the caste hierarchy by the Brahman and the Untouchable, are recognised in Assam

as elsewhere, but in practice untouchable castes are not distinguished by any marked differences in life-style nor do they suffer peculiar social disabilities which, in some degree at least, are not common to the lower castes generally.

(6) The majority of Assamese castes are heterogeneous in origin and open to infiltration from below. Assam still contains a large tribal population in process of conversion. As the members of a tribe become Hinduized, they usually pass into the ranks of existing castes as first generation converts to form a new sub-caste and, over time, tend to become absorbed into the body of the caste itself. The composition of castes is also subject to re-arrangement as a result of the general tendency to level upwards. The Kalita who has given up ploughing describes himself as a Kayastha and seeks to validate his claim by marrying his children within the Kayastha caste. The functional Kalita sub-castes - Goldsmith Kalita, Potter Kalita, Palki-bearer Kalita, etc. - omit their functional designation from the caste name in the hope of ultimately being recognized as Great Kalita, an outcome which, if they become agriculturalists, is by no means unattainable. The Commissioner for the 1901 Census of Assam observes that 'it is quite conceivable that a Kachari (i.e. tribal) family might in the course of generations rise through the various stages of Koch, Kewat and Kalita into a full-blown Kayastha', and comments favourably on the social system as 'fresh and elastic, and still suited to the needs of a living people' (R.C.A. 1901:117,119).

The degree of exclusiveness of castes, like other status groups, is likely to vary. Two points should be borne in mind here. Firstly, the Assamese material clearly indicates that some castes are recruited from below. Although, therefore, the tendency to closure may be characteristic of the system as a whole, it must be recognized that this tendency is often very imperfectly realized in practice and that its existence cannot be assumed in individual cases without further study. Secondly, even in the case of closed castes, the possibility remains that they were at one time open, and the date of closure should be established historically. Brahmans, for example, appear to be largely self-recruiting today, but the question remains whether the 159,116 Brahmans enumerated in Assam in 1931 were all descended from

by tribal converts.

- (2) The conversion of tribal peoples to Hinduism has been described above. It is effected by taking initiation from the Gosain whereupon the initiate is recognized as within the Hindu fold and therefore as a member of a Hindu caste. Caste membership is therefore intrinsic to sect affiliation.
- (3) The devotional movement in Assam has from its inception recognized the existence of the caste order, and caste distinctions in one way or other have entered into the organization of all the sub-sects. The particular contribution of the devotional path was not to deny the existence of different conditions of men, which was taken as given, but to create an area in which these differences had no relevance: caste thus lost its absolute quality. Today, however, the values of caste are increasingly questioned in independent India and new Vaishnava sects have arisen in Assam which reject the caste order altogether (v. Chapters 11, 12). The satras are traditional institutions which continue in the ways handed down from the past. As a result the satras, which arose on the basis of a path to salvation outside caste, have become paradoxically one of the main repositories of caste values which are increasingly denied in the world around (cf. Pocock 1973: 95).

Notes:

1. Further references in this chapter to the Reports on the Census of Assam are denoted by R.C.A. followed by the year of the Report.
2. In his analysis of the Patidars Pocock clearly states that the caste is characterized by graduality and infiltration (Pocock 1972: 54). But, such was the force of the anthropological model, that I considered the Patidars, like the Kayasthas, as exceptional in nature. It is noteworthy that Pocock drew heavily on historical material.
3. The term 'Assamese' is used in two senses. It can be used to refer to all those who are citizens of Assam, but it is generally used in a more restricted sense to refer to long-settled peoples who are Assamese not only in language - for many immigrant peoples have now adopted Assamese - but also in culture. It is used in the second sense here.
4. I have not included the Jugis (71,053) or Borias (19,315) as exterior, although this would probably have been the position in 1901.

CHAPTER 10

THE DEVOTIONAL PATH IN ASSAM

It is common to approach Hinduism as the juxtaposition or interpenetration of opposing elements, variously seen as the 'great' and the 'little' traditions, Sanskritic and non-Sanskritic practices, Brahmanical thought and popular religion, etc. This patchwork approach has been criticized by Sharma (1970), Dumont (1957), Pocock (1957) and Das (1977). It is unsatisfactory on two counts. Firstly, it presents from the standpoint of an outside observer a religious situation in terms of a dichotomy which, from the inside, is experienced as a coherent system of beliefs and practices. And secondly, an explanation of change in terms of the interaction of two disparate traditions ignores the internal dynamic of Hindu tradition itself.

For the view that 'Indian culture is merely a juxtaposition of Aryan and so-called Dravidian or other elements' Dumont substitutes a 'structural' or 'relational' approach to Hinduism as a system of internally related meanings. Dumont's paradigm decisively rejects the view of Hinduism as a synthesis of two disparate traditions but continues to use the concept of dualistic opposition as the central feature of both Hindu religion and Hindu society. Just as caste is seen as the opposition of the pure and the impure, Hinduism is analysed as a dialogue between the renouncer and the man-in-the-world formulated in terms of two opposing and complementary ideal types (Dumont 1960:47).¹ Within this framework Dumont sees the development of the sect as an invention of the renouncer and the relations between caste and sect at the social level as analogous to that between renunciation and worldly Hinduism in the field of religious forms (Dumont 1970:187): that is, as I understand it, a relation characterized by various types of accommodation between antithetical operational principles.

The emphasis in devotional literature on the identity of all

true devotees irrespective of their social origins and the rejection of caste as irrelevant for spiritual salvation led me to follow Dumont in analysing Assamese Vaishnavism in terms of an ~~logical~~ opposition between two contrasting syndromes, that of caste and that of sect:

<u>Caste</u>	<u>Sect</u>
Polytheism	Monotheism
Hierarchy	Egalitarianism among believers
Membership by birth: inherited status	Membership by initiation: acquired status
Collective idea of man: caste groups	Individual idea of man: individual initiates
Mediation of ritual specialists	Direct access to scriptural revelation
Rites conducted in Sanskrit through priests	Worship conducted in vernacular by the congregation
Complexity and extravagance of ritual	Simplicity of worship
Multiplicity of images	Incarnation of god in written word
Salvation through knowledge or works	Salvation through faith and mystical union

Although the elements of each syndrome were set down as a list, I argued that there was an intrinsic connection between them. Polytheism tended to hierarchy in the next world as caste involved hierarchy in this, the correspondence between 'many gods' and 'many types of men' was matched by the correspondence between 'one god' and the idea that 'all men are equal', and so forth. At the same time I recognized that on the ground the villager did not experience a conflict between the performance of his caste duties and the practice of devotion. On the contrary, he considered a scrupulous attention to caste distinctions as part of the duties he must observe on taking initiation as a devotee. The fact that to the devotee the values of caste and the values of sect were seen as part of a single religious experience I explained in terms of the interpenetration of the two syndromes over time and the necessary modifications of sectarian ideas as they became adapted to the laity living in the world of caste.

The model was not without heuristic value, and traces of this approach remain in the title of the thesis and occasionally in the text. I was led to abandon it for a number of reasons. Firstly, it was clearly unsatisfactory to present in terms of an opposition of elements in a religious situation which were viewed as perfectly consistent by the practising devotee. Secondly, the conversion of

tribal peoples in the State is effected today by taking initiation into the sect from a Gosain. Thereby they become a Hindu caste so that the acquisition of caste status is intrinsic to sect membership. Thirdly, the recognition that castes in Assam are largely open groups whereas sectarian allegiance has become de facto hereditary greatly weakened the force of the model. And fourthly, a dualistic opposition between two complementary ideal types seemed increasingly inappropriate to an understanding of devotion which Dumont himself described as a 'new religion', transcending both caste and renunciation (Dumont 1960: 57,58).

These considerations led me to the view that bhakti is best understood in its own terms, both as a means of salvation and as an end in itself, and not as part of a dialogue between the renouncer and the man-in-the-world of caste. To the devotee, caste exists both within devotion and alongside devotion, but caste in one way or other enters into everything that is Hindu. Similarly, the idea of renunciation, transmuted and adapted to the needs of the laity, is incorporated into the practice of devotion but devotion cannot be reduced to renunciation nor, as Dumont suggests, derived from it. It is a religious experience of an entirely different kind, separately accorded within Hinduism the status of an independent path.

To the devotee his chosen path represents not one of several paths to salvation but the path. This involves a re-appraisal and a re-statement of the conceptual order of Hinduism. In what follows I approach this problem through a consideration of four aspects of Assamese Vaishnavism:

- (1) The concept of god as the object of devotion;
- (2) The nature of the devotional experience viewed both as a means to salvation and as an end in itself;
- (3) The attitude of the devotee to other paths;
- (4) The relation between the devotional sect and the caste order.

The devotional god

'There is only one śāstra, that spoken by the son of Daiwakee,
 There is only one god and he is the son of Daiwakee,
 There is only one religious duty, the worship of this god;
 There is only one mantra, the name of this god.'

(Shankaradeva, Bhakti-ratnākara, ch: 5)

The central idea of devotion is an absolute commitment to another person, a chosen god. The god who is the object of this undivided love (ekānta bhakti) is a god but not god-in-himself, who in principle cannot be conceptualized. Bhakti thus involves a gradation in the idea of god in order to make him accessible to man. Vishnu is chiefly worshipped in his incarnations to whom the devotee can relate in human terms: with the tender love of a mother for her child, when the infant Krishna is the object of worship; with the erotic love of a mistress for her lover as in the Radha-Krishna cult of Bengal; or with the submissive attachment of a servant (dāsyā) to his master which is taken as the model in Assam. The devotee finds in Krishna 'an ocean of kindness' (Nāmghoṣa 316), 'compassionate to the poor' (ibid. 322), 'his greatest friend'. He is described as 'sweeter than all sweetnesses' (ibid. 251) and his name as 'softer than the softest of words' (ibid. 336). The love and adoration of the devotee for god is reciprocated by the love and concern of god for his devotees so that the relationship becomes reversible.

'God is always following devotees controlled by the recitation of his Name. Though independent, he is dependent on his devotees' (statement of a Gosain).

'I am the heart of the devotees. My devotees think of none but Me. I also think of none but my devotees' (quoted by Das 1945: 55-56).

'I am always in the company of my devotees. What they say, I do as if I were their slave' (Shankaradeva, Uddhava Sambād 71, quoted by Neog 1963:38, my translation).

The concept of a personalized (saguna) god as the object of worship exists, however, alongside the concept of impersonal (nirguna) Brahman as the ultimate reality. Shankaradeva describes god as having both nirguṇa and saguna aspects (Sarma 1966:28). This becomes a problem only if the idea of god is substantialized. In his discussion of village polytheism Dumont has criticized the substantialization of deities, arguing that the gods exist only in relation to one another and that an individual deity in isolation has no reality (Dumont 1960: 38). The substantive view of divinity as a thing in itself is also misleading when only one god is worshipped for the manner of his conceptualization is relative to the situation of the worshipper. In

the context of devotion ultimate reality is personalized: 'If god has no attributes, how am I to conceive of him?' But in other contexts, it is conceived in a different way: 'I worship this image. No, I do not worship this image. I place my ātman there and in the image I worship myself.' Whereas theism in the Judaeo-Christian tradition is oriented to the personality of god conceived as an objective reality, theism as applied to bhakti ('the theistic reaction', Bouquet 1966:75; 'theism and devotion', Basham 1954:328; 'monotheistic theism', Schweitzer 1951:179), is seen from the subjective perspective of the devotee, for whom the idea of a personalized god represents a chosen formulation arising out of the devotional attitude.

The emphasis on monotheism has the same contingent character. The Assamese term their religion ekaśaraṇa dharma (the religion of taking shelter in One) and the worship of deities other than Vishnu is forbidden:

'Do not bow down before other gods and goddesses,
Partake not of their offerings,
Look not upon their images, enter not their temples,
Lest thy faith be vitiated.'

(Shankaradeva, Bhāgavata, 11, v.545)

Monotheism is not, however, carried to the point of denying the existence of the Hindu pantheon whose activities provide the subject-matter of most of Shankaradeva's plays. For the devotee his chosen god is elevated above other gods and identified with the supreme principle. His worship therefore comes to include their worship.

'Is it not said in the Bhagavata Purana that if water is poured on the base of a tree, then all the branches and leaves suck up nourishment? All gods and goddesses are mere manifestations of Vishnu so their worship as independent deities is uncalled for.'

The gods not chosen for worship do not thereby become false gods and their followers are considered to be within the religion although outside the Vaishnava cult. It is doubtful if the term monotheism can be applied in the situation of bhakti where attachment to a single personalized god is inherent in the nature of devotion rather than the objective character of god.

The devotional experience

'I salute the devotee who has no desire for salvation,
I hunger for the nectar of devotion.'

(Madhavadeva, Nām-Ghosa, 1)

It is said that Shankaradeva himself seized the pen from his disciple to write these lines. Devotion, which originated as one path to salvation (mokṣa, mukti) among others, came to be valued as an end in itself. In a later verse (ibid. 236) Madhavadeva observes that the devotee who plays in the nectar of god's name spurns salvation as if it were a piece of straw. For this reason that form of liberation which involves complete identification with god is rejected in favour of a state of participation in which the partners remain sufficiently separate to be able to enjoy the pleasures of union.

