Chapter 4:

Naamghar-Social Dimensions

A Social Movement

Social Movements, which have manifested themselves in various forms and various places in history, are a potent force of socio-cultural transformation. A social movement can be defined as an organized attempt on the part of a society to bring about a change through collective mobilization, based on an ideology. Thus a social movement involves sustained collective action. Though it may not be formally organized, the ideology is able to create interest and awakening in a sufficiently large number of people. Social movements have generally been oriented towards bringing about change in the existing system of relationships, norms and values of a people, which are necessarily directed against efforts to resist the change and maintain status quo.

One of the main issues in the study of social movements is to find the root cause of it. The root generally lies in prevalent unfavorable conditions of relative deprivation and strain. It motivates people and mobilizes them around certain common interests and issues. However, a point conceded by the ‘relative deprivation’ theorists is that a position of relative deprivation alone will not generate a social movement. While strain provides the structural condition, it is the crystallization of a generalized belief which makes the attempt of persons under strain to access the situation, and then to explain it by creating
or assembling a generalized belief, thereby trying to remedy the situation. Both the strain and the generalized belief require precipitating factors to trigger off the movement.¹

The spread of the Namghar Institution was a social movement. The time and focus align it with the Bhakti Movement which happened all over Medieval India.

**The Bhakti Movement in India**

The Bhakti Movement of Medieval India can be looked on as a Social Movement.

There was a great efflorescence of spiritual awakening in the wake of The Bhakti Movement that pervaded almost the whole of India in the Medieval Period. This Bhakti Movement occurred in different places at different times as reactions to different social situations or deprivations. Yet there was a definitely uniting common concept running through all the different Bhakti movements propagated by the saints.

What is Bhakti? Bhakti means intense love of God.

According to Vedavyasa, unswerving attachment to worship of God is Bhakti.

Many great saints and devotees led the way to inspire and empower the common people in shaping their spiritual and cultural life. Ramananda (1299-1356 AD) and his disciples, Kabir (1398-1518 AD) and Guru-Nanak (1467-1539 AD), Tukaram (16th Century), Surdas (1418-1583 AD) and Tulsidas (1523-1623 AD) stand out among them.

The concept of devotion or Bhakti has a long and continuous history in India right from most ancient times. Although the *Upanishads* start with the concept of Pantheism, they

further lead the disciple on to the Ultimate Concept of Monotheism or Non-dualism. For instance, as found in the *Bhagavat Purana*, there is only one self-shining Purusha transcending the spheres of Prakriti. He is called Ishwara or Brahman. Further, the attainment of the state of Brahman is the Ultimate goal of life.  

Earlier, the two contemporary and major social movements in India i.e. Buddhism and Jainism also sought to introduce the concept of devotion as a means of attaining to salvation which was accessible to one and all without any need of an agent. 

Buddhism approached philosophical problems from the phenomenal point of view. ‘The subjects and objects in the world are only manifestations of consciousness. When the state of consciousness transcends subject-object duality and the intellect becomes fully identified with pure consciousness, it is the final stage of Buddhahood.’

There are many archeological and other records to show that Vasudeva-Krishna was worshipped from the time of Panini right upto Maurya and Shunga Period. In Sir R. G. Bhandarkar’s opinion (as mentioned by Dr. Bhaben Barua) – “the worship of Vasudeva-Krishna was the predominant religion in a large part of India – even to the suppression of the worship of sun, moon and other animal gods.”

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3Ibid., p.19

The worship of Vasudeva- Krishna stands at the head of the later Bhakti cults of India. From here on, we trace the trend of worship and devotion to a personal God, which crystallized into the religio- social-philosophical-cultural history of India as the well-known Bhakti- Movement.

Vishnu is a Deity who attained prominence during the Bhakti Movement and came to be referred to as the great God or sole God. In the Bhagavad Geeta, and the Bhagavat Purana, the concept of Vasudeva-son of Devaki- stands at the head.

Vaishnavism is one of the oldest religions of India where Vishnu, also called Hari, Narayana, Krishna, etc. is worshipped as the Supreme God. Vaishnavism finds its best exposition through the persona of Lord Krishna, the perfect incarnation of Vishnu-Narayana. This aspect of Vishnu’s assuming different incarnations (Avatara) from time to time is an important feature of the Vaishnava Cult.

There was an unprecedented resurgence of Vaishnavism in South India from 6th to 10th century. This resurgence created 12 Alwars or saintly persons. The composition of Nalayira Divya Prabandham (four thousand hymns) in praise of Vishnu was a milestone of the Bhakti movement. Meanwhile Adi Sankaracharya composed a treatise on philosophy of Advaita Vedanta. The emergence of Ramanujacharya and his Vishishtadvaita as a protest to the Advaita was the next development. Ramanujacharya, Madhavacharya, Nimbakacharya and Vallabhacharya popularized Vaishnava religion with their own interpretations. In this way, the Bhakti movement was spanned in India from the 12th to 16th Century.

Tukaram, Eknath, and Namdev of Maharashtra, Meerabai of Rajasthan, and Narasinha Mehta and Shyamal Kavi of Gujarat, Sur Das of Uttar Pradesh, Jagannatha Das of Orissa, Chaitanya Deva and Rup-Sanatana Goswami of West Bengal, all contributed to the preaching of Vishnu- Krishna Worship.
K. Damodaran wrote that the common features of the Bhakti movement that originated and spread in various parts of India during medieval period were “… first, the recognition of the unity of the people – irrespective of their caste, community and other religious considerations; secondly, equality of all before God; thirdly, opposition to the caste system; fourthly, the belief that communion between God and man depended on the virtues of each individual and nor on his wealth or caste; fifthly, an emphasis on devotion as the highest form of worship; and finally, denigration of ritualism, idolatry, pilgrimage and all self-mortifications.”

**Denial of the doctrine of Karma, and Faith in Divine Grace**

That the Vaishnavite thinking was basically free of the Doctrine of Karma (i.e. Salvation through performance of good deeds and rituals) is a significant point to note: ‘The original Indo-Europeans (Aryans) did not have concepts like those connoted by ‘Karma’ to start with. But in India, contact and co-mingling with Dravidian and Austric and tribal Indians brought in a synthesis in the spiritual conception of the Aryans, and the result is the doctrine of Karma: it appears to have been accepted amongst most classes of Indians in the first half of first millennium BC.

“The innovation made by Vaishnavism is the introduction of the element of grace or Divine Mercy within the deterministic view of the Law of Karma. This is how the Vaishnavism and the constituent Bhakti cults really circumvented the non-Aryan doctrine of Karma.’ ‘Grace’ is a conception which really is a denial of the doctrine of Karma.”

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6B. Barua, “A Philosophical and Sociological Examination of Vaishnavism From Sankaradeva to L Bezbarua”, *Ibid.*, pp.53-54
By propounding in general that divine grace could be achieved through devotion which was open to all classes and castes, the Bhakti movement dispensed with the principle of birth which hitherto determined access to salvation through knowledge and rituals (karma).

**Naam-Dharma as a part of Bhakti Movement**

Srimanta Sankaradeva spread Vaishnavism through *Ek- Saran-Naam- Dharma* in Assam just in the same period, i.e. in 15th and 16th centuries.

Srimanta Sankaradeva who was born in the central region of the Brahmaputra valley in 1449 A.D. was the great saint who brought about a cultural and social awakening in the land of his birth through his Vaishnavite religion, so much that he is revered even to this day as the Father of Assamese Culture. He spread the Light of the Naam-Dharma and dispelled the Darkness of ignorance, superstition and senseless violence.

He was surely a part of the Pan-Indian Bhakti Movement.

But hardly any writings on Bhakti Saints of Medieval India recognise the name of Sankaradeva and his great disciple Madhavadeva outside the geographical boundaries of North- East India. Famous authors of the Bhakti Movement, like Dr. T. S. Rukmini, K. Damodaran, and R. G. Bhandarkar do not mention Sankaradeva.

R. C. Majumdar, although not mentioning him in his own works, has given place for a 10-page article on Sankaradeva by R. M. Nath in his compilation ‘New Phases of the Bhakti Cult’.  

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7*Ibid*, p.103
These were all written probably in the 19th century and later, when India awoke to a sense of Nationalism...a time of great turmoil in Assam. Perhaps the political disorganization in the region eclipsed the cultural, social and religious aspects of Assam in those days. Whatever the reasons, Sankaradeva was not given a significant place in the history of Bhakti Movement written by Indian historians of the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Yet it remains a historical fact that Sankaradeva was not just a guru and propagator of a new faith. He was a many-splendoured personality whose actions and ideals had made Assamese people pulsate with new vitality, and enlivened them into a new social restructuring. “He was an erudite scholar, a gifted poet, an able dramatist, a talented musician, a steadfast pursuer of humanistic ideals, and above all, a great organizer of social reform.”

**Early Vaishnavism in Assam**

Although it is not easy to determine the origin of Vaishnavism in Assam, there is no want of evidences to show that the worship of Vishnu and his incarnations were prevalent much before the advent of Sankaradeva, who spread Neo- Vaishnavism through the Naamghar culture in Assam beginning in the last part of the 15th Century, and made Neo-Vaishnavism a popular movement.

