

**NEO-VAISHNAVISM IN SIXTEENTH CENTURY ASSAM: A  
HISTORICAL STUDY**

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**To**

**Sikkim University**



In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirement for the  
**Degree of Master of Philosophy**

**By**

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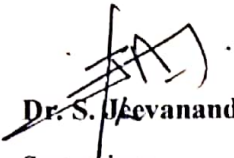
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## CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the dissertation titled “Neo-Vaishnavism in Sixteenth Century Assam: A Historical Study” submitted to the Sikkim University for partial fulfilment of the requirement of the degree of Master of Philosophy in the Department of History, embodied the result of bonafide research work carried out by Mr. Bhaskar Jyoti Das under my guidance and supervision. No part of the thesis has been submitted for any Degree, Diploma, Association and fellowship.

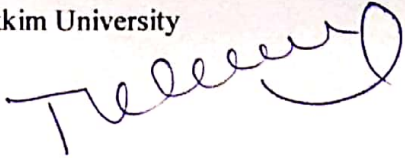
All the assistance and help received during the course of the investigation have been duly acknowledged by him.

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*Bhaskar Jyoti Das*

## **GLOSSARY**

- Satra : The Vaishnava Monastery in Assam
- Namghar : The Community prayer hall in Assam
- Bhakat : The disciple under the Satra.
- Ankiya Nat : The Drama organised by the Vaishnava sect of Assam.
- Bargita : The devotional songs of Assam
- Satriya Nritya : It is a dance-drama performance art with origins in the  
Vaishnava monasteries of Assam.
- Satradhikar : The Administrative head of Vaishnava Monastery in Assam.

*Dedicated to*  
*Papa, Maa, Dada*  
*And*  
*You*



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## CHAPTER – I

### INTRODUCTION

Social changes or transformation is a very necessary feature for the growth and development of any society. The force of religion is often the strongest one in this process. A religious belief is connected deeply within the minds of the people. It is considered as one of the oldest human consciousness. Usually, religion could reflect the behavior of a particular society. It gives an opportunity to the researcher to understand the society in a broader perspective. Religion either directly or indirectly influenced every aspect of Indian life and culture and the religious ideas have a great contribution to the Indian philosophy, literature, music, art and architecture. They have profoundly conditioned the outlook of the Indian people. In this context, this work is an attempt in focusing one of the important religious reform movement of Assam, which is popularly known as *Neo-Vaishnavism*. The main aim of this work is to study the impact of the movement in the social formation of the medieval Assam in the sixteenth century.

*Neo-Vaishnavism* in Assam is popularly known as *Ek-Sharan Nam Dharma*, which means ‘Shelter-in-one-religion’. *Neo-Vaishnavite* movement was a pantheistic religious tradition. It was founded and propagated by Sankaradeva in the sixteenth century. The *Neo-Vaishnavism* of Sankaradeva was different from the earlier patterns of Vishnu worship that was prevalent in ancient Assam. It is evident from the archeological and literary account. However, Sankaradeva popularized the cult of Krishna form of Vishnu worship in a different form with the simplest way of devotion called *Bhakti*. *Neo-Vaishnavite* movement reformed the religious life of the people and it worked as an

instrument in building the socio, economic, cultural and political life of the people. Therefore, it requires a thorough investigation to study the process of transformation in the sixteenth century by looking into the background of the society. The *Census Report of 1901*<sup>1</sup> could reveal the relevant of the movement in the modern context. According to the report, the followers of the *Shakti* cult were 702,185 and on the other hand, the followers of the *Vaishnavism* were 3,500,000 which justify the importance of the movement and its influence into the life of the people of Assam.

### **1.1. Historical Background of Assam**

In general, the history of Assam has passed several stages of development to reach its present social formation. The proto-historic Assam is reconstructed from epics and literature such as *Mahabharata*, *Kalika Purana* and *Yogini Tantra*. The historical account of Assam began with the establishment of PushyaVarman's dynasty in the fourth century in the Kamarupa Kingdom (ancient name of Assam), which marked the beginning of the Ancient history of Assam. However, the powerful kingdom of Kamarupa disintegrated after the fall of the Palas in the twelfth century and there had been emergence of number of independent or semi-independent Kingdoms.<sup>2</sup>

The medieval Assam is said to have begun from the advent of the Ahoms, a *Shan* tribe, in the first half of the thirteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Geographically, the entire Brahmaputra valley and the modern districts of Koch Behar and Jalpaiguri of West Bengal came under the periphery regions of the medieval Assam.<sup>4</sup> During this period, there were many independent tribes such as the *Chutiyas*, the *Morans*, the *Barahis*<sup>5</sup> and the *Kacharis* ruled the eastern part of the Brahmaputra Valley. In the western part, a line of Hindu kings

were ruling with their capital at Kamatapur. Further, on both sides of the Brahmaputra valley, there was a class of landlords called *Bhuyans*, who exercised independent or autonomous power in their respective areas. Another powerful tribe called *Koch* established their Kingdom in the western Brahmaputra valley.

There were constant friction and conflict among the powers to hold the power of supremacy of the land. The frequent conflicts created a political instability and that led insecurity and uncertainty in the society. The instability brought a chaotic condition in the religious belief of the people. The Hinduised royal families of Assam worshipped *Shiva*, which was based on Brahmanical rites. However, they honored tribal rites as well.<sup>6</sup> The most dominant cult of medieval Assam was *Shaktism* and it was associated with the worship of the mother Goddess or *Devi*. The majority of the Hindu rulers accepted this religion. There were many rites and practices attached to this cult and that was performed exclusively by the priestly class. The practices such as animal and human sacrifices were performed in the name of religion and it is evident from the *Ahom Buranjis*.<sup>7</sup> However, the tribal rulers, who ruled independently had their own deities and have their own distinctive manners, customs, religious beliefs and practices. All of them adopted the religion of the territory and patronized it.

Moreover, *Tantricism* was also prevalent in Assam from its ancient times but it turns to be very powerful during the medieval period. The complexities in the religious belief of the people during the medieval period were taken as an opportunity by the *tantric* priests (those who practice *Tantricism*) to influence the religious life of the people to a great extent. The peculiarities of *Tantricism* is to be found in the use of magic and charms, the revolting rites, the use of wine, the belief in the efficacy of mantras and sex worship.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, the medieval Assam was also considered as land of magic and incantation. A large section of people along with the ruling authority were swayed by its influence. The Persian Chronicles *Ain-i-Akbari* and *Fathiya-i-Ibriyah* contained the references of Assamese magical rites. The author of the *Bahristan-i-Ghaibi* also put light in narrating some of the incidents which reveals the magical practices of the people of Assam particularly in the modern district of Goalpara in Assam.

In general, the religion divided the people on the grounds of their faith, beliefs and culture. The fifteenth century of Assam displayed an incongruously varied picture of diverse shades and culture. The society presented a period of social degeneration and religious bigotry. At the same time, it was also under political turmoil, cultural stagnation and economic uncertainty. In the meantime, the entire India was in the throes of a religious upheaval. Ramanuja started the great *Vaishnava* renaissance in the eleventh century of medieval India. His philosophy was based on the earlier devotional cult of Alvars of Tamil land.<sup>9</sup> It gradually reached out to the other parts of India under the efforts of Nimbarka in the eleventh century, Madhavacharya in the thirteenth century, Vallabhacharya in the fifteenth century, Ramananda of Allahabad in the fourteenth century, Kabir and Namdeva in the fifteenth and Chaitanya of Bengal in the fifteenth and the sixteenth century along with many others.

The schools of *Vaishnavism* may differ somewhat in philosophical ideas and religious discourses. However, the fundamental basis of the school of thoughts did not differentiate much. The religious leaders and social reformers from different parts of the country were striving to put an end to the traditional religious ceremonies, rites and rituals and discrimination on the basis of castes. They tried to promote a feeling of oneness among

the people through a religious movement that came to be known as *bhakti* movement.<sup>10</sup> The spirit of religious ferment was at work in all parts of the country and the easternmost part of it i.e. Assam was also not left out.

Sankaradeva, a great philosopher, after completing twelve years of pilgrimage in different holy places of India, introduced a creed, adhering to the main principles of *bhakti*, which revolutionize the entire face of the life of the people of Assam that lead to the formation of a broader civil society. It had united the diverse tribal communities of the region and gave it a culture which later came to be identified as Assamese. The philosophical ideas of Sankaradeva and his methods contributed widely in the process of social formation of the medieval Assam in the sixteenth century. The influence of the movement can even be noticed in the economic sphere of the land. The people of Assam from the very ancient times were mainly dependent on cultivation and therefore, extensive animal sacrifices that were taking place in the name of religious rites and practices among the different sects of religion are adversely affecting its economy. The *Neo-Vaishnavite* movement rejected any kind of sacrificial practices and therefore, it contributed to a different dimension of the society, which is considered as a progressive in nature.

## **1.2. Antiquity and Etymology of Assam**

The modern name of Assam is quite of recent origin. This country which is situated to the extreme north-east of India was known by different names in different phases of time. In the earliest time this country was known as Pragjyotisपुर. The reference of this name has been found both in the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*.<sup>11</sup> The term 'Pragjyotishpur' refers



to the 'centre of the study of astrology in the east'.<sup>12</sup> However, in the medieval period this region came to be known as Kamarupa. The earliest reference regarding the name of Kamarupa is found in the Allahabad Prasasti of Samudra Gupta, ruler of Gupta dynasty in the fourth century.<sup>13</sup> There is a legend in the *Puranas*<sup>14</sup> regarding the origin of the name Kamarupa but these legends have no historical value. However, it is opined that the term is derived from the names of the tribal God like *Kambru* or *Kamru*<sup>15</sup> though, there is not any concrete history regarding the origin of the term. The term 'Kamarupa' is also considered as a Sankritised term of some earlier formation which is evidenced by some sources. The *Buddhist Charyas* and early Persian works like the *Tabakat-i-Nasiri* and the *Riyaz-us-Salatin* and even the Assamese source *Hara-Gauri Sambada* refer to this land as *Kamru* or *Kamrud*.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the Chinese traveler, Hiuen Chang who travelled India during the seventh century and was invited by the then king of Kamarupa Bhakarvarman called this region as *Kamolup'o* and, the *T'ang-Shu*, *Kamopo* and *Komelu*.<sup>17</sup>

There are different theories regarding the origin of the modern name Assam. Firstly, the name Assam is commonly connected with the Ahoms who entered the Brahmaputra valley in the first half of the thirteenth century. According to the Ahom tradition, it is believed that the present term is derived from the word "Asama" which means 'unequaled' or 'peerless'. They say that this term was applied to them during the time of their invasion of the valley by the local tribal people, in admiration of the way in which the Ahom King first conquered and then conciliated them.<sup>18</sup> Another theory connects that the modern term Assam is originated from a combination of the Aryan prefix  $\bar{a}$  and the *Tai* word 'Cham' meaning defeated. 'Aham' means undefeated, i.e. invincible. The

Ahoms considered themselves invincible and so they named their country as *Acham* from which has been derived the name of *Asom*. *Asom* gradually was changed into Assam.<sup>19</sup>

### **1.3. The Land of Assam**

The history of the physical boundary of Assam<sup>20</sup> undergone frequent changes and therefore varied from age to age. The geography of the region had profoundly influenced the distribution of various racial groups. The hilly areas were inhabited by various tribal community and the river valleys of the plain were settled by comparatively advanced tribe and people of Aryan origin.<sup>21</sup> As mentioned in the epic *Mahabharata*, the geographical boundary of ancient Assam stretched southwards as far as the Bay of Bengal and its western boundary was the Karatoya. This was then a river of the first order, and united in its bed the stream which now goes to form Teesta, the Kosi and the Mahananda. In the Tantric literature *Yogini Tantra*, Kamarupa is said to extend from the Karatoya river on the west to the Dikhu on the east, and from the mountain of Kanjagiri on the north, to the confluence of the Brahmaputra and Lakhya rivers on the south; i.e. it roughly included the Brahmaputra valley, Bhutan, Rangpur, Koch Bihar, the north-east of Mymensingh and possibly, the Garo Hills.<sup>22</sup>

However, the precise idea of the jurisdiction of the Medieval Assam was necessary to look into both the geographical area along with the people residing in it. The political boundary of Assam once included the Kingdoms of Bhutan and Nepal. Along with it, the kingdoms of Tripura, Koch-Bihar and the kingdoms that were on the west of the karatoya were within the boundary of Assam. The kingdom of Manipur, Jayantia, Khasia and the Hilly regions like *Naga*, *Singpho*, *Garo*, *Bhot*, *Aka*, *Dafla*, etc were also came

under political boundary of Assam.<sup>23</sup> However, the range of the medieval Assamese society does not confined to the then geo-political map of Assam. The whole of Brahmaputra valley and the Koch Kingdom along with the modern district of Koch Behar and Jalpaiguri would come within the periphery of the Medieval Assamese society.<sup>24</sup>

#### **1.4.1. Statement of Problem**

The *Neo-Vaishnavite* movement had played a very significant role in constructing the medieval Assam. The impact of this movement can be traced from the sixteenth century till the present time. However, the movement played its major role in the sixteenth century cutting deep into the fabric of the Assamese society and transcending all barriers of caste and tribe. The movement gave perfect shape to the vernacular language. The ideas and philosophy of Sankaradeva gradually became an integral part of the life of Assamese people. Therefore, it is outmost necessary to study the impact of the movement in all spheres of the life of the people and at the same time, the ideas and philosophy of Sankaradeva needed a thorough investigation, which successively transform the society from an unstable and disorganized to a highly established one. The religious institutions like *Namghars* (prayer hall) and *Satras* (monasteries), which were the product of the movement, had a very influencing role in the political as well as social life of the people in the medieval period. These institutions worked both as a common platform and democratic platform for the masses. Moreover, the methods that were used to spread the movement worked as an instrument in building the cultural life of the Assamese people.

### 1.4.2. Review of Literature

There are two kinds of secondary sources that will be used for this research. The first one is based on the issues related to the society in the fifteenth century Assam and earlier. The second one is based on the works done on *Neo-Vaishnavism*, Sankaradeva and its institutions such as *Satras* and *Namghars*.

There are good numbers of secondary sources which have studied the medieval Assam and dealt with the *Neo-Vaishnavite* movement of Sankaradeva. The movement of Sankaradeva has contributed to the social and cultural history of Assam. However, it has not received an adequate attention from the scholar and the historian in medieval *Vaishnavism*. Melville Kennedy in his book *Caitanya Movement* has treated the Assamese *Vaishnavism* as the branch of Bengal *Vaishnavism*, although the two schools were completely independent of their own. J. Hastings<sup>25</sup> who edited J.D. Andersen's 'Assam', *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics (Vol.2)* stated that Sankaradeva probably was inspired by the Caitanya of Bengal but it is not acceptable due to lack of any historical records to support his argument. Wilson's *Religious Sect of the Hindus*, Bhandarkar's *Vaishnavism, Saivism and Minor Religious Systems of the Hindus* and even in the Farquhar's *Outlines of the Religious Literatures of India* which contained the history of the different sects of the medieval India, unfortunately did not uncover the historical importance of Assam. However, there was some of the important works which have focused on studying the medieval Assamese society that were discussed below.

S.L. Baruah's *A Comprehensive History of Assam* covered the history of Assam from its earliest to its modern period. She stated that the populations of the territory were

composed of two broad divisions such as the Hindus and the non-Hindu tribes. The former included the Brahmans, the caste-Hindus, the Hinduised royal families and other converts. The non-Brahmanas were called *Sudir* (Sudras). She described how the Brahmanas continued to enjoy their old privileges being the members of priestly class from its ancient time and exclusively perform all types of rites and rituals. This priestly class made a huge income of profit by making the religion as a secret lore obfuscated by elaborate ceremonialism.<sup>26</sup> One of the pioneering works of Nagendranath Vasu's *The Social History of Kamarupa* also witnessed the Brahmanical dominancy in medieval Assam.<sup>27</sup> As a result of which, a large section of people who were economically weak sought consolation in magic and incantation. Baruah also mentioned that before the wave of *Bhakti* movement reached Assam, *Tantricism*, had secured a foot-hold in Assam under the Pala Kings of the ancient period, and gained wide popularity. The tantric sect kept the door open for all, irrespective of caste or sex; it recognized equality of right to worship and thereby attracted innumerable votaries.<sup>28</sup> In addition, B.K Barua, one of the most prominent historians of Assam who worked extensively on Sankaradeva also reflected the condition of the medieval society of Assam. In one of his pioneering work *Sankaradeva Vaisnava Saint of Assam*, he mentioned that the beliefs, cult and institutions of the innumerable tribal communities of Assam were absorbed by the prevailing Hindu religion and formed the system of *Tantricism*; consisting of elaborate esoteric rituals, magic, mantras, and sorcery and blood sacrifices in the centuries preceding Sankaradeva.<sup>29</sup> In addition, Sivanath Barman who focused on the works of Sankaradeva in his book *An Unsung Colossus* highlighted the religious life of the people of Assam. He pictured that the rites and rituals which people observed during the Pre-Sankaradeva's

times were more magical rather than religious. He used the term magical in the sense that it stands in direct antagonism to religion which is based on the supposition that the world is ruled by some supra terrestrial agents whom one can persuade to fulfill a person's desires by observing certain types of rites and ceremonials.<sup>30</sup>

Apart from these Hinduised families in medieval Assam, Gait in his book *A History of Assam* dealt with the Ahom society. It mentioned about a particular tribe called *Chutiyas*. He mentioned how this tribe performed various forms of *Kali* worship without including a Brahman. They have their own tribal priest called *Deories*, who worshipped the deity *Kesaikhati* (the eater of raw flesh). Human sacrifices were offered to the Goddess. He also pointed out some of the other tribes like *Tipperas*, *Kacharis*, *Koches*, *Jaintias* who were indulged in the practice of human sacrifice and so they came to be regarded favorably by the Tantric sect of Hinduism, which he believed to have had its origin in this corner of India.<sup>31</sup>

In addition, Jyoti Prasad Rajkhuwa in his book *Sankaradeva: His Life, Preaching and Practice* examined the ideas and principles of Sankaradeva. He mentioned about different types of magical rites that was common among the tribes of Assam in the medieval period. He further mentioned how the magician attributed every evil, diseases or untimely death, and how it was up to their medicine men to ward off the spirits and cure the patients.<sup>32</sup> William Crooke in his book *Religion and Folk-lore of Northern India* also mentioned about the magical attribution of medieval Assam.<sup>33</sup> Maheswar Neog in his master piece *Sankaradeva And His Times* mentioned huge mantra literatures in Assamese, which was considered efficacious in keeping off the supernatural agencies (called *bhoot*, *daini*, *Dakini*, *daitya*, *Danava*, *camon*, *gulai*, *jakh*, *jogini*, *kandh*, *khetur*,



*mor, prêt, pisach* etc.) The medicine men were called *bej* (vaidya) or *Oja* (upadhyaya) and are also known as *deo-manuh* (God men). The spells and incantation meant to cure people from snake bite that was known as *Sape-Khuwa Mantra*.<sup>34</sup> This gave rise to a section of males who indulged in incontinence, inhuman acts, oppression and suppression of the women and other weaker section of the society. The work of Jyoti Prasad Rajkhuwa's *Sankaradeva, His Life, Preaching and Practice* also revealed many of the tribal practices that prevailed in the medieval period of Assam.

Hugh B. Urban's article, *The Path of Power: Impurity, Kingship, and Sacrifice in Assamese Tantra*, described the influence of *Tantricism* in the land of Assam. He mentioned that the *Tantric* rituals were not only favored by the common people but also by many rulers of Assam as they were always in a state of insecurity being overpowered by other. Hugh said that *tantric* ritual involved a systematic transgression of the normal laws of purity in order to release the dangerous power that lies bound up with impurity and violence. He critically examined the *tantric* practices and the response of the people who were deeply under the influence of *Tantricism*.<sup>35</sup> Some of the *tantric* practices were visualized in the article *Rise and Decline of Sankaradeva's Vaishnavism in Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries* by P.K. Bhattacharyya. He discussed how a votary while performing a ritual willingly offered his own blood to the mother Goddess (Devi) in order to propitiate the deity. He also mentioned that this kind of practices was accompanied by wine-drinking and divination and ripping opens the entrails of pregnant women.<sup>36</sup>

In this context B.K. Kakati in his book *Mother Goddess Kamakhya* mentioned that the existence of the society was threatened and the land of medieval Assam was infested with itinerant teachers of the Vamacara *Tantric* schools with their insistence on the philosophy

of sex and palate.<sup>37</sup> Besides the above mentioned practices, K.L. Baruah in his book *Early History of Kamarupa, From the Earliest to the 16<sup>th</sup> century* mentioned about another class of people called *Bhogis* (enjoyers).<sup>38</sup> The reference to this class of people is also visible in the works of the other historians. The particular section of people used to voluntarily offer themselves as victims for sacrifice before the Goddess *Durgi* in return for the privileges to indulge in all manner of licenses for a whole year previous to their immolation. This statement shows how the value of a human life is minimizing and he was no longer considered other than an object. Moreover it also shows the willingness of the people who were ready to even die in the name of religion.

In contrast to the existing society of medieval Assam, historians and scholars also focused on the changes that can be noticed from the sixteenth century. Maheswar Neog was a prominent historian, who worked extensively on Sankaradeva. In his book *Sankaradeva*, he mentioned how the *Neo-Vaishnavite* movement brought the message of the religion of 'love' home to the people, and released the soul of the common man from the oppressive burden of sacerdotalism, which at the beginning continued to enjoy by the priestly class as mentioned by Baruah in her book *A Comprehensive History of Assam*, and indicated to the individual that his voice could be heard by god, only if it rose from a pure heart and sincere heart. He also mentioned how the religious activities of Sankaradeva formed the basis for the growth of a culture and literature, both rich and varied and brought about a new and comprehensive outlook on life and a distinctly healthy tone to social behavior.

