Chapter 2

The Origin of the Naamghar and its structure

The village Naamghar is at the grass-root of the Assamese Culture. It can be said that the Naamghar is related to Assamese Culture as the Sun is related to dawn.

The traditional Naamghar presents a lovely picture. Below the swaying green trees, the small thatch hut is built with three sides having half walls. The fourth side- the east wall, encloses a small shrine containing a wooden pyramidal platform with a book on top and draped with a woven white cloth. An oil-lamp burns steadily in front of it.

The Naamghar lies at the nucleus of the Assamese village. It is the congregational prayer hall. It is at the same time the centre-piece of the village and its well-spring. Every Assamese village, even today, has a Naamghar, sometimes more than one.

“Anyone who cares to know Assam and her people soon discovers that everything we call Assamese is rooted in the soil that was prepared more than five centuries ago by the great saint and savant Srimanta Sankaradeva”.

Along the River Brahmaputra and its numerous tributaries, along the green valleys stretching wide up to the foot-hills of the Himalayas, one’s eyes are feasted on the ‘pomp

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of cultivated Nature. The village Naamghar presents a lovely picture in the Assamese country-side. A small thatch house with half-walls on three sides, supported on two rows of wooden pillars.’2

**Sources for study**

Sources for information on the origin of the Naamghar and nuances of the culture of Sattras and Naamghars are available abundantly as it is a living culture.

The historic records available are of two types. The first is the religious records. Guru-Kathas kept by the devotees and propagators of the Naamghars and Sattras. They are a wealth of resource for not only their historic value, but also, their script, language, choice of phrases and choice of incidents to be narrated. The second are the writings of the European travellers, and administrators, who gave more objective descriptions of the Cultural institutions they encountered. Notable amongst them were E Martin, William Hunter and Francis Buchanan-Hamilton.

Edward Gait, who first wrote a consolidated History of Assam in modern genre, gave some valuable information regarding Naamghars. But his was more of a chronological arrangement of the various dynasties and power struggles, which hardly touched upon the pulse of the people of Assam.

Primary sources of data also include the existing old Naamghars, whose managements have the preserved documents, land grants by Ahom Kings, artefacts and a rich oral history, undocumented, which is a history of the common people, their thoughts, emotions and struggles.

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Speaking to senior heads of associations like Sattra Sangha and Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha, and Sattradhikars (heads of monasteries) also helps one to infer their attitudes and approaches to the various happenings in their history. For instance, a senior devout claimed that in 17th century, “there were as many Satras in Ahom kingdom as the number of chowries in a rupee.” (which, incidentally, works out to 1200) The information such as that Sankaradeva had referred to his own place of Origin as ‘Idesh’, Koch Kingdom as ‘Hidesh’ and Ahom land as ‘Ahomdesh’ also helps one to understand the Naamghars.

One book, which offers a wealth of very well documented information about the culture and life style of the Assamese people and which is, indeed, an excellent resource for the relationships of the Assamese people and their Naamghars, is authored by Audrey Cantlie, a British anthropologist. It is a contemporary study of the living Naamghar Culture. She details out the words used in prayer and the people’s everyday life incidents in a typical Assamese village. Her childhood days were spent in Assam since she was the daughter of a British Deputy Commissioner posted in Assam in early twentieth century. This work can be rated as an interesting primary source.

The Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha publishes every year, as a part of its activities, well-researched articles and journals about Vaishnavism in Assam by eminent historians and litterateurs from Assam and the rest of India too. So far there are about eight volumes.

Other secondary sources are abundant on the Assamese language shelves in all libraries. Although many are repetitive, almost all of them are authored, interestingly, by people who are themselves steeped in and representing the Naamghar Culture.
What are Naamghars?

*Naamghars* are the smallest and most basic units of the Neo-Vaishnavite religion in Assam.

The religion was introduced by Srimanta Sankaradeva, a great social and cultural reformer who lived in the 15th century.

“There are no permanent religious structures built by the Vaishnavites before the 18th century. No stone or bricks were employed. The Prayer halls or *Naamghars*, as they came to be called, were built of wood and bamboo and covered with thatch. The reason was perhaps the temporary nature of the stay of the originators of their faith. The times were unsettled.’

‘Moreover, any house with room enough for monks and disciples to sit together was considered sufficient for a Prayer-house or Naamghar.’

Over a period of time, it became an integral part of every Hindu village in Assam. Any Keertan-ghar set up near the *Than* (Sankaradeva’s Settlement) came to be referred to as a *Naamghar*.

