Chapter 5

Naamghar-Cultural Dimensions

Sources

Earliest records of the culture prevalent in the region of present day Assam go back to the 7th century AD. Although land-grants on copper plates, stone inscriptions and archaeological finds of early times predate this record, they do not give us a clear picture of the Culture of the Region.

It was Banabhatta, the biographer of King Harshavardhana who in his work Harshacharitam, describes in great detail the life and times of King Harsha of Kanauj, depicting the culture of the people.

The King of the adjoining kingdom of Kamarupa in the same period was Bhaskaravarman, a contemporary and a friendly neighbour. Harshacharitam describes in detail the gifts sent by King Bhaskaravarman to King Harsha, reflecting in detail the cultural materials in Kamarupa.

Another source of the same period is the travelogue of Huien-Tsang, the famous Chinese pilgrim, who studied at the Buddhist University of Nalanda in the Kingdom of Kanauj. He visited Kamarupa at the invitation of King Bhaskaravarman and recorded in detail his impressions of Kamarupa, its king and the people. “The men are of small stature and their
complexions are dark yellow: their language differs a little from that of mid-India.” (This differing a little in Huien-Tsang’s parlance meant, however, really differing entirely.)

The Katha-guru-Charits are the biographies of Srimanta Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva. They were oral traditions put to record, around a century after the life-term of the Gurus. Since the saints were from amongst the common people, their life-stories are a reflection of the culture of the common people of Assam at around the times of Sankaradeva.

The history of Ahom Kings who ruled in Assam for 600 years are well recorded by them in ‘Burunji’s (literal meaning ‘history). They provide references to the royal orders with respect to the Vaishnavas and thus corroborate the Charit-Kathas.

The Mohamedan chronicler Shihabbudin Talishq who accompanied Mir Jumla, the great General of Mughal army during his invasion of Ahom kingdom in 1662 AD has also recorded in his memoirs his observations of the people. However, considering that he was talking about the ‘Enemy’ and the fact that he did not travel much beyond Army lines in Assam, the views expressed seem to be limited in scope.

The earliest British officials, like David Scott, and other Western travellers J. P. Wade, Buchanan-Hamilton and others arrived here around the end of the 17th century. Their original writings provide some objective insights into the cultural lives of the Assamese.

The most important source is the living culture of the people. Due perhaps to its isolating geography and inhibiting terrains, there are still many pockets in Assam which are

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1 S. K. Chatterji, The Place of Assam In the History and Civilisation of India, University Publications Department, Gauhati University, 1954, p.22
considered to be living museums even into the 21st century. They have unbroken continuity of traditions. They provide live material for the researcher.

The island of Majuli is a live example. This island in the Brahmaputra preserves the Naamghars and Sattra traditions of the 17th century. The Sattradhikars strain to retain their Feudal powers over the common people and in so doing, the norms and traditions over the period have been preserved.

The Cultural Renaissance

The great cultural renaissance that accompanied the Vaishnava Movement brought about by Sankaradeva, had a strong base in the western part of Assam primarily due to the support and patronage of King Naranaryana and his brother Generalissimo Chilarai. An enormous quantity of Sanskrit literature that embodied the core culture of India and which was limited so far to scholars and intellectuals were translated into language of the masses under the patronage of the Koch King.

It appears certain that Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva together created the bulk of the literature to propagate Ek-Saran-Naam-Dharma, the revolutionizing new religion, during their stay in the Koch Kingdom only. ‘The sacred path to Vaikuntha (heaven) which was shut for common people was opened by Sankaradeva’. The Koch King Naranarayana thus figures prominently in history alongside the founder of the faith, Sankaradeva.

A study of the media and means of bringing about this transformation of the culture of the people could reveal the important links in this cultural continuum which in the course of a few centuries embraced Assam from East to West and changed the face of Assam.
Learning and Literature in the Naamghars

Besides the far-reaching religious and sociological consequences, the Sankari movement gave a great impetus to the development of learning and literature in Assam. Sankaradeva, although an accomplished Sanskrit scholar, wrote mainly in Assamese, the living language of the people, with the aim of making ancient Sanskrit lore accessible to the uneducated masses. He himself composed a large number of texts consisting of translations, commentaries, and selective combinations of Puranic texts to expound his creed.

These writings had practical utility. They were required for clearly expressing the tenets of the new and simple religion. They formed the basic texts used in the Naamghars for daily reading. This therefore, greatly encouraged literacy and learning. Most importantly, Assamese became the common language of the various ethnic tribes, the intellectuals and even the North Indians who settled there.

Sankara translated the Bhagvat Purana in a homely and direct style, even introducing stories from other sources, thus rendering the texts eminently readable and understood by even the illiterate. The most popular book in the Naamghars is the Adi- Dasama, the Xth book of Bhagavat Purana.

The Bhagavat Purana was an inexhaustible source book from which Sankara drew again and again. His Nimi Nava Siddha Samvada is based on Book XI of the Purana. In this Narada recounts before Vasudeva the discussions between King Nimi and the nine siddhas(sages) on nine different doctrinal points. Each sage expounds one problem put to him by the king, namely, the nature of Bhagavat religion, Bhakti, Maya, Brahmayoga, Karma yoga, demerits of the uninitiated and nature of an Avatara.
In another text, *Bhakti Pradeepa*, He analyses various elements that constitute *Bhakti*. It is compiled from the *Garuda Purana*.

*GunaMala* is one of the last works of Sankaradeva, produced at the request of Koch King Naranarayana. In essence *GunaMala* is a little handbook based on book X and XI of the Bhagavata. It is a *stotra* type of poem, with a jingling rhythm and rhyming alliteration. There is, in fact, hardly a Vaishnavite disciple who cannot recite the *GunaMala* from beginning to end. For example,

*Kalika damila* - *Putana susila*

*Devaka tusila* - *Vrajaka bhasila*

*Kesi vatsaka* - *samastadaityaka*

*Lagaila camaka* - *Dakhaila yamaka*.