Another prominent historian, Debabrata Dutta in his book *History of Assam* put light on the support of Koch King towards Sankaradeva for popularizing his movement. It is very

necessary for a movement to get the support from the ruling authority to take its growth and at the same time, the ruling authority also gets profited by supporting it. This relation is interlocked between both which is explained nicely in the George. W. Spencer's article *Religious Networks and Royal Influence in Eleventh Century South India*.<sup>39</sup> Debabrata Dutta critically examined the political condition of Assam in the medieval period where he mentioned that the Narayanana's reign, a Koch King, was remarkable for the *Vaishnava* reformation that was inaugurated by Sankaradeva.<sup>40</sup> He gave the outline of the religious activities on the eve of the rise of Sankaradeva's time which was of corrupt nature and of revolting practices and concludes discussing how Sankaradeva's philosophy of *Bhakti* counteract the inhuman practices and brought a reformation into the lives of the people. H.K. Barpujari's book, *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, critically examined the political history of medieval Assam and witnessed the support of the Koch King Naranarayan and his brother Sukladhwaj who patronized Sankaradeva's *Vaishnava* movement and encouraged the teachings of this cult.<sup>41</sup>

Likewise in contrast to the condition of medieval Assam prior to the sixteenth century, Baruah also pointed out some of the changes that were brought by the movement. She mentioned about the doctrine of "Universal Social Brotherhood" which created conditions for harmonious living of the people of diverse caste, communities and creeds. She highlighted how Sankaradeva proceed organizing the *Vaishnavite* society with its three components, namely, *Nama-Kirtana*, *Satra* and *Namghar*. The *Nama-Kirtana* (community prayer) fostered the community feeling among the masses and the *Satras* (religious headquarters) of a *Vaishnava* teacher became the centre for disseminating spiritual knowledge as well as for imparting training in different crafts and lastly how the

village *Namghar* (prayer hall) worked as the parliament and formed the hub of its moral and cultural life bringing a new orientation to the society.<sup>42</sup>

The outcome of the movement can also be traced in the work of B.K. Baruah's *History of Assamese literature* where he wrote, "Sankaradeva's religion brought a new meaning and depth in social and cultural life. For the first time in Assam's history, he asserted the dignity of man in society independent of the accident of birth and social rank, and established the spiritual equality of all men. Along with bringing the unity and brotherhood among the different section of people in the society, the movement also worked in removing the inhuman practices in the society."<sup>43</sup> The work of P.K. Bhattacharyya's *Rise and Decline of Sankaradeva's Vaishnavism in Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries*, also examined the role of Sankaradeva and mentioned how he made an all-out effort to stop the dreadful sacrifices and senseless killings of animals to propitiate the deities even in the face of stiff resistance by the King and the 'Sakta' priests and their followers. His clarion call to the people irrespective of caste, creed and religion to join his *Nam dharma* made a tremendous impact on the people. L.W Shakespear in his work *History of Upper Assam, Upper Burmah, and North-Eastern Frontier* while discussing about the different religions of the medieval Assam also talked about the religious faith of Sankaradeva which is free of any elaborate ceremonies and blood sacrifices.<sup>44</sup> Another prominent historian, N.N Acharyya who worked in the political history of medieval Assam also slightly touched the religious concept of Sankaradeva. In his book *The History of Medieval Assam*, he talked about the religious philosophy of Sankaradeva and highlighted the importance of the religious institutions of the movement which help in building the social and the cultural life of the people of Assam. The *Neo-*

*Vaishnavite* movement of Assam was also critically discussed by Sivanath Barman in his book *An Unsung Colossus*. He made an attempt in examining theoretically the philosophical ideas of Sankaradeva and his work in the development of the Assamese society.

Banikanta Kakati in his article *New Life, Letters and a State* focused on the growth of spiritual outlook of the people and giving special emphasis to the *Neo-Vaishnavite* institutions like *Satras*. He mentioned that these religious institutions were established as the centers of new consciousness and the allegiance to the mind and soul of the people. These monasteries framed moral laws and controlled the activities of the societies. However, the methods that were used by Sankaradeva to popularize his creed need to be focused in detail. Farley Richmond in his article, *The Vaishnava Drama of Assam*, mentioned another important instrument of Sankaradeva called *Ankiya-Nat* (Drama). Richmond examined how this new invention of Sankaradeva successfully attracted a larger mass to his fold. He detailed how *Ankiya-Nat* played a significant role in strengthening the unity among the people.<sup>45</sup> B.K. Barua in his book *Sankaradeva Vaishnava Saint of Assam* also mentioned about these plays which contains special kind of songs and verses called *Ankiya-Git* and *Bhatima*. Dramas were also performed at the present time in the *Satras* of Assam in the same way as performed earlier.<sup>46</sup>

There are significant research works which have focused on the medieval Assam and the *Neo-Vaishnavism* of Sankaradeva. The available literatures have contributed to the history of Assam from its earliest to the modern period. However, the attention was solely given in reconstructing the political history of Assam. All these works did not give a complete picture of the social, religious and cultural and economic condition of the

people of Medieval Assam. In addition, they are not detailing the impact of the movement with the social transformation of medieval Assam. Therefore, the particular dissertation will study the *Neo-Vaishnavite* movement and its impact on the sixteenth century Assam.

## **1.5. Objectives**

The objectives of the study are

- To study the socio-religious and economic life of the people in the sixteenth century Assam.
- To explore the role of Sankaradeva in the construction of sixteenth century Assam.
- To understand the *Neo-Vaishnavite (Ek-Sharan Nam Dharma)* movement in the social transformation of sixteenth century Assam.

### **1.5.1 Methodology**

The study intends to look into the impact of *Neo-Vaishnavite* movement of Assam in the sixteenth century. It uses the historical methodology and critically studies the literature on socio-religious and cultural developments, which was brought by the movement along with the political history of the time.

The research carries archival data including the secondary sources as well. Historians had to rely on different sources to construct the history of Assam. There are references about the Assam region that were found in Sanskrit and Buddhist literature and accounts of foreign travelers. Archaeological sources like monuments, numismatics, epigraphy and



pottery have also contributed to our understanding of the history and culture of Assam till the thirteenth century. The *State Archives of Assam* and *Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha* provide the information of the medieval period and the *Vaishnava* saints of Assam. The primary sources mainly consist of the Assamese chronicles, popularly called as *Buranjis* and contemporary religious and secular literature and the literary works of Sankaradeva, Madhavadeva and the writings of other *Vaishnava* preceptors. Some of the *Vaisnavite* biographies are available in print and others still in the manuscript-form, are being preserved in the libraries of the Kamrup Anusadhan Samiti and the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies of Guwahati. Along with it, Persian chronicles such as *Fathiya-i-Ibriyah* and *Alamgirnamah* and *Tabakat-i-Nasiri* also puts valuable light on the subject.

In tracing the life history of Sankaradeva and his work the only source that is available are some of his biographies. The works on the life history of Sankaradeva is said to have begun about half a century after his death. In the early half of the seventeenth century two biographies appeared exclusively on the life of Sankaradeva by Bhusana Dwija and the other on Sankaradeva along with his dearest disciple Madhavadeva by Daityari Thakura. Almost at the same time, another biographer Vaikuntha Dwija wrote a small book on the lives of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva and also focused on the life history of the Sankaradeva's two grandsons namely Purusuttna Thakura and Chatarbhuja Thakura.

In the second half of the same century two more biographies of Sankaradeva came out-one by Ramananda Dwiji and the other by Anirudhha Dasa. These works gave us more or less a realistic account of Sankaradeva's life because the span of time between the author and two saint i.e. Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva were not far removed and as such, they

were able to gather their materials from the memorial discourses made by those who had come in contact either with the two saints themselves or their immediate disciples.

On the other hand, to study the condition of the medieval Assamese society, two Sanskrit texts namely, *Kalika-Purana* and *Yogini-Tantra* contributed much to our understanding. These two texts concern themselves with the *Tantricism* of Assam and both these works contain a detailed topographical information regarding Assam. The date of compilation of *Kalika-Purana* was not certain, although it is most probably assumed to be written before twelve century in Kamarupa. The other text i.e. *Yogini-Tantra* must have been compiled in the early part of the sixteenth century. This piece of work deals with the *tantric* subject in general and also put valuable light on the historical temple Kamakhya.

### **1.5.2. Chapterization**

The present study is divided into five chapters.

The first chapter is titled *Introduction*. It details the concept of *Neo-Vaishnavism*, meaning and its importance in the medieval history of Assam. Further, it discusses about the statement of problem, literature review, research objectives and research methodology and concludes with the details of the Chapterization of this research.

The second chapter is the *Historical background of Medieval Assam*. This chapter focuses on the different religious sects of Assam that were influencing the society in the sixteenth century and earlier. Along with it, it also discusses the political, social and the religious condition of the people and their involvement in different rites and customs of the society.

The third chapter, *Sankaradeva and Neo-Vaishnavite Movement* dealt with the historical development of the *Neo-Vaishnavism* of Sankaradeva in the sixteenth century of Assam. It examines the techniques and methods used to spread the movement across the land. This chapter also focuses on Sankaradeva and his philosophy in detail.

The fourth chapter, *Impact of Neo-Vaishnavism in the Sixteenth Century Assam* examines the impact of the *Neo-Vaishnavite Movement* in the sixteenth century and its contribution in the social formation of the Assamese society.

The last chapter, *Conclusion* will summarize the arguments of the dissertation.

## **Endnotes**

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<sup>1</sup> Eliot, Charles N.E. "Hinduism in Assam." *Journal of the Asiatic Society of the Great Britain and Ireland*. (October, 1910): 1155-1186.

<sup>2</sup> Baruah, S.L. *A Comprehensive History of Assam*. New Delhi: Munsiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1986: 171.

<sup>3</sup> Barpujari, H.K. *The Comprehensive History of Assam*. Vol.II. Guwahati: Publication Board of Assam, 1992: 1.

<sup>4</sup> Rajguru, S. *Medieval Assamese Society*. Nagaon, 1988: 4.

<sup>5</sup> The 'Bariyas' are a caste peculiar to Assam. The term 'Bariya' is said to have been derived for *Bari* meaning widow. It is said that they originated from an offspring of a Brahmin widow by a Sudra husband. The children of Brahmin girls married to Sudras were also called Bariyas. However, at the present days they were generally agriculturists.

<sup>6</sup> Baruah, S.L. 1986. *Op.cit.*, 443.

<sup>7</sup> The work referred to the Chronicles of the Ahom dynasty.

<sup>8</sup> Dutta, Debabrata. *History of Assam*. Calcutta: Sribhumi Publishing Company, 1989: 32-34.

<sup>9</sup> Sarma, S.N. *The Neo-Vaisnavite Movement and The Satra Institution of Assam*. Gauhati University Press, 1966: 1.

<sup>10</sup> Goswami, K.D. *Life and Teachings of Mahapurusa Sankaradeva*. Guwahati: Forum for Sankaradeva Studies, 1999: xi.

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- <sup>11</sup> Hunter, W.W. *A Statistical Account of Assam*. Vol.I. London: Trubner and Co., 1879: 41.
- <sup>12</sup> Dutta, Debabrata. 1989. *Op.cit.*, 1.
- <sup>13</sup> Barpujari, H.K. *The Comprehensive History of Assam*. Vol.I. Guwahati: Publication Board of Assam, 1990:1.
- <sup>14</sup> For details see *Markandeya Purana, The Bayu Purana, The Brahmanda Purana, The Skanda Purana, The Garuda Purana*.
- <sup>15</sup> Dutta, Debabrata. 1989. *Op.cit.*
- <sup>16</sup> Baruah, S.L. 1986. *Op.cit.*, 72.
- <sup>17</sup> Watters, T. *On Yuan Chwang's Travel in India*. Vol.II. New Delhi.1968: 185.
- <sup>18</sup> Barua, B.K. *A Cultural History of Assam*. Vol.I. Nowgaon, 1951: 4.
- <sup>19</sup> Dutta, Debabrata. 1989. *Op.cit.*
- <sup>20</sup> The modern State of Assam is bounded on the north by the sub-Himalayan ranges of the Bhutan, *Aka, Dafala, Miri, Abar* and *Mishmi*, which have taken their names from the tribes inhabiting them. The northern boundary between this land and Tibet still remains ill-defined. On the eastern part, the country is bounded by the Patkai range, a spur of the Assam range of the Himalayas; on the south-east by the Naga Hills, bordering on Burma; on the south by the Lushai Hills extending to the confines of Burma; on the south-west by the Hill Tippera and Mymen singh, and on the west by the *Garo* hills and the river Sonkosa, making the natural boundary between this land and Bengal.
- <sup>21</sup> Choudhury, P.C. *The History of Civilisation of the People of Assam to the Twelfth Century A.D.* Guwahati: D.H.A.S, 1959:45.
- <sup>22</sup> Gait, Edward. *A History of Assam*. Gauhati: Lawyers Book Stall, 1906: 10-11.
- <sup>23</sup> Wade, John Peter. *An Account of Assam*. Edited by Benudhar Sharma. North Lakhimpur, 1972: IV.
- <sup>24</sup> Rajguru, S. 1988. *Op.cit.*, 4.
- <sup>25</sup> Andersen, J.D. 'Assam', *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*. Edited by J.Hastings. Vol.II. Edinbugh, 1967: 135-137.
- <sup>26</sup> Baruah, S.L. 1986. *Op.cit.*, 443.
- <sup>27</sup> Vasu, N. *The Social History of Kamarupa*. Vol.II. New Delhi: Northern Book Stall, 1983.
- <sup>28</sup> Baruah, S.L. 1986. *Op.cit.*, 444.
- <sup>29</sup> Barua, B.K. *Sankaradeva Vaisnava Saint of Assam*. Guwahati: Assam Academy for Cultural Relations, 1960:2.
- <sup>30</sup> Barman, Sivanath. *An Unsung Colossus*. Guwahati: Forum for Sankaradeva Studies, 1999: 61.

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- <sup>31</sup> Gait, Edward. 1906. *Op.cit.*, 42.
- <sup>32</sup> Rajkhowa, J.P. *Sankaradeva, His Life, Preaching and Practice*. Guwahati, 2003: 29.
- <sup>33</sup> Crooke, William. *Religion and Folk-lore of Northern India*. London, 1926: 115.
- <sup>34</sup> Neog, Maheswar. *Sankaradeva and His Times*. Guwahati: LBS publication, 1965 (Rpt. 1998): 91.
- <sup>35</sup> Urban, Hugh.B. "The Path of Power: Impurity, Kingship and Sacrifice in Assamese Tantra." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 69, no.4. (December, 2001): 777-816.
- <sup>36</sup> Bhattacharya, P.K. "Rise and Decline of Sankaradeva's Vaishnavism in fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries." *Economic and Political Weekly* 26, no.17. (April, 1991): 1115-1116.
- <sup>37</sup> Kakati, B.K. *The Mother Goddess Kamakhya*. Gauhati, 1961.
- <sup>38</sup> Barua, K.L. *Early History of Kamarupa*. Shillong, 1933.
- <sup>39</sup> Spencer, George W. "Religious Networks and Royal Influence in Eleventh Century South India." *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 12, no.1. (January, 1969): 42-56.
- <sup>40</sup> Dutta, Debabrata. 1989. *Op.cit.*
- <sup>41</sup> Barpujari, 1990. *Op.cit.*
- <sup>42</sup> Baruah, S.L. 1986. *Op.cit.*, 447-449.
- <sup>43</sup> Barua, B.K. *History of Assamese Literature*. New Delhi: Sahitya Academy, 1964: 21.
- <sup>44</sup> Shakespear, L.W. *History of Upper Assam, Upper Burmah and North-Eastern Frontier*. London: Macmillan and Co., 1914: 76.
- <sup>45</sup> Richmond, Farley. "The Vaisnava Drama of Assam." *Educational theatre Journal* 26, no.2 (May, 1947): 145-163.
- <sup>46</sup> Barua, B.K. 1960. *Op.cit.*

## **CHAPTER -II**

### **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF MEDIEVAL ASSAM**

#### **Introduction**

The historical account of India is broadly divided into three periods i.e. ancient, medieval and modern. These three periods of Indian history is marked by many important events and signifies a period of social changes and continuity. In the same way, the whole range of the process of formation and the development of Assam's history and its culture can be broadly divided into ancient, medieval and modern era. The ancient period of Assam covers the period from the earliest time to the twelfth century and the medieval period begin from the thirteenth century till to the beginning of the nineteenth century with the treaty of Yandabo in 1826.

#### **2.1. Political Condition of Medieval Assam**

The historical account of medieval Assam after the rule of the Pala lines of kings is as obscure as disconnected because no inscriptions or coins nor any contemporary comprehensive historical account of this period has been discovered.<sup>1</sup> Though the Muslim chronicles put some light in this period but it appears to be insufficient when confronted with more elaborated evidences given by the *Buranjis* (Ahom Chronicles) and other indigenous sources. However, the contributions of all the sources are valuable in corroborating the details history of the land.

The medieval period of Assam was marked by two important events and it is always in a state of debate in choosing the appropriate event that marked the beginning of the medieval history of Assam. The first event was the Mohammedan invasions from the west led by the Turko-Afghan ruler of Bengal, Muhammad Bakhtyar Khilji and the



second important event was the foundation of the *Tai-Shans* Kingdom, who came to be known as Ahoms in the south-eastern part of the Brahmaputra valley. During the period, the powerful kingdom of Kamarupa was losing its power and authority over their possessions owing to the internal dissension. At this juncture, a small group of *Shan* tribe overtook the territory, mixing with the indigenous people and involving in their fight against the invaders from the west, whom they repulsed successfully in a series of battles.<sup>2</sup> The Ahoms brought a political unity in Assam along with the social integrity. They assimilated with the different tribal people of the land by inter-marriage and accepted their culture that generated a force making the society catholic and liberal.

### **2.1.1. The Muhammadan Invasion**

Bakhtyar Khilji was the last Sen Ruler of Bengal who defeated Lakhmaniya at about 1198 and then set out for expedition few years later to the eastern countries like China, Tibet or Turkestan. At about 1205, he proceeded with an army of ten to twelve thousand and well-equipped horsemen to a place called Bardhankot, which is situated on the bank of a river called Begamati. Hemet, a *Mech* chief guided him to march towards north along the right bank of the river for ten days. Bakhtyar Khilji marched crossing the territories which were mostly inhabited by the tribal communities like *Koch*, *Mech* and *Tharu*. He crossed the river by a bridge of twenty-nine arches of hewn stone, and soon afterwards entered the hills.<sup>3</sup> It was presumed that during this time the king of Kamarupa was Prithu, who could be indentified with the King Viswasundaradeva of Gactal inscription.<sup>4</sup> It is said that Prithu was informed about the expedition and he sent a message that it was not the proper time for the expedition to Tibet. In addition, he recommended him to visit next year and would help him with all the arms and ammunitions.<sup>5</sup> However, Bakhtiyar Khilji disagreed with the King of

Kamarupa and moved his march in great straits for about sixteen days and embarked on a populous and well cultivated plain where there was a strong fortress surrounded by number of villages. He plundered the inhabitants but could not stay for long as they were at last checked by an army of Mongol horsemen and compelled to retreat. The return journey of them was disastrous. The road had been blocked and the local people cut-off their food supplies. Moreover, when they reached the plain of Kamarupa, they found that the bridge was destroyed by the king and they were preparing an attack upon the retreating host. Bakhtiyar took shelter in a temple but the king of Kamarupa besieged him there and constructed a bamboo palisade around the temple. However, Bakhtiyar managed to escape and crossed the river by fording. Bakhtiyar lost many of his armies but reached the opposite bank of the river and find his way to Deokot in the south of Dinajpur.<sup>6</sup>

### **2.1.2. Ahom Invasion**

Ahoms came to Assam in the year 1228 and ruled the land for about six hundred years. They were a tribal clan and belonged to the members of the *Shan* branch of great *Tai* or *Thai* family of south-east Asia.<sup>7</sup> The new power was basically agricultural settlers and came into the political lime-light in the eastern part of the Brahmaputra valley. They succeeded to a great extent in recovering the lost political unity of the country, after a series of contests with their adversaries.<sup>8</sup> Ahoms subsequently became the masters of the land subjugating all other small tribal powers. They fought against Mughals till the seventeenth century and resisted the eastward expansion of Mughals towards Burma and further.<sup>9</sup> However, due to the internal disorder and turmoil in their administration towards the later part of their rule paved the way for the Burmese invasion and subsequently by the treaty of Yandabo, Assam was annexed by the British East India Company in the year 1826. .However, it has to be noted that besides

the Mohammedan invasion and the advent of the Ahoms, the medieval land of Assam was also ruled by many other small political powers independently in their own territory.

### **2.1.3. Different Political Power Centres**

The ancient period of Assam ends with the fall of the Palas in the period between tenth and the eleventh century and with them the political power of the Kamarupa was gradually disintegrated. The ruler of the Pala dynasty, Jayapala ascended the throne at about 1120. It is very difficult in tracing a distinct and a systematic history of the particular period. However, it seems that after the reign of Jaya Pala there was no longer any powerful ruler to maintain the solidarity and the political unity of the kingdom.<sup>10</sup> The Ahom chronicles and the biographies of the medieval *Vaishnava* saints put some light in the political scenario of this period. It appears that a line of *Chutiya* kings, an indigenous tribe of Assam, ruled over the eastern most tract of Assam that covered the present district of Lakhimpur. They were reigning at Sadiya since from the beginning of the thirteenth century till to the early part of the sixteenth century and were ultimately subjugated by Ahoms. In the west of the *Chutiya* Kingdom, there lay the principality of Ahoms that covered the present district of Sibsagar and a part of the district of Lakhimpur during the fourteenth and the fifteenth century. Further west, there lay the kingdom of *Kacharis* to the south of the river Brahmaputra and it roughly covered the modern district of Nagaon. The *Kacharis* belonged to Tibeto-Burman tribe. The both sides of the Brahmaputra valley were ruled by a number of petty chiefs who were known as *Bhuyans*.<sup>11</sup> These chiefs worked as a class of officers who were entrusted with the assessment of revenue of certain areas under the old administration and then became powerful land-lords exercising important political powers and often behaved as Kings.<sup>12</sup>

The western part of Assam that included the modern districts of Kamrup, Goalpara and some parts of the Cooch Behar was ruled by few dynasties between fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and it was known as Kamata Kingdom. The kingdom emerged after the fall of the powerful Kamarupa dynasty under the Palas and it witnessed many rise and fall of several royal dynasties during the course of fourteenth and fifteenth century. However, the most important dynasty that ruled in the fifteenth century was the *Khen* dynasty. The last ruler of the dynasty was Nilambara and he was overthrown in the year 1498 by the Muhammadan ruler Hussain Shah.<sup>13</sup> During this period of two centuries, the western part of Assam experienced many frequent intrigues, murder and wrangling that deprived the kingdom in the formation of stable political order.<sup>14</sup> However, by the end of the fifteenth century, a new powerful kingdom emerged under the leadership of Viswa Sinha, which came to be known as the Koch Kingdom.