'I refuse the salvation in which, being merged in thee, I miss thy lotus feet' (Shankaradeva, Kīrttan, 114).

The path of devotion is thus associated not only with a modification in the concept of god to make him accessible to devotion, but also with a re-interpretation of the final goal, bhakti being substituted for mukti.

A man becomes a devotee by the act of initiation (śaraṇ, literally 'shelter'). Although the initiate takes shelter in One (ekaśaraṇa dharma), he is required to prostrate himself three times before each of the four realities (vastu) in turn - Name, God, Guru and Devotee - saying, 'I take shelter in Name', 'I take shelter in God', and so forth. These four things, which constitute the essence of the devotional experience, are held to be one and indivisible such that each presupposes the existence of the other three.

The state of mind called devotion requires a devotee (bhakat) to experience the devotion, a god (deva) as the object of devotion, a means of communication between god and devotee provided by god's names (nām), and a guru who, as the living god, acts as the intermediary through which the devotee relates to Krishna. Each of the four realities is an object of worship and each receives special emphasis in one of the four branches into which the sect is divided. The offering is looked on as devotion objectified. In the preparation of the offering the ingredients are offered in fours or multiples of four - four handfuls of rice, four handfuls of pulse, four or eight slices of coconut, etc. - and the following mantra uttered for each: name, god, guru, devotee. This is held to have the effect of converting the ingredients of the offering, and thus the offering itself, into the constituent parts of devotion. Worship is described as devotion in

action. During worship god is represented by the Bhagavat or some other sacred text into which he is invoked for the duration of the service; the devotees are present as the congregation; the service consists of chanting the names of god; and if the guru is physically absent, as often happens in the village, the idea of the guru is necessarily present and the Name Leader (who conducts the service) substitutes for his person.

Prior to its realization in experience devotion is believed to exist in the devotee in the form of a state of mind waiting to be felt, like some valuable in store to which he has not yet found access. The intervention of the guru is regarded as a necessary catalyst to the actualization of the experience. 'Without a guru,' Shankaradeva said, 'you cannot enter into my religion.' In the cooking of boiled rice, when the paraphernalia of cooking are ritually equated with cosmic phenomena, the guru is identified with the ladle which stirs the inert mass to action or with the fire which gives it momentum. The legitimacy of the guru rests on a line of succession recorded in the family book of his satra which links him to the original founder of the sub-sect. The relationship between successive gurus, and ultimately between the founding guru and Krishna, is believed to be one of substantive identity. At initiation the novice is instructed to consider his guru as the embodiment (murti) of Krishna in whom he is seeking shelter. 'God and guru are one, different only in body.' Thereafter he is required to repeat daily after his morning bath the four secret names of god, termed 'worship of name' (nām-sevā), and the secret name of his guru as a form of Krishna, termed 'worship of the guru' (guru sevā). In the sub-sect where devotion to the guru is particularly cultivated, the worship of images is forbidden on the grounds that the guru himself presents to his disciples the living image of god. The spiritual pre-eminence of the guru is expressed by the fact that, as he has no peer, no one can cook for him, but when he cooks he will eat. The food remains of the guru, like the food remains of god, are termed prasād are often sought after by those suffering from disease. A guru does not 'die' (mare), he 'passes on' (cale), for he is believed to attain salvation, and the place where his body is burnt becomes a shrine marked in some cases by a permanent structure credited with miraculous powers. The incorporation of the guru into the devotional

experience is necessitated by his role as the mediator through whom the disciple draws near to god: as such he is more immediate to the disciple than the god he represents and is said to be greater than god.² It is only through the guru who stands at the entrance of the path, and in identification with him, that the initiate obtains access to divine knowledge. This knowledge is not to be understood in cognitive terms as the possession of a particular piece of knowledge but as a state of consciousness or being which is realized by the internalization of the object (guru, god). It is believed that a man becomes the god he worships ('If I worship Krishna, I become Krishna'), and the virtue of initiation lies in the identification it creates between the initiate and the guru as the container of the state of consciousness which is god. On the principle that only Vishnu can worship Vishnu, the initiate is thereafter enabled to worship god in whose nature he participates.

The Assamese sometimes call their religion 'our religion of Name' (āmār nām dharma) for the recitation of the names of god is considered the quickest and most efficacious means of salvation.

'The names Ram Krishna Hari are the best of all religions,
That is the essential truth of all the Vedas;
There is no religion higher than that.'

(Madhavadeva, Nām-Ghoṣa, 23).

The esoteric mantras revealed at initiation consists chiefly of the secret names of god, the great halls built for devotional worship are called Name Houses, the service itself is referred to as Name, the leader of the chant is called 'he who touches the Name' (nām lagovā) and the verses sung towards the conclusion of the service consist of strings of the many names of god. E.g.:

'Rama Rama Rama Rama Rama
Rama Krishna Hari Narayan
Rama Rama Rama Rama Rama Rama
Rama Rama Hari Hari Hari.'

(Nām-Ghoṣa, 859,860)

'Ram Krishna Govinda Gopinath Hari Gopinath
Gopinath Gopinath Hari Gopinath.'

(ibid. 868)

In so far as the path of bhakti leads to a participation of the

individual in the divine through love, it presupposes the benevolence of a personal god and his accessibility to those who approach him. Vishnu manifested himself in the world through his incarnations but he is also conceived as existing in a number of states outside space and time. As Narayana he is worshipped as the ground and cause of the phenomenological universe, as Brahman he appears to yogins in their meditation, as Paramatman he controls the senses, as Bhagavat he creates and preserves the universe (cf. Sarma 1966:30). Usually Vishnu is equated with Narayana as the personified supreme reality in the epithet Vishnu-Narayana, occasionally he is seen together with Brahma and Shiva as lower (i.e. partial) manifestations. But as god in his nirguna state cannot be conceptualized, it is the personalized aspects of god which are recognized for the purpose of devotion. The different names of god are considered to be expressions of his many aspects, epitomizing the qualities (guna) by which he can be known and reached, and represent the accessibility of god who out of love for his devotees opens himself to them. As Krishna and his Name are held to be inseparable, whenever his Name is uttered Krishna is present automatically. By listening to Name the devotee is said to drink in Krishna through his ears (cf. Nām-Ghoṣa 517); by uttering Name, Krishna becomes manifest in his mouth ('The mouth that utters Ram is the repository of Ram', Nām-Ghoṣa 45); in this way he becomes filled with god. As the accessibility of god to man is the most highly valued of his qualities, the name of god is said to be superior to god himself:

'Thy name is superior to thee.'

(Nām-Ghoṣa 637)

The utterance of Name represents for the devotee his mode of participation in god. It seems that just as in the Upanishads the goal is not Brahman-atman but knowledge of Brahman-atman (brahman-ātmān vidyā), so the goal of devotional striving is not the personalized god chosen as the object of worship but the subjective experience of devotion itself. The Assamese conceptualize god chiefly in oral terms so that the utterance of his names is the usual form in which the experience is realized.

The last of the four realities is the devotee, who occupies a special place in the path of devotion, for although the devotee exists

within the path, the path also exists within the devotee. As the embodiment of the devotional experience the company of devotees is worshipped as the visible symbol of god and is said to be superior to him.

'Who worships Krishna alone without worshipping the devotees,
His offering Krishna does not accept as his own.
Who in worshipping Krishna bows down to the devotees,
His offering becomes prasād.'

(Goswami: 24)

In the villages recourse is usually made to the devotees to deal with the everyday contingencies of life. Suppose a girl is suffering from a persistent illness. Her father may invite to his house a number of devotees noted for their piety to hold a rite on her behalf. A prayer is uttered asking the devotees to drive away disease, misfortune and death, at the conclusion of which the assembled company utter a great shout of 'O Hari, O Ram', and it is this endorsement by the devotees, termed the 'thunderclap of Hari' (Hari dhbani), which alone is believed to make the prayer effective and realize the purpose of the rite. Worship of the devotees is an annual event in the village Name House. The invited company are greeted with obeisance and gifts for they come as devotees 'in the form of god' (īśvar rūp). It is said that even a child or a wicked man should be considered a devotee at that time and that all devotees are one (eke) and the same (samān). The prayers include some such words as these:

'As the company of devotees you are kings, you are the sacred Ganges, you are the bodily presence of the supreme god. We have not given you the welcome and farewell that you should have had... I should have carried you on my shoulders, but you came on foot. Here we have waited upon you and done you homage, bowing down before you in salutation and worship. All this has not been done as it should have been done. We have not even been able to offer you a piece of areca nut or a seat of grass. In this we have offended greatly. Remove our faults and eating the areca nut from your own pocket, bless us your servants and grant us strength so that we can continue to worship you like this in the future' (Goswami: 34-35, freely translated).

The form of address to the devotees does not differ significantly from the form of address to god, because it is considered that the true devotee by the continual practice of devotion has come to incorporate god. It is pointed out that the seating arrangements in certain Name

Houses, with the congregation in two facing rows, are such that when the congregation bow down in worship to god, they are at the same time bowing down in worship to one another. It is said: 'When the devotees are satisfied, god is satisfied.' In the sub-sect of Kal-samhati the offering is not presented to god but set down instead before the assembled devotees themselves, nor is Krishna invoked for the purpose of worship into a sacred book. Here the devotees substitute for the visible symbol of god, which is dispensed with altogether. It is the custom in this sub-sect for the guru to prostrate himself before the devotees to receive their blessing (Sarma 1966:203), for it is believed that the true devotee incorporates god, guru and name to become bhakti itself.

'The true devotee contains Name, he becomes Name itself. He can show to others the God that is within him. By his example he does the function of a guru. So guru, deva, nām, all are contained in bhakat. He is the embodiment of them all.'

The pre-eminence of the devotee among the four realities which constitute devotion derives from the fact that he is worshipped as the embodiment of the devotional experience (bhakti) itself which is both his practical religious purpose and the ultimate goal to which his worship is directed.

Other Paths

There are sometimes said to be three main paths to salvation in Hinduism: the path of knowledge associated with the renouncer, the path of works associated with the householder and the path of devotion associated with the devotee who may be either a renouncer or a householder. From the viewpoint of the outside observer the path of devotion is thus one path among others. The devotee also recognizes that his path exists within the wider spectrum of Hindu tradition - which raises the problem of his relation to that tradition and of his place within it - and he considers the followers of other paths and the worshippers of other gods as within the religion although outside the devotional cult. At the same time to the devotee his chosen path is not a path but the path to salvation, a view which colours his perception of other paths.

'I am not attained by sacrifices, meditation or gifts,
By recitation of powerful mantras or bathing in a million
holy places.

I am not attained by observing fasts,
 Renunciation of the world does not subdue me.
 In vain do men trouble themselves with rituals.
 It is the company of devotees who knows Me.'

(Shankaradeva, Uddhava Sambād, 59.60)

In relation to devotion, the idea of renunciation is re-interpreted. It is no longer believed that a man must leave the world to escape the consequences of action: he can leave the world from within.

'If we perform actions to obtain the rewards of action, they bind us to the world. We should not earn merit or demerit. Merit is earned by sacrifices, ritual, meditation. Shankaradeva has condemned these if done with the purpose of gaining merit. But they can be performed provided there is no desire for merit.'

The true devotee is described as 'one who has no attachment, who always remembers god and who sees all things as equal'. Dumont has termed this strategy the internalization of renunciation: 'renunciation is transcended by being internalized' (Dumont 1960:58). The re-interpretation of renunciation in terms of motive rather than behaviour makes it compatible with the day-to-day life of the lay devotee who is the chief carrier of the movement. This the devotee does in two ways. Firstly, as Weber puts it, 'he acts as if he acted not', for the purpose and intention of actions is missing (Weber 1958:184). Secondly, he transforms his everyday life by dedicating his actions to god so that whatever he does is done in the name of bhakti.

At initiation the disciple is instructed by his guru in the conduct of a pure life (dhuti-nīti). The manner of his rising in the morning, the performance of his natural functions, cleaning the teeth, bathing, cooking, eating and going to sleep are governed by a complex set of ritual procedures and the utterance of appropriate mantras. E.g., as he rises he puts his right foot first on the ground and remembers his guru. Before he eases himself he remembers that god is everywhere and mentally requests him to move aside ('O Hari, thou art everywhere. Remembering the guru, we purify ourselves'). When he bathes, he strikes the water four times in the names of name, god, guru and devotee, and so forth. The cultivator vows on the first day of transplantation to offer his crop to guru and devotee ('I will give to guru, I will give to devotee. After that I will feed my rotten body'), and the fisherman promises his first catch of the season to

the guru. Thus the life of a true devotee resembles a calling in which his most routine activities gain significance by being performed for the purpose of devotion. There is a popular saying:

'With Ram's name on one's lips and duty in one's hand.'

