

Notes on the “Mahapurushyas”, A Sect of Vaishnavas in Assam

Capt. E.T. Dalton

www.tributetosankaradeva.org presents before the readers Capt. E.T. Dalton’s pioneering paper on the “Mahapurushyas” which first appeared in the Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal (JASB, 1851). The current piece is redacted from *A Creative Vision: - Essays on Sankaradeva and Neo-Vaisnava Movement in Assam; Srimanta Sankar Kristi Bikash Samiti (Dec 2004)*.

[About the Author]

Captain Edward Tuite Dalton (1815 - 1880) of the Hon’ble East India Company was the Political Assistant Commissioner of Assam in charge of Kamrup. He was a military man and also an anthropologist of repute. He played an active role in quelling the Mutiny of 1857 in Chota Nagpur and other areas. *Daltonganj* in Bihar is named after this intrepid soldier. Dalton’s famous book *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal* received worldwide acclaim as one of the finest contributions in the field of Anthropology.

He visited the Barpeta Satra – the ‘Borpetah *Shostro*’, in his own words- and witnessed the prayer services. He elaborates upon the Sattra ceremonials and the cloistral life in his paper - a first-hand account of Assam Vaisnavism.

Dalton’s “Mahapurushyas” must undoubtedly be the first of its kind on Assam Vaisnavism and the Sankaradeva Movement. Readers will notice that, although Dalton displays the political correctness and ‘stiff upper lip’ of the civil-servant throughout the major part of the essay, towards the end, there is a gradual softening:-

“None that have been present could fail to be struck with this very impressive mode of concluding the service.” [pg. 11]

The devotional atmosphere of the Satra seems to have made quite an impact on the *sahib*.

Note:-

In this redaction, we have omitted certain portions as indicated by a parenthesis, ‘[...]’. These are the portions appertaining to the life-sketch of the Saint which we do not believe to be as accurate and reliable as his first-hand observation of the “Shostro” (Satra). This is only natural because while his writings on the Satra emerged out of his own observations, the accounts of the Guru’s life he must have heard from different mouths.

Notes on the “Mahapurushyas”

Amongst various tribes of *Vaisnavas* in Assam, distinguished from each other by differences in doctrinal or ceremonial points of more or less importance, I know of none that for the general respectability and intelligence of the disciples, their number and their success in making proselytes, are more deserving of attention than the *Mahapurushyas* or votaries of the *Borpetah Shostro*, a religious community widely spread throughout lower Assam, and extending into Cooch-Bihar and N.E. Rungpore.

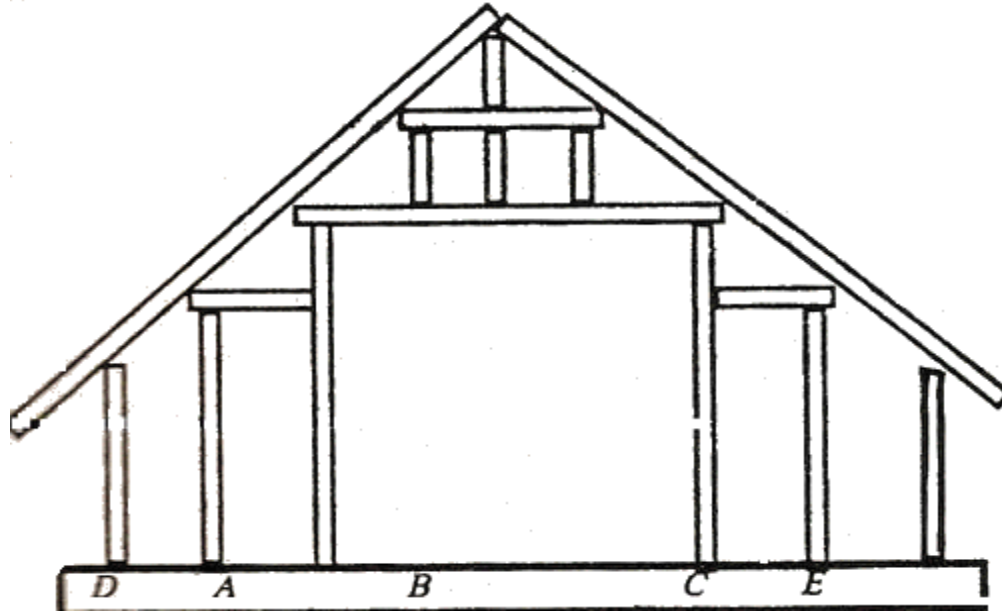
The word *Borpetah* is variously derived. Some say it is a corruption for *Borpata* and means the great throne, great altar, or with reference to the grant of lands conferred on this institution, it may signify great endowment. The sect have many monasteries in different parts of Kamrup and elsewhere, but they are all regarded as subordinate to the great establishment at Borpetah which is situated in north-western Kamrup, and gives the name to a large *Pergunnah*, and also to a subdivision of the district and to the station of the Joint Magistrate and Deputy Collector, in charge of this subdivision.