“There are epigraphic and archeological finds, folklores and traditions and writings of poets related to Vaishnavism in the ancient period. In the Shanti-Parvan of Mahabharata, Vishnu is called ‘Pragjotisa-jyestha’ (reference to Pragjyotispura-ancient city of Assam).

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Bana in his *Harshacharitam* describes Bhaskaravarman (606-647 A.D.) the great King of Kamarupa as belonging to a Vaishnava family.”

“Even the Chinese pilgrim Huien Tsiang describes King Bhaskaravarman as descended from Narayanadeva. The 11th century, *Kalika-purana* records that Vishnu in his Boar Incarnation was worshipped in Chitravaku Mountain, East of Pandu near modern Guwahati.”

“The worship of Hayagriva Madhava as an Incarnation of Visnu existed in Assam from a very early period. There is a temple, to this date, in Hajo, 14 miles North-West of Guwahati dedicated to Hayagriva Madhava. Tantric elements are associated with the worship of ancient Visnu as Vasudeva.”

B. N. Puri gives an insight into ancient movement of Aryan culture into Assam. “Vedic literature speaks of Eastern India as a land of Vratyas (Anupadesa), probably having affinity to the Magians of Iran. Spooner refers to early Magian settlers in Eastern parts especially Videha, Magadha and Pragjyotisa. The time and manner of Aryans entry to Assam is uncertain. But in Vedic literature again, there is an interesting legend in Shatapata Brahmana pointed out by Weber. It refers to Mathava, King of Videha carrying Agni-Vaishnara in his mouth, with Rishi Gautama Rahigana as his priest. Mathava is said to have succeeded in Aryanizing all the land from Saraswati to Sadanira. (Sadanira is another name of the river Karatoya.) Thus by the time of the Aitareya Brahmana, the movement towards the East gained further impetus. ‘With its richness in wood and SOMA plant, the hilly tracts of Kamarupa attracted members of Brahmana

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9 B. P. Chaliha, “Note on Sankaradeva’s Neo-Vaishnavim and his philosophical view”, *Mahapurusa Jyoti*, Vol. V.
community in large numbers and it came to be known as land of Sacrifices. *Mleccha* country became *Punya Bhumi* after the defeat of Naraka at the hands of Krishna. Whatever might be the truth of the Krishna legend and of Naraka, the land of Assam appears to have been Aryanized by early centuries of Christian Era.”

“Thus amongst the common people of Early Medieval Assam, Shaktism was the most common religion, along with Saivism in the western sector. In eastern parts esoteric Buddhism in the form of Vajrayana had begun to gain ground secretly from the ninth century onwards. (It is believed that the Buddhist Schools existing in West Coast and other parts of India when forced out, found a secret hiding place in forests of Assam. There are so far, no direct evidences except the existence of a decadent Tantric Buddhism.”

### Social Conditions before Sankaradeva

In the middle of the 15th Century, when Sankaradeva was born, Assam was in a state of socio-political turmoil.

In the East, Ahoms (a Chinese-Tai race) who invaded in 1228, had captured a large portion of Chutiya and Kachari tribal kingdoms and were continuing their attacks. In the Western region, the Khen dynasty had given way to the Powerful Koch dynasty with a brief interlude of rule for twenty-odd years by Hussein Shah – the Afghan from Bengal. In the North East was the still-powerful kingdom of the Chutiyas. To the South, the Kacharis ruled from Dimapur and the hills were populated by various tribes who never recognized any outside ruler. In Central Assam were the miniscule states of the Bara Bhuyans. Bhuyans are a land-owning class descended from the Kayasthas of Kanauj.

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10. B. N. Puri, *Studies in Early History and Administration in Assam*, Department of Publication, Gauhati University, 1968, pp. 6-7

11. B. P. Chaliha, *op. cit.*, p.110
They had to constantly fight with the tribal Chutiyas to retain their hold over the remnants of the ancient Hindu Kingdom of Kamarupa. Sankaradeva himself was from a leading (Siromani) Bhuyan family.

Dr. Bani Kanta Kakati aptly describes the social conditions:

“The Bara-Bhuyans were keeping a vigil over the broken fragments of the Hindu Kingdom like many wardens of the marches without any overlord…The existence of the society was threatened. Moreover the society itself was moth-eaten from within with no sustaining vitality from external forces. The land was infested with itinerant teachers of Vamachara Tantric schools with their philosophy of sex and palate. Amongst their religious rites were blood-sacrifices to gods and goddesses amidst deafening noises of drums and cymbals, night vigils on virgin worship and lewd dances of temple-women.”

Gait records details of corrupted tantric Hinduism prevalent at that time: “The fundamental idea was the worship of female principle as the procreative power of nature. According to Haft Iqlim, there was in Assam a class of people known as Bhogis, who were voluntary victims of a goddess named Ai… They were treated as privileged people from the time they announced that the goddess had called them. They were allowed to do what they liked and every woman was at their disposal. But when the annual festival came they were killed.”

“Black-Magic and sorcery also held an important place in the estimation of the people and, in Ain-I- Akbari, they were accused, amongst other practices, of divination by

examination of a child cut from the body of pregnant woman who had gone the full length of months.”

Being deprived of social justice, the people were waiting for a messiah to be born.

**Introduction of Naamghar Culture**

Into this socially turbulent environs, Srimanta Sankaradeva was born. The life of the great Saint of Assam, as depicted in the *Katha- Guru-Charits* clearly gives the social background into which he was born and spent the early part of his life. It was a life ridden with strife and violence, motivating him to create his deeply compassionate and revolutionizing religious movement. Thus, Sankara experienced the extremely disturbing environment first hand and charged his sensitive nature to dedicate himself to uplift the people in Kamarupa, many of whom spent their entire lifetime in war-like conditions. Sankaradeva’s whole life was dedicated to his fellow-men of every tribe, caste or community.

Since his youth, wherever he moved, Sankaradeva sought a peaceful place and built a Than (monastery) for stay of himself and his followers, and a prayer house calling it a ‘Kirtan-ghar’. Such prayer houses were later institutionalized as Naamghars.

Sankaradeva conceived of the unique Institution of a ‘Naamghar’ or prayer-house for gathering people of the community in joint devotion to God.

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14 Note: *Katha-guru-charitis* are written records of the lives of Sankaradeva and other Vaishnavite gurus. They were written around the late 16th century by many saints, three of whom are prominent-Ramcharan Thakur, Daityari Thakur and Ramananda Dwija. Compilations and additions were made by various authors who travelled across the region and recited the life-story of the gurus to the people in the Naamghars. The tradition of reading from the *Guru-Charit* in the Naamghar exists till today -author.

15B. K. Kakati, *op. cit.*, p.17
Slowly the whole land became radiant with peace and joy through his religion of *Ek Saran Naam Dharma*. Even though the rulers waged their wars, the people themselves came to the Naamghars, and independently managed to live joyful and peaceful lives amongst themselves.¹⁶

Sankaradeva had laid the foundation and in the centuries to follow, the Naamghar became an Institution in every village all over the region.

**A democratic Institution**

In his book *Socio-cultural and Political Role of Naamghar* Abhijit Bhuyan a young social-scientist says about the Naamghar, “Democratic performance in a society is due to social capital. If one wishes to promote democratic government, one should support a resource network of the civic community in the society at different levels. In this specific context of civil social partnership, the Naamghar becomes an important conceptual category.”¹⁷

The Naamghar belonged to the villagers.

Srimanta Sankaradeva, right at the initial stages, had set the path for the *Ek-Saran-Naam-Dharma* to be a religion of the people, by the people and for the people- a truly democratic institution.

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¹⁶Ibid., p.33

¹⁷A. Bhuyan, *Socio-cultural and political role of the Naamghar*, Towards Freedom, Kolkata, 2007, p.31
The uniqueness of the religion lay in the fact that the practice of *Ek-Saran-Naam-Dharma* brought about an ethnic integration and spiritual uplift through an innovative mode of religious conduct based on indigenous elements of the region.

**Naam Dharma - a religion of the people**

When Sankaradeva, in his later years, was in Koch Behar, he so impressed the King Naranarayana with his attractive culture and religion that the King not only allowed him full liberty to preach his religion amongst the people, but he himself wanted to join the fold of *Ek Saran Naam Dharma* and become a disciple of Sankaradeva.

It is not unusual in the history of India that the King adopted a new religion. King Ashoka adopted Buddhism. Some South Indian kings adopted Jainism. But it was not the peoples’ choice. That was the whole difference and the reason for the Buddhism or Jainism not prevailing over the population.

Sankaradeva did not want to initiate the King to the new religion, for which he (the King) would have to humble himself before a commoner. Secondly, in his religion, all were equals. Thirdly, the people would be forced to accept a religion which their king followed, instead of the king patronizing his subjects’ religious needs. King Naranarayana’s subjects already were devout Shaiva-Shaktas.\(^{18}\)

But Sankaradeva could not deny his friend and Patron King Naranarayana’s request. He gave a date for initiation. But Sankara mysteriously gave up his life on the day fixed for the initiation of the King. Thus Sankaradeva secured the position of *Ek Saran Naam Dharma* as a totally apolitical, democratic institution meant for the people.