The followers of the path include both ascetics and householders. In Assam it is extremely rare for an adult male to forsake the world in order to adopt the life of a celibate devotee (kevalīyā bhakat). The number of ascetics is not only small, they are in general gifted as children to a monastic centre in fulfilment of a vow. Shankaradeva, the founder of the movement in Assam, was twice married. His favourite disciple and successor, Madhavadeva, was celibate. Shankaradeva is said to have observed that, had he met Madhavadeva earlier, he would not have married for the second time. Madhavadeva, on the other hand, is said to have advised his disciples not to follow his example (Sharma 1966:66). In general, those gurus who trace their line of succession to Shankaradeva have married and those who derive from Madhavadeva have remained celibate. Of the others some are celibate and some are householders. The extent to which the practice, as distinct from the spirit, of renunciation provides the ideal environment for the cultivation of devotion is not a settled question within the sect. But in both schools of thought renunciation is not valued for its own sake nor associated with techniques of meditation, which are rejected as useless, but subordinated to devotion and valued instrumentally in that familial ties and other worldly attachments conflict with the undivided devotion (ekānta bhakti) which is seen as the mark of the true devotee.³

Shankaradeva taught that all paths are ineffective without devotion and that, with devotion, other means of attaining god become unnecessary. There are, however, a number of means by which the adherents of bhakti maintain continuity with the Veda. In the first place recourse is made to the relative implications of historicity, different forms of worship being considered appropriate to the different ages:

In the Iron Age by singing kīrttan
 The thirty-four castes obtain heaven.
 In the Golden Age salvation was attained by knowledge,
 In the Silver Age it was sacrifices,
 In the Copper Age it was ritual,
 In the Iron Age it is kīrttan.'

(Shankaradeva, Pasaṅḍa Mordan, 73-4)

God manifested himself in the four ages in different forms: in the Age of Truth he was Hari, half-lion and half-man; in the Silver Age he was Ram; in the Copper Age he was Krishna; and in the Kali Age he is Name. That is to say, it is only in this Kali Age that God is Name and devotion is the supreme form of worship.⁴ Devotion is not therefore opposed to other paths. It is said either to supersede them as a result of temporal progression or to include them, as when the worship of Vishnu is described as including the worship of all other gods and the Bhagavat is described as containing the essence of all the śāstras.

In the second place, it is possible to combine devotion with other paths on the grounds that, although unnecessary for a true devotee, they provide helpful aids to those who have not yet progressed to this final state:

'When a man is truly pure, he has no need of outward rites. But most of us are not wholly pure within and should perform śrāddha and other rites' (statement of a villager).

'We can do away with ritual observances when everything becomes Brahman. But there are stages. To attain Name is a process, not an end in itself. To make Name the end a man must first climb seven stages of initiation. After that he can do away with images, prayers, everything. He becomes Name itself. Then he can say, "I utter your Name, but I have become you. I cannot distinguish between you and me." But before that stage we must continue to carry out the external observances laid down in the śāstras' (statement of a Gosain).

Traditionally all Assamese Vaishnavas continued to employ Brahman priests for the performance of the customary domestic rituals, although this practice is condemned today by the reform sects.

Devotion and the Caste Order

The path of devotion is recommended because it is open to all castes and Shankaradeva is said to have given initiation to Untouchables, tribals and Muslims. Numerous passages in the texts assert that caste is irrelevant for spiritual salvation:

'A Candala who remembers Hari is much superior to a Brahman observing religious vows.'

(Shankaradeva, Bhagavata X, 12622-3)

'Who understands the words of Krishna
What need he be by birth a Brahman?
Let him only remember Hari by day and by night,
Bhakti does not care if he has a caste or not.'

(Shankaradeva, Kīrttan, 130).

The caste order, however, is recognized as existing in its own right both alongside the devotional sect and also within it. Caste distinctions in Hinduism are best understood as part of the natural rather than the social world. They are not believed to be imposed by man and therefore reversible but pertain to the unalterable order of nature. To deny the existence of castes in the social sphere is equivalent to denying the diversity of species in the natural sphere (cf. Inden 1976:10).⁵ The problem for bhakti is not therefore the existence of caste differences, which are taken as given, but their implications for the practice of devotion. In this crucial and sensitive area different devotional movements have adopted a variety of positions which have tended to vary over time, and within Assamese Vaishnavism itself there is a difference of emphasis in the four sub-sects. In general the observance of caste distinctions is considered to be part of the duties of a devotee. Prior to taking first initiation (śaraṇ) a man is free to associate with a wide range of castes, but after initiation he takes cooked food only from those of the same or higher castes. The initiate into higher grades (bhajan) is extremely circumspect in preserving his purity and his reputation by avoiding contact with those whose religious condition is inferior to his own: this involves devotees who have not attained an equal stage of initiation and castes below him in the hierarchy. The Gosain, scrupulous in his food observances, will not accept an offering of raw soaked ingredients from a member of a caste lower than Kalita, the highest Shudra caste in Assam. The observance of caste distinctions has thus been incorporated into the way of life of the devotee and is an accepted index of religiosity and spiritual status.

The Gosains of the sect may be Brahman or Kayastha. The office of the guru thus transcends the division between Brahmins and non-Brahmins and, when a Kayastha Gosain initiates Brahman disciples, reverses the traditional relationship between them.⁶ Initiation is open to men of all castes, including Untouchables, and fellow initiates are united by bonds of ritual kinship which often cross-cut caste membership. The Gosains differ in their attitude to non-Hindus such as tea garden labour and tribal peoples, some being prepared to accept them as disciples and others not. Conversion to Hinduism by the plains tribals is effected today by taking initiation from one of the Gosains

willing to undertake this work. The initiated households cease to be of tribal 'caste' (jāti) and are usually incorporated into the ranks of an existing Hindu caste, generally that of small Kooch (v. Chapter 9). The act of initiation is believed to effect a change of moral quality such that the initiate is accepted as a low-caste Hindu. Subsequent mobility up the caste hierarchy depends largely on further modifications of substance as a result of changed eating habits.

At village level the devotional movement is institutionalized in the Name House system. A Name House consists of an association of households which combine for the purpose of maintaining a local centre of devotional worship. Name Houses may be single caste or multi-caste. The range of castes in a multi-caste Name House is limited by the fact that its members must be prepared at the least to partake together of the offering. Thus, although the sect is open to initiates of all castes, it does not follow that all castes associate as members of the same religious congregation. The distributor of the offering is usually chosen from the highest caste in the Name House so that there can be no objection to taking food from his hand.

It appears therefore that in many areas of sectarian activity it is considered appropriate to take account of the fact of caste. The devotional experience itself, however, is open to all conditions of men who can achieve an exemplary reputation for spiritual piety irrespective of their social origins. Although the devotee recognizes the existence of the caste order, in respect of devotion itself caste has no place. Krishna is the god of the untouchable as he is the god of the Brahman and equally accessible through devotion to both. Dumont has termed this the 'relativization of caste'; i.e. caste values, by being compartmentalized, lose their absolute religious character (Dumont 1970:187).

Until recently it was the prevailing view that Shankaradeva, as a religious rather than a social reformer, did not make a direct attack on the institution of caste:

'There is no evidence to show that Sankaradeva and his followers tried to do away or interfere with caste regulations. His sole concern was to see that social distinction places no unnecessary restriction upon one's inherent right to spiritual development. Nor is there any evidence to show that he encouraged inter-dining' (Sarma 1966:64).

'Saṅkardew, a thorough-going and skilful reformer, did not attempt to kill the serpent of caste system, but simply removed the poison out of it' (Neog 1963:46).

The traditional understanding of Shankaradeva's teachings has been challenged recently by the reform sects who seek, on the basis of his writings, to abolish caste and introduce widespread social reforms. These developments and their implications are discussed in the following chapter.

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In this summary account of the devotional path, as it has come to be understood in Assam, I have concentrated on providing a background to those issues which were the subject of religious controversy at the time of my fieldwork. For more detailed information on other aspects of Assamese Vaishnavism I refer the reader to S.N. Sarma's scholarly work, 'The neo-Vaiṣṇavite movement and the satra institution of Assam' and M. Neog's 'Saṅkaradeva and his times'.

Notes.

1. Cf. 'It may be doubted whether the caste system could have existed and endured independently of its contradictory, renunciation' (Dumont 1970:186).
2. Guru-worship is highly developed in the bhakti sect of Vallabhacharya where the superiority of the guru to god is explained on the principle that 'the bestower of the gift is greater than the gift' (Peter Bennett: personal communication).
3. It is said that Shankaradeva refused to initiate women on the grounds that a woman's relation to her husband was incompatible with the exclusive attachment of the devotee to god.
4. Cf. Pocock's point that the Kali age is not homologous to the other ages but is opposed to them (Pocock 1964).
5. I am reminded of Johnson: 'Class distinctions in England, sir, are not an act of God: they are a fact.'
6. One of the complaints laid against Shankaradeva before the Ahom kings was that he became a guru to Brahmans (Neog 1965:360).

CHAPTER ELEVEN

SRI SHANKARADEVA SANGHA

The point of controversy which proved the starting point of the Vaishnava reform sects related to the period of impurity (as̄oc) to be observed by non-Brahman castes on a death in the family. Traditionally in Assam Brahmans observe ten days' ritual impurity on a death, performing the first śrāddha (ādyā śrāddha) on the eleventh day, and non-Brahmans observe thirty days' ritual impurity, performing the first śrāddha (kāj) on the thirty-first day. In the 1930s, in Nowgong district, a number of prominent non-Brahmans began to challenge this distinction on the grounds that they were not inferior to Brahmans and that it was a matter of presumption only that the soul of a Brahman, being superior to the soul of a Shudra, reached heaven more quickly. The movement proliferated and the Shudra population is now divided into the following groups: (1) the monthly people (māhakiyā), who continue in the old custom of one month; (2) the Eleven-day people (eghāradinīyā), who serve ten days' ritual impurity on the model of the Brahmans; (3) the Thirteen-day people (teradinīyā), who observe twelve days' ritual impurity as an assertion of Kshatriya status; (4) an extreme group of Haridhanyas, who do not observe ritual impurity and have ceased to employ Brahman priests for the performance of śrāddha and other Brahminical rites.

The reform movement developed in response to the social changes which originated under British rule and accelerated after Independence. These were precipitated by two main factors: the development of education and the spread of the Congress movement. The carrying of education and literacy to the masses enabled many non-Brahmans to read both Assamese and Sanskrit texts for the first time and to question traditional interpretations. Formerly the puthis existed chiefly in satra families as manuscripts which were copied and re-copied over time. Now they became available as printed paperbacks in the bazaar.

'The British came to Calcutta and started a school there. Then they came to Assam and started schools here. Gradually the people came to read the scriptures and to understand.'

More importantly, the non-Brahmans became qualified by education to compete for posts in government service, teaching and the law which, in the old days, had largely been Brahman preserves. The introduction of universal franchise and of special privileges for scheduled castes and tribes and backward classes (categories which cover two-thirds of the population) further altered the balance of power in favour of the lower castes. The Congress movement also had a considerable impact on the structure of society. After the social upheaval of the 1921 Civil Disobedience movement, which was widely supported in Assam, Kaibarttas and Brittial-Banias (exterior castes) and Naths (marginal), formerly excluded from upper-caste Name Houses, gained access to the exterior portion of the hall at the west end (tup). After the 1930 movement they were admitted in many parts of Lower Assam into the body of the hall where they worshipped together with other castes. The first leaders of the new sects were in the main active members of the Congress party who after Gandhi's Harijan movement became interested in religious reform as a means of reforming society.

The movement originated in the politically active district of Nowgong from the association of two men, Haladhar Bhuyan and Ramkanta Atoi. Ramkanta Atoi had been a celibate devotee of Kamalabaria satra and was living at Bardoa satra in Nowgong. He was a man of decided opinions and robust health who is said to have died at the age of ninety-eight. Haladhar Bhuyan was President of the Nowgong District Congress. He gives the following account of how he came to hold his religious beliefs:

Two incidents in his youth had a profound effect on his future life. When he was in class 6, he went to see the dōl jātra festival at Bardoa but, being a Kooch, he was not admitted to the Name House. This upset him: his father's elder brother was Barmedhi of Noruwa Satra at Bardoa and had made the stand for the thāpanā, but he was given prasād outside like an untouchable. He did not forget this insult and stopped going to the satra.

The second incident occurred when he was at High School. Being an orphan he did not pay fees and the headmaster said that, if he did not attend regularly, he would forfeit his free studentship. One day he went to school with malaria. On the way back he collapsed

with some other learned scholars (notably Cheniram Srutikar), he argued in many meetings called to pronounce on this question that he could find no bar in śāstra to eleven-day observances for all castes, quoting in support of his position Garuda Purana, ch.13, sloka 19:

'It is authoritatively stated in the śāstra that in the Kali Age there are ten days' purification for all castes.'

The reform sects base the authority for their teachings on the texts of the founders which they have selected and re-presented so as to provide a new image of the past consonant with their aspirations for radical social re-arrangement in the present. The universalistic ethic of the Bhagavata Purana which opens salvation to all irrespective of caste or tribe was seen as an anticipation of the modern emphasis on equality and the abolition of caste distinctions. Sonaram Chutiya, President of the Shankaradeva Sangha, observed: 'The climate of opinion today, the policy of the present government, the fundamental rights of the constitution, all tend to a casteless and classless society. But our custom was from before. Accidentally they match.' These reformers made no distinction between restoring what they regarded as the fundamental principles of their religion which had become corrupted over time and moving forward to the creation of a modern egalitarian democratic society.