The *Pergunnah* of Borpetah and others contiguous to it are composed of low alluvial lands liable to periodical inundation. The sites of the villages are all artificially raised, and in the rains the whole country presents the appearance of a vast lake, the raised villages with their groves of trees forming so many islands; the communication between them, being at this period entirely by water. The retiring floods leave these plains in excellent condition for the cultivation of mustard-seed, which in rotation with *Aussa dhan*, or summer rice, is the staple produce of this part of the country.

Borpetah is by far the largest and most densely populated of these villages. By a census made in 1847-48, that portion of it considered as belonging exclusively to the *Shostro* and comprising an area of 175 acres, contained 7,368 souls, all of them *Bhakats* or attaches of the *Shostro*. From the necessity of economizing space, where raised sites are so scarce, and raising them so expensive, the huts are more closely clubbed together than they generally are in Assamese villages, still they have a rural rather than a town appearance, being built without much attention to order, and the huts as well as the roads and pathways, that connect the different portions of the thickly populated grove, being all shaded by noble old trees.

To the south of the grove a large and well raised enclosure contains the great *Namghar Shostro*, or chief place of worship, and all the other sacred edifices of the institution. The *Shostro* is a large building with a thatched roof supported on huge posts of the most durable timber procurable. All the *Vaishnavas* of Assam have similar buildings for religious meetings, but this one at Borpetah is a chief *d'oeuvre* of its kind and merits description.

This section will show the plan of its construction. A, B and C are centre and side aisles forming the interior of the edifice; D and E are open verandahs, embracing three sides of the building; the fourth is finished with an open gable across



which, and contiguous to the *Namghar* there is another smaller building on posts in which is contained a stone image of **Vishnu** and “*Salagrams*”.

The *Shostro* is one hundred and eighty feet long by sixty in breadth supported on fourteen rows of posts. The altar, covered over with red silk, on which the *Bhagavat* and other sacred books are deposited under square frames of talc, is placed in the centre aisle in the south portion of the building; and receives light from the open gable above it. There are two entrances, one from the east near the altar, the other from the north facing it, besides which and the glebe there is no opening for the admission of light except from spaces cut out in the ornamental carving of a cornice of wood which encircles three sides of the building under the verandah, and through which spaces the portion of the congregation, who not being admitted into the interior of the building, are obliged to confine themselves to the verandah, can see what is going on inside. Near the northern entrance to the right there is a colossal figure of *Hanuman* and to the left a similar image of *Garur* supported on massive frames of timber and painted in bright colours. These images are not worshipped, which, indeed, might be inferred from their position between the congregation and the altar. Down the centre aisle there are two rows of large candelabra of wrought iron each capable of holding some hundreds of small oil burners to illumine the building for the evening service. It is only on great occasions that they are all used, a few near the altar being sufficient for the ordinary services. To give me a better view of the interior of the building they were all lighted for me in the day time, the morning service was then being celebrated and the vista of these pyramids of light with numerous white draped figures to assist in distributing it through the vast gloomy building had a most imposing effect. There is nothing else in the interior of the building worth noticing. The outer or verandah posts are all elaborately but rudely carved, every second or third being a caryatid representing one of the incarnations of *Vishnu*. None but *Bhakats*, or disciples, after purification and change of raiment are admitted into the

interior of the *Shostro*. Women are excluded but may sit in the verandah, and at certain prods join in the spiritual songs.

