Conclusion

The Namghar has been and will always remain a peoples’ institution in Assam. It is built, owned and conducted by the people themselves.

The aforesaid information shows that Sankardeva, evolved this Institution for the people who lived in the Brahmaputra valley for the first time in the 15th Century.

As the pages earlier reflect, Sankardeva was not only a great saint but was also an all-round genius. Being born in middle region of Assam (Bardowa in the present Nagaon district of Assam), in 1449 AD, to a Siromani Bhuyan he was, in a way, a representative of the Bhuyans. The Bhuyans themselves had to struggle for economic power in Assam. They were a land owning community of petty chieftains originally Kayasthas from Kanauj. When in 12th Century, the Muslim invaders pushed them back eastwards, they came into the Assam valley; they had settled there to cultivate their lands. Sankardeva’s father Kusumvara was the Siromani or Head Clansman of a land-owning Kayastha community called the Bhuyans.

But Sankardeva, so to say, had a different approach towards life. More than land-ownership he had the great zeal of bringing the people of Assam together with the thread of cultural bonding. He believed that such a bonding would also lead to spiritual enhancement of the people. He soon mastered Sanskrit. He evolved Brajwali (a former language of Eastern India) and also the local Assamese language of the literati in the Brahmaputra Valley. At the tender age of seventeen, he showed his genius by writing and enacting a “musical, visual extravaganza called “Chinha-yatra”. He wished to transport the audience into the Seven Vaikunthas (heavens) and offered the villagers of his times ‘a glimpse of heaven.’

The conditions in Assam show that the land was populated with racially diverse people who were constantly torn with ethnic strife. They had no common culture or religion. The people had nobody to think about the collective welfare and foster a peaceful co-existence amongst them. They had no way to improve their quality of life which was
spent in indulging in flesh-foods, wine and killing each other. The tantric Buddhist priests and worshippers of Tamreshwari, the flesh eating goddess, held all the people in their sway.

In such a situation Sankardeva must have thought deeply and long about the people and as to what were their needs. He developed the Ek-Saran-Naam-Dharma a simple and attractive religion which would be acceptable and enjoyable for all. It was a religion which could bind all the diverse people of Assam together with the thread of Culture. He can truly be called the Father of Assamese Culture.

Till today, every Assamese praises Srimanta Sankaradeva and many worship him as God. One needs to understand his approach towards the people and their issues in general. The chaotic social and cultural conditions in Assam actually left people directionless and in a confused state of mind. He was full of compassion for his people. Sankardeva knew that a Bhakti-marga would be ideal for the bringing the people under one umbrella. Therefore he created a new Institution, the Naamghar. It was a complete Culture - *Ek Saran Naam Dharma*- the religion of Surrender to one God.

The path of Sankaradeva was not without difficulties. He had to move away from the land of Ahom Kings due to their cruel and unjust rule. He settled for the last 40 years of his life in Koch Behar at the court of King Naranarayan and Prince Chilarai who gave him whole-hearted patronage. From then on, he started evolving his religion and by the time he died at the age of 120 years it was a well established religion of the people in the Koch kingdom.

Sankaradeva breathed his last in Patbausi in Koch-Behar, the land of his adoption in 1559 A.D.

Assamese Culture truly lives in the Naamghar. Every village, to this day, in Assam has their own Naamghar. It autonomously takes care of the governance, education, art, and all aspects of well-being of the villagers. The villagers were devoted to their Gurus who lived in *Sattras* or monasteries, where they evolved the tenets of the religion. They are
aligned to a Guru of a particular Sattra who gave them Aadesh or advise. But after that they are practically on their own and manage their own affairs.

In earlier days, it functioned independently as the administration of the village. They had no need of Royal patronage. All were equals. And the Naamghar was self-sufficient fully.

Sankardeva instituted the Naamghar (Prayer House) for the people. He wrote ‘Borgeets’ and taught the people to sing. He wrote hymns- the Gunamala, Bhakti- Ratnakara, consisting of simple rhythmic syllables, which even illiterate villagers could recite. He taught the method of worship through “Sravan and kirtan” -listening and singing. His Ex-Saran Naam dharma (devotion to one God) was accepted and adopted by all the people of Assam in the seventeenth century.

His faithful life-long disciple and friend, Madhabdeva also wrote many plays, hymns and actively popularized the religion amongst the people.

His religion comprised mainly of four principles.

1. The comprehension of parama brahma the Supreme Being in the form of Vishnu

2. The Ek Saran or complete devotion to the Supreme Being in the form of Krishna

3. Satsang or seeking the company of pious people

4. Naam kirtana or divine service in the form of prayers

These four principles are condensed in the four words; Guru, Deva, Bhakta and Naama. Popularly, this religion was called Maha Purushiya Dharma. Officially it was called Ek Saran Naam Dharma.