“You subjugated Serpent Kali, sucked out Putana.
Delighted the gods, adorned Vraja.
Demons Kesi-and Vatsavaka and others – you terrified them and showed them to Yama”

Sankaradeva’s writings do not contain the author’s name and he generally signed off as ‘*Krishna Kinkara*’ meaning servant of the Lord.

The *Keertanas* (devotional songs) created by Sankaradeva have a unique influence on the mind and thought of the Assamese people. It has the same status as *Ramacharitamanas* by Tulsidasji has in North India. Not only all *Naamghars* have a copy of the manuscript, but every Assamese Hindu home, too, has a copy or a manuscript of the *Keertana* and *Guna-mala*.
**Naam-Ghosha and other works by Madhavadeva**

Madhavadeva composed many songs, dramas, verse narratives, and other types of literature. These works became the chief instruments for spread of the Vaishnava religion throughout the length and breadth of the region. They gave both enlightenment and joy to the people. In fact, every Ghosha (refrain) of his Naam-Ghosha is now a household prayer in Assam. And its popularity and utility amongst the people are unique. His Bhakti Ratnavali and Borgits also have become a part and parcel of worship in Naamghars.

**Ankiya Nat and the Naamghar Culture**

The Katha-guru-Charit and the Bordowa Charit agree that Sankara launched his first major theatrical event-‘Chinha Yatra’ after his return from his twelve-year pilgrimage. However, Ramcharan, another biographer says Sankara organized the first event when he was just nineteen years old. M. Neog says this does not seem probable. Two other biographers, Daityari and Ramananda are silent about the dates. They all however give detailed descriptions of the show and preparations for it.²

The script of ‘Chinha Yatra’ is not available for posterity. According to detailed descriptions available in the biographies, it can be surmised that Sankaradeva wanted to give his audience a beautiful glimpse of Paradise through his play. The ‘Chinha Yatra’ consisted of a description of seven Vaikunthas (heavens).

The presentation was inspired perhaps, by the readings of the Bhagavata Purana by one Jagadis Misra. He was a visiting Pandit from Jagannath Puri to Bordowa, in Upper Assam where Sankaradeva and his clan resided.He had a dream in which he received

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Sankara painted on Tulapat (cotton-paper) the backdrops for his presentation. “He depicted Vishnu resting on Ananta—the great serpent in the Cosmic Ocean, with Goddesses Laxmi, Saraswati and fourteen devatas surrounding him. There were depicted, Kamadhenu, the wish-yielding cow, Kalpataru- the wishing tree in Vaikuntha and even seven Overlords in their seven Vaikunthas (Heavens)”.

Sankara also made other arrangements—like special drums made to order from the potters of the village called Kapilmukh with leather from village of Salmara. There were brass cymbals, small and big.

When Sankara completed the composition of the songs, the drama, and the Sutra, his Bhuyan clansmen made ready the shed for the performance. Preparations were also made for illumination and fire-works. It is recorded that the performance was divided into seven parts. It had no spoken dialogues. The performance went on for seven days.

The audience were surprised and enthralled to see Sankara play so many different roles at the same time! Sometimes he led the singers, sometimes he joined the dancers, and sometimes he enthused the drummers by playing the drums. ‘Sankara was here, there, everywhere!’ say the Guru-Charits. He was a master-drummer and could play on nine drums at the same time. ‘Chinha Yatra’ was a runaway success. Many miracles were reported to have happened as a result of the holy atmosphere created.

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5 M. Neog, *op. cit.*, loc.cit.
A new phase in the cultural life of the people started with the ‘Chinha Yatra’. They were so overwhelmed with the performance that they transcended all mundane feelings. Perhaps this was when Sankara decided that the Theatre was a medium to reach people’s hearts. Thus was born the Ankiya –Nat or the One-Act play.

The Origin of Ankiya-Nat is assigned by most scholars including M. Neog to the already existing folk traditions of Kavya recitals and Ojha-Pali Nrytya, a form of choral street performance, with a considerable stress on puppet-plays and irregular Sanskrit dramas. It is also pointed out by the same source that South-Indian performances exhibit more similarities to Ankiya-Nat than the other parts of India. It is crystal-clear that Sankaradeva was well conversant with Sanskrit drama and dramaturgy as he used them unhesitatingly in his plays viz., Nandi (the benediction) Prarochana(propitiation), Prastavana(introduction), Sutradhara(stage-manager), Slokas(verses), Bharata-vakyam(the concluding panegyrics which he called as Bhatima,) etc. Perhaps Sanskrit drama formed part of his study in childhood at the Tol of Mahendra Kandali, his Guru.

Sankara used poetic prose as well as songs for his plays. It was the first time in India that prose was used in dramatic performances. They are called One-act plays, which they are not. Rather, there are no divisions into scenes, due to the performance happening in the Naamghar itself. The Sutradhar just informs the audience about the changes in dramatic situations.

Sankara used other eye-catching visual elements to involve and rivet the audience! The actors (no woman performer) were chosen from amongst the villagers. Unlike Sanskrit

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6 B. C. Saikia, op. cit., p.24
7 Ibid, p.29
theatres, the actors of Bhaona (the Ankiya-Nats) were never of lower strata of society. They were men of erudition, high social status and respected members of society.\(^8\)

They had special costumes made for the dramas. Sutradhar (stage-manager) wears a Ghuri or flowing skirt which flares as he turns round, a Phatau or vest and a colourful Karadhani or waistband. He ties a Pag or turban on his head.

