Introduction

“If there is one thing various exponents of cultural history share, it is the belief that historical writing can enhance the appreciation of human condition by bringing to life and explaining the beliefs and cultures that are very different from our own and so perhaps adding to richness of human experience and understanding; and fostering tolerance of different cultures and beliefs in our own time.” ¹

In the globalizing process, we are losing national identity and to have a counter-image, we go back to our cultural roots which bind us together as a nation.

What is Cultural History?

Miri Rubin says, “Cultural history is the history of the people… The cultural turn asks not only ‘How it really was?’ but rather ‘How was it for him or her or them?’ To dare to ask such questions and provide the answers is the challenge!”²

Thus the cause of the cultural historian is achieved not only by way of anointment with the dust of the archives, but through the mobilization of an informed subjectivity, human and intellectual capacity for categorization, system building and empathy.

²Ibid., p.81
“A new type of historiography - self-reflective and conversational - has come into being and with it an exploration of that which has too long been left unsaid.” 3

In other words, even though Facts have been collected and documented, the interpretations and reading into the texts to find the human elements in it has hardly been done. This particularly is very much true of the historiography of Assam.

In order to study the Culture of a region, Milton Singer advises us thus – “for a study of the Culture of a region, the rites, ceremonies, and cultural performances in the Institutions are the concrete and observable units of culture. Out of this study we arrive at the more comprehensive and abstract understanding of the cultural structure, the cultural value systems and ultimately, the Great Tradition amongst the people.” Further, he says - “In a typical cultural performance, we can study the Institutional setting, the cultural performers and the common stock of legends and mythological themes which maintain the continuity of tradition from generation to generation.”4

Also, “the study of the language as a cultural medium is important - the language of the text, the spoken language of the religious interpreter– and the language used in the theatrical performances.”5

These units of culture can be used to develop the ladder of abstraction that leads to holistic understanding of the culture of the entire region.

A genuine historian never manipulates facts, but even within the limits of authentic sources available, there is plenty of room for different interpretations. Historians have

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3Ibid, p.82
5Ibid., p.68
taken the opportunity to weave many a fiction around the facts of history, so that people come alive who belonged to a fascinatingly distant cultural milieu…”\textsuperscript{6}

Culture cannot be imposed on a populace. Kings and dictators may come and go, but culture belongs to the people and it is ingrained in them. When any modernizing influence is present, the culture of the people undergoes modification to adapt itself to the change. But how they adapt depends on the traditions and ideologies, which always tend to remain constant.

Content of books written in the particular period of study are a key insight into the cultural values (ideologies) and traditions of the people. According to Milton Singer’s analysis, “the folk customs of the tribal populations form the Little Traditions and that of the Hindu customs prevalent among the farming people are the Great Traditions. Customs of marriage, trade, religious pilgrimage, festivals, public administration and the activities of itinerant entertainers, genealogists (those who study the line of descent traced from our ancestors), and the holy men are the media through which traditions are sustained. The unity of Indian culture is found in the concrete media of dance, play, sculpture, painting, religious stories and rites which connect the rituals and beliefs of villager to the townsman, one region with another and the educated to the uneducated.”\textsuperscript{7} Strangely, however, as Milton Singer says, “It is this cultural ideology of tradition that is the major instrument of modernization.” With reference to the culture of Assam, Srimanta Sankaradeva is an example of how this happens.\textsuperscript{8}

This study focuses on the work and achievements of Srimanta Sankaradeva, in terms of the tremendous development of socio-cultural life in the Brahmaputra valley due to his life and work. He is rightly honoured in Assam as the Founder of the Assamese Culture.

\textsuperscript{6}Ibid., p.43
\textsuperscript{7}Ibid .,p.65
\textsuperscript{8}Ibid .,p.62
How Sankaradeva brought about the total modernization in the attitudes of the people only through the media of the pre-existent cultural ideologies and traditions of Hindu India combined with the existing tribal culture of the region proves the theory of Milton Singer.

**Assam- A Cultural Rennaissance**

Srimanta Sankaradeva was a great religious leader, scholar, playwright, poet, musician, painter and a revolutionary social reformer all put in one. He lived in the 16th century Assam. He had developed and successfully implemented an ingenious social system—the Village *Naamghar*- which was and continues to be ideally suited to the unique geographical location and demographic set-up of the Region. This research will attempt to study the social, cultural, political and economic dimensions of influence wrought by Sankaradeva’s religion called Ek-Saran-Naam –Dharma (Surrender to one God) or just Naam-Dharma. It is to see the facts and interpret how it has been the origin and major influence for the formation of the culture of the Assamese People.

It is an objective viewpoint from the outside and at the same time it is a wholly empathetic viewpoint and grows out of a sense of belonging to the region and the people of Assam. It is an exploration into an area which lies between the History of Vaishnavism and the History of the people of Assam.

Edward Gait’s *History of Assam*, the first modern history to be written, is a political history focused on chronology and Dynastic history from the Britisher’s point of view. He devotes just a few pages to Sankaradeva’s religion and spectrum of cultural and social activities.
Many great historians have written about Neo-Vaishnavism of Sankaradeva in the period after Independence.

This study, however, is about the culture of the people, of the agrarian and peasant Assam, who dwell so close to nature that it flows in their lifeblood. The Indo-Aryan Vaishnavite culture of the indigenous people of Assam may appear familiar enough to the average Indian on the surface. But there lies a very big difference. The people are still in touch with their roots, going deep down almost to ancient times—in an unbroken continuity... Scratching the surface of their modern urbanity reveals a culture which surprises at every turn in its refreshing simplicity and rootedness in Nature...Sanjoy Ghosh says—“Unlike other caste Hindu societies, there appears a remarkable homogeneity among the Scheduled Castes here. There seems to be no difference between them on the basis of vocation.” 9 Facts like “there are only two caste divisions, one, the General Caste and the other the Shudras” and many such surprises await a serious student of Cultural History.