The breakdown of the Kamarupa Kingdom after the fall of the Palas in the twelfth century brought about a political instability in the land. There were constant friction and conflict to hold the supreme power of the land among the different rulers who were ruling independently in their respective territory. This political instability ultimately brought chaotic condition in the religious life of the people. The rulers belonged to different religious faith and some of them were Hindus and majority of them were tribal rulers, who had their own belief and practices. Thus, each of them tried to profess their own faith among the people which ultimately brought disturbances and chaotic condition in the religious sphere.

## **2.2. Religious Condition**

Assam was originally a land of different heterogeneous tribes, who were believers in animism.<sup>15</sup> Hinduism, though now very general throughout the land is not indigenous

in Assam.<sup>16</sup> Although it is very difficult to place the exact date of the origin of Hinduism but it was undoubtedly in vogue at about 830.<sup>17</sup> However, with the arrival of the Aryans, particularly of the Brahmins, Brahminical rites and rituals emerged in Assam.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, the land was dominated by the majority of the indigenous tribes and they could not completely reject the tribal beliefs and practices. In many cases, they adopted and fitted them in their religion. There was an intermingling of Brahmanical rites and tribal beliefs and practices in Assam.<sup>19</sup>

The people of the Assam were composed of two broad divisions during the advent of the Ahoms such as Hindus and non-Hindu tribes. The former included Brahmins, the caste-Hindus, the Hinduised royal families and the other converts and their members were gradually on the increase. On the other hand, all non-Brahmins were called as *Sudirs* (Sudras).<sup>20</sup> The indigenous tribes were in majority and used to live respectively in their tribal sanctuaries having their own distinct manners, customs and religious beliefs. The other section of the society professed Hinduism that loosely adhered to religious cult of *Vaishnavism*, *Saivism*, *Shaktism* or *Tantricism*.<sup>21</sup>

The Brahmins were the priestly class and enjoyed a privileged life in the society. They maintained the schools of Sanskrit learning and enjoyed important offices in the administration. Besides the priestly class, some of the other important communities which were included in the category of caste-Hindu were Kayasthas (scribes or accountant), *Ganaks* (astrologer), *Kalitas* (traders and other professions) and the *Keots* (cultivators). The other productive communities like *Kaivartas*<sup>22</sup>, *Barias* and the *Suts* were also included in caste Hindus category. However, they were placed in a considerable low stratum of the society.<sup>23</sup> In addition, another section of the society called *Yogis* or *Naths* was also in existence. They were indulged in the occupation like snake-charming, silk-rearing or drum-beating and they performed their social and

religious rites by their own priest. Among the tribal community, who ruled in the eastern part of the Brahmaputra valley, were *Chutiyas*, *Kacharis*, *Marans* and *Barahis*.<sup>24</sup> The major sections of these indigenous tribes have their own religious belief and performed distinctive rites and practices.

On the other side, the priestly section was dominating the Hindu society by introducing many elaborate ceremonialisms. The burden of expensive rituals and ceremonies for the common people of the society led them to seek their consolidation in other kind of illogical and irrational beliefs like magic and incantation to satisfy their spiritual needs.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, at the same time, *Tantricism* was also prevalent in the land and it had a great influence among the masses during its medieval period.

### **2.2.1. Saivism**

The prevalence of the worship of *Shiva* in Assam could be traced from the Ancient times and it was the popular form of religion both among the aboriginals and the migrated people.<sup>26</sup> *Siva* was the tutelary God of ancient kings of Kamarupa from the seventh to the twelfth century. *Harsacharita* of Banabhatta referred to Bhaskaravarma, who was a Kamarupa King in the seventh century and his devotion towards *Shiva*.<sup>27</sup> The medieval biographer, Ramananda, mentioned that before the advent of the *Neo-Vaishnavism* of Sankaradeva, the people of the medieval Assam did not worship *Krishna* or performs any deeds sacred to *Hari*, rather they would fain worship *Bhairava* and considered it to be the greatest of religions. They made offerings to blood of tortoises and goats to that deity, and drunk of it as a sacred drink.<sup>28</sup> The Sanskrit text *Kalika Purana* also mentioned that before the introduction of *Devi* Worship in Kamakhya by Naraka, *Shiva* was recognised as the guardian deity of the land.<sup>29</sup> The text further mentioned about the fifteen centres of this faith. The

Tantric text *Yogini Tantra* also added the numbers of shrines where *Shiva* was worshipped with different names.<sup>30</sup>

*Shiva* was originally a tribal god, and continued to receive homage from both the ruling families and the tribal communities. The particular tribe called *Bodo-Kacharis* in Assam worshipped a god called *Batho*, *Bathau*, *Bathau-brai* or *Bathau-Siv-Rai* who according to their tribal rites can be identified with the *Shiva*.<sup>31</sup> The *Shiva* temples at the modern district of Hajo, Biswanath, Singari, Neghering and Dobi are the famous temples since from the ancient period of Assam. Interestingly, *Shiva* temples were attached to every *Shakt* temple invariably in the form of *Bhairava*. In these temples *Shiva* was worshipped in two different forms i.e. *Bhogi Shiva* and *Yogi Shiva*. The former one is worshipped according to the *Tantric* rites while the latter one is worshipped according to the *Puranic* rites.<sup>32</sup> Thus, the Hinduised royal family's worshipped *Shiva* according to their Brahmanical rites but at the same time also honoured the tribal rites of the people. This is evident from an incident that is narrated in the *Darrang Raj Vamsavali* (dynastic histories of the Koch Kings) where Naranarayana is worshipping *Shiva* according to the tribal rites with the sacrifice of animals and birds before his expedition against the Ahoms in the year 1546. Further, Naranarayana also issued an edict legalising the tribal mode of worship among *Koch*, *Mech* and the *Kacharis* which set aside the north bank of the Brahmaputra valley for the practice of aboriginals' forms of worship.<sup>33</sup>

### **2.2.2. Shaktism**

*Shaktism* is associated with the worship of the Mother Goddess (*Devi*). It is based on the fertility cult. The mother goddess were regarded as one of the source of energy i.e. *Shakti* (power) and therefore, the followers of this cult came to be known as *Shaktas*.

*Shaktism* refers to the worship of different names and forms of goddess, who is adorned with sexual rites and the sacrifice of animals or whenever the law permits, of men.<sup>34</sup> It is true that many Hindus object to this sect, which may be compared with the Mormons of America and or the Skoptsy in Russia, and it is numerous only in certain parts of India especially in Assam and Bengal, but since a section of upper caste people, particularly the Brahmins of Assam patronize it, it must be reckoned as a phase of Hinduism and even today it is an important phase.<sup>35</sup>

*Shaktism* was a dominant cult of Assam since the ancient times and it turned to be very powerful during the medieval period up to the advent of the *Neo-Vaishnavism*. The two Sanskrit texts, namely, *Kalika Purana* and *Yogini Tantra* that were most probably composed in Assam dealt with the *Shakt* cult of medieval Assam. The *Devi Purana* which was probably composed at the end of the seventh century or the beginning of the eighth century stated that *Devi* (mother Goddess) was worshipped in her different forms and in different parts of India including Kamarupa.<sup>36</sup> However, it was from the tenth century, the Goddess Kamakhya emerged as one of the most popular deity and Kamarupa became the main centre for worship of the *Shakt* cult.<sup>37</sup> The sect came to be the most powerful one in Assam by the twelfth century and the temple of Kamakhya at Guwahati and Dikkaravasini became the important centres of *Shaktism*. The deity of Dikkaravasini was identified with the goddess *Tamesvari* and *Kechai-khati* (eaters of raw flesh).<sup>38</sup>

The chief scriptures of Assam *Shaktism* i.e. the *Kalika purana* and the *Yogini tantra* belonged to the 'left-hand' school of *Shaktism*, which mentioned several types of blood sacrifices and various esoteric rites. The account of *Brihat-Rajavansavali*, a work compiled under King Harendra Narayana of Koch-Bihar gives a brief description about the Hindu society of Kamarupa. It stated that the good-looking



Brahmins of Kamarupa lived merrily at home performing the customary rites as prescribed in the Vedas. They performed the Vedic ceremonies like the *Pumsavana* and many others and remained very attentive to their time-honoured customs. There was no obligation to them partaking of fish and flesh. In the land of Kamarupa, *Brahmacharya* had not to be practised through life and no vows of *Ekadasi*<sup>39</sup> had to be observed. By the single vow of *Sukhlashtami*, they used to enjoy as much as religious merit as by observing a millions of *Ekadasi* vows.<sup>40</sup> The account provided an easy understanding that the Brahmins had become the staunch *Shaktas* and they were at the topmost position in the Hindu society and became the custodian of the Hindu faith.

The religious life of the other section of the people in the society began depending completely on them for performing any kind of religious rites and practices. The priestly class became the guardian of the Hindu society and instead of making religion for the spiritual satisfaction and dynamic force in the life of the people, they made it convenient and benefitted themselves by introducing many elaborate and costly ceremonialism.<sup>41</sup> Throughout the history, this sect is seemed to have been allied with the kings and aristocracy. Until the sixteenth century, *Shaktism* was considered as the main form of Hinduism in Assam and it was confined only to the upper section of the people in the society.<sup>42</sup>

However, the indigenous tribal people of the medieval Assam worshiped the mother goddess in their own way and they have their own religious rites and practices. The *Chutiya* tribe of Assam worshipped various forms of *Kali*, without the aid of any Brahmin. This community have their own tribal priests which were better known as *Deories*. The most common form of Goddess they worshipped was *Kesai-khati* (the eater of the raw flesh) to whom human sacrifices were offered.<sup>43</sup> After Ahoms

subjugated these tribal community, these priest were permitted to continue their ghastly practices but with some purpose. It is said that if any criminal, who was under the supervision of the King, failed to obey the rules and regulation in the custody were offered to these tribal priest for the purpose of sacrifices to goddess. The victims in return were offered certain privileges and fed sumptuously until they were in healthy condition to satisfy the taste of the goddess.<sup>44</sup>

The tribal priests, *Deodhia* or *Deorai* or *Deori* worshipped *deo*, a name which is still applied by the Assamese people to the evil spirit.<sup>45</sup> Haft Iqlim mentioned of a particular class of people in the Kamarupa called *Bhogis*, who were voluntary victims of a Goddess named *Ai* who dwelt in a cave. Annually, these people were informed that Goddess had called them and since from that particular day, they were treated as a privileged persons and offered ultimate freedom and every woman was at their command. Accordingly, during the annual festival they willingly sacrificed themselves to propitiate the deities.<sup>46</sup> The practice of human sacrifices was also in common among other tribal communities like *Tipperas*, *Kacharis*, *Koches*, *Jyantia* and others.

The worship of *Manasawas*, a tribal Goddess was also much prevalent among the different tribal communities of Assam. The deity was worshipped as the snake-goddess in some parts of the country during the time of pestilence and disease and was considered as a manifestation of *Shakti* in Assamese *Kavyas*.<sup>47</sup> An extensive animal such as goats, pigeons and ducks were sacrificed in order to propitiate her. The two Assamese *Kavyas* namely, *Padma-Purana* and *Beula-Upakhyana* composed towards the end of the fifteenth century testified the existence and popularity of this cult before the eve of the *Neo-Vaishnavite* movement.<sup>48</sup> The medieval texts *Kalika Purana* and the *Yogini Tantra* also mentioned many other shrines dedicated to *Shakti*

in different places of Assam and in different forms. It is observed that these shrines at many places served as a platform for many terrible and gruesome tantric practices.

### 2.2.3. Vaishnavism

The third important cult that prevailed in the land of Kamarupa was *Pancaratra Vaishnavism*. The *Pancaratra* form of worship is marked by the predominance of the rituals common to the *Tantric-Shakta* cult besides *mantra* and *yantra*.<sup>49</sup> The worshipping of *Vishnu* in the form of *Vasudeva* was prevalent from early times. However, it should be noted that this form of *Vaishnavism* was far different from the one introduced by Sankaradeva in the sixteenth century, because it was laid on *Bhakti* and on the chanting of prayers rather than on priestly rituals. The Baraganga Rock Inscription of sixth century referred the Kamarupa King Bhutivarman as *Parama-Bhagavata*. It implies that the king was a worshipper of *Vishnu*. This inscription is one of the earliest evidence of the existence of *Vasihnavism* in Assam.<sup>50</sup> Along with it, another inscription of King Lakshminarayan of Sadhyapuri recorded in the year 1401 stated that two hundred *bighas* of land were granted to Ravideva, a brahmin who was a regular worshipper of *Vasudeva*.<sup>51</sup>

The Doobi and Nidhanpur plates referred *Vishnu* as the holder of the wheel in his boar incarnation.<sup>52</sup> The images of all the ten chief incarnation of *Vishnu*, such as *Matsya* (fish), *Varaha* (Boar), *Narasimha* (Man-Lion), *Vamana* (Dwarf), *Parusurama*, *Rama*, *Balarama*, *Buddha* and *Kalkin* are found in Central Assam dated eighth and twelfth century.<sup>53</sup> There were many other inscriptions related to the worshipping of *Vishnu* in the early Assam.

The medieval text, *Kalika Purana*, mentioned the five manifestations of *Vishnu* with their shrines. The Hayagriva-Madhava at Manikuta and *Vasudeva* in the

Dikkaravasini region hold the important position.<sup>54</sup> Another notable thing was that in this form of *Vaishnavism*, *Tantric* elements were also attached to it. The doctrine of *mantra* and *yantra* in the *Samhitas* of *Pancarata Vaishnavism* are indistinguishable from *Shakta* teachings and magic in all of its form, with innumerable spells and rites and talismans is carefully described and eagerly commanded.<sup>55</sup> The extensive remains of temples dedicated to *Vishnu* and his incarnations and the images that have been discovered so far showed the prevalence of *Vishnu* worship form ancient times which could be traced back from the fifth and the sixth century.<sup>56</sup>

#### **2.2.4. Tantricism**

Assam has been famed as a realm of treacherous jungle and strange tribal rituals. It has been for centuries portrayed in Indian literature as well as in the European accounts as a savage and untamed country. It was for long considered as a land of magic and witch-craft and above all, Assam is infamous as the heartland of *Tantra*.<sup>57</sup> *Tantricism* was prevalent in the land of Assam from the Ancient period. Many historians and scholars put forward different theories to trace its origin. However, majority of them were of the same opinion that it was an off-shoot of Buddhism, the Mahayana school, which developed in the ninth century under the rule of Pala kings of Bengal and the University of Vikramsila became its famous centre for *Tantric* doctrines.<sup>58</sup> Though nothing could be said for certain, it was probably from this centre *Tantricism* entered Assam and the temple of Kamakhya during course of time became one of its strong hold. As worshippers of female energy, the *tantrics* were much related to the *Shakt* sect. As a result, the important centres of the *Shakti* worships became the centres of *Tantricism*.<sup>59</sup>

The *Tantricism* acquired a wide popularity among all the sections of the people in the society. There were no restrictions for any person at these centres irrespective of any caste or sex. The *Tantric* rituals consisting in the partaking of five elements i.e. *madya* (wine), *mangso* (flesh), *matsya* (fish), *mudra* (parched grain) and *maithuna* (sexual union) and in the process of partaking these offerings secret meetings were necessary.<sup>60</sup> There were many instances described in the *Katha-guru carita*, which reflected the act of transgression by the tantric priest. It mentioned that a votary worshipped *Devi* by giving all his belongings to the deity and then offered his own blood till his whole body turned white because of excessive loss of blood.<sup>61</sup>

Assamese *Tantra* centres around the optimization and harnessing of power on all levels such as cosmic, physical, social and political. *Tantric* ritual was based on nothing less than a systematic, ritualized act of transgression, a deliberate violation of normal social laws through the manipulation of impure substances.<sup>62</sup> The *Tantric* priest was the one who was brave enough to handle the dangerous power of impurity and consumed the substances that were normally prohibited by mainstream Hindu culture, like beef, fish, and wine, or by performing act considered polluting and defiling, such as sexual intercourse in violation of caste and class. Indeed, it might be said that tantric practices is concerned with an explicit violation of the laws and the categories of the conventional Hindu society.<sup>63</sup> Banikanta Kakati, a historian, said that the land of Kamarupa was infested with the *Vamacara*<sup>64</sup> *Tantric* schools with their insistence on the philosophy of sex and palate. He further mentioned that the religious rituals of the people, the most spectacular were the bloody sacrifices to the God and goddess by surrounding with the deafening noises of drums, cymbals, night-vigils, virgin worship and the lewd dances of women in the temple.<sup>65</sup>

#### 2.2.4. Magical Rites and Incantations

The medieval Assam was considered as a land of magic and incantation. There were wide-spread practices of magical rites and sorcery among the people in the society. It was believed that those who possessed magical power were able to propitiate the deities and the demons representing the forces of immutable nature. The influence of these magical rites was not limited only upon the common mass but the ruling authorities were also swayed under their influence. The Persian chronicles, *Ain-i-Akbari* and *Fathiya-i-Ibriyah* brought light to the magical rites and sorcery of the medieval Assam.<sup>66</sup>

The medieval chronicle, *Baharistan-i- Ghaibi* of Mirza Nathan which covered the history of Eastern India holds special attention to the magical rites of Assam. He mentioned of a place called Khuntaghat Pargana (now in Goalpara District) where a large section of the society were influenced by the magical rites and sorcery. In the same way, *Alamgir-namah* of Mirza Muhammad Qazim also added defining that the people who comes to the land of Assam from outside lost their way and could not returned back.<sup>67</sup> There are also huge list of Assamese Mantra literature that were based on the magical charms of Assam. These texts were collectively known as Assamese *Mantra- Puthis*. These texts mentioned about various spells that were used for healing diseases and winning for good fortune and desired ends. Most of the mantras included in these texts bear the impression of the Buddhist *Dharani Suttas*.<sup>68</sup>

Hiuen Tsang, who visited Assam in the seventh century, did not notice any trace of Buddhism. However, there were many prominent historians like K.L. Barua and BaniKanta Kakati who opined that the esoteric Buddhism in the form of *Vajrayana* gradually taking place silently from the ninth century onwards.<sup>69</sup> There were

references in the medieval biographies<sup>70</sup> of Assam where it is mentioned that Vamsi Gopaladeva, a *Vaishnava* saint, while on his journey to eastern Assam for the proselytising activities received a stiff opposition from a section of people, who were called *Baudhas*, probably adherent of the debased *Tantric* Buddhism. They claimed themselves as devotees of twelve gurus and in practice made no differences in regards of caste, creed and sex rules in their conduct of life.<sup>71</sup> The *Baudhas* that referred here were most probably those *Vajrayanisits*.<sup>72</sup>

### **2.3. Conclusion**

The political life of the people of medieval Assam was much disturbed and unstable without any centralized political power and the religious life was scattered because of the absence of any common religious code. *Tantricism*, both Hindu and the Buddhist branch was widely prevalent along with the worshipped of numerous God and Goddesses, which included elaborate ceremonial rites and practices both the esoteric and exoteric. The magical priests hold an important position in the society. On the other hand, the indigenous tribes of Assam continued following their own rites and customs although a small portion came under the influence of the Brahmanical dominant Hinduism. The medieval society of Assam was threatened and it was necessary to bring different sections of the community under a systematic religious code and conduct of life. At the same time, it was also essential to remove the extreme tantric observances connected with both *Saivism* and *Shaktism*. The need was supplied by the *neo-Vaishnavite* movement of Sankaradeva which offered the society a very simple mode of worship and at the same time accessible to all section of the people. Sankaradeva came forward with his philosophy of *Bhakti* and provided the mass a kind of religion, which was far away from any kind of expensive rites and rituals. He reformed the existing faith of *Vaishnavism* to another level which was convenient for

the society and at the same time provided an ideological support in bringing back the stability first in the minds of the people and then in the land.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Acharyya, N.N. *The History of Medieval Assam*. New Delhi: Omsons Publications, 2003: 134.

<sup>2</sup> Baruah, S.L. *A Comprehensive History of Assam*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Ltd, 1986:172.

<sup>3</sup> Gait, Edward. *A History of Assam*. Gauhati: Lawyers Book Stall, 1905: 34.

<sup>4</sup> *Tabakat-I-Nasiri* by Maulana, Minhaj-Ud-Din, Abu-Umar-I-Usman. Tr. by H.G. Raverty. New Delhi: Oriental Books Corporation, 1881: 561.

<sup>5</sup> *Tabakat-I-Nasiri* by Maulana, Minhaj-Ud-Din, Abu-Umar-I-Usman. Tr. by H.G. Raverty. New Delhi: Oriental Books Corporation, 1881: 561.

<sup>6</sup> The whole account of Bakhtiyar Khiji's expedition was mentioned in the Minhaj-uddin Siraj's *Tabaquat-i-Nasiri*. This story was gathered by him thirty years after the incident from a trusted vassal of Bakhtiyar. This incident was also recorded on the epigraph engraved on the Kanai Barasi Rock of North Guwahati in the following Sanskrit words: "Sake turaga yugmese madhuasa trayodase, Kamarupam samagatya Turuskahksha yamayayuh" (on the 13<sup>th</sup> of Chaitra, in the Saka year 1127, the Turks who entered Kamarupa were defeated and destroyed).