The actors wore colourful masks. Sankaradeva introduced the use of Mukha and Cho (Masks and Effigies). Mukha or masks were made out of bamboo frame-work and painted clay. “The actors painted their faces and bodies with Hengul and Haital (red colour from cinnabar and yellow colour from yellow–orpiment) and other natural colours. Krishna was painted blue, a Brahmin was White, and evil–doers and devils were in Red or Black.”\(^9\)

For the battle-scenes in the plays weapons were made. They included swords, shields, bows and arrows, discuses, clubs and the likes. The Khanikar (artist), who provided all these objects, had been considered a man of many attainments. He had imagination, skill and acquaintance with dramatic requirements\(^10\). He built effigies like Garuda (eagle), Kaliya (serpent), Varaha (boar), Bakaasura (evil-stork). He also arranged for Torches (ariya-mata) to light up the performances. The artist also made fire-works to create dreadful noises. This created a wonderful effect of the play on the village audiences.

A typical play- ‘Patni – Prasad’

Patni-Prasad, the play was written by Sankaradeva in around 1530 AD while he resided in Koch-Behar The Drama opens with the Sutradhar and his musicians (gayan-bayan) giving a prolonged dance performance called Dhemali. The Sutradhar (stage-manager)

\(^9\) Ibid, loc. cit.
\(^10\) Ibid, loc. cit.
is the main performer and he does not leave the stage throughout the performance. He is an accomplished dancer, singer and narrator of the events in the Play. Then Sutradhar addresses a Sanskrit verse of Prayer to Lord Krisna It is called Naandi. This is in Assamese Brajvali language (described later in detail). Then the Sutradhar declares the theme of the play thus- (in Brajvali)-

Ye People!! The play called Patni –Prasada (Favour to the Wives) showing how the Lord of the World incarnated as son of Nanda and who, by way of begging food, crushed the pride of the ritualistic Brahmins, gave favour to their wives, and fed the cowherds sumptuously, will be staged now. Taahe dekhaha! Sunaha!nirantarey Haribol, Haribol!!

The last line in original Brajabuli is “Taahe dekhaha! Sunaha! nirantarey Haribol, Haribol”

. See!! Hear!! And pronounce the name of God incessantly.’

This is followed by one song, then Sutradhar describes the coming of Hari…. Krisna arrives on the stage and a song and dance sequence by the Lord Himself follows.

Then come dialogues in prose…. Thus, songs, dances and dialogues alternate, the story unfolds, ritualists are brought into repentance, their wives are extolled for being devoted to Krishna, and the play comes to an end with a mukti-mangal bhatima, wherein Sutradhar begs forgiveness of God for any omissions or commissions in the management of the drama.  

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11 D. Neog, New Light on History of Assamiya Literature, Xuwani Prakas, Dispur, Guwahati, 1962, p.218
Madhavadeva’s Jhumuras

Sankaradeva wrote his plays based on stories from the Ramayana and Mahabharata. Madhavadeva, his disciple, wrote playlets called Jhumuras, wherein he dramatized with song and dialogue, small incidents concerning the activities of Lord Krishna. Madhavadeva wrote nine such Jhumuras.12

His language was more accessible than that of Sankaradeva, using such words as are familiar to the village audience. In spite of their brevity, these Jhumuras are storehouses of lyrical music and song. They have been so carefully crafted by Madhavadeva that they are still being staged in this modern age and they remain a great source of artistic delight. Being of limited span they do not cause any monotony and are still enjoyed by the learned as well as the illiterate.

For example, in the Jhumura called Pimpara-gucowa (The removal of ants), he describes Krishna’s mischievous activity thus:

A milkmaid returns home to find Krishna there.

“Who are you in my house?” Vanamali replies “I am younger brother of Balaram”.

She says “I understand, but what makes you come here?” “I mistook it for my own house” says Narayana.

.She says “I believe you, but why is your hand in my butter-pot?”

Hari answers “It is not a crime. I wanted to remove the ants from your butter-pot”.

She says “Well, But why did you wake up my sleeping boy?” Krisna replies , “ I just wanted to ask him about my missing calf.”

The milkmaid, exasperated, asks “O wicked Kanhai! Then why is your face smelling of butter?”

Kanu replies “ O milkmaid, It is your own face which smells of butter. You have stolen the butter!”.

She gathers other milkmaids and they take Krisna to Yasoda and lodge their complaints. Yasoda scolds him and warns him not to go to the milkmaids’ houses in future. Krishna is offended and threatens that he will leave her house forever.  

**The focus of Sankara’s dramatic Creations**

B. C. Saikia analyses the effects of Sankara’s performances, saying-“There is no doubt that his dramas are simple and stereo-typed. A genius like Sankaradeva had capacity to devise many new forms and techniques for his dramas. But he maintained the same model of structure, so that even the common people dare to compose a drama following the same set model of their master. As a result we have hundreds of post-Sankaradeva dramas(though most of them are not of high standard), written by the functionaries of the Sattras and in the Naamghar circles. This practice alone is responsible for the continuation of this conventional performance till the present day!  

The popularity of the play *Kaliya-Damana* spread to neighbouring Bengal too and set the trend in Bengal of a cultural era of Krishna-based plays called *Jatra*.  

At the hands of the Ahom rulers, the dramatic acts received great impetus from *Naamghars*. The performances were taken to the royal courts, to serve the purpose of royal enjoyment. Dramas were arranged at the reception of a foreign King, a celebration of victory in battle, or a royal marriage. Thus, in the Palace it came to be looked upon as a state function. 

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14 B. Saikia, *op. cit.*, p.35  
16 L. Gogoi-Chutia, *op. cit.*, p.45
The *Burunjis*, the chronicles of the period, record many episodes relating to the *Bhaonas* that were held during special occasions in the Palace. King Rajeswar Singha (1751-1769 AD), Gaurinath Singha (1780-1795 AD), and Kamaleswar Singha (1795-1810 AD) are recorded to have Vaishnavite dramas performed for them.\(^\text{17}\)

Thus the art was enjoyed by the highest royalty and the lowest strata of society equally. It broke all social barriers, serving at the same time, its original purpose of disseminating religious and ethical ideas to the masses. They have been a source of delight, inspiration, consolation and wisdom for the common people. Dramatic performances also provided employment and entertainment to the people.\(^\text{18}\)

Indeed, Assamese Vaishnavite Drama can be considered one of the greatest achievements of Sankaradeva. Even to this day, *Ankiya-Nat* is enacted, *borgits* are sung with enthusiasm and joy. The Assamese treasure them as their national Culture and Spiritual Heritage.