‘There are presently, more than 30,000 *Naamghars* in Assam. The *Naamghar* serves a variety of purposes It is a village church, a village parliament, a library, and stage, Even

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today, the Naamghar wields tremendous influence on the cultural and community life of Assamese people.\textsuperscript{5}

The Naamghar controls the people, settles disputes, punishes wrongdoing, and helps the poor.

**The Beginning**

**Life of Sankaradeva**

Sankaradeva, the great fifteenth century saint and savant was the founder of Assamese Neo-Vaishnavite religion. He chose to base his new religion on the Bhakti Marga of worship of Cow-herd God Krisna, as described in the Classical work *Bhagawat Purana*.

His greatest contribution towards building up of society is in establishment of a network of Naamghars all over the region on democratic lines.

Srimanta Sankaradeva opened the doors of the Naamghar to people from all castes alike and struck a balance and harmony amongst caste groups

*Naahi bhaktita Jaati Ajaati vichaara*  
*Krishnata bhakti Samastere Adhikaara*  
*(Everybody has equal rights to devotion of Krishna)*\textsuperscript{6}

Sankaradeva began preaching in his native place of Tembuwani (modern Bordowa). Bhusana, in his *Guru-Charit* –a biography of the Saint, says that Ramaraya first built for

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{6} Ibid., p.42
\end{itemize}
Sankaradeva a Deo-ghar (prayer hall) at Tembuwani (now called Bordowa) and this institution became the nucleus of the Vaishnavite culture which later, spread throughout the three Assamese States of Assam, Kamarupa and Koch- Behar.

A one-man Cultural Institution
Venerated as the Father of the Asamiya Jati, Sankaradeva was a one-man Cultural Institution and his name is not mentioned in Assam without the honorific prefix of Mahapurusha (the Great One) and Srimanta (the Virtuous).

Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankaradeva took birth in A.D. 1449 and was given the name Sankara by his devout Shaiva parents Kusumbar and Satyasandha. He belonged to the Siromani Bhuyan family, who were a clan of Land-owners of Kayastha caste in mid-Assam region.

Having been orphaned at an early age, Sankara was brought up by his doting maternal grand-mother Khersuti. She sent him to the tol (school) at the house of the Brahmin Mahendra Kandali. His teacher, Mahendra Kandali was astounded to see, one day, child Sankara who, was combing out his hair after a bath with two hands and wiping water from his body by a towel with two other hands. The teacher was about to fall to his knees in awe when Sankara assumed his normal form.  

His teacher, recognizing Sankara’s Divinity, first began to address him as Sankaradeva and advised all students to do so. He exempted his special student from doing menial works in the Tol(school) and, later, became his first disciple.

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7 S. K. Borkakoti, Unique Contribution of Srimanta Sankaradeva in Religion and Culture, Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha, Nagaon, Assam, 2006, p.18
Sankardeva evolved his philosophy of Ek *Saran Naam Dharma* or *Hari- Naam-Dharma* or just *Naam-Dharma* for his people who were mostly without religious guidance and victims of debased cults propagated by blood-sacrificing Tantric priests.

He thought deeply and travelled all over India for twelve years.

Then, having discarded *Gyan-marga* (doctrine of Knowledge), *Karma-marga* (doctrine of Duties) and even Ritual Methods, decided on the most suitable way for his people was Devotion to One God *Ek-Saran-Naam-Dharma* a Way which involved no terrifying, punishing, demanding gods or goddesses.

“*It was a brilliant construct that wedded philosophical Doctrine to a popular religion of mass appeal. It had immediately struck a new chord in the hearts of the people. The path of Salvation was now not only well laid out and understandable, but also bereft of idols and expensive, cumbersome procedures, intimidating scriptures and elaborate rituals.***”

This way was just a total surrender of a servant to his loving, forgiving and generous Master, a religion which only required one to come to the *Naamghar* and take the name of the loving Lord Krisna.

The *Naamghosha* – a set of Verses written by Madhavadeva, Sankara’s greatest disciple and successor, is simple enough to be on the lips of even the quite illiterate-

“*Nija Daasa Kari Hari moke Kina Kina*

*Annya dhana nalaage NaamaDhana Bina*

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8 W. Hussien and B. J. Mahanta, *Sattras and Dargahs of Assam*, Word Weaves India, Guwahati, Assam, 2010, p.6
“O Hari! Buy me! Buy Me as thy slave

Pay me not anything except Money of Thy Name”

Later, Mahatma Gandhi had paid high tribute to Sankaradeva saying that he had formed the Ideal society - Ram-Rajya so early in the history of India.