<sup>7</sup> Bhuyan, S.K. *Anglo-Assamese Relations*. Gauhati, 1949: 2.

<sup>8</sup> Choudhury, P.C. *The History of Civilisation of the people of Assam*. Gauhati: D.H.A.S, 1959: 277.

<sup>9</sup> Chatterjee, S.K. *The Place of Assam in the History and Civilisation of India*. Gauhati University, 1955: 45.

<sup>10</sup> Rajguru, Sarbeswar. *Medieval Assamese Society*. Nagaon, 1988: 3.

<sup>11</sup> Sarma, S.N. *The Neo-Vaisnavite Movement And The Satra Institution of Assam*. Gauhati University Press, 1966: 3.

<sup>12</sup> Baruah, S.L. 1986. *Op.cit.*, 171.

<sup>13</sup> Sarma, S.N. 1966. *Op.cit.*, 3.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*



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- <sup>15</sup> Shakespeare, L.W. *History of Upper Assam, Upper Burmah and North – Eastern Frontier*. London: Macmillan and co. limited, 1914: 71.
- <sup>16</sup> Hunter, W.W. *A Statistical Account of Assam*. Volume I. London: Trubner and Co, 1879: 39.
- <sup>17</sup> Shakespeare, L.W. 1914. *Op.cit.*
- <sup>18</sup> Dutta, Debabrata. *History of Assam*. Calcutta: Sribhumi Publishing Company, 1989: 32.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.
- <sup>20</sup> Baruah, S.L. 1986. *Op.cit.*, 414.
- <sup>21</sup> Sarma, S.N. 1966. *Op.cit.*
- <sup>22</sup> ‘*Kaivarta*’ is a community engaged in the profession of fishing.
- <sup>23</sup> Baruah, S.L. 1986. *Op.cit.*
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 443.
- <sup>26</sup> Barua, B.K. *A Cultural History of Assam*. Nagaon, 1951: 143.
- <sup>27</sup> Dutta, Debabrata. 1989. *Op.cit.*, 35.
- <sup>28</sup> Neog, Maheswar. *Sankaradeva And His Times*. Guwahati: LBS Publications, 1965(Rpt. 1998): 81.
- <sup>29</sup> Barua, B.K. 1951. *Op.cit.*, 144.
- <sup>30</sup> Dutta, Debabrata. 1989. *Op.cit.*, 33-34.
- <sup>31</sup> Baruah, S.L. 1986. *Op.cit.*
- <sup>32</sup> Sarma, S.N. 1966. *Op.cit.*, 4.
- <sup>33</sup> Barua, B.K. 1951. *Op.cit.*, 146-147.
- <sup>34</sup> Eliot, Charles. *Hinduism and Buddhism*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul LTD, 1921: xxxvi.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>36</sup> Barpujari, H.K. *The Comprehensive History of Assam*. Vol.I. Gauhati: Publication Board of Assam, 1990: 318.
- <sup>37</sup> Kakati, B.K. *The Mother Goddess Kamakhya*. Gauhati, 1961: 16- 21.
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 35-70.
- <sup>39</sup> *Ekadasi* is a Sanskrit word which means ‘the eleventh’.
- <sup>40</sup> Vasu, Nagendra Nath. *The Social History of Kamarupa*. Vol II. New Delhi: Northern Book Centre, 1983: 79-80.

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- <sup>41</sup> Baruah, S.L. 1986. *Op.cit.*, 443.
- <sup>42</sup> Eliot, Charles N.E. "Hinduism in Assam." *Journal of the royal Asiatic society of Great Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge University Press), Oct 1910: 1155-1186.
- <sup>43</sup> Gait, Edward. 1905. *Op.cit.*, 42.
- <sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>45</sup> Barua Bahadur, Rai K.L. *The Journal of the Assam Research Society* (Kamarupa Anusandhan Society) 4, no.1 (April 1938): 9.
- <sup>46</sup> Gait, Edward. 1905. *Op.cit.*, 58.
- <sup>47</sup> Sarma, S.N. 1966. *Op.cit.*, 5.
- <sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>49</sup> Barpujari, H.K. 1990. *Op.cit.*, 327.
- <sup>50</sup> Dutta, Debabrata. 1989. *Op.cit.*, 34.
- <sup>51</sup> Sarma, S.N. 1966. *Op.cit.*
- <sup>52</sup> Barpujari, H.K. 1990. *Op.cit.*, 328.
- <sup>53</sup> Choudhury, N.D. *Historical Archaeology of Central Assam*. Delhi: B.R Publishing Corporation, 1985: 111.
- <sup>54</sup> Kakati, B.K. 1961. *Op.cit.*, 72.
- <sup>55</sup> Bhandarkar, R.G. *Vaisnavism, Saivism and Minor Religious Systems*. Strassburg: Karl J. Trubner, 1913: 56.
- <sup>56</sup> Dutta, Debabrata. 1989. *Op.cit.*
- <sup>57</sup> Urban, Hugh B. "The Path of Power: Impurity, Kingship and Sacrifice in Assamese Tantra." *The Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (Oxford University Press) 69, no.4 (Dec 2001): 777-816.
- <sup>58</sup> Dutta, Debabrata. 1989. *Op.cit.*
- <sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>60</sup> Baruah, S.L. 1986. *Op.cit.*, 444.
- <sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>62</sup> Urban, Hugh B. Dec, 2001. *Op.cit.*
- <sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>64</sup> *Vamacara* is a Sanskrit word meaning Left-hand attainment and is synonymous with 'Left-hand path'.
- <sup>65</sup> Kakati, B.K. 1961. *Op.cit.*, 84.
- <sup>66</sup> Baruah, S.L. 1986. *Op.cit.*, 445.

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<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 446.

<sup>68</sup> Barua, B.K. 1951. *Op.cit.*, 164.

<sup>69</sup> Sarma, S.N. 1966. *Op.cit.*, 163.

<sup>70</sup> Reference is particularly given to Ramananda Dwiji's biography *Vamsigopaladevar Carita*.

<sup>71</sup> Sarma, S.N. 1966. *Op.cit.*, 7.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

## CHAPTER- III

### SANKARADEVA AND NEO-VAISHNAVITE MOVEMENT

Historically, India during the fifteenth century was in the throes of a religious upheaval. The pervasion and debaucheries in the name of religion, was an all pervading phenomenon in Indian society of the period, where the rigidity of the caste system eating to its vitals, had been reducing the bulk of the population to depressed classes and putting barriers to their trade pursuits.<sup>1</sup> It was at this time when religious leaders and social reformers from different parts of the country came out trying to break the orthodox Brahmanical dominancy and to put an end to the traditional religious ceremonies and the social discrimination in the society.<sup>2</sup> The leaders promoted a feeling of universal brotherhood among the different communities and voiced for equality in the field of religion. They also worked for the removal of superstition in the existing belief system through a movement which is very popularly known as *Bhakti* Movement. This reformatory seed of equality in the field of religion was first sown by Sankaradeva in Assam. He initiated the *Neo-Vaishnavite* movement in the sixteenth century of medieval Assam. This movement is very popularly known in Assam as *Eka-Sharana-Nam Dharma* which means shelter in single God. The movement spread tremendously to different parts of Assam under different religious leaders and its significance shaped the history of medieval Assamese society.

#### **3.1. Early History of Sankaradeva**

Sankaradeva was born in the middle of the fifteenth century in a *Bhuya* family of Kayastha caste at a place called Alipukhuri. This place is about sixteen miles far from the present district of Nagaon in Assam. The earliest biographies of Sankaradeva have not mentioned the date of his birth. Daityari Thakur, the earliest and most authentic

biographer of Sankaradeva, is silent about the exact date of birth of Sankaradeva. However, he mentioned that Sankaradeva was born in the month of *Asvina* in 1449 C.E. The later biographies from the eighteenth century onwards have recorded two dates i.e. 1449 C.E and 1463 C.E. as the birth anniversary of Sankaradeva. The tradition, as well as the majority of the later biographers supported the former date.<sup>3</sup>

The genealogy of Sankaradeva is traced from the old hagiographies. A long pedigree of Sankaradeva was connecting his ancestry to a mythical character that was starting right from *Krnsa*.<sup>4</sup> However, among all of them, the man who claims undisputed historicity was his Great great grandfather, Candivara, who had been a resident of Gauda, presently situated at West Bengal. He came, or was rather sent to Assam by Dharmanarayana, the king of Gauda, as a member of the ‘seven families of Brahmins and seven families of Kayasthas’, at the request of Durlabhnarayan, the ruler of Kamata Kingdom in the thirteenth century.<sup>5</sup> Sankaradeva’s family was called ‘Siromani Bhuyan’, those who were the chief among the *Bhuyan* clan. His father’s name was Kusumbara and his mother was Satyasandhya Devi. His mother died within three days of his birth and later he was brought up by his grandmother, Khersuti. Daityari Thakur mentioned that Kusumvara and Satyasandhya Devi were not having a child for about few years after their marriage and as such, Kusumvara was desperate for second marriage. However, being a Shiva believer, Kusumvara Bhuyan keep worshipping for a male child and was at last blessed. They named the child, Sankara to remember the blessing of Lord Shiva. The child was sent to a village school at the age of twelve years. The school was maintained by Mahendra Kandali, who was an erudite scholar.<sup>6</sup>

### 3.1.2. Childhood and Education

The biographical account of Sankaradeva mentioned that he remained very attentive and meritorious student from his childhood. He learnt the alphabets within a short period of time and composed a hymn called *Komol Gita*, without using any vowels, except the first one, which glorifies the God. The song went like this:

*karatalakamalakamaladalanayana/  
bhavadavagahanagahanavanasayana//*

The meaning of the song is that the palms of His (God) hands are like lotus leaves and His (God) eyes are like lotus. The world is like a dense forest and He (God) resides and sleep there.<sup>7</sup>

The biographical accounts of Sankaradeva mentioned about a story which speaks about the epithet of the '*Deva*'. It is no doubt that during that period of time stories were often spoken about Sankaradeva to relate his life to that of Divine. It is believed that one day when Sankara was sleeping in the school all alone, Mahendra Kandali, his teacher, saw a large cobra extending his hood over the head of Sankara to protect him from sunlight. It was from that day Kandali had firm belief in the divinity of the young student and reverently conferred to Sankara the epithet of '*deva*', which was generally used by the Brahmins.<sup>8</sup> There are many other stories spoken about Sankaradeva like defeating a bull with his bare hand and to have crossed the mighty river Brahmaputra by swimming. The biographers have tried to relate most of his childhood stories with Lord Krishna and pictured the divine character of Sankaradeva.

It is said that Sankaradeva mastered all branches of learning like *Upanishads*, *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Tantras*, *Puranas*, *Samhitas*, *Kavyas*, grammar and lexicon.<sup>9</sup> The list of scriptures that were mentioned in the old hagiographies was very

long. Sivanath Barman in his book raised a valid argument regarding the mentioned list of learning. He argued that no non-Brahmin could have accessed the Vedic education in medieval India and Sankaradeva belonged to a Kayastha caste. The caste was formed out of the *anuloma*<sup>10</sup> marriage practices. According to the tradition, the marriage was happened between a Ksatriya male and a Sudra female, who were considered as a *saccudra* (good sudra). Moreover, Sankaradeva himself rendered in his tenth Book of the *Bhagavata purana* (Verse no. 12388), that those who were born out of a Sudra woman had no right to utter the Vedas.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, Sankaradeva must have learnt at school about the rudiments of *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and some *Puranas*, which were written for those who had no right to utter or listen to the Vedas.<sup>12</sup>

Sankaradeva completed his study at the age of twenty-four (1470) and taken the responsibility of his family. He belonged to the family of *bhuyans*. *Bhuyans* were the petty chiefs who ruled independently in their own domain. However, they seem to have been in the habit of joining their forces whenever they were threatened by a common enemy.<sup>13</sup> These chiefs were well remembered in Assam legends as the ‘*Baro-Bhuyans*’. The term *Bhuyan* has no connection with the caste system. They were just petty chiefs exercising practically regal authority over small tracts. Each *bhuyan* was the administrative and judicial head of a particular tract.<sup>14</sup> Sankaradeva, being the family member of the *bhuyan* chief assumed his duties after completing his studies.

Sankaradeva grew supernaturally to be very strong and handsome. It is mentioned in the biographies that no one have the ability to cope with him in strength and beauty, and therefore, he came to be called as ‘*Dekagiri*’ the chief of Youth.<sup>15</sup> After a while, he married a Kayastha girl named Suryavati, who died giving birth to a girl child

named Manu or Haripriya. It is assumed that this incident brought him a sense of deeper detachment from the worldly pleasure and makes him to go on a pilgrimage to different holy places of India.<sup>16</sup> However, he waited till the marriage of his daughter to a young *bhuyan* named Hari. Sankaradeva set out on his pilgrimage in 1481 at the age of thirty-two. There were about seventeen companions accompanied him in this journey, including his teacher Mahendra Kandali. The detailed account of this pilgrimage has been recorded in the biographies of Sankaradeva, compiled by his disciples.<sup>17</sup>

### **3.2. First Pilgrimage of Sankaradeva**

Sankaradeva had spent twelve years in different holy places like Vrndavana, Mathura, Kuruksetra, Haridvar, Badarikashrama, and Jagannatha, etc.<sup>18</sup> However, it is not certain whether Sankaradeva visited all these places or not because the pilgrims of Sankaradeva differed from account to account.<sup>19</sup> Daityari, the earliest biographer mentioned that Sankaradeva went to Jagannatha-Ksetra and stayed there for long. On the other side, biographer Bhusana mentioned it as Ganga-tirtha, and Gaya, and after that he visited other sacred centres and stayed in Jagannatha-ksetra for a considerable time. According to Bhusana, the whole journey covered twelve years. Ramananda gave a detailed list of places that were visited by Sankaradeva in course of his twelve years pilgrimage, which included Jagannatha-ksetra, Setukhanda in the south, Varanasi, Prayaga, Vrndavana (with Govardhana and Kaliya-hrada), Mathura, Kuruksetra with Rama-hrada and Upabadarikasrama.<sup>20</sup> Later biographers gave more details in *Katha-guru-carita* that included in its list. It almost covered all the notable places in North and South India that were connected with the life of Rama and Krishna. However, it is fairly certain that Sankaradeva stayed at Puri for a long time. It was at Puri where he received his illumination of *jnana-bhakti*<sup>21</sup>, and came in



contact with people of various shades of religious opinion. Ramananda and other biographer's stated that during his stay at Puri, Sankaradeva read and explained the *Brahma-Purana*, with mainly cantered around the cult of Jagannatha, to the priests of the god and other personalities.<sup>22</sup>

During the pilgrimage, Sankaradeva met *Vaishnavite* teachers of various schools and engaged in different theological discussions. These experiences had a significant impact on his mind and it was reflected in his *Vaishnavite* movement in Assam. He carried home with him a deep impression of the nascent *Neo-Vaishnava* movement and the poetry that grew in its wake.<sup>23</sup> The journey of Sankaradeva and his stay in the places like Puri and Banaras carried a deep influence into his career and were, to a great extent, responsible for shaping it and he discovered from there the mission of his life, and also could ascertain the method by which he was to fulfil that mission. In one of the early section of his work, *kirtana-ghosha*, he stated that in the places like Uresa (Puri) and Banaras holy men sing the songs of poets.<sup>24</sup>

The travels of Sankaradeva awakened a religious fervour in his mind. It stimulated him to move away from the materialistic life. Sankaradeva being influenced by the poetical songs of the *Vaishnava* saints of other parts of India composed his first *Bargita* (devotional song) near the bank of river Ganga.<sup>25</sup>

After his return from the first pilgrimage, Sankaradeva shifted his residence from Alipukhuri to a nearby village, Bardowa (the modern Nagaon district of Assam) and married again with a young girl of fourteen years named Kalindi. Sankaradeva was not in favour of this second marriage but his grandmother insisted him. However, it is to be noted that Sankaradeva was never against a married life. In plenty of his works he spoke in favour of it. In the popular work *Bhakti-ratnakar*, he mentioned that if a

man is wise enough, there is no harm in having a married life.<sup>26</sup> The first journey of Sankaradeva in different places of India no doubt influenced him in initiating the *Neo-Vaishnavite* movement and dedicating all his life in spreading the *Vaishnava* faith among the masses of Assam.

### **3.3. Sankaradeva and *Eksarana Dharma***

Sankaradeva had travelled different parts of India and noticed the spirit of *Bhakti* movement. After the return from his first pilgrimage, Sankaradeva constructed a small *Namghar* (prayer hall) at Bardowa with his friend Ramarama. There he composed and placed the work, *Gopi-uddhava-samvad*<sup>27</sup> in the altar, which is referred as *simhasana* or *thapana*.<sup>28</sup> This institution (*Nam-ghar*) became the nucleus of the *Vaisnava* organisation, which later on spread throughout different places of Assam in the form of regional establishments called *Satra*, and numerous village temples known as *Nam-ghar*.<sup>29</sup>

In general, Sankaradeva combined three elements to form the main tenets of his creed. *Satsanga*, the association of the good, that is, *bhaktas* taken from the *Bhagavata*; *Nama*, the chanting of the Lord, taken from the *Padma-purana*, *Uttara-khanda*, and *Eksarana*, the undivided devotion to one and the same god as enunciated by the *Bhagavat-Gita*. Sankaradeva collected a group of devout disciples, and started holding daily devotional recitations known as *Nama kirtana* and religious discourses at these institutions (*Nam-ghar*).

The official name of Sankaradeva's *Vaishnavism* is *Eksarana Nam dharma*; the religion of supreme surrender to one; and that One is Vishnu who in the form of Narayana assumes incarnations from age to age. The most favourite incarnation in which Vishnu is to be worshipped is that of Krsna.<sup>30</sup> Sankaradeva taught the idea of

equality in all human beings and accepted his disciples from different communities including the tribal people and the Muslims and placed all of them in equal footing. Some of his chief disciples were Chandsai, a Muslim; Govinda, among the *Garo* tribe; Paramananda, among the *Miri* tribe; Jayananda, among the *Bhutia* tribe; Narahari, among the *Ahoms*; Srirama, a Kaivarta<sup>31</sup>; Madhava of *Jayantia*, a potter; and Damodara, a *Baniya* or trader.<sup>32</sup> He took upon himself the task of propagating the doctrines of *bhakti* or the religion of love in simple verses of various metres in the language of people and of propagating them through congregations. He found that the people were attracted almost readily towards this new creed, and he took to regular proselytising.<sup>33</sup> Banikanta Kakati, a historian, said that the *Eka-Saharan* system of Sankaradeva is not a religion of bargain and barter between God and men or of sacrifice and easy recompense; it is one with exclusive emphasis on slow spiritual regeneration, on growth of a new spiritual outlook by laying flesh and spirit in the hands of the Lord.<sup>34</sup>

The biographical account of Sankaradeva specifically the *Bardowa-Carita* mentioned that Sankaradeva organized a dramatic performance after the return from his first pilgrimage. This dramatic performance named as *Cihna-Yatra* was represented with paintings. It is said that Sankaradeva composed this drama by interpreting the tenth book of the *Bagavata-Purana*.<sup>35</sup> However, some of the earliest biographers like Daityari and Bhusuna remained silent about this dramatic performance.<sup>36</sup> It is said that in this dramatic representation i.e. *Cihna-Yatra*, Sankaradeva himself took part in the play and acted as *Sutradhara* (managing director) and as lord Vishnu in many parts of the play. This play is said to have continued for seven days and seven nights and was highly appreciated by the people. The materials that were required to conduct this play like the paintings for the background and the new models of tools that were

used for the music and dances in the drama are all being prepared by Sankaradeva himself. The *Katha-guru-carita*<sup>37</sup>, the *Barowa-carita*<sup>38</sup> and the Ramacarana's account<sup>39</sup> carried the impression that it is only after the successful performance of the *Cihna-yatra* that Sankaradeva expressly declared himself as a preacher. However, the biographers are divided among themselves in regard to the names of the first converts to the new faith.<sup>40</sup>

Sankaradeva's *Vaishnava* movement and the renaissance in the cultural sphere, which accompanied it, thus had their inception while he was still in his native place at Bardowa, and the *Bara Bhuyans* chief held their small principalities round the place.<sup>41</sup> Sankaradeva fixed the principal tenets of his faith and the method and technique for its propagation through literature and music. He had composed the short *Bargita* lyrics (devotional songs), the longer *Kirtana* lyrics and other types of poetry. However, the religious and cultural restoration was yet to gather full momentum.<sup>42</sup>

### **3.3.1. Sankaradeva and His Journey**

Sankaradeva in his journey of life never stayed at one place. At the age of sixty-seven (1516), he had to leave his ancestral residence at Bardowa owing to the occasional disturbances created by the neighbouring Kachari Kings and his subject. At first, he moved to Gangmau and after that shifted to a place called Dhuwahata, which is situated in the Majuli Island on the river Brahmaputra. Sankaradeva stayed at this island for about eighteen years and two most important incidents took place in the island.<sup>43</sup> Firstly, it is said Sankaradeva met his greatest apostle Madhavadeva, who was born to Manorama, wife of Govindagiri Bhuyan, alia Lamkana Dighala Kath of the Bara Bhuyans in 1489. He was a staunch *Shakta* scholar. Madhavadeva accidentally came to know about Sankaradeva and his faith through his brother-in-law Gayapani

on his way for performing some ritualistic practices. Gayapani, being a strict follower of *Vaishnava* faith refused to accompany him in the act of the Vedic practices and asked him to meet Sankaradeva. Accordingly, after a little debate Madhavadeva agreed to meet Sankaradeva.