**Sattriya Dance Form**

Sankaradeva bestowed on Assam a rich legacy of classical Indian Dance, for dance has ever been, to the devout Hindu a ritual and a prayer. In South India, villagers are seen bringing their daughters to dance for the Deities enshrined in the temple, and go back satisfied that they have done homage to their Lord.

Sankaradeva’s dance-forms mainly centred around the *Ankiya-nat*. The dance sequences were part of the *Ankiya-Nat*. As they were performed mainly in *Sattras*, they are now-a-days called *Sattriya Nritya*. This dance form has now been belatedly recognized as a Classical Dance form by the Sangeet Natak Academy of India.

\(^{17}\) B. K. Barua, “The Father of Assamese Drama”, *op.cit.*, p. 11

The elaborate rhythms, mudras, varieties of costumes etc. belong to ancient Indian traditions, preserved in their pristine form in the geographically isolated Assam. “When the Chinese Pilgrim, Yuan Chwang visited the capital in the 7th century as guest of Kamarupa King Bhaskarvarman, the later is said to have entertained the holy guest with song and dance, every day for one month.

It is further held on authority of the Kuttanimata or Sambhalimata, a didactic poem composed about 755-786 AD by Damodara Gupta, the Chief Minister of King Jayapida of Kashmir. The work describes that a courtesan, who was an adept in these arts, died on the funeral pyre of King Bhaskaravarman.”

There are three classical, ancient dance styles in Assam. One is Nati-Dance of Shiva-Vishnu Temples, another, the Oja-pali Dance (non-Vaishnava) and thirdly, the Sattriya Dance form of the Neo-Vaishnava Sattras. Sankaradeva also included the Oja-pali dance form in Naamghars, converting them to a religious mode called as Vyah-gowa oja-pali. It is to be noticed that plays similar to Ankiya nat were performed in royal courts of Tanjore under Bhosle Kings in around 1708-1855. The role of Sutradhar, selection of topics for the play, absence of vidushaks or comedians, introduction of classical dances, were few of the similarities noted.


Sankaradeva’s plays are full of magical poetic descriptions, comic interludes and human elements, making it very true to life and thrilling for the audience.

**Brajvali-The language of the lyrics**

In order to address and reach his audience, Sankaradeva used the language of the people. The biographers say that the language of the lyrics was Brajvali. This word has generally come to signify the language used by Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva for their dramatic and poetic works. When one examines this language, more than one issue arises out of it.

*Narayana! kaahe bhakati karu teraa,
Meri pamaru mana, madhava,
ghana ghana ghatuka paapa na chhoraa.
(Narayana! How can I worship you? 
My fickle mind, O Madhava!
Always fails to desist from even greatest sins.)

Was it an imitation of Maithili? Was it from Mithila in Bihar or Nepal or Bengal? But why would Sankaradeva use a language from another place to address the local people?

Versions of Brajavali exist in Orissa and Bengal. Their origins have been traced to Vidyapathi, the poet from Mithila who died in 1450. The first Assamese Brajavali lyric was written fifty years later.

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So, skirting all claims and counter-claims of Bengali, Oriya, Nepali or Maithili origins of the language, we could focus on the thought as to what would have prompted Sankaradeva to evolve another language apart from Assamese.

Firstly, Sanskrit was a classical language, understood only by the intellectuals, and not reachable by the common people. Sankaradeva used it, but only for recitation of Scriptural texts or Hymns.

Secondly the colloquial language of the people, Assamese, was found to be suitable by Sankaradeva for dialogues in his dramatic works. Hence, this language was freely used and developed by him into a richer language.

Lastly, when Sankaradeva would have felt the need for a poetic language to express the lofty emotions of devotion felt by the ‘bhaktas’, he would have looked around for a more literary language, but one which could be understood by the Assamese people. Hence he arrived on Brajvali.

William Smith claims that Brajvali was derived from classical Maithili. According to an extensive analysis of the nouns, adjectives and verbs used in Maithili, Bengali, Assamese, Oriya, Gujarati, and Marathi languages, William Smith arrives at a remarkable but scientifically derived conclusion that most of the words of Brajvali have a supra-regional occurrence and hence recognizable in most of the languages spoken between Punjab and Puri.\(^{22}\)

He further concludes that Brajvali is no doubt Maithili, but at the same time it is different. For one thing, Brajvali is simpler and grammatically less complex. Maithili contains large number of variant forms, but only a limited number are employed by Sankaradeva’s Brajvali.\(^{23}\)

Another historian Dr Sukumar Sen has it that Brajvali is derived from ‘Avahattha’. This language is not the treasure of any particular province. Rather, it is a common heritage of all Aryan languages prevalent in North India (including Nepal).\(^{24}\)

**It is interesting to note that Sankaradeva never used this term, ‘Brajabuli’ to describe the language he was using, and the reason for this may have been that Sankaradeva saw nothing very remarkable about his using it.**\(^{25}\) So it is not improbable that it was a spoken language in western Assam because the rudiments are still found in the linguistic practices there. There is ample evidence to show that Brajvali was a language of the elite even in the 13th and 14th centuries e.g. A stone plaque dated A. D. 1232 excavated at Ambari in Guwahati, and another one, a pillar inscription at Gachtal dated A. D. 1362 are in Brajvali. Sankaradeva simply elevated this language to an all-India level through his Borgits and Ankiya-Nats.\(^{26}\)

Scholars have often asked the reason for his using this particular language. It is because it was a highly respected literary language and it was the most sophisticated of the North Indian Regional languages. What could be more natural to use? We should not wonder