Srimanta Sankaradeva laid the foundations of his Ek- saran Naam Dharma directly into the heart of the people of the Brahmaputra valley. He revitalized society. He unequivocally condemned corrupt social practices of offering blood sacrifices to the ‘deities’ for the explicit purposes of worldly gains, and severely ostracized even his dearest disciples if they strayed back into them out of fear. He insisted on total surrender to One God (Ek- Saran-Naam-Dharma).

“Anyā Devi-devā nakaribā sevā,

Nakhaiba prasada tara,

Murtika nachaiba-griho napasiba,

Bhakti haibe vyabhichara”

Bow not your head to other gods and goddesses,

Do not partake of the offerings made to them,

Cast not even a look at the idols nor ever enter their shrines,

Lest thy devotion will be vitiated!”

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9 P. Saikia, Mahapurush Madhavadeva’s Naamghosha, Bora Prakashan, Ananda Nagar, Guwahati, 1997, p.172
10 J. P. Saikia (ed.), The Land of the Seven Sisters, Directorate of Information and Public Relations, Govt. of Assam, 1976, p. 53
Creation of a common Culture

Sankara gained immediate acceptance for his teachings amongst the people starved for Culture. Sankara later lived at Dhuwahata in Ahom territory, where he planted a Bilva (bel) tree and built a Thaan or settlement for his followers. Later, such a place, i.e. a Guru’s residential settlement, came to be known as ‘Sattra’. Dhuwahata came to be called Belguri Sattra. Belguri Sattra was part of the land which formed part of the breakaway River –island of Majuli. Although the original Sattra was washed away by the river, the island of Majuli itself became Holy Land.

The entire, mainly tribal, populace of the region, for the first time found recognition as members of a community when they stepped into the Naamghar at Dhuwahata.

The land of Dhuwahata on which Sankaradeva dwelt for fourteen years of his life, became part of the large river –island of Majuli. A geographical phenomenon, Majuli was created in 1750 AD when a big flood and erosion changed the course of the Brahmaputra River. Majuli island, since its formation, has been the home of several Sattras (about seventy-seven) out of which only twenty-three exist today. It is in the island of Majuli that the culture of the Shankari religion was preserved while civil wars and anarchy prevailed in the Mainland.

Majuli has now become a place of pilgrimage, tourism and cultural conservation.

It was in Dhuwahata or Belguri, that Sankara met Madhavadeva (1489-1596).

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11 A common saying quoted by Vaishnavites and attributed to Sankaradeva.

12 D. Neog, New Light on History of Asamiya Literature, Xuwani Press, Dispur, Guwahati, 1962, p.150
**Sankaradeva meets Madhavadeva**

As a young lad and a tradesman, Madhava was on his way to sacrifice two goats to the gods for curing his mother of illness. He was stopped by his brother-in-law, a disciple of Sankaradeva, who did not indulge in animal-sacrifices. Madhava was angry. Then, the angry Madhava came to argue with Sankaradeva. Sankaradeva not only convinced him to abandon his intention, but Madhava, after along discussion, was finally transformed and falling at the feet of Sankara, became his life-long disciple.\(^{13}\)

This great union between guru and disciple was of great historic significance. Just as Ramakrishna Paramahamsa met Swami Vivekananda who carried his Guru’s message to the world, it was Madhavadeva who spread the religion of Naam-Dharma amongst all the people of the Assam Valley.

Both of them together had then envisioned to carry on their activities of propagating the Neo-Vaishnavism with literary, social, cultural activities in Ahom territory itself. But this was not to be.

They were totally shaken by the cruel treatment meted out to them by the Ahom king Suklenmung alias Gargiya Raaja (1539-1552 AD)\(^{14}\)

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Sankaradeva had always given the royalty a wide berth and only strived to uplift the common people. The Brahmin priests felt threatened on account of the popularity of Sankara, thinking their position was being attacked. They had the royal ear, and tried to have Sankaradeva arrested.

A very difficult job was allotted in the name of the King to Sankaradeva and his followers. It was the highly specialized work of guarding the trapped wild elephants during a Kheda-(an Elephant- trapping) expedition. One trapped elephant got away.