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\(^{18}\) J. P. Rajkhowa, *op. cit.*, p. 336
“The successful establishment of Naamghar Institution proves that it is possible and necessary to promote a religion directly in society. Serving, as it does, as a means of community communication, the Naamghar had the (proven) potential to mould a humane society based on culture of self-help, tolerance, unity and integrity. Furthermore, the Naamghar had mobilized the masses in building up their capacities to take responsibility relating to matters of community life, thus proving that ‘Peoples’ participation is the pre-requisite for real development.”19

This belonging of the Naamghar Institution has made it possible for the Assamese Society to retain its cultural identity for years together in the teeth of strains and dislocations brought about by myriad social and political upheavals of the times. Thus the social change brought about by the Naamghars which spread in the nooks and corners of Assam had manifested a significant difference between the conduct of Assamese society and the other Hindu societies of India like - say - the neighbouring state of Bengal.

The Naamghar - a Social change

The aspect of a revolutionary social change has been noted and remarked upon by several research scholars of History of Assam & Bengal. The most important of them was a change to an egalitarian society.

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19 A. Bhuyan, _op. cit._, p.33
An Egalitarian society

Bimal Dev and Dilip Lahiri, as quoted by Bhaben Barua, opine that – “Sankaradeva’s message of caste fraternity had set the process of secularization in motion at a time when the same was inconceivable in the rest of India.20

Sankaradeva brought to the people of Assam a totally uncompromising monotheism arguing that since All God is Vishnu only, there is no point in offering special worships to other manifestations of the Divinity which were conceived as various gods and goddesses of cults.

From this principle came his doctrine of ‘Ek-Saran-Nam-Dharma’ (Take refuge in One God only). Naturally, this went counter to traditional Brahminism based on the notions of caste and worship of various manifestations of the Deity.21 The mixing of tribal religions of tantricism, sorcery and worship of many gods had diluted and caused the illiberal character of Hinduism as it existed prior to Sankara’s Vaishnavism.

Shri Bhaben Barua opines rightly that ‘Had not the Vaishnava cultural ethos triumphed over the Indo-Mongoloid cultural tradition in major parts of the Brahmaputra valley, the Assamese pattern of culture too would have acquired an essentially non-Aryan and illiberal character (as prevalent in the neighbouring states).22

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22Bhaben Barua, op. cit., p.32
It was said by Shri B. V. Keskar (as quoted by M. Neog,) that but for Sankaradeva, the tribes of the North-East would have all gone Christian. M. Neog continues, “Now, while people’s conversion to Christianity could not by itself be called wrong, one could remember that there was, in recent times, a lurking suspicion that the underground movements for sovereign Nagaland had the hand of foreign missionaries in it. Besides, fissiparous movements in Khasi, Jaintia and Garo hills which have now been given Meghalaya, and Lushai hills (now given Mizoram) were there because the people in these Assamese Districts were now Christianized. It is to be noted that NEFA, which according to the Indian Constitution was to be integrated into Assam, became Arunachal Pradesh, due only to a handful of Christianised educated tribal youths of Pasighat. 

In the final analysis, it appears that there were difficulties of full Indianization in North-East where this integration had not happened during the Bhakti movement.

M. Neog further notes that “In the 11th cent Kalika Purana, the upper reaches of the River Brahmaputra in Arunachal Pradesh are claimed as the eastern most limits of the Tantric faith. But in later times this portion seems to have been abandoned by the creed.”

Sankaradeva and India (Bharata-Varsha)

Sankaradeva spoke frequently in his writings about his pride in being an Indian. Bharatavarsha, he said, is a land coveted even by the gods, and that one can be born an Indian on the strength of the piety acquired through many births.

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23 M. Neog, *Contribution of Sankaradeva’s movement to the Culture and Civilization of India*, Lawyer’s book Stall, Guwahati, 1988, p.135

“This India is the best of all lands. Even gods find pleasure in being born here.
We don’t want a living in the imaginary world of heaven.
Rather we would die young by being born here.
The birth in India is like the nine treasures of Kubera...
How virtuous are we that we have had the land
we have been yearning for day and night”
-so he wrote in ‘Anadi-Patana’(vv112-113) Be it mentioned that he devoted a whole chapter entitled Bharatavarsha Prasansha( in praise of India) in his Sanskrit Treatise-Bhaktiratnakara.25

Madhavadeva, in his devotional out-pouring called Naam-ghosha, eulogises India and the glory of being born an Indian:

“Dhanya -dhanya Kali Kaala, Dhanya- dhanya Nara-tanu bhaala, Dhanya-dhanya Bharata-varsha –(Expressing his gratitude for the Kali-Age, a Human body, and being born in India.).26

Robust Character of the Sankaradeva Order

Lakshminath Bezbarua, the noted author says:

Sankaradeva’s Ek- Saran- Naam- Dharma was a robust and manly path, followed by Kabir, Nanak and Tulsidas. It was a straight forward faith in the Master, without assuming the nature of a woman.

26 Dr. K.D. Hazarika, Madhavadeva, His Life, Art and Thought, Bani Mandir, Guwahati, 2005, p.69
It is noted that the idolization of the Female Element which formed a marked characteristic of Northern Vaishnavism and of Chaitanya’s movement in Bengal, is conspicuously absent from Sankara’s Vaishnavism.

Chaitanya’s concept of Madhura-rasa between the Lover and Beloved does not find favour with Sankaradeva.\(^{27}\)

There is neither the combined worship of Radha-Krishna, nor the Gopi-Krishna. It is also not Rukmini-Krishna of Namdeva, or Sita-Rama of Ramananda. The Naam Dharma imposed the idealism of Dasya Bhakti with Satsang. The unwavering devotion of Hanumaaan to Ramchandra was the main plank of Sankara’s creed.\(^{28}\)

Here, Sankara is seen to be more logical than Adi Shankaracharya who practised Advaita, but sang the glory of Devi in Saundarya Lahari -i.e. he preached devotion to the female Goddess. In the systems of Madhavacharya, Ramananda and Ramanuja also, one finds worship of Lakshmi along with Vishnu. Vallabhacharya, Nimbarka and Chaitanya too worshipped Radha. Some Southern Vaishnavites worshipped ‘Varahi’ along with ‘Sri Varaha’. Worship of Female Deity became part and parcel of Vaishnavism in other parts of India.

Sankaradeva however, did not compromise on this issue. His aim was to cut clean the society from all the amoral and vulgar tantric practices in the name of worship of Female Deity by discarding Shakti worship.

\(^{27}\) L. Bezbarua, *The Religion of Love and Devotion*, M Neog (ed), Asam Sahitya Sabha (1968), p.15

He stands out alone amongst the saints of the Bhakti Movement in India for this firm non-compromise.

**Sankaradeva and his concepts for women**

Even in the Writings of Sankaradeva, women have been dealt with in a positive light. In his play, *Uttarakanda*, for example, diverging from the traditional story of Ramayana, he depicts the “*Wrath of Sita*” on being abandoned by Lord Rama. The portrayal reveals his sympathy towards women’s rights. He depicts Sita quite differently from Valmiki (original author of Ramayana).

She is shown as suffering a deprived life in exile. She says “*In my mind, Ram is the God of Death. Had I known earlier, I would have ended my life in Lanka*” She confronts Rama in the court in a long and dramatic harangue at the end of which of course, she calls on Mother Earth to take her. Sankaradeva reveals his great sympathy with Sita for the unjust suffering.29

His biography is replete with instances where he encourages his disciples to take care to respect and educate the women.

However, later than 18th cent., though there is no record of women playing major roles in the *Naamghars* or Sattras, they enjoyed much more freedom than their sisters in other parts of India. Many acquired learning.30

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Sankara propagated Moral Principles, denounced Sorcery

The early Assamese literature records many accounts illustrating the prevalence of evil practice of sorcery and black-magic in the region.

B. K. Barua quotes a reference to ancient Assam in the life of AdiShankaracharya. Adi Shankaracharya (788-820 A.D.), when he visited Kamarupa, came across Abhinavagupta, a Shakta teacher. Shankara had long arguments with Abhinavagupta relating to his creed, which resulted in the defeat of the latter. Abhinavagupta thereupon practised his evil spells on him with the result that Shankara got a bad attack of haemorrhoids. Shankara could not be cured of this sorcery to the end, he succumbed to it.  

Mohamedan chronicles record that the people of Assam practice witch-craft and “whoever happens to step into the land becomes enchanted and cannot find their way to come out of it…”

Occultism was practiced by Mahayana Buddhist monks. A prose biography of Shankaradeva was published by H. N. Dutta. Barua records the accounts of two Buddhist monks who earned their living by practicing black magic.

The Charit puthis also mention a book of spells called Dhatu Tamraakshari said to be in the possession of The Bara Bhuyans of North Lakhimpur.

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32 Ibid., pp. 42-43

33 Ibid., p. 44
Shankara strictly denounced all forms of sorcery. It is recorded in another biography that one day, while travelling in a boat, Gopaladeva a chief disciple of Shankaradeva, resorted to using a spell to avert an impending storm whereupon, Sankaradeva severely reprimanded him for violating the rules of the creed.34

**Absence of Communal Rancour**

Because Assam Vaishnavism bequeathed into Assamese mind the ideal of non-violence and secularism, spirit of tolerance and mutual trust, sense of fellow feeling and fraternity across religious and ethnic lines, in the long history of Assamese culture there is no communal rancor and violence. Untouchability is practically unknown in Assam.