\(^{24}\) M. Neog, *op.cit.*, p.259

\(^{25}\) W. L. Smith, “What is Brajvali” , *op.cit.*, p. 25

\(^{26}\) Dr. S. K. Borkakoti , *Unique Contributions of Srimanta Sankaradeva in Religion and Culture* - Reception Committee, 75th Annual Conference of Sankaradeva Sangha, Nagaon, Assam, 2006, p. 95
why he used it, rather we should wonder at the dynamic and effective instrument he made of it!\(^\text{27}\)

“By using Brajavali in his plays, Sankaradeva sought to invest them with the great literary prestige of Maithili, at the same time, disassociate them from the rather common type of Assamese street performances such as \textit{Oja-pali-} which celebrated cult deities like \textit{ManasaDevi} and also \textit{Yatras} which were often tainted by vulgarity. The \textit{Ankiya Nat} not only became accessible to the Assamese audience, but thanks to the supra-regional character of most of the vocabulary, it could also be understood by audiences in other regions of Eastern India and even beyond. (It is indeed tempting to think that they were written with this in mind) \(^\text{28}\)

On the other hand the very purpose of the \textit{Ankiya Nat} did not require any complexity of language. Sankaradeva further facilitated comprehension by avoiding words in Brajavali which had no Assamese counterpart. (It is noteworthy that this is not done in the case of Bengali Brajabuli verses which are meant for the intelligentsia.)

“Brajavali also does not bear any resemblance to Braj bhasha, the Hindi spoken around Bareilly, Aligarh, Agra and Mathura. Maithili drama uses simple dance, music and non verbal means to reach its audience. In the \textit{Ankiya Nat}, dialogues were interlaced with songs and punctuated by dances. In the case of Nepal, we have to study literary evidences to reconstruct the way in which Nepali plays were actually performed.\(^\text{29}\) But in Assam, the \textit{Ankiya Nats} are still being staged at Vaishnava monasteries and in \textit{Naamghars}. It is a live tradition.

\(^{27}\) W. L. Smith, \textit{op.cit., loc. cit.}
\(^{28}\) \textit{Ibid}, p. 11
\(^{29}\) \textit{Ibid}, p.10
**Borgits- The songs Celestial**

Along with the *Ankiya Nats*, Sankaradeva left his distinctive mark with another pioneering literary genre- the *Borgits*. According to B. K. Barua, Sankaradeva’s *Borgits* are far more poetical than the Kavyas, and more passionate than the Akhyanas of his Keertanas. The growing popularity of the music and requirements of congregational prayers and devotional services made Sankara compose a large number of *Borgits*, the most beautiful Prayer-songs of the Assamese literature to this day.

As far as the origin of word *Borgit* is concerned it literally means a ‘great song’. “The actual origin however, seems to be lost in antiquity. Some say that Madhavadeva first called them so on his guru’s instance. But historical records say that both Sankara and Madhava called them *geets*. The *Guru-Charitras* tell us that the term *Borgit* was in vogue since 18th century at least”.  

M. Neog says that the word ‘*bor*’ is extensively used in Assamese to denote a higher grade of the same class of things. For example, *kapor* (cloth) *borkapor*, *phukan* (Ahom viceroy) *Borphukan*, *kakati* (clerk) *borkakati*, etc. *Bor-gits* occupy a similar position. The *Borgits* are a group of devotional lyrics constituting a class by themselves and are held in great veneration in religious circles. Other songs similarly composed are never ranked as *Borgits*.  


Sankaradeva composed altogether 240 Borgits for the purpose of Prayer-service. It is said that the only manuscript copy of the Borgits was consumed by fire accidentally in the house of a disciple, Kamala Gayana by name. Sankara was extremely saddened and asked Madhavadeva to compose a fresh set of the hymns. The latter agreed, putting first the few borgits of his preceptor that had been memorized by the bhaktas. He then composed some new ones himself. Later, some more were composed by Sankaradeva two years before he died, or perhaps they were recovered from the original at a later date. These are placed towards the end of the borgit manuscripts. The number of lyrics came to a total of 191(Katha Charit, leaf60, MS).  

Most of the songs are written in Brajavali language. The saint composed his first borgit while on pilgrimage in Badrikashrama between 1481 and1493. It was Mana merey Ram charana hi lagu in raag Dhanashri). He possibly heard the mystic Dohas of Saint Kabir while he was in Benaras. He was probably inspired to use this curious poetic language for his lyrics.

The place of Borgits in Naamghar ceremonials

The place of Borgits in daily prayers in Naamghars is unique. Every session of Prayer in Namghars and in Sattras starts with a borgit. The role of Borgits as an instrument of religious propaganda is also a very important one. The edifying contents, literary beauty and appealing music of the songs attracted people to the new faith and became the solace of distressed hearts. Narayana Thakur, one of the foremost disciples of the Saint was first attracted to the religion when he heard Bhaskara Vipra singing Borgits on musical instrument called rabab. General Chilarai was first attracted to Kamalpriya, niece of Sankaradeva, when he heard her singing a borgit to the accompaniment of a Sarengdhar. Damodardeva , as a poor tired peasant, stood out-side the house of Sankaradeva every

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32 Ibid, p.164  
33 Ibid, loc. Cit.  
34 Ibid, p.166
evening, listening to the soothing strains of Sankaradeva’s Borgit. Sankaradeva invited him inside and later he became a leading disciple.

“Even though they are written in a language not easily understood by all, and set to classical tunes not easy to master, nevertheless, the Borgits are known to all Hindus of Assam. There is a popular saying—Nom-negur barjit, soi gay Bargit—meaning ‘the most wretched person also sings borgit’. This goes to show the people’s veneration of borgit and how the songs have reached to the lowest of the low in society to become the property of common folk.”  

Later songs in imitation of Borgit

There were a stupendously large number of imitations of borgit after Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva. The later lyrics composed in the style of Borgits were never termed as Borgits, even though they came to be sung at ceremonies in the Sattras. They were just Gits. The git-writers were mainly the Gurus or Sattradhikars of monasteries. For instance, several successors of Jadumanideva and also several successors of Aniruddhadeva wrote considerable number of lyrics (Both were gurus of the Kala-sanghati).