So the king’s men were sent to arrest Sankara and his followers. Although his disciples carried him away to safety, Sankaradeva was shocked when his son-in –law , Hari Bhuyan who was the Head of the Bhuyan Clan, was caught and beheaded at the King’s behest and his favourite disciple Madhava, although he was not killed, was kept imprisoned for long. As soon as he was released Sankaradeva decided that he would leave the land of such an unjust King.

Sankara his followers decided to leave Ahom territory by escaping when Ahom kingdom was under attack by the Koch Army.

Accordingly, he and his followers, in 1546 A.D., then secretly took a boat and sailed down - stream along the River Brahmaputra into the Kingdom of Koch- Behar in Lower Assam. Sankaradeva had heard that the King Naranarayan of Koch-Behar (1533-1587) and Crown Prince Chilarai were benevolent and just rulers.  

15 Ibid., loc.cit.
Sankara settled at Patbasi (now called Barpeta), in the Koch Kingdom, built a residence for his disciples and himself. He called it as a Than. Later, it was called a Sattra. In a prayer-hall (Naam-ghar) in his Than, Sankara held discourses. A large number of people were drawn to the new way of Vaishnavism with his soul-stirring music and attractive personality.

Once, a very tired man, a Brahmin, reduced to farming due to poverty, was passing by the Naamghar. He paused thus, everyday, to hear the soothing strains of Sankara’s music, leaning his hoe against the Naamghar wall. After a few days, Sankara noticed him and beckoned him inside the Naamghar. Sankara helped him to sort out his personal matters and later, the poor labourer became an important member of the Than around 1550 AD. He was Damodaradeva, one of the saints of Assamese Vaishnavism, and founder of a sect.

In the Koch Kingdom too, Sankaradeva ran into trouble with the Brahmin Pundits. The narrow-minded priests, who were receiving royal patronage from King Naranarayana, spread false rumours and submitted malicious complaints to the King regarding the “irreligious” activities of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva.

It was at this stage that Yuvraj Sukladhwaja alais Chilarai the great Generalissimo and Prime minister of the Koch King came to the rescue of the saint.

**The Role of General Chilarai in Development of Naamghar Culture**

Yuvraj Sukladhwaja alias General Chilarai alias Sangrama Singha was the younger brother of King Naranarayana of Koch Kingdom. He was third son of Viswa Singha
(1496-1530) the virtual founder of the Koch Kingdom of North Bengal and Assam (Kamata- Kamrupa).\(^{16}\)

Both the brothers were educated at Varanasi and were accomplished scholars.

J. P. Rajkhowa, in the frontispiece of his book on Generallissimo Chilarai, writes “He was one of the greatest Warrior-heroes and most colourful personalities of all times. In the course of a single military expedition, he swooped down and conquered all the kingdoms of the then Eastern Region of India, without facing any defeat. This way of swooping down on his ‘prey’ earned him his nick-name Chilarai i.e. Kite-King\(^{17}\)

General Chilarai (1510-1571 AD) and his elder brother King Naranarayan (1509-1587 AD) were both patrons of learning and arts; it is amply borne out by many appreciative references by his contemporary scholars and poets like Ram Saraswati and Pitambara to the patronage extended to them by the Prince. Sankaradeva, too, in his play ‘Ram Vijaya’, has appreciated Prince Sukladhvaja (Chilarai), for helping to arrange performance of his play.

Chilarai was a great warrior and an astute strategist and a cultural giant. He patronized scholars of his time who wrote learned books in Mathematics and Grammar under his patronage. He himself authored a book- Saravati Tika, a commentary on Geet-Govindam in Sanskrit.

According to Gait, as quoted by J. P. Rajkhowa, Chilarai was the name given by Ahoms to the Koch Prince Sukladhwaja when he attacked them with the speed of a Kite (Chila).

\(^{16}\) Ibid, p.20

\(^{17}\) Ibid, Frontispiece
Chilarai is also credited with inventing guerrilla war-fare techniques (The Nazis later called it ‘blitzkrieg’). “He developed a large Naval fleet even before King Akbar. He fought and won more naval battles than Napoleon. But the brothers never annexed conquered territories nor oppressed the people. They only collected tributes from the vanquished kings. Even enemy-prisoners were kindly treated and given land-grants to settle.” 18

According to the tradition, one day in the course of his routine visits in disguise to his kingdom, Chilarai came to Patbaisi. There, General Chilarai saw young Kamalpriya and heard her singing in a sweet voice to the accompaniment of a Sarengdhar. Chilarai was enthralled by her song as well as her beauty. He learned that she was the niece of the Vaishnavite Saint Sankaradeva, daughter of Ram-rai, his cousin. The song she sang was a Borgeet—“Man Meri Ram Charan hi Lago” composed by Sankaradeva.