After introduction, a historic verbal dual ensued between the two great scholars of two different faiths. Madhavadeva, in support of his view, quoted verses from various scriptures. On the other hand, Sankaradeva refuted his arguments and cited superior grounds from different scriptures and sought to establish the supremacy of the *Vishnu-Krsna* cult. The debate continued for three hours<sup>44</sup> and each of them sought to establish their own faith as superior. Madhavadeva spoke in support of *pravrtti-marg* (the path of activism), while Sankaradeva tried to show the supremacy of the *nivrttimarga* (path of detachment).<sup>45</sup> At the end, Sankaradeva took a verse from the *Bhagavata-purana*<sup>46</sup> and explained it to him that as the branches, leaves, and foliage of a tree are nourished by the pouring of water only at the root of the tree, as the limbs of the body are nourished by putting food only in the stomach, so all gods and goddess are propitiated only by the worship of Acyuta.<sup>47</sup>

Madhavadeva was said to be significantly impressed hearing this verse and surrendered himself to Sankaradeva and became his disciple. Sankaradeva not only founded a devotee in him but an ardent propagator of his Faith. Madhavadeva was an accomplished poet, dramatist, lyricist and a musician and by dint of his talent, perseverance and unremitting zeal, later rose to the position of Sankaradeva's spiritual successor.<sup>48</sup>

At Dhuwahat, Sankaradeva's religion successfully attracts a vast numbers of people. Some of the notable members were Ratnakara Kandali and Vyasakalai, both

Brahmins, who used to read and explained the *Bhagavad gita* in the religious gatherings as, mentioned by the earliest biographer Daityari.<sup>49</sup> Sankaradeva along with his role as a preceptor also bruised himself with literary activities as well. Based upon the *Bhagavata* and other *Vaishnava Puranas*, he composed altogether six books of his *Kirtana* at Dhuwahata, which were *Pasanda-mardana* (The suppression of Heretics), *Namaparadha* (The Faults in Disobeying the Name (of Hari)), *Sisulita* (The Childish Pranks(of Krsna)), *Rasalila* (The Rasa Sports), *Kujirvanca purana* (The Fulfilment of the Desire of Akrura), and *Patni-prasada* (The Propitiousness of Wife).<sup>50</sup> The last one is said to have been the first drama that Sankaradeva composed at the place of Dhuwahata.

### **3.3.2. Sankaradeva and His Philosophy**

Sankaradeva's philosophy of *bhakti* was open to all section of people, irrespective of any caste or religion. It gave the same religious footing to a Brahman and a Chandala alike. Sankaradeva rendered the sacred scripture, the *Bhagavata-purana*, into simple Assamese songs and verses so that every human being, whether he is literate or illiterate, could sing and recite or enjoy. He, moreover, declared that this simple singing of the tales of the *Visnu-krsna* and the taking of the refuge in him would be an effort sufficient for the attainment of final beatitude.<sup>51</sup> Although, he did not seem to have discarded Brahmanical rites as were not opposed to his *eksarana* cult, his teachings amounted to a challenge to the Brahmanical priesthood by minimizing the importance of that oligarchy and even trying to by-pass it in some respects.<sup>52</sup>

The non-*vishnuite* cults certainly were hard hit, and the significance of this fact in this country of *Tantricism* and tribal faiths needs hardly be emphasized.<sup>53</sup> The priesthood, thus affected, took up the challenge against Sankaradeva and even offered open

hostility by abusing and molesting his followers. The hostility against the *Vaishnava* follower's increases with time and Sankaradeva, at last, arranged to meet the leading and scholarly Brahmans of the locality. The meeting was held at the residence of Sankaradeva's relative Budha khan where many scholars having the epithets like Acharya, Kandali and Upadhyaya were present. Sankaradeva through persuasive questioning justified his position and successfully placed his religion in a safer platform.<sup>54</sup>

However, the religious discourse of Sankaradeva with the opponents brought him only a limited success and his struggle for the propagation of his faith continues. After this incident, an another section of people, specifically the priestly class, who were not satisfied with the Sankaradeva's argument went to Gadgao, the capital of the Ahom Kingdom, who were still following their old faith and were not Hinduized.<sup>55</sup> The priests approached Suhummung, (1497-1539) with the allegation that a person named Sankaradeva, who belongs to Sudra by caste, had tampered with their traditional religious practices and made a complaint he was not allowing the people to perform their religious rites and rituals in a sacred manner and as such, the people were continuously giving up their religion.<sup>56</sup>

The monarch was possibly alarmed at such disaffection among the people living in the locality of such strategic importance. Thereupon, Suhungmung, the Ahom King invited a gathering of learned scholars of different places and summoned Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva to his court for a trial, which, however, was summary, as the Ahom kings till then was not much acquainted with the Hindu manners and customs. Sankaradeva was honourably acquitted; but the hostility continued with unabated fury.<sup>57</sup>

In the meantime, another incident embittered the feeling of Sankaradeva, which ultimately prompted him and his faithful followers to migrate from the Ahom Kingdom to western Assam. Suhungmung (1497-1539), the reigning Ahom monarch, engaged *bhuyans* including Sankaradeva's son-in-law Hari Bhuyan, one of the prominent members of Vaishnava faith, in the act of catching wild elephants. But unfortunately due to some unprecedented circumstances they failed the job and few of them including the Hari Bhuyan and Madhavadeva were taken to custody under king's order. Hari Bhuyan with some of his companions was ultimately put to death at the King's bidding, but Madhavadeva was let off. This incident bereavement embittered Sankaradeva's feeling against the Ahom Monarch. The Kingdom of the Koch King, Naranarayan in the western part of Assam, who was known to be an enlightened monarch and had the reputation of sheltering and encouraging scholars, poet and saints, was considered a better resort by Sankaradeva and other *Bhuyans* to settle there and propagate the *Vaishnava* faith among the masses.<sup>58</sup>

In 1534, Visvasimha of Koch kingdom died<sup>59</sup>, and his son Naranarayan ascended the throne with Sukladhvaja alias Cilaraya as the commander-in-chief of his army. There was a long run conflict between the Ahoms and the Kochs since from the time of the Koch king Visvasimha. This conflict continued under the leadership of Naranarayan and Chilarai. The two *bhuyans*, Pratapraya and Gabharu-Khan, who fled to Gauda, when Visvasimha had attacked them, now returned to Kamarupa, and made a sort of alliance with Naranarayana.<sup>60</sup> These two *Bhuyans* were instrumental in the arrangement of easy passage of Sankaradeva and his following from the Ahom to the Koch Kingdom.<sup>61</sup> The Koch Kingdom, at that point of time was preparing for an attack on the Ahoms, and they entered Asama with a large army. Sankaradeva and his followers took the advantage of this situation and escaped from the Ahom territory.



This is possibly a reference to the Koch-Ahom wars of 1546 and 1547.<sup>62</sup> After leaving the Ahom Kingdom, Sankaradeva arrived at Kapala, in the Ksetri-pargana (Kamrup district) and was said to have stayed there only for six months because he had to abandon that place as it was unhealthy causing death to many of his close relatives and followers. They then moved further to the west, and stayed for a short time at a place called Baradi (present Barpeta town of Assam), and after a while went up a small stream called Gaijan, and stationed themselves at Palengdi-bari or Cunpura<sup>63</sup> (now a part of the Barpeta town) on the Barpeta-beel.

Sankaradeva's stay in the Koch kingdom is marked by a comparative calm, which gave him an opportunity to fulfil the mission of his life. He settled at Barpeta in a comparative peace and was able to bring huge masses under his fold. At Barpeta, many of the notable people including Narayana Das Thakur Ata, who was a merchant, accepted the *Vaishnava* faith. Narayana, who later became a devoted friend of Madhavadeva, managed to get a good number of followers of the faith. Sankaradeva, finding the atmosphere favourable at Barpeta set himself to the task of propagating his creed through religious discourses, congregational prayers, recitation of the sacred texts and songs and dramatic performances.<sup>64</sup> However, the hostility to suppress the *Vaishnava* movement of Sankaradeva, were still there. But Sankaradeva's hands were strengthened by the swelling number of his followers and the acquisition of the help of the Koch commander-in-chief and minister of state, Cilaraya, to whom the daughter of Sankaradeva's cousin, Ramaraya, was married.<sup>65</sup>

Sankaradeva finally came to Patbausi,<sup>66</sup> near Barpeta, which was originally a deep forest pestered with wasps and that place became his permanent place of residence, where he stayed for a long twenty years. At Patbausi, Sankaradeva's literary genius flourished in an astounding inordinate manner. All his major literary works including

four of his remaining dramas (*Rukmini-harana*, *Parijata-harana*, *Kaliya-damana* and *Keli-gopala*), the adaptations of several sections of the *Bhagavata-purana* and *uttara-Khanda* of the *Ramayana* were done at this place. Moreover, on the basis of the *Bhagavata*, he wrote three independent works, *Anadi-patana* (The Descent of the Eternal), *Nimi-navasiddha-samvada* (The Conversation between Nimi and the Nine Sages) and *Kuruksetra yatra* (The Journey to Kuruksetra). His popular work, *Kirtana-ghosa*, was brought to completion here.<sup>67</sup> It was at this place that Sankaradeva met Damodaradeva (1488-1598), a Brahmin youth and Harideva (1493-1568) and a good poet Ananta Kandali, who were the prominent followers of his faith and moved the spirit of the movement to the other parts of Assam.

#### **3.4. Second Pilgrimage of Sankaradeva**

In the year 1550 C.E., Sankaradeva went out on his second pilgrimage accompanied by one hundred and twenty followers including Madhavadeva, Ramarama, Ramaraya, Srirama Ata and others. During this time, he visited Puri and came into contact with spiritual leaders from different parts of the country.<sup>68</sup> The *Katha-guru-carita* and some other biographical works provided the account of this journey even in its minutest detail. On their way back, they visited the *matha* of Kabir, whom Sankaradeva had held in high esteem. But unfortunately Kabir was no longer alive to receive them but his granddaughter reverentially greeted them. According to some of the biographical account, Sankaradeva met Caitanya, Harivryasa, Ramananda and others in Puri, but this seems nothing but an anachronism because Caitanya, Ramananda and Harivryasa died earlier than 1550.<sup>69</sup> At Puri, they stayed for six months and returned back to Patbausi in the month of *Vaisakha*.<sup>70</sup>

After the return from his second pilgrimage, Sankaradeva continued his task of propagating the movement. The fast growing popularity of the new faith of Sankaradeva, however, invited fresh hostilities. Those of the old priestly class, who could not tolerate Sankaradeva's teachings made doggerels<sup>71</sup>, stressing the anti-traditional traits of his school, and abused King Naranarayana's ear with greatly exaggerated accounts of Sankaradeva's activities. The hostile camp did not rest content with this and poured more venom into the king's ear; and he sent out men to arrest Sankaradeva. The biographer Ramcarana<sup>72</sup> mentioned that the king was so much angry with Sankaradeva that he comments to cut him down into pieces and throw it to the dogs.

Cilaraya sensed his brother's fury, and sent men to take away Sankaradeva in a boat to his abode, Phulbari. Naranarayana asked Cilaraya to send Sankaradeva to his court assuring that no harm would be done to Sankaradeva. Accordingly, Sankaradeva presented himself at the court and achieved victory in the trial by dint of his dignified appearance, erudition and personality. While presenting himself at the court of Naranarayana, Sankaradeva recited his Sanskrit hymn in the *totaka* metre (*madhudanava darana deva varam*, etc) and two *raja-bhatimas*, eulogising the king. The king was not aware of the conspiracies of the priestly class but he was much impressed by the personality of Sankaradeva. Sankaradeva expounded the main principles of his *Nam-dharma*, and defeated his opponents and rooted out their malice for good. The king was deeply convinced and honoured Sankaradeva, and assured him of full patronage.<sup>73</sup> With the support of the king and his commander-in-chief, Sankaradeva and his followers felt completely secure in their movements, and the *Vaishnava* order thrived vigorously.

After the conciliation, the bond between the Koch king Naranarayan and Sankaradeva strengthened and discussions and meetings began taking place in short intervals. Chilarai, the commander-in-chief constructed a monastery (Bhela-danga *Satra*) near the capital for the purpose of these meetings. After a while, at the request of Chilarai, Sankaradeva had a forty-yard long piece of cloth woven by the weavers of Tatikuchi (Barpeta), depicting the early activities of Krsna up to the killing of Kamsa.<sup>74</sup> At the King's court Sankaradeva also meet some of the important personalities like Purusottama Vidyavagisa and Ram Saraswati who later became an important part of the movement.

Vidyavagisa was a great man of learning, who wrote a lucid grammar in Sanskrit entitled *Praypga-ratnamala*. Rama Saraswati was one of the literary giants of the *Neo-Vaishnavite* era. He composed a number of works including his most widely known piece *Bhima-carita*. But his greatest contribution to Assamese literature was his rendering of almost the whole *Mahabharata* single-handedly.<sup>75</sup> Finally, in the last year of his life, Sankaradeva at the request of Chilarai composed his last dramatic work, *Rama-vijaya* in 1568.

In 1568 C.E., Sankaradeva left his residence at Patbausi for the last time and went to Koch Behar. He stayed there for one night with Madhavadeva at Ganakkuchi, and had the last intimate talk with him. He assigned Madhavadeva as his chief disciple and advised him to continue the movement under his leadership with great effort. All the biographers described Sankaradeva's death as coming all of a sudden, and ascribed it to a simple but fatal disease, a boil in some part of his body. His eventful carrier came to an end on Thursday, the 7<sup>th</sup> or the 21<sup>st</sup> *Bhadra*(September), the 2<sup>nd</sup> day of the bright half of the lunar month, 1569.<sup>76</sup>

Sankaradeva lived for a hundred and twenty years of a full and vigorous life. However, Gait<sup>77</sup>, a historian, thought that the date of Sankaradeva's demise was probably correct but the birth date (1449) must be about thirty or forty years too early. However, considering the robust health and the regulated and disciplined life of the saint and the almost unanimous opinion of the biographers, the span of his life of more than a hundred years is most probably correct. It was true that the earlier biographers have not mentioned the date of his birth but all of them agreed on the point that the saint lived for more than a hundred years. The date of his death is beyond question as all the biographers are unanimous in this respect.<sup>78</sup>

After being nominated as the spiritual successor of Sankaradeva, Madhavadeva carried on the proselytising activities as well as the cultural tradition of the movement. Daityari<sup>79</sup>, who considered Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva as two successive incarnation of *Vishnu* stated that Sankaradeva only revealed (the secret of) *bhakti*, the religion of love but it was Madhavadeva, who made it public. However, during the very first year of his pontifical tenure, a section of *Vaishnava* headed by Damodaradeva seceded; disowning Madhavadeva's leadership and here is the beginning of schism.<sup>80</sup> The main cause of this division is said to be the expectation of Damodaradeva to succeed Sankaradeva to the pontifical position which, however did not happened. It was narrated in the biographies that Damodaradeva did certain modification to accommodate traditional Hindu rituals in the *Vaishnavite* faith of Sankaradeva and even accepted in his fold a few persons who were expelled from the order by Madhavadeva. Damodaradeva being asked about the modification answered Madhavadeva that he considers *Bhagavata* to be more authoritative than Sankaradeva and further; he did not owe explanation to Madhavadeva for the modifications.<sup>81</sup>

After getting such an unexpected reply, Madhavadeva severed all his connections with Damodaradeva. Both Madhavadeva and Damodaradeva promulgated the new creed by appointing preachers and founding *Satras*. Those originating from Madhavadeva and the teachers appointed by him are known as the *Mahapurushia Satras* while those originating from Damodaradeva and his immediate disciples are known as *Damodaria Satras*. These constitute the most important religious institutions in Assam even in the present day. With the spread of the new creed, the religious institution known as *Namghars*, which were meant for congregational prayers, was also introduced widely. Every Hindu village in the Assam valley now has its *Namghar*.<sup>82</sup>

### **3.5. Madhavadeva and His Journey**

Madhavadeva outlived Sankaradeva by twenty eight years and spent most of his time in comparative quiet, giving him the opportunity to propagate the faith of Sankaradeva far and wide in Kamarupa. After the death of Sankaradeva, Madhavadeva moved to Sundaridiya (near Barpeta district) from Ganak-kuchi. Madhavadeva, was a strict disciplinarian and a life-long celibate in the cause of religion who did not compromise at any circumstances to relax the principles of *Ek-sharana dharma* or often reminded his followers of the simplicity and the single-hearted devotion that were to be observed by a true *Vaishnava*. Thus, because of absent of any outward attraction, it had adversely affected the spread of his cult.<sup>83</sup>

On the other side, Damodaradeva attracted a large section of people to his fold because of his liberal attitude and the outward show of festivals and dramatic performances that he used to organise in his *Satras*. It was this moment of time when Narayan Thakur, who was a friend and colleague of Madhavadeva, advised him to follow the

method of Damodaradeva, otherwise their followers would dwindle gradually. Madhavadeva reluctantly undertook the task of reorganising and reconstructing the Barpeta *Satra* on a grand style. On the completion of the construction, the opening ceremony was performed with dramatic performances and religious dances, where devotees donning female costumes acted and dances as *Gopis*<sup>84</sup>. Madhavadeva's opponents however, found it a convenient occasion to bring him under the frown of Raghudeva, the then king of the eastern Koch kingdom. They alleged that Madhavadeva, with celibate disciples, had been dancing and singing with women.<sup>85</sup> Raghudeva employed an officer to arrest Madhavadeva and also to ascertain the truth of the allegation. Accordingly, Madhavadeva was arrested but when allegation was found to be baseless one, he was set free. But he was not allowed to stay at Barpeta and was directed to reside at Hajo, near the temple of Hayagriva-Madhava.<sup>86</sup> However, Madhavadeva moved his residence near the capital of Koch-Bihar and within a short span of time attracted huge masses into his fold. This placed favoured Madhavadeva for the propagation of the *Vaishnava* faith and the members of the royal family including the King Naranarayana's mother, his wives and his sons and daughter accepted the faith. Further, the biographers also mentioned that the local tribal community gave up their traditional rites and customs with the acquisition of the Madhavadeva's teachings.<sup>87</sup>

In the mean time, most of the literary works of Madhavadeva were completed at Koch Bihar. He compiled his *Ghoshā* couplets into a systematic treatise, *Nama-Ghosa*; and at the request of an officer of state, Virupaksa Qaji, rendered Purusottama Gajapati's work *Nama-Malika* into Assamese verse. At this place Madhavadeva meet another two important personalities namely, Mathuradasa of Barpeta and Ramacarana from Sundaridiya and assigned two *Satras* to their charge. Ramacarana, on the request of

Madhavadeva made an extensive tour to different parts of Assam and brought together the entire sections of Sankaradeva's *Kritana-Ghosa*.<sup>88</sup> However, at this place also Madhavadeva had to face much hostility by his opponents in the royal court but he successfully defends his position in the eyes of the King and came out victorious. After this dispute, the king of Koch-Bihar issued a royal charter recognizing the *Vaishnava* faith as the state religion and ordered all his subjects to follow the path of Madhavadeva.<sup>89</sup> After a while, Madhavadeva had some troubles with his kidney and died on the second bright (lunar) day on the month of *Bhadra* (Aug-Sep) in 1596.<sup>90</sup>

Madhavadeva was never in an intention to nominate anyone as his spiritual successor. He recommends his disciples to acquire the knowledge of his chief work *Nama-Ghosa* where he had employed all his intelligence and energy in composing it. Further he mentioned that devotees will find him in his work if they know how to seek.<sup>91</sup> This act of Madhavadeva refusing to nominate any successors resembles the action of Lord Buddha who replied in a similar way when asked for nominating any successor.<sup>92</sup> However, the death of Madhavadeva without any successor paved the way for internal dissention resulting in the creation of three more sub-sects of the *Vaishnava* Faith.

### **3.6. Conclusion**

Finally it can be summed up that Sankaradeva with his philosophy of *Bhakti* provided the sixteenth century Assam a new face of religion that was based on democratic principles. In contrast to the orthodox Brahmanical model of Hinduism, Sankaradeva provided a very simpler and easier way of worshipping that does not require any external agency for performing any kind of rites and rituals. The movement opened up a new dimension for an inclusive society with its flexible and easy going ideology. It



reformed the religious life of the people of medieval Assam and provided them an institutional democratic platform in the form of *Satras* and *Namghars*. Further, the impact of the movement never remained confined only in the religious sphere; rather it reached to various aspects of the life of the Assamese people, which I will be discussing in my next chapter.

### End notes

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<sup>1</sup> Baruah, S.L. *A Comprehensive History of Assam*. Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1986: 446.

<sup>2</sup> Goswami, K.D. *Life and Teaching of Mahapurusa Sankaradeva*. Guwahati: Forum for Sankaradeva Studies, 1982: 1-2.

<sup>3</sup> Sarma, S.N. *The Neo-Vaisnavite Movement and The Satra Institution of Assam*. Gauhati University Press, 1966: 9.

<sup>4</sup> Barman, S. *An Unsung Colossus*. Guwahati: Forum for Sankaradeva Studies, 1999: 15

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Barua, Birinchi Kumar. *Sankaradeva Vaisnava Saint of Assam*. Guwahati: Assam Academy for Cultural Relations, 1960: 3.

<sup>7</sup> Barman, S. 1999. *Op.cit.*, 18.

<sup>8</sup> Goswami, K.D. 1982. *Op.cit.*, 9.

<sup>9</sup> Lekharu, Upendrachandra (Ed.). *Katha-Guru-Carita*. Nalbari, 1952. It gives a detailed account about the education of Sankaradeva.

<sup>10</sup> *Anuloma* marriage is a social practice according to which a boy from upper caste or class can marry a girl from lower caste.

<sup>11</sup> Barman, S. 1999. *Op.cit.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Gait, Edward. *A History of Assam*. Gauhati: Lawyers Book Stall, 1906: 36.

<sup>14</sup> Barua, K.L. *Early History of Kamarupa*. Shillong, 1933: 278.

<sup>15</sup> Das, Hara Mohan. *Sankaradeva- A Study*. Gauhati, 1945: 14.

<sup>16</sup> Neog, Maheswar. *Sankaradeva*. New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1967: 9.

<sup>17</sup> Barua, Birinchi Kumar. 1960. *Op.cit.*, 4.