'In our Vaishnava dharma man is Vishnu. There is a saying: "The service of man is the service of God." Nehru and Gandhi also believed that man is God.'

'Mahatma Gandhi is the guru of this sect. There is no difference between the ideas of Shankaradeva and Mahatma Gandhi.'

'Shankaradeva founded a casteless society. Vishnu was incarnated as Shankaradeva only to uplift backward people. Like Gandhi he worked for Untouchables. The Shankaradeva Sangha came into existence by the will of God for the purpose of restoring the actual principles of Shankaradeva. It has all castes eating and worshipping together. It is a new era in Assam.'

The Sri Shankaradeva Sangha now numbers about 100,000 members and claims to be the largest religious body in Assam. Unlike the satra, it is not based on the traditional link between guru and disciple and its organization is modern. The primary unit of association is a branch with a minimum membership of 25. Members are listed in

and asked two men on the road to help him but they passed by on the other side. He decided that the time of this religion was over.

Later he read Kirttan and Ghosa and concluded there was nothing wrong with the religion: the people were at fault. The gurus had had failed to instruct them properly.

In 1921 he left his job to join the Independence struggle and was influenced by Gandhi's Harijan movement. In the meantime he met Ramkanta Atoi and with his help he decided to form a Dharma Sabah for the propagation of Shankaradeva's teachings and for the reform of society. He asked the Auniati Satradhikar to assist him but he refused, so he approached the Garamur Satradhikar (himself an active Congress worker). The Garamur Satradhikar lent his support and became for a time actively involved in the movement.

In 1933 Jogendranath Barua, a District Judge in Golaghat, performed the śrāddha of his father on the eleventh day. This was the first eleven-day ceremony by a prominent non-Brahman and caused a sensation in society. A meeting was convened under the chairmanship of the Principal of Cotton College attended by eighteen pandits of Kamrup to determine whether the performance of śrāddha by non-Brahmans on the eleventh day was supported by śāstra. At the end of a heated debate, Haladhar Bhuyan spoke: We respect the Brahmins always. Whatever is quoted in this meeting, it is all written by Brahmins. But times are changing. If you press the people under your feet, the people will revolt. So you should conclude that both the Monthly and the Eleven-day forms have religious authority. Otherwise people will leave the Brahmins and become Nam-Kirtaniya. The scholars, however, subsequently printed a leaflet to the effect that Shudras could not perform śrāddha at all: it had no śāstric authority.

On receipt of this leaflet Bhuyan consulted with Mahantas and pandits of Nowgong. They called a meeting and founded the Shankar Sangha with Rai Sahib Dambarudhar Barua as President and Haladhar Bhuyan as Secretary. Six months later the All-Assam State Sangha was established.

Haladhar Bhuyan said that he founded the Srimanta Shankaradeva Sangha in opposition to the Goswamis and Mahantas and devotees who call dharma a-dharma and a-dharma dharma, and against the Brahmins who offer pūjā. The main objects of the Sangha he described as the publicizing of a monotheistic religion (ek nām dharma), the abandonment of ritual impurity, the abolition of untouchability, the creation of equal rights for men of all castes and the cementing of good-will between the peoples of the hills and the plains. In this way he believed they would create a broader society and preserve the distinctive character of the Assamese people. (This account is taken from Haladhar Bhuyan's Presidential Address of 1962 in which he gives a history of the Sri Shankaradeva Sangha.)

The Sangha was proposing a change in the ritual observances of the Shudras as they had been practised within living memory, but they were not willing to proceed without śāstric authority. Gopikabhallub Goswami of Golaghat acted as the pandit of the movement and, together

a register kept by the branch secretary and pay a subscription of 4 annas a year. One-third of the sum of the subscriptions is retained by the branch, the rest being divided between the district and the state fund. The President of the Sangha, called the Padadhikar, is elected by secret ballot from three men nominated by the central executive committee. He holds office for two years. In 1971, according to the Padadhikar, there were some 600 primary units in the State, of which half were in Nowgong district. Lakhimpur, with its large population of Chutiyas and Ahoms, ranked second, and then came Sibsagar. The Sangha had only 20 branches in Kamrup, which is largely Brahman-dominated, and under 10 in the tribal district of Goalpara. It draws its support from the lower castes - Kooch, Chutiya, Ahom - rather than the higher - Kayastha, Kalita, Keot - and from the younger generation rather than the older, which is a source of much family conflict. The untouchables, who are highly Sanskritized in Assam, are in the main reluctant to forfeit the position they have achieved by more traditional methods. The Sangha is active in proselytizing and every branch contains a number of organizers who go from house to house and arrange public meetings in likely areas. They work also among tea garden labour and tribal peoples and claim two or three Muslim converts. The core of the movement consists of dedicated workers who hold meetings several times a week in each other's houses for religious discussion, but the membership is more fluid and their initial enthusiasm is not always maintained.

'Srimanta Shankar Sangha went to tea garden labour. The people say: "Yes, we are with you." But whether they have taken initiation or avoid inedible food (e.g. alcohol and chicken) is another matter. In every garden Durga Puja is held. It is incorrect to say they have converted among tea garden labour.'

The Sri Shankaradeva Sangha began as an anti-Brahman movement. The Brahmans number probably only 150,000 in Assam but they are over-represented in government service, teaching and the bar which, before Independence, were largely Brahman preserves. With the spread of education non-Brahmans felt they could compete with the Brahmans and were not different from the Brahmans.

'I agreed to address some meetings in the villages. I said to them: "Brahman blood is said to be different from the blood of other castes. We have examined the blood of Brahmans and the blood

of non-Brahmans under a microscope. No difference could be found between them." They liked it very much.'

Many educated members of non-Brahman castes began in consequence to resent the distinctions between themselves and the Brahmans in the ritual sphere.

'If Brahmans can end in eleven days, why should we stay one month?'

'My father performed the first śrāddha of my father's father on the eleventh day on the grounds that he was not inferior to the Brahmans. There was a ripple in the society.'

'In hom and other rituals the priest in case of non-Brahman will say "offering of slave" (dāsa). But in case of Brahman he will say: "offering of god" (deva). The non-Brahmans object and when the Brahman says "slave", they say "god" in the mantras.'

The leaders of the Sangha deny that they are opposed to Brahmans - 'we are not anti-Brahman, but anti-priest' - but anti-Brahmanism is prominent at all levels of the organization.

'I am a living witness to the start of the Sri Shankaradeva Sangha. I was Secretary of the District Congress Committee in Nowgong at that time, Haladhar Bhuyan was the President. We ran our candidate for the Assam Assembly. He was opposed by one of the most powerful persons in Nowgong, Rai Bahadur Bindalan Chandra Goswami (Brahman)... Wherever we went, we were frustrated. No one came to vote for us. We not only had no supporters, even the candidate suggested that we should not spend another farthing and not go into any more villages canvassing votes, for he received so many insults.

'We sat dejected. At that moment a man came to Haladhar Bhuyan's house, Rama Kanta Atoi, on cycle. Seeing us brooding he asked us the matter. We expressed our frustration. He said: "Give me Rs: 20 and a good bicycle. I will defeat Bindalan Chandra Goswami." Although at that time Rs: 20 was something, we gave and the office bicycle.

'He went first to the village where our candidate was born and started speaking ill of the Brahmans from generation to generation. That worked like anything. Our candidate was returned...

'When we won, there was another meeting among ourselves. In order to continue our support Haladhar Bhuyan said we should go on preaching against Brahmans and Brahmanism. And so the Sangha came into being.'

The Brahmans tend to live apart from the rest of society and, not being known, are often misunderstood. Nowadays they are largely on the defensive and no longer express open opposition to the Eleven-day movement. The following stories (probably apocryphal), which were still circulating in Nowgong District in 1971, illustrate the bitterness of anti-Brahman feeling in that area:

'A Sut died near Nowgong town, leaving a wife and baby. The Brahman priest asked for her cow which was her only possession. She said she needed the cow or her baby would die. The Brahman insisted. She refused. He said he would not perform the funerary rites unless she gave him the cow. She burnt her husband without Vedic rites.'

'A Brahman came to perform the funerary rites of a prominent Sut. The son of the dead man was an undergraduate with no belief in ritual observances. Sixteen gifts are offered in the name of the deceased in order to extinguish the attachment of the soul to this world. If he gets these articles over there, he will not hanker for them here and his soul will rise upwards. The Brahman accepts certain of these gifts in the name of the dead. He generally wants something to which the deceased was particularly attached. In this case the Brahman knew the family well. He said, "Your father was very fond of his bicycle. If possible offer that bicycle to me." The son became annoyed and said, "Do you insist on something very dear to my father?" He replied, "Yes." The son went inside the house and returned with his mother. He said to the priest, "My father loved my mother very much. I offer my mother to you. Take her away." The priest replied, "Because you have said this, you will get no benefit from the śrāddha", and left without taking anything. After that the village gave up employing Brahman priests.'

The offices of the Brahman priest in respect of mortuary rites have been described in Chapter 2. The Garamur Satradhikar, one of the early Padadhikars of the Sri Shankaradeva Sangha, wrote a short manual called 'Eleventh-day purification ceremony or First Śrāddha' for the guidance of Shudras.

The Garamuriya Gosain begins by advising all castes to follow the instruction of the Garuda Purana and end their period of impurity on the tenth day of death, performing the first śrāddha on the eleventh day, on the grounds that 'there is no difference between the soul of a Brahman and that of a Shudra, all souls are the same and indistinguishable'. He then takes up the question of obtaining a priest fit to perform the śrāddha who, according to śāstra, should be versed in the Veda and perform the daily fire sacrifice. He quotes Manu as saying that the soul of the deceased has to swallow as many mouthfuls of molten iron as morsels of food eaten in his name by a Brahman who is not versed in the Veda, and the Mahabharata as saying that if a man knowingly invites an unfit Brahman, his ancestors have to swallow excrement. If a suitable Brahman is not available, the Garamuriya Gosain advises the rites to be performed by Nam-Kirtan. In support of this he quotes a number of slokas from the Brahmanda Purana to the effect that, 'Those who worship Hari on the śrāddha days of their ancestors need not offer piṇḍa in Gaya and other sacred places', and a sloka from the Padma Purana that what is accomplished in the Satya age by meditation and austerities, in the Treta age by sacrifice and in the Dvapara age by worship is effected in the Kali age by chanting the names of Hari. He concludes that it follows that worship of Hari is to be effected by Nam-Kirtan which yields

results which cannot be equalled by hundreds of sacrifices.

He then sets out nine rules for the performance of śrāddha by means of Nam-Kirtan. These include rules governing fast, ritual impurity, daily performances of Nam Kirtan for 12 days with special performances for guests on those days when piṇḍa is usually offered by Shudras. The rites conclude with a feast for friends and relatives on the 13th day. 'If everything is done in this way, it will yield greater results than the offering of piṇḍas through Brahmins. Nothing can be of greater benefit than chanting the names of god.'

The impurity associated with birth is also to be terminated on the 10th day except for the mother who remains unclean for one month.

In this manual published in 1945 the Garamuriya Gosain does not condemn the employment of Brahman priests for the performance of śrāddha: he says only that, if a good Brahman cannot be found, Nam Kirtan provides an alternative of at least equal efficacy.² Today, however, the Sangha rejects the performance of Brahmanical ritual as contrary to Vaishnava precepts.

'Eight thousand rishis well versed in all the Vedas performed hom till their bodies were blackened but still they could not find peace. Then they asked Shuka to recite the Bhagavat and they found peace.

'Bhagavat came into existence to stop hom. So how can we Vaishnavas perform hom? If god cannot save a man, how will piṇḍas and rites give salvation? If we give milk to Brahman, how can the dead man drink? If we give him bed, clothes, fan, how can the dead man get them? The Sangha has given up karma kaṇḍa and does bhakti kaṇḍa.'

The main rationale for the rejection of Brahmanical ritual is that it involves the worship of deities other than Vishnu. The Vaishnavas describe their religion as 'taking shelter in One' (ekāśaraṇa dharma) and traditionally strict Vaishnavas refused to participate in Durga Puja and similar festivals. Now, however, for the first time the principle of monotheism was applied to domestic ritual in the course of which, it was pointed out, the priest makes offerings to a great number of gods and goddesses. All such rites were therefore condemned as explicitly forbidden by Shankaradeva:

'Do not bow down before other gods and goddesses;
Partake not of their offerings;
Look not upon their images, enter not their temples;
Lest thy faith be vitiated.'

(Shankaradeva, Bhāgavata, II, v.545)

Those who continue to perform Brahmanical rites do not deny the

authenticity of this verse, which they explain in a number of ways, but they point out that Shankaradeva was married by hom and offered pinda to his father and to his father's mother.