To the east of the *Namghar* and at a distance of about twelve feet from it is a small brick temple with a dome, occupying an area of thirty eight square feet, enshrined in which is a stone about half a cubit long bearing an impression said to be the foot print of *Madhab* one of the founders of the *Shostro*. This is revered as a most sacred relic, and when cholera or other epidemic rages in the village and a time is in consequence appointed for solemn prayer to avert the calamity, this stone is then placed on the altar beside the *Bhagavat* in the *Namghar*, and the people on such occasions worship fasting and in wet garments. In front of this temple there is a well, protected by a copper canopy, supported on four light pillars of the same metal, the water of which is considered very holy.

To the north of the enclosure containing these buildings, is the principal entrance, a covered structure of timber grotesquely carved and gaily painted. To the south a flight of rough stone steps conducts to the bed of a *nullah* and also to a small tank; to the east and west are the cloisters of the monks whom I shall now proceed to describe.

The *Mahapurushyas* recognize two orders of their sect, the “*Udasins*” or monks who have renounced the World, and devoted themselves to celibacy, and the “*Grihist*” or family men, or as they are also called, “*Grihi*”, laymen.

Any *Bhakat* that pleases may become a *Udasin* or monk, on his doing so he occupies or shares with another one of the small cells or divisions of the cloisters. He lives on alms going daily his rounds to collect from his friends; and during the remainder of the day and part of the night, he should devote himself to reading or hearing the history of the two *Mahapurushyas*, founders of the sect, *Sankar* and *Madhab*, called the “*Lila Charitra*”, practising the three “*Veds*” ‘hearing, singing and remembering’, contemplating and realizing to himself the attributes and form of the deity, for idols he is not allowed to worship. Each of these monks acts as immediate spiritual adviser or confessor to one or more families of *Grihis*. It is said they are allowed access at all times to all parts of the house and to all members of the family, and that if the good man of the house observe the monk’s long staff with brazen knob (the symbol by which they are known as *Udasins* in their peregrinations) planted at the entrance of his *zenanah*, he may not himself go in till the holy visitor comes out; but this account, suggestive as it is of somewhat too intimate a connection between the spiritual guide and his fair penitents, was not given to me by any member of the sect, though it is very generally asserted.

In the cloisters to the east and west of the *Namghar*, there are at present one hundred and fifty-seven monks. Long sheds substantially built and enclosed, with front verandahs from end to end, about six feet in breadth, are divided into apartments, sixteen or twenty feet square, opening out on the verandah by one double door to each. In these apartments the monks live sometimes two together, sometimes one alone. They exercise considerable ingenuity in making their cells commodious, the simple materials of which they are composed do not give much scope for their skill and taste, but the doors and

lintels are elaborately carved and the door fastenings, all different, are so many inventions for which each originator might take out a patent. The cloisters and every place connected with the *Shostro*, are kept scrupulously clean and neat. The monks have a small flower garden in which they cultivate flowers and flowering shrubs used in the religious ceremonies.

In the dress and appearance of these monks there is nothing peculiar to distinguish them from ordinary mortals, with the exception of the long staff already alluded to. For raiment, however, they are required to confine themselves to the simple waistcloth and a small white "*chadder*" or scarf and to keep the cloths they wear at worship and at meals exclusively for those occasions.

Detached in other parts of the village there are two other sets of cloisters containing the one fifty-five, the other twenty-six monks. In one of these there is a particular seat from which the head monk reads and expounds. In consequence of a dispute there are at present two who by turns occupy this seat. The old monks are called *Ata* and *Atoi* and marks of respect.

There are in the Kamrup district one hundred and ninety-five *Shostros* subordinate to that of Borpetah. I know not how many there may be in other districts. All those I have seen are built exactly on the model of the parent institution, each having its establishment of *Udasins* in cloisters, and its "*Grihis*" or laymen in ordinary dwellings. Five or six of these are to a small extent endowed, that is, have received grants of land held at half rates from the former rulers of the country, the remainder have no endowment; but they are nevertheless maintained in much better order than the generality of *Shostros* and temples to which extensive grants have been made, being well supported by a numerous and respectable body of disciples who all pay a very devout attention to the externals of religion.