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- <sup>18</sup> Goswami, K.D. 1982. *Op.cit.*, 16.
- <sup>19</sup> Neog, Maheswar. *Sankaradeva and His Times*. Guwahati: LBS publications, 1965 (Rpt.1998): 103.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.
- <sup>21</sup> *Jnana* is a Sanskrit term that denotes spiritual knowledge and wisdom and the term *Bhakti* means the path of devotion to God or others.
- <sup>22</sup> Neog, Maheswar. 1965 (Rpt. 1998). *Op.cit.*, 103-104.
- <sup>23</sup> Neog, Maheswar. 1967. *Op.cit.*
- <sup>24</sup> Neog, Maheswar. 1965 (Rpt. 1998). *Op.cit.*, 104.
- <sup>25</sup> Neog, Maheswar. 1967. *Op.cit.*, 10.
- <sup>26</sup> Barman, Sivanath. 1999. *Op.cit.*, 29.
- <sup>27</sup> It is a text on the life of Krishna.
- <sup>28</sup> Goswami, K. D. 1982. *Op.cit.*, 13.
- <sup>29</sup> Neog, Maheswar. "The Vaishnava Renaissance of Assam in Aspects of the Heritage of Assam." *Souvenir of the Indian History Congress*, Guwahati, Session. 22 (1959): 32.
- <sup>30</sup> Barua, Birinchi Kumar. 1960. *Op.cit.*, 5.
- <sup>31</sup> Socially depressed community of Assam who mainly lived on fishing.
- <sup>32</sup> Baruah, S.L. 1986. *Op.cit.*, 448.
- <sup>33</sup> Neog, Maheswar. 1967. *Op.cit.*, 12.
- <sup>34</sup> Barua, Birinchi Kumar. 1960. *Op.cit.*, 5.
- <sup>35</sup> Neog, Maheswar. 1965 (Rpt. 1998). *Op.cit.*, 107.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>37</sup> The MS of this voluminous prose *Guru-Carita*, was obtained by Banikanta Kakati as *Nirmalaya* from his religious preceptor, Caturbhuja Misra of Barpeta *Satra*. It was edited by UpendraChandra Lekharu in the volume of *Katha-Guru-Carita*. Nalbari, 1952.
- <sup>38</sup> The original MS was found at Bardowa, Nagaon, and was redacted by Puwaram Mahanta of *Khatara-Sattra*, Tezpur in modern Assamese prose, edited by Lakshminath Bezbaroa. Vol. II-V. Guwahati: Bahi Monthly Journal of Assam, 1910-1914.
- <sup>39</sup> The first printed publication of this work was edited by H. Mahanta. Kamrup, 1925.
- <sup>40</sup> Neog, Maheswar. 1965 (Rpt. 1998). *Op.cit.*,109.

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- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>43</sup> Barman, Sivanath. 1999. *Op.cit.*, 32.
- <sup>44</sup> Goswami, K. D. 1982. *Op.cit.*, 41.
- <sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>46</sup> “*Yatha tarormula niseceanena, trpyanti tatskandha-bhujopasakhah  
Pranopaharac-ca yathendriyanam, tathaiva sarvarhanam acyutejya.*”
- <sup>47</sup> Goswami, K. D. 1982. *Op.cit.*, 42.
- <sup>48</sup> Barman, Sivanath. 1999. *Op.cit.*, 35.
- <sup>49</sup> Neog, Maheswar. 1965 (Rpt. 1998). *Op.cit.*, 111.
- <sup>50</sup> Barman, Sivanath. 1999. *Op.cit.*, 35-36.
- <sup>51</sup> Neog, Maheswar. 1965 (Rpt. 1998). *Op.cit.*, 111
- <sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>56</sup> Ramcarana Thakur’s *Guru-Carita*. Edited by Baruah, Harinarayan Dutta. Vol. 2426-27. Guwahati: Nalbari, 1957.
- <sup>57</sup> Neog, Maheswar. 1965 (Rpt. 1998). *Op.cit.*, 111-112.
- <sup>58</sup> Ramcarana Thakur’s *Sankara-Carita*. Edited by M. Haliram. Kamrup, 1925: 125ff.
- <sup>59</sup> Gait, E.A. 1906. *Op.cit.*, 48.
- <sup>60</sup> For details see Neog, Maheswar. 1965 (Rpt. 1998). *Op.cit.*, 112.
- <sup>61</sup> The biographer Ramananda said that before the arrival of Madhavadeva at Dhuwahat, Sankaradeva sent a messenger named Gabharu-Khan to inform him of the sad plight of the *Bhuyans* under the *Ahoms* and as such Naranarayna asked Gabharu-Khan to lead a small contingent of his soldiers to Assam, Accordingly, the chief moved towards eastward and Sankaradeva along with his companions left Dhuwahat with the contingent by boat.
- <sup>62</sup> Neog, Maheswar. 1965 (Rpt. 1998). *Op.cit.*, 113.
- <sup>63</sup> Daityari’s Mahapurusa *Sankaradeva-Madhavadeva Carita*. Edited by Gupta, Haribilas. Vol.458. Calcutta, 1900.
- <sup>64</sup> Goswami, K. D. 1982. *Op.cit.*, 44-45.
- <sup>65</sup> Neog, Maheswar. 1965 (Rpt. 1998). *Op.cit.*, 114.

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- <sup>66</sup> Daityari's *Mahapurusa Sankaradeva-Madhavadeva Carita*. Edited by Gupta, Haribilas. Vol. 460. Calcutta, 1900.
- <sup>67</sup> Neog, Maheswar. 1967. *Op.cit.*, 21.
- <sup>68</sup> Goswami, K.D. *Early History and Development of the Purusa Samhati Sect of Assam Vaisnavism*. Gauhati University Publication, 1970: 68.
- <sup>69</sup> Sarma, S.N. 1966. *Op.cit.*, 15.
- <sup>70</sup> For details see Lekharuchandra, Upendra. 1952. *Op.cit.*, 154-169. It gives a long list of different places mostly in Bengal.
- <sup>71</sup> For details see Gupta, Haribilas. 1900. *Op.cit.*, 714f. It provides specimen of such verses.
- <sup>72</sup> For details see Ramcarana Thakur's *Sankara-Carita*. Edited by Mahanta, H. Vol. 3455. Suwalkuchi, 1925.
- <sup>73</sup> Goswami, K.D. 1999. *Op.cit.*, 47.
- <sup>74</sup> For details see Daityari Thakura's *Sankaradeva-Madhavadeva Jivana-Carita*. Edited by Gupta, H. Vol. 744-45. Tezpur, 1900. This Manuscript mentioned the place as Tatikuchi and the work was done under the supervision of Sankaradeva. This piece of cloth is referred as *Vrindavani Vastra*
- <sup>75</sup> Barman, Sivanath. 1999. *Op.cit.*, 52.
- <sup>76</sup> Neog, Maheswar. 1998. *Op.cit.*, 119-120.
- <sup>77</sup> Gait, E.A. 1906. *Op.cit.*, 57.
- <sup>78</sup> Sarma, S.N. 1966. *Op.cit.*, 16.
- <sup>79</sup> Neog, Maheswar. 1965 (Rpt. 1998). *Op.cit.*, 122.
- <sup>80</sup> Sarma, S.N. 1966. *Op.cit.*, 18
- <sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>82</sup> Barua, K.L. 1933. *Op.cit.*, 313.
- <sup>83</sup> Sarma. S.N. 1966. *Op.cit.*, 19.
- <sup>84</sup> Gopi is a Sanskrit word originating from the word Gopala referring to a person in charge of a herd of cows.
- <sup>85</sup> Sarma, S.N. 1966. *Op.cit.*
- <sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>87</sup> For details see Daityari Thakur's *Sankaradeva-Madhavadeva Jivana Carita*. Edited by Gupta, H. Vol. 1504-06. Tezpur, 1900.
- <sup>88</sup> Neog, Maheswar. 1965 (Rpt. 1998). *Op.cit.*, 126-27.

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<sup>89</sup> Sarma, S.N. 1966. *Op.cit.*, 20.

<sup>90</sup> Neog, Maheswar. 1965 (Rpt. 1998). *Op.cit.*, 127.

<sup>91</sup> Sarma, S.N. 1966. *Op.cit.*, 22.

<sup>92</sup> Dutt, Nalinaksha. *Early Monastic Buddhism*. Calcutta: Oriental Press Ltd, 1941: 315.

## CHAPTER - IV

### IMPACT OF NEO-VAISHNAVISM IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY ASSAM

#### **Introduction**

Literature and culture of the medieval Indian society entered into a new phase of growth and evolution with existence of the *bhakti* movement of India. The movement worked as a pervasive cultural movement, which appeared in various forms of cultural expression including religion, philosophy, language, art and literature.<sup>1</sup> In the same way, the sixteenth century Assam signified a period of social transformation. In this connection; the *Neo-Vaishnavite* movement played a very significant role in it. The impact and the significance of the movement can be traced from the Assamese society.

The *bhakti* movement was the culmination of the new awareness that had been brought about by the changes in the condition of material life. In contrast to the other parts of India, the socio-historical surrounding of Assam presented a different picture. The Assamese society till to the advent of *Neo-Vaishnavism* was by and large a primitive one. It was in a phase of transition from a primitive to a feudal and the appearance of Sankaradeva with his new faith of *bhakti* contributed the essential feature that was necessary and suitable for a newly formed feudal society.

#### **4.1. Feudal Nature of Medieval Assam**

The *bhakti* movement in all other parts of India implied the transition of society from a lower order of feudalism to an advanced one; on the other hand, Assam signified a change in the earlier stages of society i.e. in a period of transition from a primitive

society to a feudal one.<sup>2</sup> Wills was the first author who suggested that the emergence of states in the high land areas of east-central India in the sixteenth century that represented a system of feudalism super-imposed on the earlier tribal organisation.<sup>3</sup> Kosambi (1956) and Sharma (1965) picked up the theme and maintained that the widely diffused practice of granting land grants to Brahmans by the 'Hindu' states was the principle of the early mechanism of planting the seeds of feudalism in tribal societies.<sup>4</sup> However, this theory does not sufficiently fit in the context of Assam. Assam from the very beginning was the land, which was largely inhabited by the indigenous tribes even long before Sankaradeva appeared. There were some evidences of land grants to the Brahmans in the ancient period. For instance, some of the copper plates of King Bhaskaravarman of seventh century had been discovered in the Sylhet district. These plates all together were known as Nidhanpur inscription.<sup>5</sup> These copper plates were issued with the purpose of granting lands to Brahmans. But it has to be noted that Bhaskaravarmana renewed these grants that were already made by one of his predecessors, Mahabhutivaraman.<sup>6</sup> However, the system seems to be disappeared after the disintegration of the powerful Kamarupa Kingdom in the twelfth century as there was not any powerful authority to hold the supremacy of the land.

The essential economic factor that is required for the early social formation in the land of Assam was gradually fulfilled by Ahoms. They were mainly agrarian community, who brought with them the technique of wet-rice cultivation in the lands of Assam. The uncultivated land was brought into cultivation to satisfy the need of the growing population, because of which, Assam ultimately experienced the surplus production. The growth of surplus production undoubtedly contributed and worked as one of the determining factor in the process of social formation in medieval Assam. Barman pointed out that, by the time Sankaradeva appeared the medieval society of Assam

was in an evolving stage of feudalism accompanied by the synthesis of various cult and communities and in the formation of a general Assamese society. Sankaradeva was the ideologist of such a society.<sup>7</sup>

However, at the same time it is a fact that a single factor cannot all alone work and determine the process of a social formation at large. Engel in one of his letter to Block wrote that in the materialistic conception of history, the ultimate determining element is the production and reproduction of real life. He further mentioned that though the economic element is the basis, there are various other elements of superstructure like the political, juristic, philosophical theories and religious views which exercise their influences upon the course of historical struggles and in many cases preponderate in determining their form.<sup>8</sup>

In this particular context, with the growth of surplus production, the newly formed religion of Sankaradeva alongside played a very significant role in unifying the people and bringing them under one roof. It triggered the process of social formation and merged it into a composite Assamese society. *Neo-Vaishnavism* of Sankaradeva assumed a strong local character that contributing immensely to the growth of a more broad-based homogeneous social formation in Assam. The change in the material mode of production immensely contributed in the process of social formation but since the changes in the inner world does not commensurate with the outer world; there arises a conflict between the two.<sup>9</sup> The sluggishness of mental faculty made the people reluctant to welcome the impending new world and sometimes even stand against it.<sup>10</sup> It was at this period; Sankaradeva appeared and became the harbinger of a new age. The liberal and rational views of the *Neo-Vaishnavite* movement shatter the intellectual lethargy of man, and compel to accept the idea that is suitable with the time.<sup>11</sup>



So, in order to understand the role of religion in the medieval history of Assam especially in the sixteenth century, it is very necessary to look into the different aspects of the society and from different perspectives. The political condition of Assam before the appearance of Sankaradeva and during his times presented a vast changes in the political structure of the country. Prior to Sankaradeva times, Assam was an ensemble of independent principalities on the political plane.<sup>12</sup> There was absence of any central political power to control the political boundary of the land. Since after the fall of the *Palas* in the twelfth century, the powerful kingdom of Kamarupa was disintegrated and the land was divided among different rulers. The south-eastern part of the Brahmaputra valley was ruled by Ahoms. Another tribe called Chutiyas ruled over the eastern most regions of Assam and Kachari's ruled over the south of central Assam. The extreme west represented the kingdom of Kamata. However, it has to be noted that the powerful Koch kingdom which rise to power during the Sankaradeva's time did not exist during this period. The territories on both sides of the Brahmaputra valley were ruled by a class of land lords who were better known as Bhuyans.

#### **4.2. Sankaradeva and the Construction of Assamese Identity**

The absence of any central political power, the territory of Assam was disintegrated which lead to constant friction and conflict among the rulers to hold the supremacy of the land. The constant fighting created the political instability and public felt insecurity and uncertainty. However, the state of political disintegration did not last for long. A great change in the political structure of the land is noticed during the life-time of Sankaradeva itself. Ahoms who invaded Assam during the thirteenth century gradually rose to power in the eastern part of the Brahmaputra valley. Further, they subjugated the local tribal powers like Kacharis, Chutias and Bhuyans under the

powerful ruler Suhungmung (1497-1539) and in the extreme west, the Kamata kingdom was vanished and in its place a powerful kingdom known as Koch Kingdom was established under the Koch ruler Viswa Sinha in 1515.<sup>13</sup> The Kingdom gave a proper platform for the Sankaradeva's movement for its propagation under the Koch king Naranarayana (1540-1584) and his brother Sukladvaja alia Cilaraya.

The rise of the two powerful Kingdoms i.e. Ahoms in the eastern part and the Koch in the West side of Assam brought about a kind of synthesis amongst the various ethnic groups of the country. A feeling of identity was growing rapidly among the rulers out of internal political necessity as well, which was an outcome of major changes in relations of production, shaking the very foundation of the society in this region.<sup>14</sup> In these circumstances, religion of Sankaradeva worked as an acting ideological force, which enhanced the growth of a community feeling among the people.

The *Neo-Vaishnavite* faith of Sankaradeva was based on the principle of human equality. The heterogeneous faith and the creeds that prevailed in the land gradually disappeared and a common and a simple religion sprang up breaking the different tribal elements with those of the Aryan or Hindu. It had strengthened the foundation of a developing feudal society and led to the formation of a broader Assamese civil society.<sup>15</sup> The movement in its full flush synchronised with and helped socio-economic stirrings that could generate an impetus for a less violent or friendlier interaction of peoples of different ethnic origins on the way to nationalistic integration.<sup>16</sup> It is in this sense; Sankaradeva is often regarded as the "Father of Assamese Nationality".<sup>17</sup>

Apart from the political scenario, the socio-religious aspects of the medieval Assam before the sixteenth century represented a period of all round deterioration. The

society was engulfed by several jarring cults and creeds without having any common religious code. The morality of the people, in general, appeared to have been at its lowest ebb. In addition, superstitions and meaningless ritualism was at its height and were the practice of the day. Moreover, people observed rituals that were more like magical than religious. Injustice, tyranny, selfishness and indulgence in immoral pursuits in the name of religion were in vogue everywhere.<sup>18</sup>

### **4.3. Sankaradeva and His Philosophy of *Bhakti***

In contradistinction to all irrational and magical beliefs and practices, Sankaradeva introduced his philosophy of *bhakti*, which laid stress on a direct and emotional relationship between God and the people who worship Him without intervention of any external divine agency. Sankaradeva made the people realize that the God can be felt only by surrendering completely to Him, not by performing any kind of ceremonials and sacrifices or with the help of any external agencies.<sup>19</sup>

The main purpose of Sankaradeva was to reform the society from the long going traditions of irrational beliefs and practices that were associated with many heterogeneous faiths of the time. He offered a very simple and liberal Faith to the people compared to the contemporary customs and makes it appealing to the imagination of the people. Sankaradeva spoke of nine form of *bhakti* i.e. *sravana* (listening), *kirtana* (chanting), *smarana* (remembering), *arcana* (worshipping), *pada-sevana* (prostrating at Visnu's feet), *dasya* (serving), *sakhitva* (friendship), *vandana* (invoking) and *deha-arpana* (bodily surrender).<sup>20</sup> However, from all of this kind, he gave special importance to the *sravana* and *kirtana* and the *dasya* form of *bhakti*.<sup>21</sup> In the Sankaradeva's philosophy of *Ek-Sharana Nam Dharma*, *bhakta* or Guru occupies a very important position and he comes next to God. He also prescribed certain

qualification necessary for a real *bhakta* like possessing the qualities of sympathy, beneficence, forgiveness, softness of heart and complete mastery over his passions.

The idea of *bhakti* can be considered as a non-*Vedic* concept because it was a kind of adoration of an omnipresent and omnipotent God.<sup>22</sup> The *bhakti* principle did not include any kind of rituals, which contains rites and practices connected with sacrifices as compared to that of *vedic yajna*<sup>23</sup>. Vedic traditions contain some of the rituals which were more magical than religious. In this connection, Levi defines the characteristics of the *Vedic Yajnas* as the magical operation, independent of divinities, effective by its own energy and which is capable of producing something good as well as evil.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, as the idea of *bhakti* is exclusive of any kind of rites and rituals, it can be considered as a non-*Vedic* concept. However, Sankaradeva and his disciples did not directly deny the *Vedic* tradition. Vishnu was considered as the chief figure in the Sankaradeva's idea of *bhakti* and Vishnu was a *Vedic* deity. They were much conscious that the minds of the people of their times were so deep-rooted with the authority of the *Vedas* and they understand the verbal allegiance to the *vedic* scriptures would be necessary for their religion to reach the populace.<sup>25</sup> The popular work of Sankaradeva *Bhakti-pradipa* spoke out that the words of the *Vedas* are written in stone. So knowing this, strengthened your mind and leave aside all other gods, and pay obeisance to Me (Vishnu) and be contented.<sup>26</sup>

The idea of liberation in the philosophy of Sankaradeva holds uniqueness. He taught people that liberation could be attained even when a person is alive.<sup>27</sup> This idea is called *Jivan-Mukti*. Sankaradeva gave much emphasis to *bhakti* and regards it superior to *mukti*.<sup>28</sup> *Bhakti* is also described as being itself the emancipation (*mukti*). Sankaradeva in one of his work, *Bhakti-ratnakara*, stated that though the state of liberation is all happiness, yet *bhakti* is superior to *mukti*, in as much as, the latter is

devoid of joy inherent in the service to the Lord, while the bliss of *mukti* is inherent in the former (*bhakti*).<sup>29</sup> Again, Sankaradeva's chief disciple Madhavadeva stated that devotion to Hari saveth the soul of its own accord and do not expect help from anything else. Knowledge and the rituals cannot save one until devotion is generated.<sup>30</sup> He believed that liberation is inherent in *bhakti* and comes automatically taking its own course.<sup>31</sup>

Sankaradeva presented the necessary things to the society and it appealed the people to accept it without a second thought. He used many techniques and methods for the propagation of his movement. He often used the simplest methods that could be suitable to all section of the people. His main tool was *Nama-dharma*. The term, *Nama-dharma*, literarily meant chanting the name of the supreme self with undeviated devotion and with pure heart. The term undeviated was used because in his creed the worship of any other God was strictly prohibited.<sup>32</sup> He stated his work, *Bhaktiratnakara*, that Hari never shuns the company of His name. It is absolutely certain that *Nama* is Hari himself.<sup>33</sup> Sankaradeva propagated the idea of *bhakti*, when Assamese society was engulfed by many irrelevant rites and rituals and the performances of various religious practices that were more or less of magical type. The advantage of reciting the name of *Hari* for the realization of God was a very simple and easy way, which everybody could do it, irrespective of caste or age, and stage of life or place.