'The first biography of Shankaradeva was written by Ram Saran Thakur, Madhavadeva's nephew. Here it is said that Shankaradeva observed 30 days' impurity for his father's death and for his father's mother's death. Madhavadeva observed 30 days for Shankaradeva. This nephew was with Madhavadeva all the time as his cook. He records marriage with hom, he records pinda, he records lagun diyā. In the ten or twelve biographies which I have read, the same story is told. All cannot be wrong.'

The Sangha rejects these passages as spurious additions interpolated by the Brahmans, preferring to rely on the writings of Shankaradeva himself rather than on his biographers. Much of the argument is conducted in homely analogies:

'Is it not said in the Bhagavata Purana that if water is poured on the base of a tree, then all the branches and leaves suck up nourishment? All gods and goddesses are mere manifestations of Vishnu so their worship as independent deities is unnecessary.'

'If one wants some C.I. sheets, one does not go directly to the Deputy Commissioner but to the Supply Officer. So we poor devotees, if we want wealth, we must go to Lakshmi.'

'It is true: God is one. But this does not mean we should disrespect other gods. To dinner we invite a guest of honour. But there are other guests. We must feed them too. What is the harm if we feed them too?'

As the prohibition of the worship of deities other than Vishnu provides the only rationale for the rejection of Brahmanical rites and the opposition to the Brahmans, it is insisted upon in the Sri Shankaradeva Sangha with a rigidity uncommon among Hindus and members have been suspended for attending Durga Puja. At the same time the concept of untouchability has been re-defined to apply to worshippers of many gods, described as 'the unholyest thing in the world', more polluting than beef cooked in wine by an outcaste woman (cf. Shankaradeva's Daham). 'Shankaradeva wrote,' observed a Vice-President of the Sangha from the Untouchable fisherman caste, 'that he who believes in more than one god is an Untouchable. That was the opinion of Shankaradeva. That was the opinion of Lord Krishna.' Members of the Sangha eat with Untouchables who have joined the organization but they refuse to eat with Brahmans observing Brahmanical ritual.

The Sangha was formed with the assistance of a number of satrādhikārs. Some, like Garamur, were attracted by their programme of social reform.³ Others saw in the substitution of Nam-Kirtan for Brahmanical ritual more work for the poorer Gosains. But as the Sangha became more extreme in its views, the majority, including the Garamuriya Gosain, withdrew.

'Srimanta Shankar Sangha has peculiar history. Child of betrayal. They wanted to oust the Brahmans from the social leadership. For that purpose they enlisted many poor Mahantas (i.e. Kayastha Gosains). The Mahantas got money for performing by nām instead of Vedic rites, so it suited them. With their help they were partially successful. Then they began to oust the Mahantas. These leaders wanted their own disciples. If Mahantas were within the fold, the trade was poor for them. So they worked against the Mahantas. Those who joined the fold turned back. Few are there now.'

'In a meeting at his house Haladhar Bhuyan said: 'First we are to oust the Brahmans, then we will crush the satrādhikārs. After that we will establish our own system of religion.'

'Few Brahmans and Goswamis join, because the activities of the Sangha are against them' (statement of Vice-President of Shankar Sangha).

The leaders of the Sangha criticize the gurus for corrupting the religion of Shankaradeva and appeal over their heads to the authority of the written text as support for their views:

'After Shankaradeva's death, the satrādhikārs neglected his ideals and vitiated his principles. They did not consult his books and did not do what the books said. They became self-indulgent. Dharma became a money-making business' (Vice-President of Shankar Sangha).

'There are many satrādhikārs who regard Sri Shankaradeva as guru but never follow his instructions' (President of Shankar Sangha).

'The satras were established to carry out Shankaradeva's teachings but the satrādhikārs are groping in the darkness. They have forgotten the real motto of Mahapurusha and are ruining the society. Some satrādhikārs have become zemindars. They have no time to preach dharma and occupy themselves with land accounts' (former President of Shankar Sangha).

'If this state of affairs continues in the satra, in twenty years they will go to hell.'

The satrādhikārs are in a difficult position. For a number of reasons they have become unpopular today. Visitors to the satra are expected to wash their own utensils. They sit on the bare ground

while the Gosain sits on a mat. These customs are resented by the educated youth. When the Gosain is invited to low-caste Name Houses he takes his own distributor to prepare the offering. Today the lower castes resent these distinctions and mock the Gosain, 'Why are you bringing that distributor wearing a dirty dhuti?' The satrādhikārs depend for their livelihood and for the maintenance of the satra on the support of their disciples. This limits their freedom of action.

'I don't know what I am. I would like to be Eleven-day but I associate with the Monthly people. My father supported the Sri Shankaradeva Sangha. He addressed meetings and wrote books, but he could not practise because of the obstruction of Monthly disciples' (Purna Chandradeva Goswami, Noruva Satra, Bardoa).

The Sangha claims the support of five or six satras with Kayastha Gosains, but of these only two are actively involved in the organization. At first many Gosains refused to initiate Eleven-day disciples but, as their numbers grew, this became impractical. The majority of satras still refuse to initiate Haridhaniyas.

'I allow people to be Monthly or Eleven-day. What I object to is this revolutionary Haridhaniya doctrine which has nothing to do with Shankaradeva's religion or with Hindu śāstra. Some of my disciples have become Haridhaniya. I have almost severed connection with them' (Mohan Chandra Mahanta, Diciaryal Satra, Nowgong).

Dissociation from the gurus has created problems with initiation. Traditionally the rite of initiation was the portal to the sect. 'Without a guru,' Shankaradeva said, 'you cannot enter into my religion.' Few men outside the satra are versed in the stages of higher initiation with their attendant mantras. The Sangha in consequence minimizes the significance of the rite - 'If a man reads the Bhagavat, initiation is unnecessary' - but the public continue to expect it. In an attempt to undermine the authority of the gurus the Sri Shankaradeva Sangha has recently published a manual for initiation (Tirthanath Goswami 1969) containing the esoteric mantras which they describe as 'fake things introduced by the satrādhikārs for their own power.' The first leaders of the Sangha initiated converts who became attached to them personally as their disciples. This system led to schismatic tendencies in the organization and allegations of corruption. They have now introduced in each district an Initiation Committee, three

to seven of whose members are required to be present at initiation. Initiates thus belong to the organization and not to an individual guru. In the form of initiation adopted by the Sangha Shankaradeva and Madhavadeva are presented to the initiate as the gurus of the sect and not those who give initiation. A Gosain made the following practical comment on the revised system:

'The religion of Shankaradeva is based on initiation. The particular instructions are not important. They are kept secret and handed down from Mahanta to Mahanta and from Gosain to Gosain. But it creates belief in the system. By publishing the mantras they have destroyed this framework and modified the religion of Shankaradeva ... Initiation taken from a committee of seven members is meaningless.'

Indirectly the impact of the new sects is said to have benefitted both the satrādhikārs and the priests. The Gosains of many small satras, driven by economic necessity, have profited by turning to western education and taking gainful employment; their satras exist today only as a postal address. Similarly the Brahman priests, with a diminishing clientele, are abandoning their traditional occupation and only the fool of the family is said to enter the priesthood. Some are to be seen cultivating with hoe or buffalo, others have entered the professions.

The commonest reason given for the change to Eleven days is that one month's impurity is incompatible with the conditions of modern life.

'Nowadays one cannot stay in the house doing nothing for one month after the death of parents - that is certain. That is not a crime.'

The Shankar Sangha is opposed to the renunciation of the world:

'We oppose bhakats who have long hair and go from house to house begging. The śāstras say we should marry and do our duty in the world - that is dharma. In Kali Yuga the sannyasis are eaters of night soil' (former Padadhikar of Shankar Sangha).

They have devised a shortened version of the mantras and other daily rituals compatible with active participation in business and office life. For the traditional hom sacrifice at marriage they have substituted a new ceremony in the vernacular. The simplification of ritual extends to many folk customs either suggestive of spirit worship or rejected as superstitious. Traditionally, for example,

it is the custom for the mother of the bride and the mother of the groom, when they go in procession to draw water for the ceremonial bath, to place an areca nut, pan and pice in the tank saying, 'I draw water for the marriage of so-and-so.' This is objected to on the grounds that, 'We worship Vishnu, we do not worship water'. The marriage customs that have been discontinued in some areas include the throwing of sugar balls (lāru) over the head of the groom on arrival as a protection against evil spirits, the rubbing of the bride and groom with turmeric and pulse, the erection of a ceremonial quadrangle of banana trees (bei) for the ceremonial bath, the burial of a duck's egg under the quadrangle, the pounding of wild turmeric by seven married women (gāthiyan khundā), the exchange of ceremonial water pots between the bride's house and the groom's house, the drawing with rice flour of a circular pattern (maṛal) as a seat for the sacred water pot, the hanging of auspicious mango leaves across the gateway to the house, the ribald dance of an old woman with a winnowing mat on her head, the contest between drummers, the ritual fast of the bride and groom and the offering of spiced foot to the spirits of envy (Khoba Khubi) on the third day of the wedding.⁴ On folk custom there is a division of opinion within the Sangha. Some reject all such customs as superstitious, others wish to preserve their distinctively Assamese character provided they do not contravene the monotheistic principle.

'We want to preserve the old customs unless they clash with Shankaradeva. I build a bei but I do not bury a duck's egg under it. I have no objection to mango leaves and other things. They will be used in my daughter's marriage. It is play. Some say: "Why should we use mango leaves?" But I say, "Why should we not?" My children will throw vegetables on the cattle on Cow Bihu. Play' (Padadhikar of Shankar Sangha).

Members of the Sangha do not observe fast days, the forbidden months for marriage or the forbidden days for ploughing, when they can be seen in the fields driving their oxen. They do not recognize ritual pollution - 'pollution does not exist' -, for which they have substituted the western notion of hygiene:

'We think as you do. When a fly falls on food, that food is impure.'

'Others put on ritually pure (dhuti) clothes to eat. We put on clean (cāphā) clothes to eat.'

The attenuation of ritual is criticized on the grounds that it has made religion too easy: the leaders may be devout but the followers will simply observe the forms and the forms have been so reduced as to mean little.

'If you take the line of the Shankar Sangha, just burn a man and finish him. They are too drastic. The danger is that when the rites become a habit, the religion will disappear. They are making religion too easy. Of course it is all right if done with feeling - this will not remain. In their ardent enthusiasm they will destroy everything.'

It was open to the reform sects to take the position that ritual requires adaptation and simplification in the changed conditions of modern life. Their critics, indeed, see what they are doing as essentially something new.

'Let them found a new religion. Why claim to derive from Shankaradeva? Shankaradeva's teaching has been handed down to us unchanged in an unbroken line from Gosain to Gosain. They say what we have done for five hundred years is a mistake. No, what they do now is a mistake.'

The Sangha, on the contrary, claims that its teachings derive from the authority of śāstra and the writings of the founders. The story is current of how Gopikabhallub Goswami, the pandit of the movement, journeyed to Benares in order to obtain an authentic copy of the Garuda Purana. In the edition used in Assam, published in Bengal, sloka 19 authorizing eleven-day observances for all castes was omitted - or so it is said - at the instigation of the Brahman priests. At the annual meeting of the Sri Shankaradeva Sangha in 1936 Rs: 2000 was put on the table and promised to anyone who could show that the rules in respect of death pollution (aśōc) as laid down in the Sangha were contrary to śāstra (aśāstriyā). The Sangha takes the view that its changes in accepted practice represent a return to the original purity of Shankaradeva's religion as set out in his writings and that they in consequence are the only true Vaishnavas:

'We don't speak anything outside the religious books, Shankaradeva's works. He also did not invent his own religion but referred to earlier scriptures.'

'Our basis is the writing of Shankaradeva and Madhavadeva only. It is no new thing. What we believe is that it is Sri Shankaradeva's own teaching. The satras were established to continue his teachings, but the satrādhikārs are groping in the darkness. There are many satrādhikārs who regard Sri Shankaradeva as their guru but never follow his instructions. The people have been misled. The Sri Shankaradeva Sangha was started forty years ago in order to teach people exactly what their religion is.'

The uncompromising rigidity of the Sangha is often criticized: 'If a man's religion cannot tolerate other religions, it is not worth the name of religion.' It serves, however, two important functions for its adherents. In the first place, it provides them with a platform for the abolition of caste and the rejection of the Brahmans so that the social reforms which provide the impetus of the movement can be implemented in the name of religion. Secondly, it acts as a form of legitimation for a new middle class élite composed of men from the lower castes who have benefitted from the changed conditions of education and employment to gain a new secular standing. These men are not willing to acquiesce in the inferior rank held by their caste in the traditional system. At the same time, by virtue of being brought up in this system, they also share its values. A highly educated Chutiya, attracted by the ideas of the Sangha and engaged with his co-villagers in a protest to the Gosain at the low place given to Chutiyas at feasts in the satra Name House, commented on his caste rank as follows: 'It is not only the high castes who think we are inferior. We also feel we are inferior.' The effect of the reform movement is to provide such men with an alternative system in which caste distinctions are not only disregarded as irrelevant to spiritual salvation but condemned as heretical social practices on the authority of the scriptures.