**Obstacles to the spread of Ek-Saran- Naam –Dharma**

In his book *Nimmi- Nava Siddha Samvaada* (Conversation of King Nimi and nine *siddhas*) Sankaradeva refers to the Buddhist tantrics who troubled the saint and his disciples a lot in their efforts to spread religious awareness. In disgust, he says of Buddha-

“The Incarnation of Buddha- After this, the Lord will incarnate as Buddha and propagate many a heretical scripture. *Asuras* will desert the path of Vedas and give up sacrifices, engage in disputations. All men will take to the *Asura* ways and become heretic. Befooled, they will blame Bhakti and perform unclean rites.”35

He was troubled by the Bauddhas and the Tantric practitioners who indulged in carnal desires in the name of religion.

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35 M. Neog, *op. cit.*, p. 194
Social Organization under Ahom Rulers

The Khel and paik system
The origin of the *khel* and *paik* system of the Ahoms is obscure. The *Burunjis* aver that they came along with the first conquerer, Sutapha. The *Khels* and *Paik* were the obverse and reverse of the same coin.  

The Ahoms introduced a feudal system not common in the rest of India.

Within the feudal system of revenue collection, “not only the soil, but the subject was property of the State.”

The tribal groups, before they were conquered by the Ahoms, lived in forests by hunting animals and practiced basic forms of agriculture without ploughs.

In the 17th Century (during reign of King Pratap Sinha) Momai Tamuli Barbaruah, a nobleman, was authorised to conduct a Census of male population and organize them. At first, Momai Tamuli did try to make a composite village consisting of a combination of different castes and professions. But it was not feasible. Hence the idea was not pursued and was replaced by the *Khel*-oriented process.

The entire populations were divided into *Khels* (guilds), each numbering about 1000 to 3000 able-bodied men (*paiks*) of one caste or calling under one superior officer called a *Borah*. A *Borah* possessed authority over 20 or so *Gots*, (each *Got* consisting of 4 *paiks*), a *Saikia* over 100 *Gots*, and a *Hazarika* over 1000 *Gots*. The whole was placed under the control of a *Phukan* or a *Boruah*.

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37 Ibid., p.37
Each *Khel* was to render specific services to the State like boat-making, house–building, provision–supplying, and fighting in wars. The officers were responsible for mobilization of the *Paiks* as per the needs of the State.38

**Formation of Villages**

Thus the villages or *Khels* were formed. Particular services like supplying forest products for the Royalty was assigned to them. Names of the villages were after the *Khels* such as *Baruvatigaon, Senchowagaon, DhenuChochagaon, Naogaichagaon*, (house builder village, cattle-keeper village, boat-maker village) etc. 39

So villages were thus organized into about 1000 to 5000 *khels* and a certain amount of land was allotted to each *Khel*. This amply proves that every village was predominantly inhabited by persons of a particular group or caste or tribe, as professions were caste based. (Of course, there were exceptions, and some villages with mixed populations attached to different *khels* did exist but they were few).

**The *Paik* System**

Next Momai Tamuli had to organize the labour force for the Royalty. For this, the adult male population of the entire Ahom kingdom was organized into the *Paik*–system. Each able-bodied male was a unit called *powa-paik* and four such *powa-paiks* constituted a *got*. Each *Paik* was allowed *two Puras* (nearly 3 acres) of good wet-paddy-growing land (called *roopit*) and also land for his house and garden (called *hari*), all these lands were revenue-free.


Each man or *paik* served the State as a soldier in the Royal Army for three months by turn. His home and cultivation was to be looked after by the other 3 *paiks* in his *got*. The groups thus formed were placed under an Officer who had to mobilize the work–force when required by the King. The *Khel* system adopted by the Ahoms is likened by some authors (ref H. K. Sarma) to the *Mansabdari* system under the Mughal kings. It is conjectured by some that it may have even been derived from the Mughals.\(^{40}\)

**Social effect of the Khel-paik system**

This form of compulsory service was rather degrading to the farmers and they were treated like slaves for three months of the year. Also, they had to compulsorily suffer the vagaries of war, whenever the State required them to do so. Thus it happened that the Assamese people were treated as just units instead of living human beings.

For not serving the State, they had to pay a heavy poll-tax, which was burdensome. Prevelance of slavery is recorded by many historians. The people sold themselves in the market-place. Slaves were received as gifts, captured others in battle and frays, and also purchased in the markets. Common people and the priest-hood also purchased slaves to work in their private estates or households. A peasant who could not serve the state nor pay the poll tax preferred to sell himself as a slave to a rich master rather than be a free citizen with the burden of taxes and compulsion of free service to the State...\(^{41}\)

Thus the peculiar land administration of the Ahom Kings created pressure on the agricultural people who formed the majority of the population.

\(^{40}\)H.K. Sarma, *Socio-religious life of the Assamese Hindus*, Daya publishing House, New Delhi, 1992, p. 57

This also led to a tendency amongst the populations to hide the number of male members of their family. When the British in 1902 conducted a census, the correct numbers were not available. \(^{42}\)

It was said that in Ahom Kingdom, not only all the lands belonged to the king but all the subjects were also belonging to the State, and whose services could be requisitioned any time by their rulers.

This de-humanizing tendency of Paik- and Khel system was mitigated to a great extent by the Gurus of Neo-Vaishnavism who brought them into the fold of Vaishnavism, educated them, guided them, gave advice on secular matters and taught them the songs prayers and theatre Arts to make them into a community. The villagers came together to build their community Naamghars, taking charge of the welfare of their community and their own lives. Perhaps this was the reason for the unprecedented popularity of the Vaishnavite creed. Very soon, almost the entire population accepted Naam-Dharma and built a Naamghar in their village.

**Growth of villages under the Vaishnavite Gurus**

It is important to recognize that after the death of Sankaradeva, the growth of the movement was no longer monolithic. Multiple leaderships had emerged with Sankaradeva’s leading disciple, Damodaradeva seceding from the order. Madhavadeva, the rightful successor to the leadership of the Order and his protégée Gopaladeva (Gopal Atta) carried forward the Movement in its pure, vibrant form as propagated by Sankaradeva, commanding greater numbers of followers.

The Twelve Apostles sent by Madhavadeva and Twelve sent by Damodaradeva, travelled to the different and newer areas mainly in the Ahom Kingdom. They moved along the river routes in the Ahom Kingdom. It was a time when new lands were being brought under cultivation by the State. The Ahom Momai Tamuli Barboruah was organizing land allotments to different groups of people.

The river system threw up new virgin lands where Sattras could be established. At first, Sattras were established by the senior Abbots (Guru). They proselitized the khels and got the people to build their Naamghars after getting permission from their Guru.

Thus, a Growth Pattern was established. It was a completely decentralized growth pattern, almost organic in nature. The Gurus competed with each other to proselitize and obtain disciples.

Villagers grouped themselves and built a Naamghar under Aadesh (instruction) of a Guru who was Sattradhikar or Head of a Sattra. Each of the Sattras under a Sattradhikar had hundreds of Naamghars affiliated to them. When the Sattras were established well, branch Sattras, or new Sattras were formed by the heirs of the Sattradhikars in a different place which in turn gave people instruction to come together in a group to form a Naamghar.

**The consternation of the Ahom Kings**

The period when Ahom Kings who were trying their best to govern the lands ruled by them (refer Momai Tamuli Borborua’s work of organizing the people.) the sudden and phenomenally exponential growth of Naamghars under Sattras confused the Kings. Quoting from Dr. K. D Hazarika, we follow the fortunes of a Guru:
“Vamsigopaladeva was deputed by Madhavadeva to proselytize in Ahom-held regions. In this mission, firstly, he had to face much trouble from the ‘Bouddhas’ who had previously ensconced in the villages.

Later on, he founded the Kahi-kuchi-Sattra, but here too he encountered much difficulties and moved to a place called Kalabari in easternmost part of Darrang dist. Later, he got the support of two Ahom officers and established another Sattra in Deberapar on the Northern bank of the Brahmaputra. In this Sattra he installed the wooden image of Madana-gopala which Sankaradeva himself had worshipped and had left behind at Dhuahata. This Sattra was persecuted by the Ahom royal quarters and Gopaladeva had to fly from place to place. But such was his organizing capacity that he established as many as twelve Sattras at different places during his flights. At last, he established the now famous Kuruabahi Sattra on the bank of the Brahmaputra off the estuary of river Dhansiri. His successors established two great Sattras at Majuli -i.e. Auniati Sattra and Gadamur. His early disciple established another famous Sattra – Daksinpat Sattra.43

The similar stories of persecution and support and great personal dedication and sacrifice to the cause characterized the early Vaishnavite Gurus. Thus we see that the Gurus who were spear-heading the spread of Vaishnavism faced great impediments from the Royalty and others with unscrupulous motives. The Ahom Officials in their confusion alternately supported them and persecuted them.