However, of all the different modes of *bhakti* or devotion, Sankaradeva insisted on the *dasya-bhakti* (servitude) as the relation between *Sri-Krishna* and His devotee.<sup>34</sup> The attitude of the votary is not to look upon Krishna as an play-mate as in *Sakhya* (Friendship), nor as one's child as in *Vatsalya* (filial love), or as the male lover as in *madhura* (conjugal love), neither as an impersonal Being as in *Santa rasa* (calm

sentiment) but as the master demanding love and veneration of the devotees as of a servant.<sup>35</sup> The *madhura* (love) conception is popular in *Bhakti* movement in others parts of India but Sankaradeva probably discarded it seeing that it could not be worked out practically when it would fall into less enlightened minds.<sup>36</sup>

#### **4.3.1. An Idea of *Bhakti* and Feudal Society**

The *dasya* form of *bhakti* helped in strengthening the emotional bondage between the different classes of people and also brought stability in the political plane. The prominent historian Amalendu Guha said that the feudal model of a personal bond between the master and his serf was projected into this relationship.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, Barman pointed out that to hold together a newly formed society, which had been in a transitional stage from a primitive to a feudal one, a kind of emotional bondage between different classes in the society had been a historical necessity and in order to maintain this stability there must be the allegiance of peasants to landlords, landlords to vassals and from vassals to the king etc.<sup>38</sup> This spirit of allegiance was supplied by the concept of *bhakti*; because *bhakti* of a devotee to his God is what loyalty of the subjects to the king. Particularly, Sankaradeva's *dasya* form of *bhakti* helped in strengthening the bond between the master-servant relationships that was inherent in the feudal way of life. Sankaradeva's writings are replete with instances that give expression to this material meaning of *bhakti*. In the popular work *Kirtana*, Sankaradeva<sup>39</sup> taught people that the kind of allegiance we serve to God by our undeviated devotion should be the same we pay to our King by paying our taxes. He further mentioned this allegiance should be without any desire.<sup>40</sup>

Sankaradeva even declared in his rendering of the sixth Book of the *Bhagavata* (v.5413) that king was the greatest sage, who looked after his subjects like sons and

dispenses justice to them. A king does not punish his subjects without fault.<sup>41</sup> He believed in the divine origin of the King. At some of his work it can be noticed that he compared the qualities of a King with the God. In his work *Kirtana Ghosa*, he stated that when there was chaos and disorder in the planet Earth, God came under the name of *Prithu*, the first king, to save the people in the world.<sup>42</sup>

Further, looking into the work of Sharma's twin concepts of political and economic feudalism which was similar to that of Kosambi's idea, Sharma considered the practice of making land grants to the Brahmans, as the most crucial among a set of factors that tended to feudalise the state apparatus from the Gupta time onwards in the pan-India context.<sup>43</sup> It is also to be noted here, unlike the feudal lords in England, the Brahmans in India did not render any military service to the state. However, they did preach to the people that the sacred duty of carrying out their *Varna* functions and of obeying the king was the need of military service if the people could be persuaded to behave themselves and to acquiesce in the existing order.<sup>44</sup>

The *Neo-Vaishnavism* of Sankaradeva served the similar purpose like that of feudal lords in the Indian context, which helped in building the political order of the land. The philosophical ideas of the movement brought to the minds of the people a state of political consciousness. Sankaradeva, through the medium of songs and poems brought the allegiance in the minds of the people towards their King. The movement contributed in the process of political consolidation of the state in medieval Assam. Further, it also strengthens the state power by holding the different segments of the people in the society and maintaining the social equality among all.

#### 4.4. Sankaradeva and Caste question

Sankaradeva, throughout his life worked to wipe out the caste differentiation and established equal rights for all castes and communities. He voiced for a society in which every individual irrespective of any caste or creed would get equal opportunities without any discrimination in the field of religion. However, it has to be noted that Sankaradeva focussed on the idea of egalitarian society in the spiritual domain. The idea of equality in the philosophical views of Sankaradeva towards the caste system varies comparing it to the other medieval *bhakti* saints of India. The religious leaders and social reformers like Kabir, Nanak and Dadu in the other parts of India challenged the caste ladder strictly which was not a strong point of Assamese *Neo-Vaishnavism*.<sup>45</sup> Sankaradeva never tried to do away or interfere with caste regulation and his sole concern was to see that the social difference did not take place unnecessarily putting restriction upon one's inherent right to spiritual development.<sup>46</sup>

“The service of humanity is the service of God”<sup>47</sup> had been the motto of the *Vaishnava* reformers. Sankaradeva questioned the Brahmanical dominancy in the religious activities and wrote many verses in support of the backward caste people to improve their religious status. The literary works of Sankaradeva repleted in breaking the Brahmanical dominancy in the field of religion. In the popular work *Prahrada-Carita*<sup>48</sup>, Sankaradeva mentioned that every individual in the universe including the Candala by caste is better than a Brahman if he meditates in the name of Hari (God)<sup>49</sup>. He further mentioned in his *Vaikuntha-Prayana*<sup>50</sup> that those who do not discriminate any person on the grounds of caste are recognised as a scholar.<sup>51</sup>



#### **4.5. Sankaradeva and Economic Growth of Medieval Assam**

The philosophical ideas of Sankaradeva contributed considerably in the economic growth of medieval Assam. The ancient society of Assam was largely depended on agriculture<sup>52</sup> and thus, was always in a great need of cattle. However, the rapid growth of the *Shaktism* from the twelfth century along with *Tantricism*, encouraged the number of animal sacrifices for the purpose of religious rituals. It indirectly affected the economy of the land. The religion of Sankaradeva was based on moral values and was exclusive of any kind of sacrifices. This principle of Sankaradeva minimized the practice of animal sacrifices to a larger extent and helped the agrarian society of Assam to flourish.

Sankaradeva's movement stood firm against the blood sacrifices. The movement strongly opposed the blood sacrifices that were taken place in the name of rituals in the *Shakti* cult of Hinduism. Sankaradeva in his work *Bhakti-ratnakar*, mentioned that any individual who perform blood sacrifices in the name of religion was destined to hell and dark perdition.<sup>53</sup> His approach towards the animal sacrifice was accepted by a vast section of people. This was evident from the travel account of Ralph Fitch, an English traveller, who visited Assam towards the end of Koch king Naranarayana in the sixteenth century. He noticed that the people of the kingdom were averse to the killings of animals and there were establishment of hospitals for the domesticated animals.<sup>54</sup> It could be noticed that the essential economic factor that was required for the social formation of the Assamese society was supplied by the liberal principles of *Neo-Vaishnavism*.

## **4.6. Sankaradeva and Religious Institutions**

The *Neo-Vaishnavism* of Sankaradeva gave birth to the foundation of the religious institutions which were one of the most essential features of this movement. These institutions could be divided into two categories, firstly, *Namghar*, which means prayer hall and secondly, *Satras*, which means the *Vaishnava* monasteries.

### **4.6.1. *Namghar* (Prayer Hall)**

The *Namghars* were set up as central institutions of the village that served the purpose of spreading the intellectual and the cultural activities in the village, and in course of time this prayer halls become the nerve-centre of the village and came to co-ordinate all the aspects of social, political as well as the economic life of the Assamese people.<sup>55</sup> This institutions not only serve as a place for reciting prayers but various cultural activities like singing *bargitas* (devotional songs) with proper melodies and dramatic performances were also held here. These institutions worked as a repository of cultural activities that helped the Assamese society till to the modern times to hold it's a strong and charming cultural image. The *Namghar's* also worked as a democratic platform and played a judicial role. The villagers gathered at this place to have discussions and solve their problems related to their day to day life.

### **4.6.2. *Satras* (Vaishnava Monasteries)**

While the *Namghar* worked at the base level, *Satras* i.e. central monasteries were at the top. The word *Satra* is a Sanskrit word. The term “*Satra*” was mentioned in the *Rig Veda* and its etymological meaning is that which protects the good and the honest.<sup>56</sup> In the initial stage of the *Vaishnavite* movement, *Satra* was used as a religious sitting or association where the *Bhagavata* was recited or explained and not as a systemized institution.<sup>57</sup> Inside the *Satras*, there was a prayer hall where the main

activities were performed. The structure of these *Satra's* gradually changed with the later development of the movement. However, from the biographical literature of the *Vaishnava* Saints it is known that each *Satras* contains a prayer hall and the Shrine.

The modern Assamese *Satra* consists of a square enclosure wall with four gateways called *Karapat*. It was surrounded by four rows of huts or long houses and each was divided into numbers of room. The main shrine of the monastery called *Manikut* was placed at the centre of the building with an assembly hall. The surrounded rooms of the *Satra* are generally of equal size but the eastern faced rooms were quite larger, being the residence of the superior better known as *Satradhikar*, who controls every activity of the *Satra*. The east faced rooms are also occupied by the deputy of the superior called *Deka-adhikari* and the principal office bearer of the establishment.<sup>58</sup>

At the initial stage of the movement, the *Satra* institution was in a formative stage and management system was completely different as compared to that of the later-day *Satras*. However, in general, each *Satras* of Assam was under the control of a chief *Vaishnava* guru known as *Satradhikara*. It was under his supervision that a person could take *Sarana* (initiation) into the *Vaishnava* cult by accepting him as his *Guru* (spiritual head). These religious institutions created a kind of bondage between the spiritual leader and the masses. The *Satra* institutions were under the supervision of the political authority, thus, two kinds of social affiliations could be noticed, firstly, a kind of temporal affiliation to the ruling authority and secondly, the spiritual submission to the head of the *Satra* (*Satradhikar*) by the complete acceptance of the *Vaishnava* cult.<sup>59</sup> These double allegiances to both the authority helped in binding the people in the politico-religious environment of the state and strengthened the unity of the Assamese society.<sup>60</sup>

The *Satra* institutions gave an expression to the social organisations of Assam. In the *Vaishnava Satra*, every individual was treated as equal without any discrimination on the basis of caste or classes. All the devotees, disciples and followers were considered as equal and they performed all kinds of works, whether it's social, moral or religious. In the gathering of worshippers, people from all ranks and orders had the same privilege and equal status. It was based on egalitarian ideals. There was no restriction even in reading the sacred books. The doors of the *Satras* were kept open to all classes of people in the society.<sup>61</sup> There were many instances in the *Guru-carita-katha* where the egalitarian nature of this institution could be noticed.

The biographical literatures presented many instances which supported the egalitarian nature of these institutions. The very common incidence in the life of the Sankaradeva's spiritual disciple Madhavadeva was mentioned in almost all the biographical account of the *Vaishnava* Saints. Madhavadeva, while his stay at Bhela *Satra* presently situated in the district of Koch Behar, disliked the action of an old nurse of King Lakhminarayan, whom he considered as his own mother. The reason was the unequal distribution of cloths among the monks. Madhavadeva is said to have calm down only when she agreed to distribute the same quality of cloths equally to all the monks.<sup>62</sup> There are also many other instances that were put forward by the biographers which reflected the egalitarian equalities of these institutions. However, it has to be mentioned here that these *Satras* which were at its initial stage worked on a democratic plane could not retain its original character for long. Sankaradeva, who gave the foundation to this religious institution to bring the simplicity and equality among his followers, itself, took the form of a new class of society and giving its way in the formation of a parallel empire of its own.

Towards the later part of the medieval period, the spiritual leaders of the *Satras* moved to the royal court seeking favour and patronage to increase their power and affluence. The egalitarian nature of the institution which was based on the simplicity and austerity gradually took the form of holding powers and prestige in the hands of the spiritual leaders. As a natural corollary to these acquisitions of power and wealth, courtly formalities and customs began to gain ground in the dealings of the affluent *Satras*. The power of the *Satradhikar* increases on the political plane along with the standard of their living. The increase of power and wealth created a huge gap between the Guru (Spiritual leader) and their disciples. The exchange of philosophical ideas, which helped in widening the intellectual and imaginative horizon of the common mind gradually, disappeared with this gap.<sup>63</sup>

#### **4.7. Sankaradeva and Language**

Another important contribution of Sankaradeva towards democracy was his method of spreading the movement in the language of common people. He broke the seal of classical learning making it available to all the sections of the society including the unlettered masses. The use of regional language is one of the common features of the *bhakti* movement in all other parts of India. Prior to the *bhakti* movement, a few classes of people in India had captured its hold on the knowledge of Sanskrit language and the common people lost interest in it. Moreover, all the sacred scriptures were written in Sanskrit and, therefore, the common people could not read or learn anything from this religious text and started depending on the priestly class. In contradiction to this, the *bhakti* saints spread their movement in the vernacular language and gave a great impetus to the development of learning and literature in India.

Kabir, the medieval *bhakti* saint, remarked that Sanskrit was water in a well whereas language is running water.<sup>64</sup> In the same way, the *Vaishnava* saints of Assam popularized the movement in the language of the common people in place of Sanskrit. Many of them had a well-founded scholarship in Sanskrit. However, they decided to write in the language of the common people. Sankaradeva himself was a remarkable Sanskrit scholar, but he decided to write mainly in the common language of the people with the purpose of making the Sanskrit lore accessible to the uneducated masses.

The actual growth of the Assamese literature and its culture took the real shape and form and has been permanently established only by the litterateurs of the sixteenth century which was started by Sankaradeva.<sup>65</sup> Sankaradeva translated *Bhagavata-purana* into Assamese language. Sankaradeva and his disciples shared the work of the translation. He himself undertook the rendering of the major portion namely, Books I, II, III, VIII, IX, X and the Book XII.<sup>66</sup> Sankaradeva's rendering of the *Bhagavata* was not a simple translation with that of original. It marked an era of renaissance in Assamese poetry.<sup>67</sup> The literary influence of *Bhagavata* proved as a shaping force in the writings of the Sankaradeva. He was not indebted to *Bhagavata* only for the legendary stories of Krishna but also for literary forms, expressions and traditions. Moreover, Sankaradeva translated the *Bhagavata* not only into Assamese words, but also into Assamese idioms.<sup>68</sup>

Sankaradeva's rendering of the different books of the *Bhagavata* can be considered as an adaptation because in order to fit into his schemes some sections of the original text was intentionally left out and some were elaborately summarized.<sup>69</sup> For example, the tribal communities of India that were mentioned in the original text<sup>70</sup> do not match with the Sankaradeva's version. Sankaradeva, in the place of India tribal communities

mentioned about the different tribes of Assam.<sup>71</sup> In fact, Sankaradeva in all his translated work tried to give a local colour by changing some part of the original text.

Sankaradeva did not stop with the translation of the *Bhagavata*. He kept the *Bhagavata* as his source material and composed a large number of other works. His *Nimi Nava Sidha Samvada* was a doctrinal treatise that was based on Book XI of the *Bhagavata*.<sup>72</sup> Some of the other works which were composed drawing materials from the *Bhagavata* were *Anadi Patana*, an adaption from the Book III of *Bhagavata*. Another notable work that was based on the Books X and XI is *Gunamala*. It contained a *stotra* (eulogy or hymn of praise) or *stuti* (phrases) type of poem with six small sections which contained hymns in praise of Krishna and Vishnu.<sup>73</sup>

The most popular and important work that requires a special attention was the *Kirtana-Ghosha* or *Kirtana* of Sankaradeva. It holds a very important place in the minds and thoughts of the Assamese society. In fact, there would be a very less Assamese house-hold in present time that did not possess a copy of *Kirtana* at their home, which was used for the purpose of reciting prayers at the religious occasion.<sup>74</sup>

The original date of the composition of this text was unknown. However, some of the biographers hold that the book was not completed at a one particular period. Looking into the methodical arrangement of the chapters, it could be said that the book was written at different period and were later compiled by the nephew of Madhavadeva, Ramacarana Thakur.<sup>75</sup>

The *Kirtana* consisted of twenty six sections which included selective collections of poems that comprised about two thousand two hundred sixty one couplets in diverse metres.<sup>76</sup> However, the *Kirtana*, contained two poems, which were works of others than Sankaradeva. These two poems, namely, *Sahasra Nama Vrittanta* and *Ghunuca*

were respectively written by his disciples Ananta Kandali and Sridhara Kandali. Each poem bears a *ghosa* (refrains) and was followed by a number of *paras* (verses). These poems were recited in the religious gatherings as well as by an individual in the household prayers. There was a systematic procedure to recite prayers from *kirtana*. In the religious gatherings, after reading a couplet from the *kirtana*, the religious leader repeated the refrain and the gathering took it up along with the clapping of hands.<sup>77</sup>

Sankaradeva, in his masterpiece *Kirtana* spread several messages among the masses. He made up some stories in a very extraordinary way and expresses his message to the humanity. Sankaradeva emphasized on the importance of chanting God's name as a tool for attaining salvation. In the poem, *Ajamilopkhyana*, he mentioned the story of Ajamila, who attain salvation by unknowingly uttering the name of his son, Narayana which is the other name of Vishnu. Ajimala was a Brahman who married a Sudra harlot breaking all sacred laws of his caste. But at the time of his death, he uttered the name of his son i.e. Narayana and, thus, his soul were taken to the abode of Vishnu.<sup>78</sup>

This influential piece of work also focussed in elevating the noble thoughts of the people. Sankaradeva in his poem *Prahlada Carita* emphasise the importance of time in human life. He speaks out that men wasted half of his life time in sleeping and other quarter of time in accumulating the riches. Thereafter, comes the old age when men were incapable of performing any potential work and spend rest of his life in bed being unwell.<sup>79</sup>

Sankaradeva's master piece *Kirtana* maintained a level of clarity in expressions and holds a unique style in narrating the different stories. This work contains the blended sentiments of pleasure and pain, love and separation, anger and forgiveness. It



delighted the youth with its poetic beauty and elder generation with the religious instructions and wisdom.<sup>80</sup>

Some of the other eye-catching works of Sankaradeva's *kavyas* (Epics) were *Haricandra-upsakhyana*, *Ruukmini-harana*, *Amrta-mathana*, *Bali-chalana*, *Kamajaya* or *Rasakrida*, *Gopi-uddhava-samvada*, *kuruksetra-yatra*, *krsna-prayana-pandava-niryana*. However, it has to be noted that although all the *Vaishnava* literature were religious in nature, it swept medieval Assam brushing aside all other literary approaches. The tradition of expressing one's thought through the medium of writings as started by Sankaradeva later inspired the other competent scholars and poets to keep the lamp burning which considerably contributed to the literary stock-house of Assam. It will be not wrong to say that Sankaradeva with his abundance of literary works actually initiated a literary movement in the land of Assam.

#### **4.8. Sankaradeva and His Cultural Contribution**

The cultural contribution of Sankaradeva acquires a special attention in the history of medieval Assam. Sankaradeva introduced different forms of music in Assam which are popularly known as *Bargitas* and the *Ankiya-geet*. *Bargitas* are the devotional songs that were composed by Sankaradeva and his spiritual disciple Madhavadeva in different places throughout the movement and under different circumstances. The lyrical songs were written in an artificial speech called *Brajabali*, a mixed form of both Maithili and Assamese language.<sup>81</sup> The *bargitas* were used as a medium in propagating the *Vaishnavite* movement of Assam. The first *bargita* of Sankaradeva was most probably the one he sung during his first pilgrimage at Vadarikasrama in 1481. According to the biographers, Sankaradeva is said to have composed about two hundred and forty such devotional lyrics but unfortunately, only thirty four are now

available. Each *bargitas* are tuned to a particular *raga* (melody). In the available *bargitas* lyrics of Sankaradeva, the following thirteen *ragas* (melody) are used: *Asowari, Ahira, Bhupali, Dhanasri, Sri, Natamallar, Suhai, Vasanta, Kedar, Mahura-dhansiri, Tuda-vasanta, Gauri* and *Kalyana*. The *bargitas* are considered as distinctive school of Indian classical music. It will be not wrong to say that these *bargitas* were used as a medium by Sankaradeva to create an atmosphere of tranquillity in the heart of the Assamese people based on a new religious enthusiasm and were able to lead them nearer to God.<sup>82</sup>

The devotional songs of Sankaradeva also encouraged people to focus on human lives and values including all other creations. The humanitarian nature of the *Bargitas* is clearly noticed in the song, “*Narayana kahe bhakati karo tera*” where he mentioned all the creatures of the universe including the insects, birds, trees and mountains should be equally treated without making any harm to them. He further mentioned that all the creatures are the body and soul of the God.<sup>83</sup> In fact, these *Bargitas* are woven with strands of religious experiences, philosophical reflections, secular and ethical broodings, poignant introspection of the self, agony of spirit and saintly humility.<sup>84</sup>

Assamese literature is also blessed with another typical form of Sankaradeva’s poetry, which is called *bhatima*. It is a class of lyric similar to the English ode “often in the form of an address, generally dignified or exalted in subject, feeling and style.”<sup>85</sup> These classes of lyrics are classified into three sections, firstly, *natya-bhatimas* or dramatic *bhatimas*, which were used in the dramatic performances or the plays, secondly, *deva-bhatimas*, which were used in the praise of God and lastly, *Raja-bhatimas* or panegyrics to the kings.

#### 4.8.1. *Ankiya Nat* (Drama)

Apart from the literary works, *Ankiya Nat* is one of the most important and valuable creations of Sankaradeva. It constituted a great treasure for Assam for shaping its cultural history. The term “*Ankiya Nat*” is an Assamese word, which meant the religious dramas, that are traditionally perform in the religious institutions like *Namghar* (prayer hall) and *Satras* (monasteries). This plays consisted of different element like the arts of music, dance paintings and dialogues contributed in creating an environment of mental pleasure to the people, which were earlier engaged in and under the influence of the magical acts and superstition during that period of time. The biographical account of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva mentioned about various dramatic performances in the sixteenth and seventeenth century of medieval Assam.

Sankaradeva had travelled almost most of the parts of India and he was familiar with the dramatic performances of different places like *Rashlila*, *Ramlila*, *Kathaka* etc. which were quite popular at that particular time.<sup>86</sup> After the return of Sankaradeva’s first pilgrimage, he realized that the appeals of his *kavyas* are oracular rather than visual. He transformed and elevated this rudimentary plays into a kind of drama that was built on classical concept and grandeur.<sup>87</sup> This dramatic performance was a new element that introduced in the literature of Assam. Sankaradeva elucidated the ideas of God’s attributes through his poetical woks and now with the help of dramatic performance, he visualised those attributes. The play attracted a huge section of people to the *Vaishnava* cult, because it was the pressing need of the society to have some mental amusement in the minds of the people in contrast to the environment of magico-religious beliefs and superstitions, which people were being living. Moreover, it brought a sense of discipline in the minds of the individuals. The dramatic performances along with the other activities like reciting prayers were scheduled at an

appointed time so it brought to the people a sense of responsibility to get there at that particular time. Thus, a kind of discipline was instilled into the minds of the individuals that actually nurses determination and resolution which was a very essential for the development of individual's own potentialities which in turn enrich the society.

The play started with a sort of *purvaranga* that consisted of the singing of orchestral music of devotional to the accompaniment of the playing of the musical instruments. After that the *Sutradhara*, who was the conductor of the whole play introduced the drama with a preliminary dance.<sup>88</sup> Like in the Sanskrit plays, *Sutradhara* recited the *nandi* and he introduced the other characters of the play. The duty of the *Sutradhara* did not end with this but remained in the stage controlling and directing the performance from the beginning till to the end.