The reform sects draw a parallel between the teachings of the Bhagavata Purana and the egalitarian values of democratic India. Many of their revisions to existing practice advocated in the name of bhakti - the simplification of ritual, the abandonment of magical and superstitious customs, the emphasis on monotheism, the condemnation of blood sacrifice and image worship and the rejection of untouchability and caste - seem to owe at least as much to the current trends of the modern age. The belief in one God provides a rationale for abolishing caste distinctions - 'God is one: therefore man is also one' - and

is seen as the basis of a universalistic ethic which will convert Vaishnavism into a world religion:

'This religion will unify not only Assam, including tribals and Muslims, but the whole world.⁵ The worship of one god is the only religion of mankind. Islam and Christianity are simple forms of Vaishnavism.'

The adaptation of Vaishnavite practices to the spirit of the age has been accompanied by a transformation in the categories of religious thought. The idea of Brahmanhood as the possession of knowledge, traditionally vested in the Brahman caste and extended to the gurus, has given place to the diffusion of divinity among the laity regarded as the living representatives of God. The privileged intermediary roles of the priest (in respect of Vedic ritual) and the guru (in respect of bhakti) have been rejected in favour of the text of the Bhagavat which is accessible to all who can read. The rite of initiation, traditionally regarded as the only portal through which the devotee can approach God, has been diminished to the point that it is no longer considered essential for membership of the sect. The rite itself has lost both its esoteric character and its personalized link between guru and disciple conceived in terms of exchange of substance when the initiate is identified with the guru as the embodiment of God. In its revised form the mantras have been greatly simplified and the system of higher stages of initiation has lapsed. The Sangha is hostile to the idea of renunciation as withdrawal from the world and advocates a short and straightforward set of rituals appropriate to the daily life of a Vaishnava actively involved in worldly affairs. The complex observances of ritual purity have also been abandoned in favour of the modern notion of hygiene. The sect has rejected the concept of caste - 'caste does not exist' - and the gradations of the caste hierarchy, formerly expressed in terms of relative purity, are replaced by a dichotomy between those within the faith and those without, untouchability being re-defined in terms of those outside the faith who worship many gods. The belief that devotees are 'one' and the 'same' by virtue of sharing a common substance is translated into the modern idiom of equality and democracy. The worship of the devotees as embodiments of god - 'The service of man is the service of God' - is secularized as the

idea of public and national service. The leaders of the Sangha see themselves as social reformers, faithful to the teachings of Shankaradeva, who are striving to regenerate their religion and their society in accordance with his principles. But in the eyes of their critics the conversion of Vaishnavism into Everyman's religion has necessitated a radical transformation in the structure of the religion which they no longer recognize as their own.

From Nowgong the reform movement spread to other districts of the State. Today the Sri Shankaradeva Sangha represents only a small proportion of those who have become Eleven-day or Haridhaniya under the influence of the ideas which led to its inception. It is estimated that perhaps one-third of the Shudra population of the State has already become Eleven-day and their numbers are increasing. The effect of the movement has been to create new social divisions in the village. When a group of households decides to become Eleven-day or Haridhaniya - usually on the death of a prominent man - it divides itself from the rest of the village to form a separate religious association with its own Name House. The different sects do not associate or inter-dine and as one or other of the new sects is now to be found in almost every village of Upper Assam,⁶ the reform movement has become the major vehicle for the expression of caste and other local animosities.

The development of the reform sects in the village of Panbari is discussed in the next chapter.

Notes.

1. My father, who was Deputy Commissioner of Nowgong at this time, notes in his memoirs that he had a very religious man in his office called Dambarudhar Barua who arranged the marriage of his daughter without employing a Brahman to perform the customary rites. The atmosphere in the office became so acrimonious that he had to have him transferred.
2. When offering piṇḍa, a length of kuśa grass, measured by the stretch between the thumb and forefinger, is cut and twisted into a ring. This is called the kuśa Brahman. I have been given various interpretations of its significance. It is said that a Brahman in performing śrāddha acts as the servant of his client; but a Brahman cannot be a servant (dāsa), so he invokes the kuśa Brahman which becomes impure and is thrown away at the conclusion of the rite. It is also suggested that the kuśa Brahman is used so that the mantras uttered by the giver of piṇḍa should have the same efficacy as if uttered by a Brahman. Again it is said that if there is any fault in the performance, the responsibility will rest, not with the giver of piṇḍa, but with the kuśa Brahman. The most popular interpretation, however, is that a good Brahman priest is required for the rite, but as there is no such thing as a genuine priest, a Brahman is made out of kuśa instead.
3. The Garamuriya Gosain was an active member of the Congress party and spent some years in jail. When he was released, it is said that the other Gosains would not give him proper place, a slight which he resented. The Gosains usually required Congress workers to undergo purification (prāyaścitta) on release from jail, which often caused offence.
4. A guest at a wedding ceremony conducted according to Sangha rites commented that it was more like a funeral than a marriage.
5. The movement also serves as a vehicle for ideas of Assamese nationalism. The Sri Shankaradeva Sangha takes the view that all who live in Assam are Assamese and not only proselytizes actively among tribals and tea garden labour but claims three Muslim converts. This view is partly a response to the dismemberment of Assam and the carving of five hill states out of what was once a single province.
6. I visited 11 villages in Upper Assam during the course of the field-work. All contained one or more sectarian divisions of Eleven-day people, Haridhанийas, or members of the Sri Shankaradeva Sangha, who did not inter-dine or associate with the Monthly people or with one another.

CHAPTER TWELVE

REFORM SECTS IN PANBARI

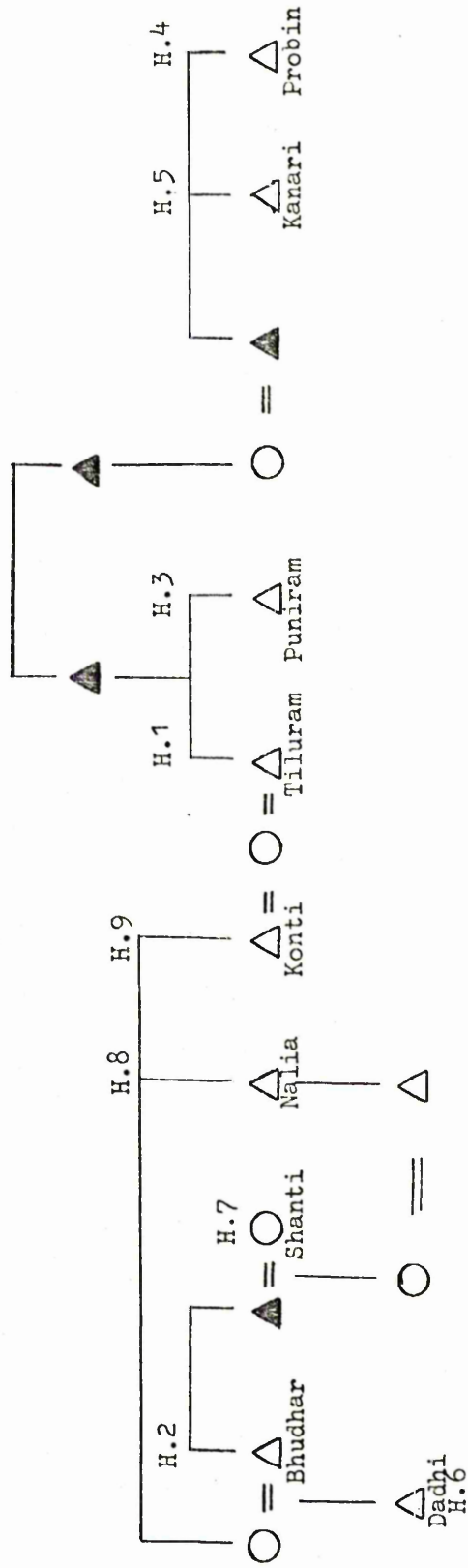
There are two of the reform sects in the village of Panbari: the Haridhaniyas, who call themselves Harijaniyas, and the Thirteen-day people.

The Harijaniya movement in the village was started in the early 1940s by two men: Bhudhar Bora, known as Bhudhar Bhakat because of his knowledge of religion, and Tiluram Dutta. Bhudhar is a man of sixty, Duliya Kalita by caste, who works as a peon on Rs: 80 per month. He has $3/5$ bigas of house land and 2 bigas of paddy land which yields enough rice to feed the household of nine for three months. At the time he became a Harijaniya he was poor but the household condition has improved since two of his sons began earning. Tiluram Dutta is about 50, Chutiya by caste, who works as a carpenter on Rs: 250 a month. He has 2 bigas of house land and no rice land but, as he has three sons earning, the house is well-off by village standards. The fathers of both men were small cultivators, but they have profited by the opportunities of employment near the town to raise their standard of life. They tried to convert the other villagers to their views but in this they have had only a limited success. In 1969 the Harijaniyas numbered 11 houses of which 6 were Chutiya, 3 were Duliya Kalita, 1 was Kooch and 1 Miri.

Excluding the Miri who migrated to Panbari from a Miri village six years ago, the other 10 households are distributed in 5 descent groups. In each case only part of the descent group has become Harijaniya, the rest continuing in the old custom of one month.

8 of the households are connected by affinal ties: see fig. 6 overleaf. Bhudhar, Duliya Kalita by caste, eloped with Nalia's sister who is a Chutiya. Great marriage was held five years later: the children are Duliya Kalita. Tiluram eloped with his first wife and, while she was still alive, he eloped with his wife's younger sister. She bore him a son. One year after the elopement he sent her home and her mother arranged a gift marriage with Konti. The little boy stayed with his grandmother. He has never been reconciled

Fig. 6. Affinal Links between Harijaniya Houses



N.B. All the unions shown were elopements, except for that of Konti with the girl who bore Tiluram a son, which was a gift marriage.

to Tilu for deserting his mother and did not invite him to his wedding. Tilu's father's brother's daughter eloped with the elder brother of Kanai and Probin. It cannot, however, be concluded that affinal ties provide the cement of the group for many households in this quarter of the village are connected by runaway matches.

The Harijaniya Name House and the location of the Harijaniya houses in the village is shown on Map 12. (The house of the Miri is not shown, as he was absent from the village in 1969 when the survey was conducted: he lives near the Name House.) Although neighbourhood ties, caste and kinship have been factors in recruitment, individuals are often motivated by more personal reasons. Particulars of the other 9 households (H.3-11) are given below:

H.3. When Tilu's mother died fifteen years ago he persuaded his elder brother Puniram, who lived in the next house, to cremate her without the expense of Brahmanical rites. Puniram thereby became a Harijaniya.

H.4 and 5. Probin returned to the village eleven years ago after working on a tea estate. After the death of his first wife, he eloped with his wife's younger sister but she too died shortly afterwards. He then took up with an Ahom woman who left him. Later he eloped with another Ahom who bore him three sons. As the Name Houses in Panbari do not ordinarily associate with Ahoms, he would have had difficulty in gaining admission. He became a Harijaniya on his return. Six years later his elder brother Kanari retired and he too joined the Harijaniyas. They are Chutiya by caste.

H.6. Bhudhar's eldest son, Dadhi, separated from his father and brothers eight years ago. He continued as a Harijaniya.

H.7. Santi is a poor widow with a young daughter. After her husband's death she ate occasionally in the house of Bhudhar, her husband's younger brother. The Tamuli Name House warned her that she must not associate with him, but she replied that she was often hungry and had to accept food sometimes in the houses of her relatives. She is no longer a member of the Name House and is considered a Harijaniya because she eats with Harijaniyas.

H.8 and 9. Nalia and Konti are two brothers. Their father was a Keot who eloped with a Chutiya girl. He was cut off by his family who performed the 'throwing away of the cooking pots' as if he were dead. Nalia went as a son-in-law of the house to another village. He inherited his father-in-law's land which he sold for a considerable sum and retired to his natal village four years ago. He became a Harijaniya together with his younger brother, Konti, who is very poor. They have taken Chutiya caste.

H.10. Bhola is a Kooch who drinks heavily and is very quarrelsome. One evening he struck a Kalita in Bayan Name House and abused the

Kalita caste for their arrogance (v. p.132 above). The Kalita laid a complaint against him and two days later the Name House met and fined Bhola for disorderly conduct. He replied that he had been drunk but he refused to pay the fine. He added: 'I will never pay the fine and today I leave the Name House never to return in my life or the lives of my children.' Bhola then joined the Harijanias and is actively trying to convert his four brothers.

H.11. Prem Pau is a Miri. Eight years ago the Sri Shankaradeva Sangha held a meeting in his village and converted a number of families, including his parents. When he moved to Panbari six years ago, he joined the Harijanias here. He is a highly educated and much travelled young man, who has been very successful in various business enterprises. On the wall of his house are three framed placards: one with a quotation from Mahatma Gandhi, one a religious text by Newton which he translated into Assamese,² and the third saying 'Hail to guru Shankar'. Assamese Vaishnavism, the all-India Congress movement and Christianity are combined in his catholic views. He stands aloof from the parochial and often acrimonious life of village politics: 'I have observed that in the villages everyone wants to arrange affairs himself. I have travelled outside Assam - all India is my country.' As a Miri who sees himself as a citizen of India, he is attracted by the universalistic features of the Harijaniya dharma.