**Sattras receive patronage by the royalty**

Thus we see that in the Ahom Kingdom, the rulers at first were confused in their attitude to Vaishnavite proselitization. But later Kings like Jayadhvaja Singha and even King

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43Dr. K. D. Hazarika, *op. cit.*, p.45
Sivasingha were compelled to patronize some of the Sattradhikars due to the phenomenal popularity of the Naam-Dharma amongst the entire population of their state.

The Gurus of the Brahma Sanghati particularly, were successful in gaining the confidence of the Ahom Kings. It was Jayadhwaja Singh who not only recognized the Sattradhikars, but also became a disciple of the Auniati Sattradhikar.

At this juncture, the geographical phenomenon of Majuli happened (1750A.D.). An island was created in the middle of river Brahmaputra near present city of Jorhat, which was named as Majuli. 44

Perhaps in a bid to confine the Sattra-spread, the King decreed that all Sattras should henceforth confine themselves to Majuli, the new island.

Soon there were about 70 Sattras in Majuli, many were patronized by Kings and Nobility. Large land grants called Dharmottar were given along with paiks, revenue-free, by the generous Ahom Kings to their Gurus. The Nobility was not far behind and they too, patronized the Sattras, heaping expensive royal gifts on them. The laity were proud to be disciples of the Royal Sattras and they flocked in great numbers to Majuli Island. The five royal Satstras were Auniati, Garumur, Dakshinpat, Kamalabari, and Kuruabahi.

Peace ominously reigned for some time.

But a Dangerous situation was being created by the social forces polarizing.

44 Note: Formation of Majuli Island was a geographical phenomenon. The course of river Dihing, a tributary, was parallel to the Brahmaputra for long distance before it merged into the Brahmaputra. Due to a series of floods and earthquakes the river Brahmaputra divided in two and one part joined the Dihing river in its upper reaches, thus cutting off a major land mass between the two rivers. This land in between became an island. When formed, it was said to be 900 sq. km in area. They named it Majuli (in between) - researcher.
Ahom Royalty should have sensed threats to their supremacy when the Sattradhikars became as rich as kings and they collected huge amount of Tax (guru-kar) from their disciples.

Also, problems would arise for the royalty when many thousands of able-bodied men went into monasteries as monks. The monks did not pay any poll-tax, they were exempt from fighting in wars and celibate life in Sattras was preferable to service under the inhuman and unjust Ahom nobles. Thousands of peasants joined the Sattras of the Kala-Sanghati as monks. (they were, it is said, mainly from the Kala Sanghati, who till then were fierce and aggressive tribals.)

The Ahom Kings committed some wrong political moves, motivated and ill-advised by the Brahmin priesthood in the Royal quarters.

Finally the situation became extremely explosive and this led to disastrous Civil Wars (1769-1806 A.D.) in which the entire population was involved one way or other. We study it later chapters.

The social structure of the Assamese village

Prior to the 13th century, we come across the names of a few capital towns in epigraphic records e.g. Pragjyotispura, Durjaya, Kamarupanagara, and Harrupeswara. A description of the city of Harrupeswara is found in the Tezpur grant and Parbatiya grant of King Vanamalideva:

“The people belonging to all castes and stages of life are extremely happy in this city of Harrupeswara. Broad roads are crowded with kings coming to pay homage to the monarch and go seated on backs of colourful elephants, horses, sivikas (litters)…”

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The city of Gadgaon, capital of the Ahom rulers was described by Sahabuddin Talish who accompanied the great General Mir Jhumla in his Assam expedition –

“The city of Gargaon has four gates built of stone set in mud, from each of which to the Raja’s house - a distance of 3 kos - is constructed at an extremely high embankment for the passage of men. The city is surrounded, in place of a wall, by bamboo plantations running 2 kos deep. But in the city the houses of the inhabitants are situated in a scattered manner, with one end their bamboo groves and orchards touching the Ali (road) and the other end of it touching their house. It seems to us that the city of Gargaon is circular, wide, and is an aggregation of villages.”

Mohamedan writers also describe the fortifications. The forts, built only of mud and bamboo, were surrounded by deep pits which had sharp bamboo spikes planted in them. Any enemy falling inside would be impaled.

B. C. Kalita in his study of the Assamese military, states that the surrounding areas of the Kings Palace was covered by villages or Khels producing muskets, cannons, swords, etc. for use by the palace. But it is surmised that they were also not free and were enslaved by the rulers.

This indicates that even in the King’s palace, it was basically not urbanized set-up.

Quoting from Ananda-Lahari, a shakta work by Anandaacharya, who was patronized by Ahom King Sivasingha(1714-1744) who ruled in Saumarapitha(ancient Upper Assam),

“There is no Pitha like Saumaara pitha, where Mahadev and Bhavani reside. Many towns are there –none could vie with Rangpur (Ahom new capital).

46 Ibid, p.57
47 B.C. Kalita, Military activities in Medieval Assam, Daya publishing House, New Delhi, 1988, p.46
There are earthen forts as high as Manikia mountain over which wooden ramparts have been raised.

Store-houses are full, some with gems, jewels and clothes, some with aromatic materials and some with weapons of defense.

The squares in the crossings of the roads are paved with red stones…”⁴⁸

Travernier remarks, “It is believed that the Assamese first discovered gun-powder and guns, which passed from Assam to Pegu, and thence to China. This is the reason why the discovery is ascribed to China.”⁴⁹

**Structure of a Village settlement**

In order to study the structure of the medieval village, we go back to their tribal roots – a typical tribal community – the Mising tribal communities settled in the plains at least from the 15th century. Sankaradeva himself has mentioned the Miris as one of the tribes of Assam (Mising were earlier called Miris). Some of them are found even today, living in the same manner. They live in long-platform houses built on wooden piles. They usually cultivate their lands at a certain distance from their houses because the pigs they rear under the houses tend to destroy the crops. Formerly, they did not settle in a particular locality, but moved their residences as per their convenience. They usually cultivate winter-crops, though Bodo (variety of) paddy is also done. Usually, twenty to twenty-five households constituted a village. Up to sixty members lived in the same house. The headman of the village is called the Gam. Their staple food is rice, meat (pork), chicken, fishes of all kinds. Liquor (rice beer) is also taken abundantly.

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The most remarkable feature of tribal life in Assam is the democratic basis of their social and administrative organization. All lands belong to the community. The position of local chiefs remains nominal and they were not absolute rulers. They could hardly give any independent judgment without the elders of the community. Disputes were heard in open courts and the judgment given by the elders was considered as decision of the entire village.\textsuperscript{50}

In most tribal communities there was a ‘deka-chang’ or youth dormitory called variously by different names in different tribes. These were youth clubs where junior youths served and obeyed their seniors in conducting various village events, instilled the sense of discipline, learnt and practiced skills of martial arts, culture, respect for elders and the spirit of service to the community. Women were not allowed in these places.

Even when tribal populations settled down in a place to form a village under guidance of Vaishnavite Gurus, and land settlements from the King, the structure of the population continued to be non-vertical or non-hierarchical in nature. It was more like the tribal system of living which had very strong community and kinship but a non-vertical structure.

Thus, the typical Assamese village in the medieval period was not a SOCIAL UNIT in the conventional Indian way. They were not as other conventional villages of India, with its presence of hierarchy of castes.

We see that in Assam, structure of the village was essentially non-vertical. Each household or at least each community was quite self-sufficient in the sense that each

family produced all they needed for their subsistence. They produced little or no surplus. In case they had a requirement of goods they did not produce, they could barter for it from other groups who produced it.

The people had equal status and families did not depend on each other because it was not necessary except on reciprocal basis. This is in contrast to villages in other parts of India, where lower castes sustained their livelihood by serving the upper castes or selling their products to an urban population which did not produce.

When the tribals adopted Vaishnavism and while being assimilated, the *deka-chang* was discontinued. In its place, they constructed *Naamghars* in their villages which became the new community space for religious and secular activities of the community. Thus, with settled pattern of living, cultural development through the Gurus, the tribals were slowly integrated into the Vaishnavite fold.

But due to the *Paik*-system, the people were not free and were bound to serve the King.

As late as 20\textsuperscript{th} century, Audrey Cantille observes the same structure as under,

“Villagers associate more on the basis of the particular *Naamghar* to which they belong and whose members describe themselves as one people (*raij.*)” Groups having similar caste or social status or profession generally form a village. e.g. *Keots, Kayasthas, Brahmins*, etc. As a consequence of the separate organization of specialist castes, there is an absence of vertical ties based on the Jajmani system. So that functional integration is low….”

As the cult of Vaishnavism spread and took root in the Assamese soil, the essentially horizontal construct of the groups persisted except for the new development – the setting up of the Naamghar. Affiliation to the Naamghar soon became the centre or nucleus of the new villages.

Another important characteristic is that villages did not have clear boundaries. Audrey Cantille observes,

“Assamese villages are not well-defined geographical units clearly isolated from other villages... Men from one village often have land in other adjacent villages. When the property is divided after death, one son may move to the new land although he remains socially attached to the same Naamghar. Also People from adjoining villages may settle in a different village but would not be considered a part of the village Naamghar.”