Of the actual number of this sect I am unable to form any estimate, and form a considerable proportion of the population of this district (Kamrup). I know of two villages each containing two or three thousand inhabitants, the one a village of weavers, the other a village of oil-pressers, all of whom are disciples of Borpetah, and they are numerous in all parts of the district. They also muster strong in Gowalparah and Cooch-Bihar, and are found, I believe, even in the Dacca district. Wherever they reside they appear to regard Borpetah, with as much reverence as the Mohammadans pay to Mecca, though their great saints and founders, *Sankar* and *Madhab*, neither died nor were born there. Many respectable men holding offices in the courts of *Gowhatty*, or fiscal charges of *Pergunnahs*, have their permanent residences in, and never remove their families from, the sacred grove of Borpetah. They regard it as "the loveliest spot one earth", and a protracted absence from it, they cannot endure. Of the inhabitants of the grove generally I may safely say there is not a more intelligent or a more industrious community in the whole province.

They are most of them traders as well as cultivators of the soil, and their boats with agricultural produce, pottery, &c. are to be found in every creek in Assam, and as far

down the Brahmaputra as Serajgunje. In point of education the proportion of those amongst them, that can read and write, is far greater than amongst any other class of Assamese that I am acquainted with. The rising generation appear to be nearly all receiving instruction in letters.

As the sect of the *Mahapurushyas* have sprung up within the last four hundred years it ought not to be very difficult to trace their history, but the desire of the disciples to deify their founders has somewhat mystified their origin.

[...]

Madhab was a “Sakta”, a worshipper of the female principle. One day he gave directions to his brother-in-law Ramadasa to procure a goat for sacrifice, at an approaching festival in honor of Kali. Ramadasa having made known to Sankar the commission he had received, was advised by him to return to Madhab without having executed it. The latter displeased at what appeared to him an unwarrantable interference sought an interview with Sankar and entered into an altercation with him; but Sankar mildly removed him and quoting from the *Bhagavat* expounded to him how all adoration should be paid to “**Vishnu** the Supreme”. “For” said he, “if you pour water on the roots of the tree the leaves and branches are refreshed and strengthened by it, applied to the leaves and branches and not to the roots it is of no avail.”

Madhab is stated to have been so much struck with the aptness of this illustration that he at once prostrated himself as a disciple before Sankar, from that hour devoted himself to the study of the *Bhagavat* and its commentaries, and became in time Sankar’s most efficient coadjutor in translating these works into the vernacular for the benefit of his countrymen. His merits as a translator and as a faithful follower of Sankar are acknowledged by all the *Vaishnavas* in Asam, but the *Mahapurushyas* regard the master and the disciple as equally entitled to adoration, and deify them both. If there be any difference, it is in favor of Madhab. The enclosure of their great place of worship contains a temple in honor of him - his footprint, enshrined therein, is their most sacred relic. They have nothing similar in honor of Sankar; but the anniversaries of their respective deaths are observed with the same solemnities.

The success of Sankar in proselytizing drew upon him the envious eyes of the Brahmans, but as they dreaded meeting him in controversy, they are accused in the *Lila Charitra* of endeavouring to throw discredit on his doctrines, by ridiculing, reviling and bullying those that received them. The disciples having brought this to Sankar’s notice, he applied to the authorities to bring about a meeting between him and the Brahmans. This was arranged and Sankar promising by saying that he would condemn the Brahmans out of their own mouths, asked them, if a sinner and an outcast might repeat the name of Krishna, without having made atonement and being readmitted to caste? They replied that the name of Krishna was of such efficacy that repeating it with faith was not only permitted but enjoined by him, as the repetition of the name alone was sufficient for atonement, and in this “*Kali Yug*” it is all that was necessary for man’s salvation except

the Brahmans. All present declared that this was what *Sankar* had been inculcating, and taking up the cry of *Hari ! Hari !* which he had taught them, the Brahmans had not a word more to say.