The practice of human equality by Sattras and Naamghars on a democratic basis subsequently had a profound effect on the political life of the people. It promoted not just religion but much wider activities. The Naamghar was a place for community decision-making and as a court of justice.

The doctrine of human equality and practice of community prayer was quite appealing to the tribesmen and in a surprisingly short period, a large number of them became
Vaishnavites. The Vaishnavite teachers fanned out from the Sattras and also undertook the task of teaching the people advanced techniques of production and trading activities. In the meantime, the imperial armies of the Koch and Ahom Kingdoms faced each other in battle and later the Mughals and Ahoms faced each other for a period of nearly 200 years from 1500-1700 A. D. Large tracts of land, so frequently changed hands that imperial administration virtually did not exist. This gave rise to a large group of small and middle sized landlords. Also, the Vaishnavite Sattras grew in power and influence over the people. The powerful Sattras and rich landlords clashed with the Ahom royalty. The rebellions culminated in the total collapse of the Ahom power, at the end of the 18th Century.

The most striking feature in the economy of the Ahom State was the system of enforced compulsory labour. The adult male population were divided into groups of 3 or 4 called Got. Each of the 4 members of the Got was called a Paik. One Paik from each Got was always employed on duty and the other three supported his home. The King and his ministers thus, had at their disposal, a vast army of labourers to whom they paid no wages and for whose maintenance, they did not have to make any provision. They were deployed to build enormous water tanks and embankments. Many of these were public works but mainly the Paiks worked for glorification of the King and the Nobles. This system of enforced labour must have been quite unpopular, but it had one advantage, it taxed people in the one commodity of which they had plenty i.e. labour. Also each and every male person was assured of a plot of land he could call his own.

Under the British, the indigenous system of taxation by means of enforced labour was replaced by direct money taxes. Under this arrangement, Chaudharys were appointed. The system created difficulties for people who were not used to pay tax in cash. Adequate supply of coins was not available. The markets were soon flooded with spurious ones. The Chaudharys took advantage of the situation and inflicted a great deal of injustice for
the people. People started moving from place to place in search of revenue-free waste lands.

Some scholars have concluded that the tea planters conspired to urge the British Government to enhance the land revenue rate to such and extent that people would give up cultivation and work for the tea planters for wages.

The British abolished slavery in 1843 but slavery was so deep rooted in Assam that it took ages to die out. In the mid 1860s, the British recruited labour from other provinces of India. It is reported that almost two thirds of the population of plantation labour was imported.

It is important to know that the Naamghars continued to exist amidst various economic ups and downs because the lands were belonging to many powerful Sattras.

The successors of Sankaradeva also strived hard to keep up the spirit of Sankaradeva with respect to Naamghars. Madhabadeva had a vision as far reaching as his Master, a genius for culture as great as his Master’s and a drive for propagating the religion, which he did after his Master breathed his last. Damodardeva, another disciple of Sankardeva led another group of devotees and spread the religion in the Upper or Eastern Assam. The grandsons of Sankardeva, Chaturbhuj and Purshottam Thakur also founded another group and spread the religion in the original place of Sankardeva’s birth.

A fourth group was formed by Gopaldeva and Aniruddhadeva, who travelled deeply eastwards into the thick forested areas, and spread the religion amongst the aggressive and fierce tribal populations. They were having a long way to go to calm their aggressive temperaments and follow the tenets of a quietist religion. But they did not lack in devotion for their Guru.

Namghar, a simple hut was built by the villagers in a common suitable space as soon as they formed themselves into a community. A social community in Assam is generally not vertically aligned. It is formed by a large family or clan like a group of Misings, a group of Bhuyans etc. They could also be a community of boat-makers, a community of fishermen etc. There was no Zamindari system. They build their own Namghars.
It was only the cultural development of Sankardeva, who worked without thought of return wholly and solely for the benefit of the people of Assam. The Assamese have a rich culture which is based on Vaishnavism. Only Lord Krisna is to be worshipped. No other God needs to be worshiped.

The culture consists of songs and hymns set to classical tunes in Assamese language. They have many books in Assamese language. Most of them are based on the Bhagavat Purana, the story of Krsna, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Assamese is a highly developed and rich language.

A very great contribution of Sankardeva is towards developing an Assamese version of Brajawali. Sankardeva had developed an adaptation of a scholastic language of Brajawali. His adaptation had no Sanskrit terms, no difficult grammar. It was very simple and used many Assamese words.

Sankardeva and MadHAVdeva wrote many plays, which could be performed again and again for the next 600 years and not lose its charm. They are just like the Classic stories of Mahabharata and Ramayana which have borne repetition for thousands of years and still sound eminently fresh and new. The exploits of Krishna are always charming to listen and repeat.