The Harijanias are troubled by constant schism as a result of personal quarrels. In 1967 Tiluram and Bhudhar quarrelled and the group divided into two parties. Puniram, Tilu's elder brother, joined Bhudhar and Bhudhar's son joined Tiluram. In 1968 they combined to construct a Name House on government land and built a manikūt of mud walls and thatch. Two months afterwards they separated again; Bhudhar's party continued to use the Name House, but Tiluram's party met in members' houses. In 1969 they combined again to produce a religious drama in the Name House on Janmastamee under the leadership of Tiluram who is a Bayan. In 1970 Puniram quarrelled with his brother Tiluram, and left. Soon afterwards Bhudhar also quarrelled with Tilu and the group again divided. Tilu's party does not use the Name House, which is now complete, although they have laboured to construct it. The main reason for division is the rivalry between Tilu and Bhudhar for leadership of the group. Prem Pau commented: 'Both know much. If one acts as Name Leader, the other is dissatisfied. Two tigers cannot live in one forest.' As against this, the group can scarcely command sufficient resources at full strength to stage a play or celebrate a festival and it is on such occasions that differences are usually healed.

The sect in this village calls itself Harijaniya ('he who knows

Hari') in preference to the more usual term of Haridhaniya ('he who shouts Hari'). They base their monotheistic dharma on the teachings of Shankaradeva and Madhavadeva whose works both Tilu and Bhudhar quote extensively in their religious expositions:

'God (bhagavan) has four names: Ram, Krishna, Hari, Narayan. Who knows and worships no other gods and goddesses, we call Harijaniya. In our dharma śāstra it is written that in the Kali Age only one god should be worshipped' (Tiluram).

'In Shankaradeva's 'Ratnakara' he said that in the Kali Age we should worship only one god. It is written: God lives in the soul of man, so one should not worship other gods. If, like Brahmins, one worships goddesses and then performs Hari Nam, it is as valueless as the howling of foxes' (Bhudhar).

The Harijanis reject Brahmanical rites on the grounds that they involve the worship of numerous deities and tell many stories against the Brahmins:

'In ancient times the Brahmins killed a cow after laguṇ diyā (initiation with sacred thread) and ate it. Now they make a cow out of rice flour and cut it and eat it. They put a cloth round to keep it secret, so that no one can see' (Tiluram).

'The Ahom kings persecuted Shankaradeva 600 years ago because they were under the influence of the Brahmins. Brahmin satras were established which slaughtered the followers of Shankaradeva' (Bhudhar).

'Forbidden days for ploughing. Rules of ritual impurity. The Brahmins, who alone could read, introduced these things to get power over people' (Prem Pau).

Apart from the Miri, the Harijaniya households were formerly disciples of three satras (Auniati, Bengenati, Bhotmaric), but the Gosain now refuses to accept their dues. They in turn reject the satrādhikārs on the grounds that they have corrupted the teachings of Shankaradeva by the adoption of Brahmanical rites.

'Five hundred and twenty-one years ago Shankaradeva was born in Nowgong. He translated the Bhagavat into Assamese and spread the Harijaniya dharma. He died in Cooch Bihar at the age of 125. His chief disciple, Madhavadeva, continued his work. He died at the age of 107. After his death this dharma was lost. There are many satras today, 530 satras. They take the name of God in their mouth, but they perform the worships of gods (devata pūjā), not the worship of God (īśvar pūjā).'

Tiluram and Bhudhar give initiation but they do not call themselves guru and make no distinction among themselves between guru and

disciple, substituting for the authority of the guru the text of Bhagavat which, with the spread of literacy, can be consulted directly as the word of god.

'The Bhagavat is my guru. I learnt the Harijaniya dharma from Bhagavat.'

In the absence of the guru there has been a shift in favour of the lay devotees as the living representatives of god and the traditional form of worship has been adapted to emphasize this:

'When we invite devotees, the devotees are God. We have no need of thāpanā. We worship the devotees, not the thāpanā. We do not invoke God into the Bhagavat. We do not invoke God into the offering (prasād). We prepare the offering but we set it down before the devotees. God does not come to eat, so we eat. We ourselves are God.'

The devotees here substitute for the visible symbol of God which is dispensed with altogether.

These unorthodox procedures were later modified. The number of Harijaniyas in a village is usually small so that they associate with like groups in other villages whom they invite to their ceremonies. These Harijaniyas objected to the conduct of worship in Panbari, saying that without light, incense, areca nut, pan and pice no worship could take place: if these practices continued, they would no longer eat the prasād. As a result the Harijaniyas have now resumed the customary form of worship: they establish god in the thāpanā and make an offering to him of prasād, light, incense, areca nut, pan and pice as customary.

The Harijaniyas do not make caste distinctions and say they are prepared to accept even Christians or Muslims as one of themselves provided they observe the Harijaniya dharma, but they will not eat or associate with caste Hindus outside their faith. They do not recognize ritual pollution. They are not therefore required to preserve the ritual purity of the kitchen nor to observe a period of fast after cremating the body of a kinsman.

'Ritual impurity does not exist. If we are cooking fish in a house when a child is born, we will eat the fish. After cremation, we read the Bhagavat. When the name of Bhagavat is there, how can there be impurity?'

They have rejected the many folk customs of the traditional Assamese marriage and ceased to celebrate the three seasonal festivals

(bihu), so that a son-in-law no longer visits his wife's parents on those days. They do not recognise the forbidden days for ploughing when they can be seen in the fields driving their oxen. All this runs counter to village ideas of propriety.

'We do not like the Harijanias, we do not understand them. We have seen customs we do not like. The Harijanias plough on forbidden days. They do not fast after death. They eat food on the cremation ground, shouting "Jai Ram". We no longer visit these houses.'

The Harijanias feel themselves to be hated and occupy an isolated position in the village. The Name Houses of Panbari, Bayan and Tamuli, who continue to observe the traditional period of one month's death pollution for Shudra castes, no longer eat in Harijaniya houses nor will the Harijanias associate with them.

The prohibition on inter-dining between different sects creates particular problems for kin and affines. In this conflict of loyalties some men sever all connection with their relatives. Others, more liberal, continue private informal visits, but to attend a public gathering such as a marriage or funerary feast is seen as a statement of political alignment and leads to expulsion from the Name House. The pattern of kinship obligations thus becomes difficult to sustain.

'Last year our mother's brother invited us to the marriage of his daughter. He performed by Vedic rites so we did not attend the ceremony. In other ways we helped. We went to the groom's house, we helped in selection. But on the day of the marriage we did not go. Tonight we invited him to the marriage of a daughter in our house but he refused. As he is not coming today, we will not visit his house again.'

Marriage arrangements also cause difficulties and many matches are broken off because the parties fail to agree on the form of ceremony. Religious scruples, however, often yield to the advantage of obtaining a good son-in-law whose scarcity value is reflected in the shift within one generation from bride-price to dowry. If the groom's house insists on marriage by the traditional fire sacrifice, a Harijaniya is usually prepared to compromise his principles to the extent of asking a relative to substitute for him as the 'giver of the bride' (kanīyā dātā) and absenting himself from the house on the wedding night.

The exclusiveness of the reform sects places the individual in

a situation of conflicting obligations in which his decision to adhere to a particular set of ritual observances is often determined less by religious considerations than the practical advantages of continued support from kin and neighbours.

Padma was attracted by the Harijaniya dharma and attended several of their meetings. His elder brother rebuked him and his wife's father took the lead in rebuking him. Although he still supports the ideas of the Harijanis, he paid a fine and returned to his Name House.

Tiluram persuaded his elder sister's husband and his two brothers to join the Harijanis. They did so willingly to avoid the cost of employing Brahmans. The brothers' wives continued to visit the Monthly houses nearby whereupon Tilu reproved them, 'Why are you going to Monthly houses?' They replied, 'They are our neighbours. We must visit them.' Shortly afterwards the three brothers left the Harijanis and upon payment of a fine of Rs: 5 and a piece of cloth were re-admitted to their old Name House.

Deoram became a Harijaniya 15 years ago when his eldest son died and he cremated him without Brahmanical rites. His wife's parents and her brothers ceased to visit him. Two years later he became Monthly again.

Between my two visits to the village (in 1969 and 1971) two more houses joined the Harijanis. One was that of Noren, Bhola's younger brother. Bhola tried to convert his brothers to become Harijanis. In June of 1970 his younger brother, Turun, gave a feast to the Harijanis on the eleventh day of his child's birth and invited all his brothers. Golap, the eldest brother, went to Bayan Name House and said: 'My younger brother, Turun, has invited me. He is trying to make me a Harijaniya. What shall I do?' They replied: 'It is as you wish. If you wish to go, go. If there is a death in your family, you turn first to your brothers. After that, you turn to us.' In spite of this Golap did not attend the feast, but Noren, who was living with Turun, ate at the feast and became a Harijaniya. (Turun has since migrated to Tezpur.)

The other was the house of a destitute Keot widow who lived for a time with her younger brother and her husband's younger brother on land provided by her daughter's husband. When this land was sold, she moved to a plot given her by her son's wife's mother's younger brother. Her husband's younger brother died. As she was too poor to employ a Brahman, she decided to cremate him without Brahmanical

rites and to become a Harijaniya.

The Sri Shankaradeva Sangha was established in the Panbari area on 12 September, 1960. A meeting of about 200 people was arranged by three organizers of the Sangha, one of whom was Prem Pau's father who came from a Miri village. Sonaram Chutiya addressed the meeting and Prem Pau provided the rice for the jal-pān which took two days to prepare. 51 members joined the Sangha from Panbari and neighbouring villages to form a primary unit with Prem Pau as President and Tiluram's mother's brother's son as Secretary. The 13 Harijaniya households in Panbari all joined with the exception of Puniram, who had left because of a quarrel with his brother, Tilu. The 51 adult members, male and female, were distributed in 19 households of which 9 were Chutiya, 3 Duliya Kalita, 3 Kooch, 1 Kalita, 1 Cachari (tribal), 1 Miri (that of Prem Pau), and 1 Brahman. The Brahman was said to spend all his money on drink. A few months later he left the Sangha and underwent purification (prāyaścitta), paying a fine for associating with Harijaniyas. The continued membership of some of the other new members is also in question. After the establishment of the Sangha, the Harijaniyas divided again (v. p.288 above). While the division continues, one party will remain in the Sangha and the other will operate independently.

There is little difference in the religious observances of the Harijaniyas and that of the Sri Shankaradeva Sangha, who are themselves often referred to as Haridhaniya (a term which they resent). The majority of Haridhaniyas, however, prefer to remain as autonomous local groups rather than become members of a State organization. There are a number of reasons for this. The Sangha has a reputation for intolerance and exclusiveness and is criticized as a destructive movement, based on communal hatred, which has divided society. Its members are forbidden to associate with houses who employ Brahmans, that is, with most of the population. The Harijaniyas in Panbari also take this position, but other groups of Haridhaniyas are not always prepared to cut off connection with their affines, and relax these rules in practice. Again, there are many local variations of custom amongst them. In some villages the Haridhaniyas observe the forbidden days for ploughing with oxen, in others they take initiation from the Gosain: in these matters they have no wish to follow the

Sangha line. More importantly, however, each group of Haridhanyas has its own history of local struggle and has little wish to be merged as a primary unit in a large scale organization when it can retain its pride of achievement and its sense of separate identity.

The Thirteen-day people are predominantly Kayastha. For an account of these households see p. 224 above. The movement started in Panbari in 1967 when Ganesh Prasad's wife died. He consulted the houses of his seven brothers and his second brother's son who was living separately from his father and they agreed to complete their death pollution on the 12th day and to perform the first śrāddha on the 13th day. Ganesh engaged a new Brahman priest who was prepared to officiate at the rites. These were the wealthiest houses in the village, engaged in business or clerical occupations in the nearby town, and they gave as their reason for shortening the period of ritual impurity the economic disadvantages under modern conditions of staying at home and losing a whole month's work. All nine houses claimed to be Kayastha by caste.

Six months later they were joined by a Keot called Lakhi Bora. Lakhi had settled in Panbari, his wife's natal village, after his retirement in 1960. He was a man versed in the scriptures. One night when the usual Name Leader at the Name House was ill, he attempted to take his place and lead the service. The congregation refused to co-operate and, angered by this insult, he left the Name House and became Thirteen-day together with his wife's brother. Another rich Kayastha house became Thirteen-day about the same time.

The Panbari Name House sat to discuss the Thirteen-day people and ruled that if any house attended Thirteen-day rites, it would be expelled. When Lakhi Bora arranged his daughter's marriage, he invited the Thirteen-day people and three or four houses of his old Name House. Of these a Kayastha attended and a Keot widow who was not on good terms with her relations. They were in consequence expelled from the Name House and joined the Thirteen-day group.

In the beginning of 1969 another Kayastha woman died. The dead woman's sons performed her śrāddha on the 13th day and, together with three Kayastha houses who attended the funeral feast, they were expelled from the Name House.