The building of the new community Centre-The Naamghar- created in the village a single centre of cultural life that formerly revolved loosely around several temples. To this day, despite the declining position of the village as a cultural centre in the twenty-first century, there is still continuity from village to towns through the common stock of songs, theatre, music and literature of the Naamghars.

The Naamghar came to play a great role in the social life of the people. Naam – Prasangas (prayer meetings) were held at least three times a day when people gathered together. The conducting of a typical Prasanga is described in Chapter 3.

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52 Ibid, p.112
More importantly, the assembly of representatives of the entire community everyday for peaceful and uplifting purposes led to the development of the Naamghar for a variety of secular functions.

The Naamghar as a Village Panchayat
Whereas in the rest of India the Panchayat system of administration was launched in the 20th century, in Assam, however, since the time the Naamghars came into existence, every village has had its own Panchayat in the Naamghar. All developmental works of the village was done through the Naamghar. Village elders took decisions in the community, for building roads, tanks, bridges and maintenance of health and hygiene. Issues pertaining to the community were also sorted out in the Naamghar.

As has been reported, “Six Koch brothers wanted to join the Naamghar. When their father died, they invited all the people of the Naamghar for the mortuary rights. They attended and the brothers were accepted as members.”53

The Naamghar as a Court of Law
The Elders in the Naamghar decided over disputes amongst the villagers.

“A boy eloped with a girl of his own family. For three years both families were excluded from the Naamghar, then it was decided in the Naamghar that both the boy and the girl and their families should undergo penance and then they were readmitted to the Naamghar.” 54

53Ibid., loc.cit
54Ibid, p.73
“Padma Keot eloped with his ‘classification’ sister. His mother hanged herself, his father died in grief. The couple had to do penance in the Naamghar. A ceremony was held to rehabilitate them, the cost of which was born by the girl’s father and Padma’s elder brother.” 55

Larger legal issues were decided by the Bar-Medhi (representative of the Sattra) or by the Sattradhikar at the time of his visit to the village. It is to be noted that Royalty did not care to dispense justice.

**Naamghar as a Centre for Performing Arts**

Almost all forms of art were brought into play every day in the ‘Prasangas’ (prayer sessions) in the Naamghar. Villagers, including women, though illiterate, recited passages from the Guna-mala, Naamghosha and other religious texts. The mode of prayer in the Naamghar always involves singing and playing on musical instruments. Villagers including women, learnt to sing and play the instruments. The Bhaona or One-act plays organized from time to time, gave plenty of scope to village arts crafts like costumes, masks, decorations and lighting (also fire-works using gun-powder) and dramatic talents of the common people.

**Naamghar as a Library of Manuscripts**

Manuscripts of the Holy books are stored in a special house called “Puthi bharal” or in the Manikut. The art of manuscript writing and painting was carried on in the Naamghar. The apprentices learnt the art from the senior Lekhaks (writers) and Khanikars (Painters) who were trained in the Sattras. (Details of Manuscript writing are given in Chapter 3)

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55 *Ibid.*, p.113
Naamghar as a Lecture Hall to initiate literary discourses
At the end of every Prasanga, (prayer meeting) the Pathak (reader) would read from the holy books and instruct the people regarding moral obligations and ethics. Opportunities were given to villagers to enter into discussions and clear their doubts regarding any spiritual matters.

Naamghar as a Centre for Art and Crafts
The paraphernalia of worship, basketry, bell-metal work, musical instruments, carpentry, painting and carving on walls etc, were created by the villagers indigenously. The walls of the Naamghar were painted depicting scenes from the Ramayana and the Bhagwata and the Naamghar became a space for display of the artistic talents in Art Crafts. Weaving of ceremonial textiles and various indigenous decorative and functional articles used in the Naamghar was done. The main Sattra at Barpeta had set the trend in the days of Madhvadeva to use tin-foil decorations on the pillars. The beaded trellis windows (kundraksha- jaala) had colored mica-sheets to filter in colored sunlight. The lamp-tree was lit with Myriad lamps. Thus, the singularly beautiful and divine atmosphere was created in the village Naamghars.

Social and Caste mobility through Naamghar
This may be noted as one of the chief characteristics of the Bhakti movement all over India—that Bhaktas are rated from one consideration alone— they are all God’s men.”

Although he did not set value on caste, Sankaradeva did not throw the society into confusion by demolishing it. Sankaradeva, it is said, was not against caste

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56M. Neog, Religions of North- east India, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 1984, p.46
57Ibid., p.47
differences in society. He just removed the sting from the system. Chansai, a Muslim, is counted as one of the chief disciples of Sankaradeva.

Sankaradeva humbly maintained his own caste position as a Shudra with respect to Brahmins. For example, he recognized Damodaradeva’s caste as a Brahmin and allotted him the duty of initiating the Brahmin neophytes as he was a Brahmin.

Another instance is that of a Brahmin disciple, when he begged the remnants of Sankaradeva’s food as holy Prasad, Sankaradeva (being aware, perhaps, of his own lower caste) responded by asking him to complete writing a book which he himself had left in half. Sankara himself being a Kayastha had permitted his own niece to be married to Prince Chollarai, a Koch (a tribal, improved to Kshatriya).

Sankaradeva opened the doors of the Naamghar to people from all castes and tribes. He has given in his writings a poetic list of the different people who accepted Naam-Dharma and who were living in Assam during his time.

Kirata kachari, Khasi Garo miri
Yavana kankha guwala
Assama muluka, Rajaka turuka
Kuvacha mleccha chandala
(The Kiratas, the Kacharis, the Khasis, Garos, and Miri people, the Muslims, Kankhas and cowherds, and the Koch, Mleccha, and the Chandalas, all were brought into the fold of Naam Dharma.)

The tribes were thus smoothly elevated to the status of a caste and ‘lower’ castes improved their caste ranking through the process of Naam Dharma. In this process the
tribe names were changed to caste names. Thus the Koch people, who were originally a tribe, came into the Hindu fold as a caste. The Koch caste then absorbed and gave status to other tribes like Kacharis, Lalungs, Mikirs and other original tribes.

**Effects of social up gradation**

The possibility and successful process of up gradation of caste raised tremendously the self–esteem of the down- trodden castes. That this process i.e. up gradation by entering into Naam Dharma is still active can be seen by the comments of Audrey Cantille regarding the society in 1972 in this way, “Majority of Assamese castes are heterogeneous in origin and open to infiltration from below. Assam still contains a large tribal population in the process of conversion. As the members of a tribe become Hinduized they usually pass into the ranks of existing castes to form new sub castes. The commissioner for the 1901 census of Assam observes that “it is quite conceivable that a Kachari (tribal) family might in the course of generations rise through Koch, Keot and Kalita into a full blown Kayastha” and he comments favorably on the social system as fresh and elastic and still suited for the needs of a living people’. 58

The history of Assam has therefore provided and continues to provide a rich body of material on the process by which tribes turn into castes and sub-castes and had struck a balance and harmony among various caste groups.

Although inter-dining and inter-marriage across caste divisions were not prevalent, the Sattras and Naamghars fostered a spiritual fraternity and bond of camaraderie among various castes tribes and sub-castes by reducing the invidious discrimination among them.

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As M. N. Srinivas notes; “the observance of common rituals frequently marks off one community from another – such observations become a symbol of community solidarity and identity.” Thus the performance of common rituals of Naam Prasanga and observing the same disciplines and singing the same songs, bound one Vaishnava to another and caste barriers were dissolved in similar socio economic communities.

Vaishnava apostles and the Sattraadhikars proselytized people from the tribes and backward castes by bringing them into the Vaishnava fold. Portals to a refined way of life and higher education were opened to them. As a result, caste discriminations were loosened, paving the way for an unprecedented caste mobility among the Assamese Hindus in general and Vaishnva faith in particular.

The office of the Sattraadhikars also provided avenues for a number of Gosains for caste mobility. Audrey Cantlie writes:

“Dihial Goswami’s fore-father was a Kaibarta (fisherman) although he claimed to be a Kayastha. The first Sattraadhikar at Barpeta Satra was Mathuradas Ata from Chandala community (Scheduled Caste). Next was Narayandas Ata, a weaver. The Puranimati Sattraadhikar was originally a Maran (tribe). Now he is a Kayastha. Now all non-Brahmin Adhikars call themselves Kayastha. Earlier, it was not so.” Another Gosain puts it simply, “Sankaradeva created as Guru a mussalman, a Garo, a Kaibarta, and a Naga. Now no one claims to be descended from these!”

M. N. Srinivas in Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India has written

59 Ibid, pp.176-177
“The complete absorption of any group of people into the Hindu fold is indicated by their becoming a caste e.g. Jain. The observation of common rituals usually marks off one community from another. Such observations become a symbol of community solidarity and identity, Sanskritic Hinduism has a plasticity which enables it to absorb local religious phenomena.” 60

We find the proof of these profound observations in the transformation of the warring, ethnic tribal populations of Assam into well-settled gentile castes of the Hindu community.