Some lyrics are also attributed to Ahom royal courts of Rudrasimha (1695-1714) and Sivasimha (1714-1744). They were written by the two monarchs and poets in their courts like Kaviraj Chakravarti and Gopalachandra. Some lyrics attributed to Kabirdas, Vishnupuri Sanyasi of Tirhut, and Brindavanadasa of Brindavan are also popular amongst the people. Many anecdotes are told in this provenance about these saints. 

35 Ibid, p.175
36 Ibid, loc.cit.
37 Ibid, p.177
The Art of Manuscript –writing

“One of the earliest reliable historical references we have to Assam concerns its manuscript tradition. Banabhatta in his biography of Emperor Harshavardhan (A.D. 606-646) tells us that King Bhaskaravarman of Kamarupa sent as presents to Harsha, various treasures including jewels, silks, “volumes of fine writing with leaves made from aloe-bark, and of the hue of ripe pink cucumber.” This writing material is called Sanchi-pat and has been described about. Paper was also used for Assamese manuscript writing, but it is of a peculiar kind known as Tula-pat. It is traditionally made from ginned felted cotton.”

It is found that cotton-leaf (tula-pat) paper was mainly used in Assam for ‘inferior’ or profane purposes like horoscopes, land-records, draft of matters to be engraved on copper or stone etc. Sanchi-pat was used for writing religious texts of the Vaishnavites. Sankaradeva and his disciples took up the fine tradition of writing on sanchi-pat, a tradition which is living to this day in the Sattras and Naamghars. Each Namghar obtains for the purpose of worship and reading, a set of religious manuscripts from their affiliating Sattra. They could also produce their own reproductions if they had a Khanikar and a Likhak (artist and writer). The manuscripts are stored in the Naamghars in Library-rooms called Puthi- Bharal or sometimes even in the Manikut..

Another reference in the invaluable book by J.P. Losty describes the making of paper in neighbouring Nepal thus, “Paper-making in Nepal was undertaken since at least the 12th century, as two manuscripts dated 1105AD and 1185 AD are now known (Ashutosh Museum, Kolkata). The Nepalese used a pulp of the Daphne (tree) as the raw material, which grows high in the hills surrounding Kathmandu.”

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39 Ibid, p. 11
writing still lives, a monk-artist in the Auniati Sattra, Majuli, mentioned that Tula-pat was not made in Sattras. However, he had some knowledge of how it was made:

“Chunks of the bark of a particular tree were dried and stored. When required, these pieces were boiled in water for some time and left to cool in a large flat pan. A thin film (of the pulp) was formed on top, which was carefully lifted out and dried in the sun and pressed into sheets. These sheets were so strong that they could not be torn by hand. The surface however, was not smooth.”  

(See PLATE XV-(vi)- Budhindranath Borpathak)

According to J.P. Lotsy, “The other early writing material referred by Strabo is well-beaten cotton cloth- a material to which reference is made in early Sanskrit legal literature (pata or Karparsika), as being used for official documents, texts for engraving on stone or copper-plates were written on cloth before being handed over to the engraver. None have survived from ancient times, but it may be assumed that, as in later times it had to be made writable on by first stiffening it with paste and then covering it with suitable ground.”

In Assam, many samples of Tula-pat or paper made of cotton are still available. The Katha-Guru-Charits record that Sankaradeva painted his backdrops depicting seven Vaikunthas for his first play- Chinha Yatra, on Tula-pat. It also records that Ankiya Nat and Bhaona were announced in the Naamghars in the 16th and 17th centuries by putting up banners of Tula-pat with scenes from the upcoming drama painted on it. They were hung up along the temporary pavilions built for staging the dramas. (Perhaps like the posters of the present day)

40 As told by Shri Budhindra Nath Borpathak, a painter of manuscripts and a monk of Auniati Sattra, Majuli. (He entered the monastery when he was 10 years of age. In 2010, when the informations were given, he was 84 years old.)

41 J.P. Lotsy, op.cit., p. 9
Consider the following extracts from ‘The art of the Book” by J.P. Lotsy,

“We follow Skelton in believing that it was the Indian practice of painting on large square pieces of cloth (pata) which finally determined the format of Moghul manuscripts like Hamzanama. Many of the Hindu artists who flocked to the Mughal studios must have earned their living earlier as painters of Pichhais (cloth paintings) which in later centuries are exemplified by the Nathdwara tradition but which must have been practiced in all Vaishnavite centres of Brij and Mathura, the original home of the Nathdwara image. Totally unused to painting on paper, they would have taken to cloth as their natural medium.”

“The death of Aurangzeb in 1707 signalled the collapse of the central Mughal authority and enabled powerful noblemen to establish independent states in Deccan, Bengal and Oudh. The flourishing brilliant court of Nawabs of Oudh, the Mughal styles under Nizams of Hyderabad testify to the presence of artists and litterateurs. In Bengal, the Capital was shifted (1704) from Dacca to Makhsudabad on the banks of the Bhagirathi by Murshid-Quli-Khan, who renamed it Murshidabad…. However, by 1770, the importance of Murshidabad as a city was lost to the British in Kolkata. **Artists found patrons in Hoogly and some went to Assam in service of the fading monarchy of the Ahoms.**”

It is to be noted that illustrations in the manuscripts in Assam after this period, particularly those commissioned by the Ahom Kings, show strong influences of Rajput-Mughal paintings. Costumes and styles of dress depict the Mughal style e.g. Ahom Kings wore Mughal jama and Mughal turbans.

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42 Ibid., p.86
43 Ibid, p.110
An example of such manuscripts as *Brahmavaivarta Purana*, produced by artists who were patronized by Ahom King Purandara Singh and his wife can be cited.