After this Sankar went about establishing *Shostros* in different places, and where he halted one of these institutions sprung up, Near his own village he founded the *Borduar Shostro* the present head priest of which is descended from him through his grand-daughter, for though he left sons they had no male issue. In the autumn of his life he again visited Jagannath and there he had an interview with Chaitanya. He returned from this pilgrimage and recommenced his religious teaching with a more comprehensive library and a greater store of knowledge, and resigning his mantle to Madhab finished his career in Cooch-Bihar in the one hundred and fourth year of his age.

Sankar and Madhab between them translated into Assamese the *Bhagavat*, *Ramayana*, *Namamala* and other *Granthas*. They taught their disciples choruses of spiritual songs and several hymns from a work called the *Kirttan Grantha*. They gave instruction on the names and attributes of God from the books called the *Namaghosa*, *Gunamala*, *Lilamala*, &c. and compiled or translated, I do not know which, the *Bhakti Ratnabali*, selections from the *Bhagavat* and the *Purans*.

The doctrines taught by these divines appear clearly the same as those ascribed to Chaitanya, and perhaps the most essential difference between the *Mahapurushyas* and the Vaishnavas of Bengal is that the former more rigidly observe and preserve in greater purity what they have received.

They instructed their disciples to acknowledge the existence of only one God, Vishnu the supreme, and prohibited their engaging in the worship of any other deity. They do not ignore the existence of the rival or minor gods of the Hindu Pantheon, but consider that in adoring Vishnu they obtain the favour of them all. They were instructed to acknowledge all the Avatars of Vishnu, but were to regard his appearance as Krishna as the manifestation of most importance to mortals, and to seek salvation by the repetition of his name and contemplation of his attributes.

[...]

Those amongst them who were "*Grihis*", laymen, were permitted to worship the images of Vishnu and Krishna in the form of the *Salagram* but all other idol worship was interdicted, and though images of *Krishna*, *Rama*, &c. are set up in some of the places of worship belonging to the *Mahapurushyas*, no adoration is paid to them except by Brahmans. To the *Salagram* and image of *Krishna*, offerings of un-cooked food are, however, made by the *Pujari*, a Brahman, in the name and on behalf of the community. The '*Udasins*' are absolutely interdicted all image worship, even of the *Salagram*, and the reason assigned for this distinction between them and the laity is that, images or symbols of the deity on which to concentrate the ideas, are required by men whose minds are distracted by family cares and by indulgence in worldly enjoyments, but not by those

who have withdrawn themselves from both, and who, if they act up to their vocation, spend the greater portion of their time in holy meditation.

The doctrines of Chaitanya obliterated the distinctions of caste. In all probability those originally promulgated by Sankar had a like tendency; but at present though the *Mahapurushyas* have not that reverence for it that is entertained and arrogated by other Hindus, and have more intercourse with each other irrespective of caste than is usual amongst the 'twice-born', yet the distinction is not altogether effaced, and the *Mahapurushyas* will not eat cooked food from the hands of a brother whose blood is not as pure as their own.

Hindus of all castes are admitted into the fraternity, and once admitted are, with the exception above notice, associated with on equal terms by all the brethren, and there is nothing more remarkable about this sect than the firmness with which this bond of fraternity is maintained, supporting each other through evil report and good report, bravely and generously. One of the most highly respected of the *Udasins* is by caste a distiller of spirit. Amongst ordinary Hindus it would be considered degrading to men of caste associate with such an individual, but now, as a *Mahapurushya* and a *Udasin* of acknowledged holiness, his origin is considered no disgrace to him.

Actual privacy at meals, such as is enjoined by some of the *Vaishnava* divines, the *Mahapurushyas* are not obliged to conform to. It is usual with this sect when a number get together, to form a mess, the man of the purest caste amongst them cooks for all, and they eat sitting together in one enclosure but not from the same dish. The uncivilized practice of eastern nations they regard with disgust and every man has his own plate to eat off. Though a social fraternity in their own community is thus encouraged, they are obliged to be extremely circumspect in their intercourse with all other sects, who are to them as gentiles. Purification by bathing and change of raiment is necessary before every meal and previous to entering their places of worship, as they cannot transact the affairs of every day life without coming into contact with gentiles, and all such contact pollutes.