The Assamese - A Unique Culture

The ethnic populations of the region, those that are untouched by the advancing ‘development’, suffer from none of the uncertainty and fear that cripples the minds of modern youth. The total self-reliance of the villagers shows in the way they manage all matters pertaining to their livelihood, social, cultural and educational activities. It has inspired the researcher to look deeper and longer into their culture.

In an age where globe trotting and world citizenship is quite the norm and men and
women slip easily into the cultural milieu of one country, then another and another with
effortless ease and suave sophistication, the truly Assamese son of the soil would much
rather remain in tune with the environment where he belongs. The nature and the
environs that he dwells in is in fact, an intrinsic part of the very definition of the
Assamese cultural persona.

The Village Naamghar

The Naamghar lies at the very core of this culture. The Naamghar, outside of its setting,
has little or no significance.

Many a modernizing great religious movement has not been sustainable or just partially
successful because they remained largely at the intellectual level, for example, the
Bramho Samaj. But Sankaradeva’s religion included within its body all the cultural
traditions that made up the lives of the ethnic people. For example, the Oja-pali street-
theater performance was not originally meant as a religious performance, but
Sankaradeva adopted it as a media for transmitting the philosophy and thoughts on his
‘Ek Saran –Nama Dharma’. The devotional songs he wrote were set to the tunes of folk
music already familiar to the people.

Krishna was already recognized by the Hindus as the God of love and Bhakti. Sankaradeva not only evolved a new religion, but reached through to touch the heart of
every person by singing the glories of Krishna as written in the Srimad Bhagavat. He
used the words Rama, Hari and Narayana as other names of God - all names which were
familiar to the common Indo-Aryan people.
The traditional media of folk music and dance, the art of painting, writing of manuscripts with illustrations and weaving of cloths were all the Little Traditions of a culturally rich people of the Brahmaputra Valley. Sankaradeva drew for this vast and living tradition to adopt them as instruments of the Cultural Renaissance.

Sankaradeva very carefully selected the parts of scriptures which he transcribed for the common people. Not the whole of Krishna’s life was highlighted. E.g. it was left to the intellectuals to meditate on Nirguna Brahman (Formless Self). Sankara totally discarded this path as too difficult for the average people.

He also discarded the path of karma (rituals) as slippery and unsuitable for the peasant population. He highlighted in great detail the ‘Uddhava Samvāda’, the conversation between Krishna and his close friend and servant, Uddhava. He positively promoted the path of Bhakti (Love) and Saran (surrender) which is not only highly suitable but also easy and practical for the common man.

According to Milton Singer,” it is in this selective and creative process that the cultural traditions take on a self-consciousness that reflects the changing aspirations and evolving cultural identity of the people.”

Sankaradeva’s aims were again much broader than just religion. He wanted to bring about social transformation in people. According to Milton Singer, ‘the traditions are cultivated and transmitted by a class of learned specialists, the literati, who have a definite social structure and organization.’ Although Sankaradeva aimed to keep it democratic so as to eliminate the literati(here represented by the Priesthood) by making the texts simple enough for even illiterate people, and used the easy vernacular for his

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10D. Neog, New Light on History of Asamiya Literature, Xuwani Prakas, Gauhati,1962, pp .43-44
11Milton Singer, op cit., p.60
12Ibid ., Loc. cit.
plays, we yet see the emergence of a priestly sect. The ‘learned literati, as Singer called them, resurfaced soon after Sankaradeva’s death to establish and head the Sattras (Vaishnavite Monasteries). But the same people were also the ‘agents of modernization.’ The Democracy was challenged by the Feudal outlook of the Heads of the Monasteries (Sattras).

Sankaradeva focused on the need of the people to lead peaceful and organized, happy lives. Organization of the people and their cultural development leading to spiritual upliftment were the keystones of the grand cultural renaissance of the 16th century as propagated by Srimanta Sankaradeva through his Naamghar culture.

Today Sankaradeva is venerated amongst the Assamese Vaishnavite people not only as the founder of their faith, but also as the originator of all that is typically and uniquely Assamese.

In an age where globe trotting and world citizenship is quite the norm and men and women slip easily into the cultural milieu of one country, then another and another with effortless ease and suave sophistication, the truly Assamese son of the soil would much rather remain in tune with the environment where he belongs. The nature and the environs that he dwells in is in fact, an intrinsic part of the very definition of the Assamese cultural persona.

Of course, the scenario is a fast changing one. There is a high level of tension in the region. The unique geography of Assam allows scope for entry to different ethnic groups to come and settle down. It was such a tension ridden situation earlier in the fifteenth century too, and Sankaradeva evolved his social and democratic religion to make all the people dwell in harmony of the Naamghar who are not ethnically nor culturally the same.
That the techniques evolved by him resulted in Peace and harmony of the region is proved without doubt by study of the history of its people.

**Feudalism versus Democracy**

Just as the feudal Ahom Rulers as well as the Brahminical elements in the 16th and 17th century feared the power of the people and tried to obstruct it, even today, the ruling members of the society and more so the vested commercial and political interests obstruct and resist the power to the people.

To quote Sanjay Ghosh again, writing about the current disharmony in Assam—*“The only answer seems to lie in the hands of the people themselves.”*  

13 Srimanta Sankaradeva said the same in the 16th century. He gave power to the people to decide their own destiny. The history of the Assamese people as defined in these few pages chronicles this entire process spanning three centuries of empowering the people themselves.

In order to study the Development of its Culture, a study of the geography of the region is a starting point.

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13 Sumita Ghosh (ed), *op. cit.* , p. 201