*(See PLATE X- Illustrated Sanchi pat Manuscript)*

“It is a late medieval document, depicting Krishna, Radha, *gopis* and *Gopas* in *Goloka*. This is a translation by Durgacharya. Nothing is known about the author. His grandfather Agamacharya flourished during the reign of King Rajeswar Singha(1751-69). This manuscript is dated Saka 1758 (1856 A.D.) and has been copied by Jaduram Changkakati. The approximately 400 paintings it contains are by Durgaram Betha. The manuscript represents the last great flowering of Assamese manuscript illustration and is laid out in grand scale. It has a most valuable series of portraits showing King Purandara Singha’s descent from Rudra Singha(1696-1714), who is depicted on f.4a. His third son Rajeswar Singha is on f.4b; his son Sarujan Gohain is on f.4b; his son Nirbhaya Singha is on f.5a., and his son Brajnatha Singh on f.5b., whom Purnananda Gohain (chief Minister) invited to be King to overthrow Chandrakanta Singha and the Burmese army. As he was ineligible to be King, his young son, Purnananda Singha, was made King and pictured with his wife on f.6a. Three subsequent paintings depict them and f.8a shows Purnananda Buragohain with his son Ruchinatha who succeeded him.

“This manuscript and also some others are important as they depict everyday life in Assam of the 18th century. The Queen Ambika was depicted perhaps just as she appeared- without any *Purda*.

These manuscripts are in the British Library, London,”.44

A lot remains to be done to study Assamese painted manuscripts. Dr Suniti Kumar Chatterjee says, “With the publication of and study of Assamese Miniatures, a forgotten and glorious chapter in the history of Indian painting will be opened up. It is for both the

44 *Ibid*, p.140
State of Assam and the Centre to preserve this Culture, a responsibility which cannot be neglected.”

Art and Craft in Assam

The material and intellectual culture of Assam was highly advanced since ancient times. Wars, devastation and British Rule have almost completely eroded the culture of the land. Fortunately, a major piece of evidence is available in the form of a description by Bana in his Harsha-Charitam of 7th century.

He describes the presents sent by Bhaskaravarman, King of Pragvyotisa to his royal friend King Harshavarman when he ascended the throne.

“The presents brought by Hamsa-vega, his confidential messenger were displayed and inspected by Harsha. They included, in the first instance, a white silk umbrella, an ancient heirloom of the family of Bhaskara.” There is an elaborate description of this wonderful creation of ancient Pragjayotisa craftsmanship in the Harsha-charitam.

“There were ornaments which crimsoned the heavenly spaces with the light of their gems, the prime of sheeny crest-jewels, pearl necklaces which seemed the source of the Milk-ocean’s whiteness,

Silken towels, pure as the autumn’s moon-light, rolled up in baskets of various colored reeds,

Quantities of pearl, sapphire and other drinking vessels, embossed by skilful artists,

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45 M. Neog, *op. cit.*, p. 13
Loads of Kardaranga leather bucklers with charming borders, bright gold leaf work winding about them, and cases to preserve their color,

Soft loin-cloth, smooth as birch-bark

Pillows of Samuruka (a kind of deer) leather and other kinds of smooth figured textures,

Cane-stools with bark yellow as the ear of the millet,

Volumes of fine writings on leaves made from aloe-bark and of the hue of ripe cucumber,

Luscious milky betel-nut fruit hanging from its spray,

Thick bamboo tubes of mango sap, and black aloe oil,

Bundles of silken sacks filled with aloe bark black as pounded collyrium,

*Gosira* sandal stealing away the fiercest inflammation,

Camphor, cool and pure and white as ice,

Scent bags of musk, clove-flower bunches and nutmeg clusters,

Cups of ullaka (fruit-juice?) with fragrance of sweet wine,

Carved boxes of panels for painting, with gourds, holding bamboo brushes.

( and lists of exotic birds and animals which were also sent were included).”

The above list enumerates some remarkable artistic products of Assam. These are artistic crafts in which Assam excels even today.

*(See PLATE XVI- Artifacts in the Sattra)*

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**Textiles of Assam**

An article in the Sunday edition of an Assamese daily carried this news “On 18th Aug 2004, Auctioneers at Christie’s in New York have auctioned off a Pictorial Textile from Assam at 1.2 million dollars. As per auction rules, the buyer’s and seller’s names were

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not revealed… The purpose of this information is to inform the people how unique were the Textiles of Assam. Such pieces of textiles from Assam are available in many Museums of the world. Sometimes they are preserved as Textiles from Tibet- like the one at British Museum.”

The article, however, carried pictures of the Textile.

“Historical records provide ample evidence of the glorious Textile Traditions of Assam. At the request of Koch King Naranarayana and his brother Chilarai, Sankaradeva took up the project of weaving the Brindavani Bastra, a silk woven textile, measuring 120 cubits long and 60 cubits across. He had engaged the weavers of Tantikuchi village in Barpeta district, and it took six months to weave and a large quantity of silk thread of red, yellow, green, blue, black and white colors. Eventually, the cloth was lost though the last place of resort for the Bastra was Madhupur Sattra (now in West Bengal)”.

(See PLATE XVI- (iii) Piece of Brindabani Bastra)

The Brindavani Bastra is a textile depicting the Sishuleela of Sri Krishna and Sri Rama. On this, words from the Bhagawat in Assamese are woven with colored silk thread. They were probably used to cover the Guru-Asana in the Namghar. Even today, the use of Textile for covering the Guru Asana is prevalent. It is now called Gohain- Kapur. (Now-a-days they are in cotton.) Red, yellow, green and blue colored threads are used. A few words –usually ‘Krishna’ and ‘Rama’ are woven in.

Richard Blurton, the Curator of British Museum explains “It was Percival Landon, a British Journalist and special correspondent for ‘The Times’ who acquired a piece of the

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48 Ibid., loc.cit.
Brindavani Bastra on his expedition to Tibet in 1903-1904 in a town called Gobshi. And he gave the textile to the British Museum as a Tibetan Textile.”