Sankar particularly warned his followers against the commission of the following crimes, which from their being particularized whilst others of equal or greater importance are omitted, were doubtless those that in the days of his admonitions were most prevalent - adultery, theft, lying, pulling each other's hair, or any violence to the person of another. He also placed his interdict on the use of intoxicating drugs, which is considered to extend even to the use of tobacco, and, in addition to what is abstained from by all orthodox Hindus, he prohibited his disciples from eating or even keeping ducks, pigeons and goats. Some of these prohibitions are not now much attended to.

This sect of *Vaishnavas* make nine marks with *chandan* or powder of sandal wood on the forehead, bridge of the nose, the ears, breast and arms. As they make each mark they repeat some name but further than this, the rationale of the marking they will not disclose. Perhaps there is one mark for each of the accomplished incarnations of Vishnu, or it may be, one for each of the nine *Bidhs* or modes of acquiring knowledge.

During the life-time of Sankar all the *Vaishnavas* acknowledged him, and him only, as their spiritual head. On his death Madhab succeeded to this position amongst the *Mahapurushyas*, but the first *Shusturiah* or *Adhikari* of the *Borpetah Shostro* was a *Udasin Bhakat* whose name was *Mathura Dasa*, but who was generally called and is now spoken of as “*Bura Ata*”. He was selected for the office, and installed in it by Madhab. Mathura Dasa before his death directed the *Bhakats* in conjunction with the *Mahants*¹, or heads of the subordinate *Shostros*, to select a successor from the Brahman family of *Rama Rama Guru*, the learned pundit who studied with Sankar, a successor was chosen in accordance with his Wishes and since then the vacancies in the office of *Adhikari* have always been filled by the descendants of this Brahman. Some assert that such was the injunction of the last *Sudra Shusturiah*, others contend that the *Bhakats* are not bound to select from any particular family, but had there been no restriction on their choice, it is not likely that the succession would have so long continued in this one. There have been many sharply contested elections, when the *Bhakats* were divided in opinion, but on no occasion were the nominees of either party selected from any other family.

The *Adhikari* is assisted by a deputy called the *Desha Adhikari* and there are several other office-bearers for the lay and for the spiritual duties.

With exception to certain fees allotted to the *Adhikari*, all offerings received for religious duties, presents from disciples, fees of admission from proselytes, fees for re-admission to caste and the like are deposited in the *Shostro* treasury and credited in the *Shostro* accounts by the accountant, and no disbursement can be made except by order of the *Adhikari* with the assent of the *Bhakats*, or a portion of them forming a sort of committee. The treasury is said to be very rich. The value of gold and silver utensils and ornaments together with the cash in the storehouse is estimated at 60,000 Rupees. The annual receipts may average four or five thousand and the disbursements about three thousand. The chief items of expenditure being the subsistence of poor travellers, for whose benefit an establishment of wood-cutters, potters and fishermen is kept up, and the expense of feasting at the great annual festivals all visitors who avail themselves of the hospitality of the *Shostro*.

The half rent paid to Government for the *Dharmmottar* lands attached to the temple is also paid from the general fund, nothing on this account being taken from the *Bhakats* who occupy the land.

For adjudication in disputes brought before the head of the institution, for assessing the amount of fine to be levied from an outcast for re-admission to caste, and for other matters requiring consideration, the *Adhikari* is assisted by a council which usually consists of two or more members of the family of the “*Pathak*” (reader of a commentary of the *Bhagavat*) and of reader of the *Bhagavat* in Sanskrit, a Brahman, or

¹ There are four families of these Mahants, all Sudras, one descended from Ram Dasa who married Madhab’s sister, the other three from favorite disciples and fellow labourers of the two Mahapurushyas. They signify their ratification of the *Bhakats*’ selection by presenting the *Shusturiah* elect with the sacred “*Mala*”.

one of the family of the “*Rajmedhi*” who is the man of business of the *Shostro* in all temporal affairs. These councils are held in a house adjoining the “*Namaghar*”.