However, groups continued the tribal form of a settlement. People having similar caste or social status and profession generally had a settlement. e.g. Keots, Kayasthas, Brahmins, etc. As a consequence of the separate organization of specialist castes, there is an absence of vertical ties based on the Jajmani system. So that functional integration is low- a factor which contributes to fissions in the society and also in the Naamghar. 61 The same was noted by his William Robinson in the 19th century. He mentions about feuds among the Assamese villagers, “On close inspection, too much disappears of the mildness and quietude conspicuous on the surface of the native character. Deadly feuds reign in the interior of villages.” As there is no motive to be on ceremony with each other, violent altercations take place, seldom however proceeding to blows.” 62

60 M. N. Srinivas, Religions and Society amongst Coorgs of South India, Asia Publishing House, New Delhi, 1965,(1952), p.26
61 A. Cantille, op.cit., p.252
62 W. Robinson, A Descriptive Account of Assam, K.M. Mittal, Sanskaran Prakasan, New Delhi, 1975 (1841)p.264
Caste implications in Sattras

Although Naam-Dharma did away with the clashes or inter-caste hatred, the caste system did raise its head in the different aspects in the society. Cantille notes that “The lower caste and tribals preferred to establish their own Naamghars as they had to suffer the disabilities associated with being with higher castes.” Mainly these were related to positions in the Naamghar.

And, sadly, it is true that even the leaders of the Vaishavite religion in Assam divided mainly on caste lines.

Schisms in the order and their social implications

Late in the 18th and 19th centuries, the spread of Sattras and Naamghars all over Assam had certain interesting social and caste implications. The Sattras aligned themselves into four main groups due to some fundamental differences in observation of rituals and relationship to the royalty.

Formation of Sanghatis

Brahma Sanghati

Damodardeva had defied Madhavadeva and had him seceded from the order. But the reason was that he retained his caste position as a Brahmin. He did not discard idol-worship or Brahmanical rituals.

In later 16th century, Sattras established by Brahmin apostles had idols in the Naamghar and had Brahmins as Heads and also in important positions like Distributor, Name-leader,

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63 A. Cantlie, *op.cit.*, p.114
Reader, etc. They observed Brahmanical rituals and idol-worship. They formed the Brahma sanghati. Auniati Sattra at Majuli was a leading Sattra of this Sanghati. They gave initiation to the King into Vaishnavism and they were also on good terms with the Royalty. 64

**Purusa Sanghati**

Chaturbhuj Thakur and Purushottam Thakur, were the grandsons of Sankaradeva. They formed the Purusa-Sanghati. They recognize only Sankaradeva as Guru.

They along with Kanaklata, wife of Chaturbhuj, established a different line of Sattras with the main Sattra at Bordowa, birth-place of Sankaradeva. The Sattradhikars of this group were Kayasthas and they pursued a safe middle-path with regard to rituals. They were instrumental in substituting Naam-Kirtans for Vedic rites of passage and festivals.

**Nika Sanghati**

The Nika Sanghati adhered most closely to the tenets laid down by Madhavadeva for conducting rites, ceremonies and customs of the religion. The monks and Sattradhikar were all celibate. They democratically selected their Sattradhikar and other elders without caste considerations. However, they were pre-occupied with ritual purity.

**Kala sanghati**

This group emphasized on the importance of their Guru. Worship of any images or symbols was strictly forbidden. Guru was the living embodiment of God. They were the most democratic amongst the different groups. The adherents and their Gurus were mainly from the lower classes.

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64 K.D. Hazarika *op.cit.*, p.47
Each Sattra and each Naamghar being autonomous and free to make their own rules, this Sanghati followed very different rules. During a Prasanga, Krishna was not invoked into the sacred book for purpose of worship. No Thapana was kept (Guru is God). No light is offered in the Naamghar (light of Knowledge is within). The offering is not kept in front, but in the middle, in baskets not in raised trays etc. They were not in good terms with the royalty.

By the 17th century, the structural features of the Sattra institutions also received a clear shape. The Sattras firmly established themselves and the Ahom Royal Authority was compelled to recognize and accept the presence of the Ek–saran-Naam–Dharma. The Rulers made land-grants (called Brahmottar) along with the paiks to cultivate the lands, to prominent Sattras and donated generously to them.

The Sattradhikars collected ‘Kar’ or tax from villagers under them.

Thus the Hindu Assamese had two unavoidable affiliations,-that of temporal allegiance to the State and King, and that of spiritual allegiance to the Naam Dharma and his Guru. The popular saying was “Rajaar Khazana, Gurur Kar” (Rent to the King, Holy tax to the Guru.) showing how conscious people were of this double allegiance binding people’s lives.

Life in the 17th century was peaceful. The period from 1650 to 1800 A.D. may be called the era of growth of branch Sattras. The villagers accepted discipleship under different Sattra Gurus, and built their own Naamghars in the villages of residence.
H. K. Sarma quotes the words of noted anthropologist Dr. Vernier regarding Assamese people at that time (18th cent) “I am intoxicated with delight at the natural scenery, grace and charm of the people…. Although I have travelled in many countries, I have never found so much courtesy and friendliness amongst ordinary people.”

More Sattras came into existence when difference of opinions arose amongst the heirs after the Sattradhikar’s death. Samghatis (separatist groups), each vied with the other for gaining disciples; there was a phenomenal growth of Sattras.

**Education of young monks**

(See PLATE XV- Young monks in the Sattra)

The Sattras functioned as Residential Schools for the young boys. The children were recruited into the Order from the neighbouring villages and from amongst their own relatives by the monks of the Sattra.

It may be noted that monks generally inducted their own young relatives into the fold and this resulted in a subtle caste exclusiveness of the leading Sattras particularly of the Brahma samghati. “The young Bhakats lived under the guardianship of the Sattradhikar who was responsible for their temporal and spiritual welfare. Further, each pupil-monk when he comes to enter the monastery is immediately placed under the charge of a senior or elderly Bhakat (monk). During the probationary period, the pupil serves as ‘adhara’ or personal attendant of the senior Bhakat, who as a guide trains him in monastic life, discipline, liturgy and doctrinal practices.”

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“The pupil–monks also receive education from other functionaries of the sattra particularly the Bhagyati and Pathak. They imparted instructions both orally and through written tests and services.”

“Besides religious education, Bhakats engage in secular education such as cultivation of Arts and Crafts. Since the converts are drawn mainly from the villages, they bring with them the skills and techniques of village crafts. They are occupied in building and repairing the Naamghars and their own dwellings in the hatis. They make useful articles of wood and bamboo, reed and ivory, and articles required in worship and for Dramatic performances.”

“The monks are taught music vocal and instrumental by the Gayan and Bayans.”

“Dancing too was a part of education of young pupil monks. Various forms of Dance like Sutradhari, Natuwa, Krisna, and Gopi-nach was taught in the Sattras. The tradition is kept alive till today in the Sattras.”

“These children are recruited from surrounding villages but if any time they find the rituals of celibacy irksome, they are at liberty to return to the outer world.” Many a leading citizen of Assam even in the present day, acknowledge their indebtedness to the Sattra Institution for their early education.

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66B.K. Barua & H.V. Murthy Temples and Legends of Assam, a publication of Bhavans Book Trust, Mumbai, 1965, p.114

67Ibid., p. 116
Role of women in the Naamghars

It is relevant to note that women have also a specific duty to perform in the Naamghars. Women from each household by rotation are to sweep and clean the Naamghars daily. They are allowed to receive initiation and they can attend devotional chanting in the Naamghars, of course, not simultaneously with the men disciples. Thus it is seen that women enjoyed more freedom and respect than in other parts of India. Many were learned in Vaishnavism.

Sankaradeva’s grand-daughter-in-law, Kanaklata became not only the head of the Bordowa Sattra but she herself appointed twelve Satradhikars to set up and organize more Sattras.

Although written records of contribution of women to Naamghar institution are difficult to find, it is apparent that women in every household in Assam as in rest of India, are the caregivers. They nurture and pray for the well-being of children, cattle, crops etc. Sankara wanted that men should participate more in religious actions. Decisions regarding Village development were however, left to the men in the Naamghar.

Diha- naam

The prayers of women at the Naamghar too, slowly evolved to include Ai- naam (prayer to Mother-Goddess), Biya-naam (prayers during weddings) and other prayers for the well-being of their household. Dihaa-naam (choral folk prayers) deserves special mention.
“Diha-naams are popular folk-songs composed by the people over the entire length and breadth of Assam emerging just after the death of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva. The songs are generally sung in the Naamghars by the women as a part of their worship.

It has some distinctive features which mark it out from the ordinary folk songs and it is quite different from the Bargits and Kirtans which have a classical footing. The chief characteristic is the fine blend of wordings and tunes to which it is sung. It has its literature which has been in oral tradition only. Average members of a group (mostly women) participate more generally than in case of cultivated music (sung by men). It is the product of many generations of singers. The word ‘diha’ has come from ‘doha’ meaning refrain.”

The most common of these Diha-naam is as follows,

‘sankara e he mora nija guru, ai ram daivaki nandana deva he..’

(Sankara my only guru, Thou art God, son of Devaki)

The composers of these lyrics were the common people, therefore the performances and creative abilities have certain limitations. The need for spiritual quest and expression of feelings plays a dominant part in the cultural evolution. Diha-naam is a tradition which maintains and propagates the Assamese cultural legacy.