Art and performing arts were developed as simple and pure entertainment of the people. Dance, theatre, colourful costume and large props created an extra-ordinary atmosphere of thrill and festivity at minimal costs.

In the seventeenth century, many of the Gurus, particularly of Damodardeva’s group, sought and received acceptance by the Ahom Kings. They were patronized and given place in royal court.

But some others, mainly the hapless Gurus of the Kala Sanghati of the eastern parts were insulted or killed outright by the Ahom Rulers.
In the eighteenth century the *Kala Sanghati* devotees revolted and over-ran the kingdom and occupied the palace. They were driven out by the British who came to help the Ahom King. The King, as soon as the British left, again took cruel revenge on the aggressors and tried to commit genocide. The people revolted again as soon as they could recover. This time, the Burmese Army came to help. They attacked and killed the innocent Assamese people all over the valley and there was no place when the Burmese did not enter.

Finally, in the nineteenth century, the British came in once more. They signed a treaty with Burma to vacate Assam. Thus Assam was handed over by the Burmese to British.

Assam always had a subsistence economy due to policy of Ahom Rulers. Trade with outsiders was discouraged. Only barter system prevailed.

The British colonists exploited Assam for tea, opium, oil and coal. In all these machinations, neither the Ahoms (since they did not come in till the 12th Century), nor the Burmese, nor the British ever gave a thought to the common man of Assam. Assam was used as a slave by the Ahoms. The land was looted, ravaged and tortured by the Burmese. The land was also exploited economically by the British. The demographic pattern, already precarious to begin with, was thoroughly disturbed by influx of alien populations in large numbers. It was a disturbed area. But it is important to know that the Naamghars survived all the odds created by economic or political crisis.

The Naamghar is very much a living Cultural Institution of Assam.

The relevance of Sankaradeva in today’s socio-cultural-political situation in Assam is quite obvious. Sankaradeva explicitly preached monotheism where traditional Hinduism was explicitly polytheistic. As Toynbee pointed out in his ‘Study of History’ Monotheism could become the basis for universal brotherhood for, only by becoming aware of a common father, people could accept each other as brothers.

If credit is due to Sankaradeva in setting motion a great reform movement, equal credit is due to Koch Bihar for acting as a base from which a force was set in motion that rapidly
dissolved Tribal barriers and attempted to create an Ecumenical Empire out of an uneasy federation of Tribal States.

The culture is alive and full of vigour in the Borgeets which are sung by villagers in every Naamghar even today. It is here that the Naamghosha and Gunamaala recited fluently by the Assamese women and men. There is no need to conserve any building or architecture called the ‘Naamghar’. It is alike in every Assamese village. It belongs to the soil like the grains in the field. The rich textile tradition is not visible so much in the museums as on the garments worn by the ladies for weddings and formal occasions. Garments as beautiful as the ancient museum- pieces are yet woven and worn in Assam.

The threats to the culture of Assam do not come from outside. They come from within when children of the land for various reasons have no understanding of their own soil and compassion for culture. They start moving not in synergy with Nature like the true Assamese- but in ways which destroy Nature for petty gains. Actually no true Assamese would go against Nature, because his heart truly beats to the same rhythm as Nature. The Naamghars can cultivate the feeling of oneness and also represent as the keepers of nature because there is a feeling of simplicity is nurtured therein.

The travails of the Assamese really began with the advent of the British and their arbitrary redrawing of provincial boundaries which inevitably left Assam with strange bedfellows and a margin of slightest of numbers demographically.

Lurking behind the ideal of unity is this chimera of homogeneity an unattainable and, for the Assamese, a self destructive objective. Little wonder the dawn of independence was forced to witness cracks appearing in the solidarity or oneness of national consciousness achieved.

Struggle for nationalism is a post British phenomenon. Assamese were very much in Indian National Congress but in spite of that Assam was witness to agitation for liberation of the colonial yoke of ‘India’. The present scenario in Assam is only one half due to the influx of a large number of Muslim and Hindu Bengali populations. It is a demographic invasion of outsiders combined with a retarded industrial and agricultural
development. They have no access to their own resources. So the fight is to drive out the immigrants, have access to their own resources and for more economic development.

The long drawn out critical situation i.e. a perpetualization of crisis has suspended the cultural growth of the entire population. In Sankaradeva’s time also, the critical situation was apparently political with a myriad of tribes conflicting with each other. The solution was sought only by transforming the people from within. By developing their culture, their aims in life changed and people were able to rise above the mundane into a more refined and peaceful frame of mind.

A close observation of the people reveals a degradation in cultural values. Only a cultural renaissance can transform the people to accept each other as they are and divert their efforts for productive work of bettering their economic condition for the benefit of the entire state. The surviving Naamghars can play an important role even today in inculcating culture based on values.