Any individual wishing to become a *Bhakat* or disciple must present to the *Shostro* an offering of oil, cloths, and a sum of money according to his means. The *Adhikari* or in his absence the *Desha Adhikari* then teaches him the *Mantra* or initiating incantation, upon receiving which he must fee his instructor, and as far as I have learnt, these are the only fees the *Adhikari* can claim, though he also receives presents from disciples who visit him after a long absence.

I have not been able to ascertain in what words the mystic *Mantra* is given. It is an inviolable secret.

It only remains for me to notice the services daily performed in the *Shostro*. **Sankar** and **Madhab** taught their followers that of the nine modes by which knowledge was acquired (“the *nobo vid*”) the most important were “hearing”, “singing” and “remembering”, and it is with reference to these, that the following ritual has been established.

1st. The morning service appropriately commences with the songs which the *Gopis* were accustomed to sing to awaken **Krishna**.

2nd. This is followed by spiritual songs accompanied by the clapping of hands and striking of cymbals.

3rd. The officiating Brahman reads a portion of the *Bhagavat* in Sanskrit.

4th. A portion of the commentaries on the above in Assamese is read by one of the *Bhakats*.

In the afternoon service:-

1st. The commentary of the *Bhagavat* is read.

2nd. The congregation sing and clap their hands and strike.

3rd. The *Bhagavat* in Sanskrit is read.

The third service is held in the evening, at dusk, by candlelight, at which,

1st. A portion of the “*Gunamala*”,

2nd. Portions of the “*Lila mala*” and

3rd. Parts of the “*Bhotima*” are read.

4th. Singing accompanied with cymbals and other musical instruments.

5th. Singing accompanied with the clapping of hands only.

6th. A portion of the commentaries on the *Bhagavata* or a part of the Assamese translation of the *Ramayana* is read. These books are read regularly through till finished, and then recommenced.

At the conclusion of each of these services the name of *Krishna* is slowly repeated three or four times by the *Bhakat* who officiates, in a deep, solemn-and-impressive tone of voice. The whole congregation repeat it after him with equal solemnity, all with their heads reverently bent down till the forehead touches the ground; it is echoed by those in the verandah and taken up by such as may be within hearing outside, who all prostrate themselves as they repeat it, and thus it is continued till it is heard but as a faint moan and dies away in the distance. None that have been present could fail to be struck with this very impressive mode of concluding the service.

The superiority of the form and mode of the devotional exercises above described, contrasted with the ordinary temple worship of the Hindus, is apparent enough to attract and retain votaries. Instead of a small shrine into which none but the officiating Brahman enters and from which no instruction to the crowd outside is even attempted, a large building capable of affording accommodation to thousands is devoted to the purposes of praises of the deity, congregational singing and moral instruction, and to keep up the spirit of the sect as well as to afford them ensamples of holy living, the actions, precepts and chief incidents in the lives of their founders are constantly brought to their recollection.

Amongst the peculiarities of this institution is the almost communistic nature of their system of Government. In other *Asam Shostros* the resident *Bhakats* were regarded as little better than slaves of the high priest for the time being, whether the latter office was hereditary or otherwise held, but the *Bhakats* of *Borpetah* have all a proprietary right in their *Shostro* and a share in its Government. Acknowledging the *Adhikari* as their “*Guru*”, they implicitly submit to his guidance in spiritual affairs but in temporal matters he can take no step without their voice. There are indeed two parties amongst them which we may designate “high and low church”, the one admitting, the other disavowing his claim to infallibility, but these are delicate questions with which I will not further meddle.

The institution is less richly endowed by the former rulers of the country than many others of far less importance, but they hold a grant of land conferred on them by *Seeb Sing*, one of the Ahom rajas of Asam, Dated Saka 1657, corresponding with AD 1735, in which the rights of the *Bhakats* are peculiarly recognized. The lands, about 397 acres being granted to 297 individuals by name who were the heads of the families of the resident *Bhakats* then existing and to the *Shusturiah* and *Desha Shusturiah* and *Pujari* for the time being the space for whose names is left blank. I am told that they have more

ancient grants for a smaller quantity of land from two of the Delhi Badshahs but these I have not seen.

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