The men, however, sing these songs at places other than Naamghars like ‘bheda-ghars’ or Bihu-festivals or at residences of religious heads, or when invited to sing at other houses. The men use

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‘daba’ (big drums) or ‘khols’ (mridang) and big cymbals. The women use only *khuti-tal* or *khanjari*.  

(See PLATE XIII-Naamghar-Musical Instruments)

### Food and Prasada in the Naamghar

(See PLATE XIV- (v) Prasada distribution)

Sankaradeva had introduced a unique tradition of ritual food-offerings during the Prayer meetings in the Naamghars. At the close of religious services, the food-offering of *maha-prasad* is distributed to the gathering in the *Naamghar*. The *Naamghar* official in-charge of Prasad-distribution, the Deuri (distributor), distributes the Prasad – **consisting of soaked green gram, horse gram, bananas, other seasonal fruits, ginger and salt.**

Cooked foods were not served in the *Naamghar*- the tradition was established by Sankaradeva himself to circumvent the problem of caste rules for inter-dining.

### Modes of Communication of Culture

The culture established in the *Naamghars* which took root in the Assamese people’s psyche was the same from Manas in the West to Sadiya in the East and it would be interesting to study the modes of communication which resulted in the fast and uniform spread of the common culture.

### The River net-work as a means of Communication of Culture

The Brahmaputra and its numerous tributaries which are large river systems themselves, criss-cross the whole valley and closely link all the people together. “Indeed, the

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69 *Ibid, loc.cit.*
tributaries weave a skein of arteries and veins through which flows the life-blood of the people and binds the remote dweller in the hills and forests to those who subsist on the fertile plains below.”

Social-networking of all the Naamghars was an important aspect of Assamese Vaishnavism.

As water-ways and rivers are the best nay, only ways of communication, they were the common means of transport and networking in the densely forested regions of Assam.

That the Naamghars were intensely networked ‘from Sadiya to Manah’ is very clear from the history of the Mayamara Rebellion with shook and shattered the land to its depths for an entire century.

The entire population of the Kala-samhati was able to spontaneously rally at the call given by their Guru. From Manas in West to Sadiya in East, they came together to defend the honour of their Guru. The only link they had was the Naam-Dharma. With no previous training or organization, they still attacked as one man and defeated the great Ahom King in his capital.

**The Spoken Language as a communication tool**

*Language* is a pre-eminent cultural medium for communicating the content of the culture. The common language Assamese or Asamiya was refined and brought into use by Sankaradeva as a medium for dissemination of knowledge. Songs, Dances, Drama,

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Graphic and Plastic Arts were combined in many ways to express and communicate the content of the Naamghar culture. A study reveals the Borgits, kirtans, Bhaonas, and Jhumuras to be important links which bind together villages to towns, North to South, modern to traditional. The diverse ethnic populations spoke one language- Assamiya.

The popularity of Brajabuli

Brajabuli was a language chosen by Sankaradeva for his Dramatic and lyrical works, for its pan-Indian applicability. Much has been studied and written about the usage of this language by Sankaradeva. It is said to have its origins in Mythili. It was a rich and poetic and formal language used for formal writings and in dramatic plays to add lyricism. It was very popular and helped to link the populace and rest of India together.

Places of Pilgrimage

(See PLATE V Sattras-1)

There are places of pilgrimage which brought the people together in reverence of common religious places. The people visited their common holy places associated with Sankaradeva, Madhavadeva and senior apostles of Vaishnavism.

Madhupur, now in Cooch Bihar, is regarded by the devout Vaishnavites as the holiest place, the other two being Barpeta in Lower Assam and Kamalabari and other Sattras in Majuli. The three holy places belong to the earliest times.

“Behare Madhupur, Kamrupe Barpeta, Ujanit Kamalabari” was a popular saying of the old times. (In Behar, it is Madhupur, in Kamarupa, it is Barpeta and on that side, (meaning Upper Assam) it is Kamalabari)
The Madhupur Sattra

It was set up by Sankaradeva during the regime of the Koch king Naranarayan in the 16th century. It played a major role in propagating Vaisnavite religion and Satriya culture in the area. History has it that Srimanta Sankardeva and his disciples were traveling and stopped over for rest under a Paroli tree at Chandan Chora (the site of the Sattra). At this place, Srimanta Sankardeva described the life of Lord Krishna to his disciples and when he was doing so, honey from a bee hive on the tree fell on his head. Madhavadeva then stressed the need for transforming the area into a holy place, a suggestion which received support from Srimanta Sankardeva, and thus came the name Madhupur.  

Sankaradeva stayed at Madhupur, close to the capital city of Koch-Behar for eight years till he breathed his last. Though he refused to stay at the palace, at the request of the king, he used to visit the palace almost every day.

The Barpeta Sattra

It was established by Madhavadeva. Within the compound and to the left of the main entrance, there is the house of the Satradhikar and next to it are seen a number of small dwellings intended for the Kevaliya Bhakats (celibate monks). At the time of Madhavadeva, there were as many as one hundred and twenty Bhakats living in those dwellings.

It is a big and massive Satra noted for its artistic decoration. The old Kirtanghar which has now been destroyed by fire was decorated with finely engraved and painted wooden panels depicting scenes from religious texts. It was rebuilt after the fire. Paintings on the

71J. P. Rajkhowa, *op. cit.*, p.144
ceilings of Naamghar and Manikut are a standing testimony to the patronage of painting by the Sattra. The Barpeta Sattra remains to the present day as the main source of inspiration to the Vaishnavas of Assam. It is even now regarded as the headquarters of the Mahapurushiyas. On festivals like Janmashtami, Nandotsava, Dol-Jatra, Rasapurnima and on the observances of the saints’ days, a large number of devotees visit the Sattra and take part in the ceremonies. The Dol-Jatra is celebrated with great pomp.72

Kamalabari Sattra and Others in Majuli Island
Along with a few more Sattras like Auniati, Dakhinpat, Garumur, Bengenaiti, the Majuli Island Sattras form a place of pilgrimage for all Vaishnavites of Assam.

Natun Kamalabari Sattra is in the Majuli Island was set up by Padma Ata (Ata is a respectful name by which senior abbots wee called, who was a Sudra. He led a very simple and saintly life and attained high spiritual eminence.). Kamalabari Sattra is also an Udasin Sattra i.e. the head of the Sattra is a celibate. The location of the Majuli Sattras had to undergo constant change due to erosion of the Island. However there are a few which are existing since 500 years. The Vaishnavite people visit them at least once a year.

The Bordowa Sattra
It was started at the original birthplace of Sankaradeva by the Purusha Samhathi. The Sattra is revered as the birth-place of Srimanta Sankaradeva. The Satra at Bardowa near Nowgong is historically significant as originally set up by Sankaradeva in about 1484 A.D. at his place of birth. He is said to have erected the first Kirtanghar (Naamghar) and regularly held religious discourses. Around him, he collected a group of devout disciples.

and held daily devotional recitations known Naam-Kirtan. Sankaradeva stayed at Bardowa till 1516 A.D. It has many relics related to the Saint’s life-time.

**Independent Naamghars**

The Atkeliya Naamghar (managed by a group of eight Khels) near modern Golaghat and the Dhekhiakhowa Naamghar near modern town of Jorhat are considered to be very ancient and deserving of pilgrimage due to their association with Madhavadeva. They are independently administered Naamghars existing in the same place since 400 years of existence. The maintenance is by the villagers themselves. They were not involved with the Royal patronage at any stage.

**The Movement of Religious Gurus**

The Sattradhikars accompanied by Satra functionaries paid periodic visits to the villages and stay either in the Naamghar, Manikut or Bahas, temporary camps.

“These progresses were generally attended with considerable pomp and dignity. If the journey is made during the rainy season, the Gosains and their followers travelled in stately barges whose carved prows and slender lines distinguished them from the ordinary rough - built country boats. Most of the Sattras owned one or more fine Elephants and these ponderous animals took a leading part in the procession that escorted the spiritual leaders of the people. The Gosains themselves were carried in litters or palanquins. Drums were beaten, and cymbals clashed before them. And when they alighted, their feet were not allowed to touch bare ground.”73

To this day, the Sattradhikars, during their visits, give Saran (initiation) to new disciples, and Bhajana(advise) to those already converted. They also acquaint themselves

with spiritual problems of their disciples and deliver sermons to rouse pious feelings to strengthen conviction, and prepare for a pure and moral life.

Thus the movement of Gurus was vital to convey the culture, and propagate the cultural values.

It can be said that the most notable contribution of the Sattras and their Naamghars is their work towards social upliftment of and betterment of the various ethnic groups and the bordering tribes of Assam. They brought about an intellectual awakening in the different ethnic tribes of the Ahom kingdom who gradually imbibed refined and enlightened ways of living. In other parts of India, the humiliation to which the unfortunates were subjected, drove them to the bosom of other religions. In Assam, the Sattras endowed them with a sense of self-respect and individual value.

They brought a fresh-life breath to the Assamese. There was a sense of control over their own lives. Evils of society like Tantric worship, Black magic, ethnic warfare were done away with. People were enthralled by sweet music, Dance-dramas, and the advice of the gurus. Caste differences took a back seat. They gained back their self esteem and recognized themselves. They came together as the Asamiya community.