In all the plays of Sankaradeva, there was only one act in each drama and therefore, it was called *Ankiya nat* (one act plays). This *Ankiya-nats* later came to be known as *bhauna* and the actors performing in the play were called *bhaoriyas*. These plays were accompanied by the musical instruments like the drums (*khol*s and *mardangas*) and cymbals (*tals*). Sankaradeva was said to have composed seven plays but unfortunately one of his plays named *Kamsa-vadha* was not available in the present time. The names of his other plays were *Rukmini-harana*, *Parijata-harana*, *Keli-gopala*, *Patni-prasada*, *Ram-vijaya* and *Kaliya-damana*. This dramatic performance helped in the evolution of a new kind of dance that was very popularly known as *Sattriya Nritya*. In the modern times, *Sattriya Nritya* had occupied its position in the Indian classical dance system.

The list of literary works of Sankaradeva was never ending and it required a deep research giving particular preference in each of his work. After the death of Sankaradeva, the tradition was carried further by his disciples and other *Vaishnava* saints of Assam. The most important and influential work of Madhavadeva i.e. *Namghosa* holds a unique attention of the Assamese people. The literary works of the sixteenth century had established the characteristics of the Assamese people such as mode of living, habits, customs, society, spiritual uplifts, mental and moral dispositions and what not.<sup>89</sup>

#### **4.9. Conclusion**

Sankaradeva was a very socially conscious person who had sensed the suffering of the people and decided to spread his ideals that would fit in the society at that period of time and being an artist, he took up his pen and used his literary works as a tool for the propagation of his Faith which ultimately contributed in the establishment of Assamese literature and its culture at a proud position and as a distinctive identity in India and outside. H.V. Murthy<sup>90</sup> in one of his article tried to compare the ideas of Sankaradeva to some of the modern concept like Community Development, Adult Education and the *Panchayati Raj*. However, it would not be wrong though if we see these modern concept from a lens in the medieval times, like the ideas of *Bhakti* was used as a tools for the betterment of the society and the literary movement that was initiated by Sankaradeva serve the learning purpose of the people and lastly the religious institution which were worked on a democratic platform served the purpose as those of the *panchayat* in modern times. The philosophical ideas of the Sankaradeva's movement, indeed, help in transforming the medieval society of Assam to a civilised and advanced one.

## End notes

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<sup>1</sup> Pandey, Manager, and Alka Tyagi. "Bhakti Poetry: Its relevance and Significance." *Indian Literature* (Sahitya Academy) 45, no. 6 (Nov-Dec 2001): 129-138.

<sup>2</sup> Barman, S. *An Unsung Colossus*. Guwahati: Forum for Sankaradeva Studies, 1999: 60.

<sup>3</sup> Wills, C.U. "The Territorial System of the Rajputs Kingdoms of Medieval Chhattisgarh." *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal* 15 (1919): 197-262.

<sup>4</sup> Cited in Saha, Suranjit K. "Early State Formation in Tribal Areas of East-Central India." *Economic and Political Weekly* 31, no.13. (March 30, 1996): 824-834.

<sup>5</sup> Dineshchandra, Sircar. *Studies in the Geography of Ancient and Medieval India*. New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publication, 1971: 161.

<sup>6</sup> Dutta, Debabrata. *History of Assam*. Calcutta: Sribhumi Publishing Company, 1989: 19.

<sup>7</sup> Barman, S. 1999. *Op.cit.*

<sup>8</sup> Marx, K and F. Engels. *Selected Works*. Vol.3. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1983: 487.

<sup>9</sup> Barman, S. 1999. *Op.cit.*, 142.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Barua, B.K. *Sankaradeva Vaisnava Saint of Assam*. Gauhati: Assam Academy for Cultural Relations, 1960: 1.

<sup>13</sup> Barman, S. 1999. *Op.cit.*, 68.

<sup>14</sup> Barua, S.L. *A Comprehensive History of Assam*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1986: 252.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Phukan, K.N. "A Crusading Work." *Indian Literature* (Sahitya Akademy) 33, no. 4 (July-Aug 1990): 156-166.

<sup>17</sup> Barman, S. 1999. *Op.cit.*

<sup>18</sup> Goswami, K.D. *Life and Teachings of Mahapurusa Sankaradeva*. Guwahati: Forum for Sankaradeva Studies, 1982: 20.

<sup>19</sup> Barman, S. 1999. *Opt.cit.*, 61.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 62

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Vide, S Farquhar. *An Outline of the Religious Literature of India*. New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1977: 82.

<sup>23</sup> It means ritual sacrifices with specific objectives.

<sup>24</sup> Frazer, J. *Magic Art (Golden Bough Series)*. Macmillan, 1955: 288.

<sup>25</sup> Barman, S. 1999. *Op.cit.*, 63.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>27</sup> In one of the Sankaradeva's work *Kirtana* he said "He who sees Vishnu in the entire world gets salvation forthwith even while he is alive. Of all the means by far the best is to deem all creatures as one's own self".

<sup>28</sup> Barua, B.K.. 1960. *Op.cit.*, 95.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Neog, Maheswar. *Sankaradeva And His Times*. Guwahati: LBS Publications, 1965 (Rpt. 1998): 243.

<sup>31</sup> Barua, B.K. 1960. *Op.cit.*

<sup>32</sup> Neog, Maheswar. "The Bhakti Cycle of Assamese Lyrics: Bargits and After." *Journal of the Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha II* (1999): 1-19.

<sup>33</sup> "Aponar namar sanga nacarata Hari;

*Yeyi nama seyi Hari jana nista kari*" Cited from Barua, B.K. 1960. *Op.cit.*, 97.

<sup>34</sup> Kakati, B. *Mother Goddess Kamakhya*. Guwahati, 1961: 75-77.

<sup>35</sup> Neog, Maheswar. 1965 (Rpt. 1998). *Op.cit.*, 1-19.

<sup>36</sup> Cited in "History of Vaishnavism in India", an article reproduced from Bezbarua, Lakshminath. *A Creative Vision: Essay on Sankaradeva and Neo-Vaisnava Movement in Assam*. Srimanata Sankar Kristi Bikash Samiti, 2004: 17.

<sup>37</sup> Guha, A. *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam: Society, Polity, Economy*. Calcutta: Centre for studies in Social Science, 1991: 100.

<sup>38</sup> Barman, S. 1999. *Op.cit.*, 68-69.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 69-72. All the verses were cited in details.

<sup>40</sup> "Just as the vassals pay taxes to the king, so I pay

Obeisance to the feet of Hari, God of all living

Being, starting from Brahma himself.

And again, I am Your uncraving servant as You are my master without desire

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Like a king's servant I have no other work to do (except worshipping you)"  
(*Kirtana Ghosa* c.452)

[The above translated verses were taken from Barman's book *An Unsung Colossus*)

<sup>41</sup> Barman, S. 1999. *Op.cit.*, 72.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Saha, Suranjit K. March 30, 1996. *Op.cit.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Sarma, S.N. *The Neo-Vaishnavite Movement and the Satra Institution of Assam*. Gauhati University Press, 1966: 64.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>48</sup> "Yito candalra kaya vakya mane, sadaya sumare hari

*Ache bahra vrata yito brahmanara, si si srestha tato kari."*

<sup>49</sup> For details see Goswami, K.D. 1982. *Op.cit.*, 37.

<sup>50</sup> "Brahmanara candalara nivicari kula, datata corata yara bhaila eka jnana

*Nicata sadhuta yara bhaila eka jnana, tahakese pandita buliya sarvajana"*

<sup>51</sup> Goswami, K.D. 1982. *Op.cit.*, 37.

<sup>52</sup> Dutta, Debabrata. 1989. *Op.cit.*, 35.

<sup>53</sup> Neog, M. 1965 (Rpt. 1998). *Op.cit.*, 365.

<sup>54</sup> Dutta, Debabrata. 1989. *Op.cit.*, 59.

<sup>55</sup> Barua, B.K. 1960. *Op.cit.*, 107-108.

<sup>56</sup> Barman, S. 1999. *Op.cit.*, 86.

<sup>57</sup> Sarma, S.N. 1966. *Op.cit.*, 103.

<sup>58</sup> Neog, M. 1965 (Rpt. 1998). *Op.cit.*, 309.

<sup>59</sup> Bera, Gautam Kumar. *Religious and Cultural Legacy of Sankaradeva*. Guwahati: Spectrum Publications, 2016: 34.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> Acharyya, N.N. *The History of Medieval Assam*. New Delhi: Omsons Publications, 1966: 266.

<sup>62</sup> Barman, S. 1999. *Op.cit.*, 88.

<sup>63</sup> Sarma. S.N. 1966. *Op.cit.*, 189.



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<sup>64</sup> Quoted in Majumder, R.C.Ed. *The History of Culture and the Indian People*. Vol. VIII. Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1972: 572.

<sup>65</sup> Sankaradeva was, actually not the first person to begin the age of *Vaishnava* literature in the Assamese society, because it had a long heritage starting back from the fourteenth century. In this connection, the works of three scholars made a remarkable contribution to the Assamese society. Madhav Kandali, who was a profound scholar, wrote an *Assamese* version *Ramanaya*; Haivara Vipra wrote three books based on *Mahabharata* and Hema Saraswati's *Prahrada carita* was the notable one.

<sup>66</sup> Barua. B.K. 1960. *Op.cit.*, 11.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> Barman, S. 1999. *Op.cit.*, 121.

<sup>70</sup> “*Kirata hunanhdra pulinda pukkasa abhira kanka yavanakhay sadayah*”

<sup>71</sup> “*Kirata Kachari Khasi Garo Miri*”

<sup>72</sup> Barua, B.K. 1960. *Op.cit.*, 13.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 20-21. The whole story in detail is cited in the Book.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>82</sup> Das, Nirmali. “Social Impact of the Bargitas.” *Journal of the Srimanta Sankaradeva Research Institute* 1. (1990).

<sup>83</sup> Das, Hara Mohan. *Sankaradeva: A Study*. Gauhati, 1945: 112.

<sup>84</sup> Barua. B.K. 1960. *Op.cit.*, 55.

<sup>85</sup> Neog, M. 1965 (Rpt. 1998). *Op.cit.*, 195-196.

<sup>86</sup> Barua. B.K. 1960. *Op.cit.*, 69.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

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<sup>88</sup> Literally it means the “thread–holder”. It is said that Sankaradeva himself played this role in his first drama *Cihna-Yatra*.

<sup>89</sup> Das, Hara Mohan. 1945. *Op,cit.*, 127.

<sup>90</sup> Murthy, H.V Sreenivasa. *Vaisnavism of Sankaradeva and Ramanuja: A Comparative Study*. Delhi: Motilala Banarsidas Publication, 1973.

## **CHAPTER – V**

### **CONCLUSION**

The present dissertation, *Neo-Vaishnavism in the Sixteenth Century Assam: A Historical Study* focussed on the *Neo-Vaishnavite* movement of Assam and its impact in different aspects of the society. There are three objectives formulated in understating the historical development of *Neo-Vaishnavite* movement and its contribution in the social formation of the medieval Assamese society. The first objective is to study the political and the socio-religious as well as the economic aspects of the sixteenth century Assam. The second one is to understand the historical development of *Neo-Vaishnavite* movement and to explore the role of Sankaradeva in the construction of the medieval Assam. The third objective is to explore the impact of the *Neo-Vaishnavism* in the social transformation of the sixteenth century Assam.

*Neo-Vaishnavism* is a religious reform movement started by Sankaradeva in the sixteenth century Assam. He reformed the religious outlook of the people and constructed the progressive social and cultural phenomenon of medieval Assam. One of the special features of the movement is that it alongside played the role of literary movement. The impact of the movement can be identified in each and every aspect of the society and its contribution is remarkable in the medieval history of Assam

The medieval period of Assam was starting from the thirteenth century and it was disintegrated after the fall of the powerful Pala dynasty. The territory lost its political integrity and the land was divided into many independent rulers. There were rise and fall of dozens of independent kings during this period, and it resulted in the loss of political order in the country. In addition, the social condition of the society was degenerated in terms of religion. The most dominant sect of medieval Assam was

*Shaktism* and it was dominated by Brahmans i.e. the priestly class. The lower sections of the society were deprived of performing any kind of rites and rituals, and therefore, they had to completely depend on them. Further, the ceremonials that were connected with this religion were very expensive. On the other hand, the tribal communities of Assam had their own God and Goddess and they worshipped them according to their own tribal rites and rituals. The tribal communities of Assam were believers in animism and their rites and practices were connected with the human sacrifices, ancestor worship, and belief in heavenly bodies, magic and sorcery.

The prevalence of *Tantricism* was another drawback for the medieval Assam. The tantric sect was associated with *Shaktism* and they had a stronghold over Kamakhya temple. The rites and practices of the tantric priests were inhuman and irrational. It encouraged sacrifices that included both human and animals. It further exploited women. In the mean time, the medieval Assam was engulfed by the magical rites and sorcery. The medieval biographers, Ahom *Buranjis* and the Persian chronicles clearly mentioned about the magical rites and practices that were based on irrational beliefs and charms.

In general, the condition of the medieval Assam was degrading and the existence of the society was threatened in all aspects. In the middle of fifteenth century, a great social reformer, Sankaradeva was born. He belonged to *bhuyans* family who were engaged in hereditary business. However, Sankaradeva denounced the materialistic world and went for pilgrimages in different parts of the country. He realized the wave of *Bhakti* movement that was spreading rapidly across India. After his return, he came up with a new faith that was based on the Sanskrit scripture, *Bhagavata Purana*. His movement is known as *Ek-Sharana Nama Dharma*, meant shelter in one God i.e. *Vishnu*. Sankaradeva borrowed the concept of *Ek-Sharana Nam Dharma* from the

Sanskrit literature. However, he propagated it so ingenuously and gave a local colour that people accepted the ideology easily. He established a small *Namghar* (prayer hall) and invited people to hold philosophical and religious discourses. This activity gradually spread to other parts of Assam and within a short period of time it took the form of a greater movement that came to be well known as *Neo-Vaishnavite* movement.

The medieval society of Assam before the advent of the movement presented a picture of diverse shades and grades of culture. The people were divided on the basis of heterogeneous faiths and belief system. The society was in an urgent need of something universal that is acceptable and convenient for all section of the people. It is a fact that in order to construct a strong unity there must be something that is universal and acceptable for all. This need was supplied by the *Neo-Vaishnavite* movement by offering a very simplest and easy way of worshipping God irrespective of any caste or creed. It broke the barriers of separatism among the people of different section of the community and brought them under a common roof. The universalistic character of the movement helped in constructing the bond of oneness among the masses and contributed in the formation of a general Assamese society. The religious institutions of the movement i.e. the *Namghars* and the *Satras* which were based on democratic principles strengthened this unity among the masses. These institutions not only work as a common democratic platform for holding discussions and prayers, but served the purpose of a cultural platform where various activities like music, singing, dancing and paintings were held.

The political condition of Assam during the sixteenth century displayed a significant change in terms of its power. The political instability that existed during the medieval period due to the absence of any centralised power and rise of many independent

rulers seems to be settled with the rise of Ahoms in the eastern part and Koch kingdom in the west. These two powers subjugated the other independent rulers and take over the entire territory under its control. The Ahoms ruled the eastern part of the country and the western part came under the territorial jurisdiction of Koch. The masses residing in both the sides of the land were connected with the universal faith of *Neo-Vaishnavism*. It enhanced the growth of community and that made the people to feel oneness. In fact, the faith of *Neo-Vaishnavism* worked as a kind of synthesis among the different communities of both the territory. This oneness helped in the construction of the Assamese identity in the history of Assam. In the mean time, the movement played a significant role in providing the ideological support to both the ruling authority.

The *Neo-Vaishnavite* movement propagated the idea of *Bhakti* (devotion) i.e. the complete surrender to God (Krishna). It focussed on the *dasya* form of *bhakti*, which meant the subjects (people) were the servants to his master i.e. God. This relationship between the God and his subjects projected a personal bond between the master and his serf of a feudal model. In addition, the sixteenth century Assam was in a transitional phase from a primitive society to a feudal one. In this context, the first essential characteristics that is essential was the development of an emotional bondage between the different classes of the society and to maintain that bondage there must be the allegiance between the peasants and land lords, land lords to the vassals and the vassals to the King. Therefore, the idea of *bhakti* propounded by the movement delivered a kind of spirit of allegiance between the worshippers to his God, which can be however, be compared with the loyalty of the subject to his King. The philosophical idea of *bhakti* implied a complete surrender of an individual to God and his intense loyalty to him. Therefore, the concept of *bhakti* associated with the

Assamese *Neo-Vaishnavism* could be easily compared to the complete subjugation of the vassal to the lord in a feudal structure. Moreover, the feudalistic nature of offering a part of produce and labour services in return for the protection from the superior is also projected in *Neo-Vaishnavism*; where a devotee offered complete devotion to God in return for blessing.

At the same time, the hierarchical structure that is interlocked between different classes of people in a feudal society is also reflected in the *Neo-Vaishnavism* of Assam. It could be indentified with the interlocked relationship between the people and their spiritual leader and the God. The spiritual leaders, who were the head of the religious institutions of the movement worked as a mediator between the populace and the God. The dependence of one group on the other and the intense trust and loyalty holding this relationship signifies feudal nature.

Thus, the idea of *dasya*-form *bhakti* of *Neo-Vaishnavite* movement helped the medieval Assam in strengthening the relationship and building trust between the master and his servant which is one of the most essential features for a society that is in a transitional phase from a primitive to a feudal one. Further, the philosophical ideas of the movement also worked in constructing the political aspects of the society. In many of the works of Sankaradeva, it is noticed where he relate the superior qualities of a master with the King. He compared the duties of paying obedience to God with that of paying taxes to the King. His works no doubt reflects his intention of bringing the idea of political awareness into the minds of the people.

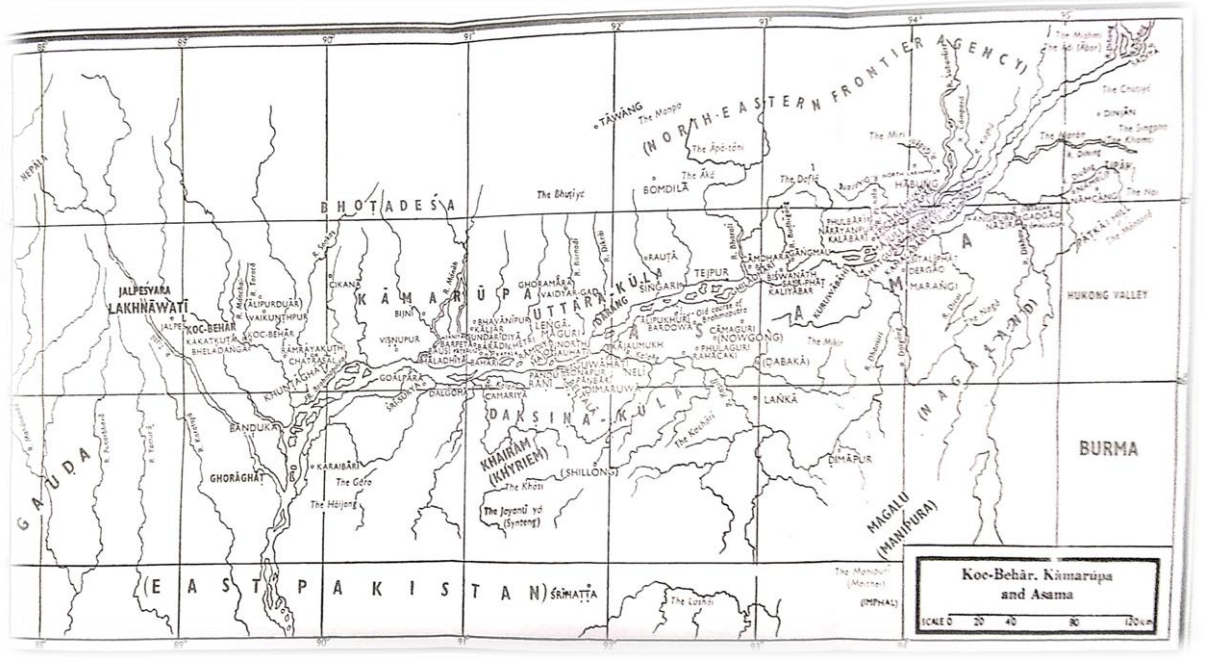
The *Neo-Vaishnavite* movement also shaped the cultural life of the Assamese people. It provided cultural identity to Assam. The religious institutions i.e. *Satras* and *Namghars* took the form of a cultural platform where various cultural activities were

performed. The gatherings of the people at these institutions from different communities brought a sense of commonness among them and this commonness united them and worked as a progressive step in the process of social formation.

The entire argument of the dissertation was able to establish the fact that the *Neo-Vaishnavite* movement made a significant impact on the process of social formation of the medieval Assamese society in the sixteenth century. The movement provided ideological support to the ruling authority, which helped in the construction of the Assamese identity. The movement also brought about a new social order in the society by removing the superstitions, corruptions and irrational beliefs and practices. It strengthened the feeling of universal brotherhood by creating unity among different communities irrespective of any caste or creed. This unity contributed in the formation of a general Assamese society. The movement, at the same time, also advocated the principles of non-violence, humanity, tolerance and forgiveness. The philosophical ideas and the principles of the movement is inspiring a better future in every stages of life.



## APPENDIXES



**Appendix 1: Historical Map of Medieval Assam.**



**Appendix 2: Modern Structure of *Moina Poria* Namghar of Assam introduced by Sankaradeva, Madhavadeva and Damodardeva in the sixteenth century.**



**Appendix 3: Entrance of Moina Poria Namghar and people having community prayer**



**Appendix 4: Main Shrine (*Kirtan-Ghar*) of a prayer hall**





**Appendix 5: Modern Patbausi Satriya of Barpeta**



**Appendix 6: Sculpture of two person performing Sattriya Dance**



A 16TH CENTURY ILLUSTRATED ASSAMESE MANUSCRIPT  
(From Chitra Bhagavata)

(By courtesy of Shri Munindra Narayan Dutta Barooah)

**Appendix 7: A sixteenth century Illustrated Assamese Manuscript.**



**Appendix 8: A male performer in a Krishna posture at a Namghar in Majuli**





**Appendix 9: People performing different acts in a Drama (*Ankiya Nat*)**



**Appendix 10: People performing in an Act.**

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