20 households have now seceded from Panbari Name House to form

the Thirteen-day group. They comprise 17 of the 18 Kayastha houses in the village together with 3 Keot houses. The Kayasthas in Assam are an open caste, largely recruited by infiltration from below, and it is the general opinion of the village that it is open to any Kalita to become a Kayastha by giving up cultivation. The transition is validated by affinal connections and in particular by the marriage of daughters. These houses are, however, for a number of reasons at odds with the villagers and their claim to Kayastha rank is not recognised. One house has four unmarried girls who attained the menarche 21, 13, 12 and 10 years ago respectively. Their father, unable to find suitable bridegrooms, prefers to keep them unmarried rather than compromise his caste aspirations. Another house has three unmarried girls, the eldest over 40, in a similar situation. The decision of these households to become Thirteen-day is chiefly to be seen as an affirmation of their disputed status as Kayastha.

The Thirteen-day movement is confined almost entirely to Kayasthas living in towns or sub-urban villages who wish to differentiate themselves from the Shudra population as Kshatriya. They do not seek to equate themselves with the Brahmans and have no quarrel with Brahmanical rites. In general they show little interest in doctrinal matters - most of the Kayasthas in Panbari have not yet taken initiation, saying they are too busy - and the change to Thirteen-day is to be interpreted as a move to upgrade their caste status within the traditional system rather than as a challenge to institutionalized religious observances or a desire for widespread social reform.

Notes:

1. 'If someone offers you a little water,
Give him a full belly of food.
If someone greets you with kindness,
Bow down to him.
If someone gives you a small coin,
Help him with a gold coin.
If someone saves your life,
Give your life for him.'

2. 'Like water to fish,
So is religion to the believer.
To him religion is his nature
And he lives on that.
He cannot live outside it.'

CHAPTER 13

CASTE AND SECT

In order to analyse the relationship between caste and sect it is necessary to know what caste is and what sect is. During the period of my fieldwork these categories did not constitute a problem and it was only in the course of working my way through the data on return from the field that I gradually lost confidence that I had any real understanding of either of these institutions. As a result the comments in this concluding chapter are largely negative. In Chapter 9 on Assamese castes I set out some of the misconceptions, as they appeared from the ethnography, in anthropological models of the caste system. In Chapter 10 on the devotional path I attempted, more positively, to present certain aspects of the religion in terms which, I hoped, bore at least some correspondence to the ideas of the people. The task of de-construction is, however, much more severe than I originally supposed. In what follows I indicate some of the difficulties that have arisen in the attempt to analyse the institutions of an alien people through the concepts and language of our own culture.

The most comprehensive attempt to understand the nature of the caste system is Dumont's celebrated work, Homo Hierarchicus. In his introduction Dumont criticizes contemporary anthropologists for their cultural bias towards equality which, in his view, has made them incapable of understanding the nature of hierarchy and of caste as a hierarchical system (Dumont 1970). The term 'hierarchy', however, is also culture-specific. The Assamese do not have a word for it. Anthropologists usually present the order of castes in their village in a vertically-ranked series, with the highest at the top and the lowest at the bottom. The associated visual image is a ladder-like construction and castes are spoken of as moving 'up' and 'down' the hierarchy. In Assam, however, castes are said to be 'big' or 'little', not 'high' or 'low', and the associated visual image

is a circle with the 'biggest' castes in the centre, the 'smaller' castes in the surrounding rings, and the untouchables outside altogether (the ideal plan of cities and temples is of a similar kind). The implications of this model are not those of a ranked series of status groups, but of a moral universe with a sacred and protected centre inhabited by the Brahman as the possessor of knowledge.

Dumont's emphasis on hierarchy as the central feature of caste and of Hindu society has been criticized by Parry as 'over-simplified and one-dimensional' in that it 'obscures some persistently egalitarian features of the Indian scheme of values' (Parry 1974). He examines relations of equality in respect of bhaichara land tenure systems and draws attention to bhaktiyoga as another area where religious egalitarianism could usefully be studied. In Assam the devotee is described as god in human form and all devotees are said to be one (eke) and the same (samān). When a devotee is invited for Name, his host bows down before him in worship, for at that time he comes in the form of god (īśvarar rūp). The so-called egalitarian features of bhakti are indeed interpreted by the reform sects as an anticipation of modern ideas of equality and democracy. The fact, however, that all devotees are considered in some way to be one and the same seems to exclude the possibility of their equality, for in so far as persons are identical they cannot be thought of as equal. The Western concepts of equality and hierarchy are substituted in the Hindu context by the distinction between those who share the same inherent moral substance (dhātu) and those of different moral substance, a distinction that governs the nature of the exchanges considered proper between them. It is doubtful whether imported categories such as hierarchy, equality, individualism, theism, are appropriate to an understanding of the conceptual order of Hinduism.

In anthropological studies the term 'caste' has usually been taken to denote a group. This has led to the (unsolved) problem of the distinction between caste and sub-caste. Lucy Carroll, for example, has argued that the so-called caste of Kayastha is an unintended consequence of British administrative policies and that the reality on the ground consists of the many sub-castes who have found it expedient to group themselves under this category (Carroll 1975). Pocock's study of the Patidars represents a significant shift from

structure (castes as groups) to process (caste as 'being'): 'Faced finally with the problem of definition - What is the Patidar caste? - I am obliged to abandon the conventional search for factors making for solidarity or even for unity in disunity. I describe what I call a perpetual defining process in Patidar life, a constant inter-play of integrative and differentiative currents' (Pocock 1972:52-3). A caste (or sub-caste), taken as a whole, is not a group in the anthropological sense, at best it can be conceptualized as a series of over-lapping networks chiefly based on affinal connections (cf. Mayer 1960). Dumont's perceptive comment that, 'far more than a "group" in the ordinary sense, the caste is a state of mind' (Dumont 1970:34), suggests the possibility of looking at caste as one of a number of categories used as a basis of social differentiation.

The Report on the Census of Assam, 1891 contains a section of 47 pages headed 'Assam Castes with their Sub-divisions' (R.C.A.1891: 66-113). Thereafter follows a list in alphabetical order of what are now called castes and tribes together with the sub-sections of each. Although the sub-divisions of Ahom, Chutiya, Kalita are in some cases called 'sub-castes' while the sub-divisions of Ao Naga, Kuki are called 'sub-tribes', the category 'section' appears under both and the heading suggests that the Commissioner was using 'caste' as a general term of classification. In this, of course, it corresponds closely to the use of jāti. The sub-divisions are differentiated according to a wide range of criteria: occupation, ancestry, territory, diet, sectarian affiliation, length of conversion to Hinduism, family office held under the Ahom kings, etc. In other words, a great number of factors are available for use as the differentiating criteria of social classes. The Assamese use the term jāti to denote all classes (animal and vegetable), but the anthropologists use 'caste', which is presented as a translation of jāti, to denote one class only. The effect of this approach has been a one-dimensional analysis of Hindu society almost exclusively in terms of the single factor of 'caste'. What we require to know is not a man's 'caste' but his 'castes'.¹

The understanding of bhakti requires a more radical re-orientation than the understanding of castes. The categories employed in the religious discourse of bhakti - deva (god), puruṣa (person) saguṇa/

nirguṇa (personal/impersonal), murti (image, form), rūp (form, shape), guru (religious preceptor), mantra (magical formulae), avatār (incarnation), śāstra (sacred text) - have no exact counterparts in our conceptual system. Two of these - deva, mantra - are taken up briefly below.

It has often been pointed out that the concept of divinity is diffused in India (Brahmans are living gods, beggars come in the form of god, senior kin are addressed by the suffix deva meaning 'god'); this is not a problem. The difficulty arises when god's name as his oral form, or the guru as his living representative (murti), or the devotee as a worshipper participating in his nature, is said to be greater than god himself. The idea of a personalized god associated with bhakti is clearly different from God as understood in the West. In the Judaeo-Christian tradition worship is oriented to the absolute personality of God, considered as an ontological reality, and Christ in each moment of his appearance is believed to be Christ. The personal god of the devotee, on the other hand, is set within the different cultural tradition of Hinduism, in which no conceptualization of god is taken to be god-in-himself, who rests in a state of pure consciousness outside the three guṇas and cannot be conceptualized. Shiva transforms himself in the mode of manifestation (vibhūti, māyā), Vishnu transforms himself mainly in the mode of incarnation (avatār). But Shiva in his momentary manifestations is not Shiva (because whatever is manifest is illusory), nor from this point of view are the incarnations of Vishnu to be taken as Vishnu. The personalized god of bhakti represents a gradation in the nature of god to make him accessible to devotion. In other words, the orientation of the worshipper is seen as entering into the idea of the god whom he worships. For every performance of Name, Krishna must be established in a thāpanā (in spite of the fact that the Name House contains the great thāpanā in which Krishna is permanently established), for each manifestation of Krishna is held to vary with the place and circumstances of establishment and the condition of the worshippers. His symbolic representations (murti, rūp) are therefore transformations which vary between one another according to contingent factors deriving from the circumstances of their establishment rather than the objective character of god. (In the same way the Madonna of one shrine is not seen as identical with

the Madonna of another shrine: her placement enters into her nature.)

A mantra is an oral symbol imparted personally at initiation by a guru to a disciple. Outside this context the same collection of sounds does not constitute a mantra and has no efficacy (Bharati 1965: 106). Religious knowledge is here to be understood as a state of 'being' and not as the possession of a 'piece' of knowledge. The guru in his person represents to the initiate Vishnu himself. The effect of the rite is to realise the identification of guru and disciple such that the disciple becomes Vishnu: therefore he knows Vishnu. From this point of view knowledge is not handed down through time but reproduced in each generation so that it persists outside time. The legitimacy of the guru does not derive from his charter of succession, but from the recognition that he presents to his disciples the living embodiment (murti) of god. The connotations of mantra give to Hindu ritual its specific character as the mental realization of a pre-existent state and not as an instrument for changing the natural order. In all ritual the transformations effected are mental transformations. E.g. The paraphernalia of cooking are equated by mantras with cosmic phenomena (v. chapter 8), but it is explicitly stated that the mantras themselves do not effect this identification. The identification exists but it is through the mantras that the cook comes to realize it. A similar view underlies the Hindu view of 'creation' as an evolution or unfolding of a potential, of truth in terms of the realization of the unmanifest, and of events (both what a man does and what happens to him which are not distinguished) as expressions of his nature. From our point of view marriage into a higher caste achieves higher caste status, but from their point of view it is a manifestation and confirmation of a pre-existent moral state (cf. 'Whoever bears rule is a Kshatriya'). Claims that we take to be aspirations of the socially mobile to higher status are invariably couched in terms of the recognition of lost status.

These illustrations exemplify the problems of attempting to understand and convey the nature of concepts which do not correspond with those of our own culture. Given that these concepts can only be understood in their passage through our consciousness, which is very differently oriented, an understanding of their nature, if at all possible, is necessarily partial and imperfect. Added to which

are the difficulties of conveying these concepts in a language which, because it lacks an appropriate vocabulary, is likely further to distort the meaning of the concepts in the very attempt to clarify them. The fundamental obstacles to the progress of interpretative sociology are extremely discouraging.²

In conclusion I propose briefly to examine the simplification of religion advocated by the reform sects in terms of the attenuation of religious categories.

The path of devotion, as traditionally understood, involved a re-ordering of the conceptual categories of Hinduism. The Gosain appropriated from the Brahman the role of the guru as the possessor of knowledge, a role which became greatly enlarged, leaving with the Brahman the offices of the priest. The Gosain, no less than the Brahman, was considered a living god. As the Gosain might or might not be a Brahman, the category of guru overlapped the categories of Brahman and non-Brahman. The householder appropriated the idea of renunciation and adapted it to life in the world so that the category of devotee, who might be either an ascetic or a householder, overlapped the categories of renouncer and householder. At the same time, although caste was taken as given, its relevance for devotion was denied, so that the devotee, in respect of devotion, could be said to be without caste. In sum, the basic social categories of religious thought persist in bhakti but are combined to form a different conceptual system.

The position of the reform sects can be summarized as follows:

They do not recognize the category of Brahman.

They do not recognize the category of renouncer.

They do not recognize the category of caste.

They do not recognize the category of guru (except in so far as it is vested in someone no longer living or in a sacred text).

They divide the social world into two categories only, devotees and non-devotees, and the religious world into god, sacred text and devotee, the text providing in respect of the devotee an avenue of direct access to god. The social reforms undertaken by the reform sects are thus accompanied by an equally radical transformation in the world of religious forms.

The extent to which the new sectarian movements will be successful in eliminating the social relevance of caste is a question that must wait upon further research in the field.

Notes:

1. The approach to caste in terms of social classification was prompted by an unpublished paper by Richard Burghart on 'Ethnicity and state transformation in Nepal'. Veena Das has recently made a considerable advance in the understanding of conceptual categories in Hinduism (Das 1967), and Ronald Inden has implicitly done an excellent hatchet job on the anthropological model, differentiating jātis in middle-period Bengal according to their possession of worship, territorial and occupational substance (Inden 1976:17). But these developments have so far made little impact on anthropological discourse.
2. Needham is one of the few anthropologists to address himself to the problems in this field (Needham 1972).

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