Many such pictorial textiles were woven throughout Assam during the 16th to the 18th century. They are all called Brindabani Bastra. They depict the incidents in Life of Lord Krishna and Lord Rama in a floral, naturalistic and preciously elegant style. “The Bastra samples are also preserved in Victoria and Albert Museum, Chepstow Museum in Wales, Calico museum of Textiles in Ahmedabad, New Ark Museum in New Jersey, Virginia Museum of Fine Art in Richmond, Philadelphia Museum of Art, AEDTA Collection in Paris, Centro Internazionale delle Arti e Del Costume in Venice.”

Francesca Galloway, a researcher in World Textiles writes in her web-site, “Tremendous interest is being shown the world over by researchers of Textiles into textiles from Tibet, Nepal and South Asia. A textile used in a Japanese float was traced to the textile used in Indonesian religious rituals and preserved very carefully during the in-between periods. Tibetan Buddhist Monasteries have remained largely undisturbed and hence Textiles have been preserved here rather than in other places of Asia.”

It is startling to see in her collection of images of South East Asian textiles put on her web-site, cloth from Assam wherein motif on the cloth bears striking resemblance to Indonesian and other countries of South east Asia. e.g., Motif of YALI(lion), This is a typical motif in Assamese textiles. This shows the cultural continuity of Assam with South-east Asia.

“The ‘Bulletin Duceita’, a research Journal, has an article stating that in Assam, the textile-traditions and techniques are more ancient than the 16th century. A tradition of

49 Web-site, www.posoowa.org/2008/09/30/ the Brindavani Bastra of Assam
50 Ibid, loc.cit.
51 Web-site www.francesca galloway.com
skilled weaving existed prior to Sankaradeva. This appears true as, if there was not a
tradition of fine weaving, Sankaradeva would not have a village- full of weavers (Tanti-
kuchi) for manufacturing his Brindabani Bastra.( SeePLATE XVI- Piece of Brindabani
Bastra - Assamese pictorial Textile).

“Even in the Harsa-Charit by Bana, it is mentioned that fine silken textiles –like burja-pat
were sent as gift from Bhaskaravarman, King of Kamarupa to King Harsha.”52

Assam was well known in ancient India as a producer of finest silk textiles. According to
Arthashastra, “Kamarupa Patrana is the best”(patrana=silk in Sanskrit). Muga and Erí are
two varieties of silk indigenous to Assam. They are both wild variety and sturdy and
long-lasting. Muga has a natural golden sheen Erí is coarse and very warm for winter
wear. In Assam, it is common for the simple villagers grow the cocoons, spin and weave
their own Erí silken shawls. The porters and day-labours too from Bihar cover
themselves with Erí silk shawls from Assam.

It is said that Mahatma Gandhi came to Assam first in 1921 specially to see the weaving
by the women. Every Assamese woman could weave cloth for the whole family, just as
she cooked food for the family.

Shihabuddin Talishq, a Mohamedan chronicler who accompanied Mir Jumbla, in his
expedition against Assam in 1662 AD, says “It is not the custom here to wear turban on
their head or to wear coat and trousers, or shoes, or to sleep on bedsteads. They only wrap
a piece of fine linen round their heads, waistband round their middle and place a chadder
on their shoulders. Some rich men put on in winter, a half-coat like jacket. Flowered silk
velvet tatbund and other silk stuff is excellently woven here.”

52 Samiran Barua, op.cit., p. 7
Weaves and Motifs of Assam

The art of weaving in Assam used many different weaves like *Lampas* weave (used for pictorial textiles like Brindabani Bastra), Satin weave, compound weave, double compound weave, single compound weave etc. Nowadays, we have only the simple cloth weave. The other weaves are not used by the locals except for precious textiles.

In Assam, cloth is woven by women as part of their household duties. Hence, motifs in Assam textiles are created by the women. “*Motifs tell the story of the culture of the women who weave their culture into their cloth*” says Shanker Roy of Department of Geography, Gauhati University. When a girl from one tribe is given in marriage to another, the motif gets transformed. A study of the motifs gives the researcher a fascinating understanding of the movement of cultures. “With the advent of Muslims into Assam, motives like the Kimkhwab motif were introduced and the purely geometrical patterns of the tribals acquire movement.” says Shanker Roy.

The Bodo motif typical of Assam consists of diamond shapes. It is the main base motif of the entire region. Other common Assamese motives are

*Dhekiya-fulia* motif- Fern -a floral motif drawn from nature.
*Gosa-sazia*- a tree motif.
*Loka paro*- a pair of birds facing each other is quite common motif for jewellery and textile.
*Jon-beri* –Crescent- moon shape motif for jewellery and textile
*Dholak* -motif derived from shape of the musical instrument. Other jewellery motifs are *Thoria, Karana sinh*. etc.

*Kimkhwab*- It means little dream. It is a Muslim motif which is more than 500 years old. Its ornate elegance was meant always for use by those of noble birth. It was generally woven in Zari and *muga*. It is an important motif. Assam was well known as a producer of fine textiles. Pieces of Kimkhwab (PLATE XVI- (vi) Kingkhap motif) were
exported from weaving centres that developed at Barpeta and Sualkuchi. But due to the economic policies of Ahoms, commercial development to the extent of competition with Chinese silks never was encouraged. The finest weave developed were Lampas weave, Satin weave, compound weave, double compound weave and single compound weave. Now most of them are extinct and not used by the local weavers.

Thus, the discussion carried out in the aforesaid pages reflects the cultural ethos generated by the Naamghars. Actually, the Naamghars were places of spiritual learning, but for obtaining spiritual elevation, the mundane rituals were also to be observed. These required various objects, the making of which gradually brought in artistic proficiency. Thus, the performing arts and fine arts came to be developed within the institutions. The tradition continues even in the present times. Naamghars thus display various dimensions of Culture.