He expressed his wish to meet Srimanta Sankaradeva. The later too, was pleased to meet the Crown Prince. Yuvraj Chilarai then married Kamalpriya after consulting Sankaradeva, at the place which is now called Ram-Rai Kuthi. Kamalpriya became Chilarai’s consort and her name was changed to Queen Bhuvanesvari.

Chilarai also became a disciple of Sankaradeva. In an account by Sahityarathi (Lakhinath Bezbarua) as quoted by J P Rajkhowa, it is mentioned that the meeting between the two stalwarts was like ‘Mani-Kanchan Sanjog’. (Meeting of Gold with the Gem-stone) 19, like every precious stone is enhanced only by a good gold setting! This coming together of great personages laid the firm foundation on which the great structure of Assamese Cultural Renaissance was built.

18 Ibid, p.20
19 Ibid, p. 84
It was due to the large-heartedness, courage, diplomatic skill and sagacity of Chilarai that Sankaradeva was saved from the initial wrath of King Naranarayana. It would be not wrong to say that, but for Chilarai’s marriage with Kamalpriya, the course of History of Mahapurusa would have been entirely different.

It happened in this way as narrated in the *Guru-Charits* (the saint’s biographies). As the Brahmin Pundits repeatedly complained against Sankaradeva to the King, he (the King Naranarayana) got provoked and said to his minister,

“Garamali, listen how Sankara is destroying religion in my kingdom! I will finish him- I will make drums with his skin- I will beat the drums with his bones!”

He ordered that Sankara be arrested and produced before him forthwith.

On hearing of the anger of the King and the King’s order, Sukladhwaja (Chilarai) became very sad and thoughtful. He decided on his course of action.

He immediately dispatched eight of his own soldiers ordering them to travel non-stop and reach Patbausi before the King’s men.

They were instructed to arrest Sankaradeva ‘on orders of the Yuvraj’ on a drummed up pretext, before the King’s men reached there.

The King’s men, when they reached, could not arrest Sankaradeva, as he was already under arrest of the Yuvraj Chilarai. Sankara was thus “kidnapped” and brought safely to the Prince’s Garden Palace where he was received with great honour.
Chilarai then pleaded with the King to give an audience to Sankara before condemning him. The King, being a noble soul, agreed to do so.20

When the meeting took place the King was mesmerized by the serene and elegant personality. Sankara, moreover, effectively refuted in the King’s court, all the arguments put forward by the Pundits against his preaching. The King was impressed and gave Sankara the honour of a seat next to him, close to the throne. The King was convinced of his greatness and honoured him and permitted him to freely spread his religion.

Thus it was The Great Warrior Chilarai, who not only saved Sankaradeva from certain death, but it was only due to his Royal Patronage that Sankaradeva was able to establish the Ek–Saran- Naam- Dharma in Assam and bring about his cultural renaissance.

Chilarai built a garden house for Sankara and his followers to stay at Patbausi. All of Sankara’s major literary and dramatic works were completed here with his patronage and protection.

The Contribution of King Naranarayana to the spread of Naamghar Culture

The advent of Srimanta Sankaradeva into the Koch Kingdom marked the Golden Era of Assamese Renaissance. King Naranarayana (after initial misgivings) and General Chilarai came to be the chief patrons of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva during their stay in the Kingdom of Koch-Behar.

20 Ibid., p.86
King Naranarayan and his younger brother Sukladhwaja were educated at Varanasi and returned to successfully rule the powerful Koch Kingdom after the death of their father, Viswasingha in A.D. 1533, who had founded the Koch kingdom. When elder brother Naranarayana was crowned as King, he made Sukladhwaja (called Chilarai) the Commander-in-Chief of the Army.

Gohain Kamal, another of his brothers, was given governorship of a large tract of land by the generous brother King.

A European traveller, Ralph Finch, had remarked that indeed, in this Kingdom, there was peace and prosperity, and even a hospital for animals!21

It was truly the patronage of King Naranarayana which was behind creation of Sankaradeva’s famous works. Sankara created the Brindabani –Bastra, the grand Pictorial textile as a gift to the King and under his patronage.

The King gave him governorship of the small principality Tanti-Kuchi (a community of weavers) for this purpose. The textile was reputed to be 120’ long and 60’ wide! It took six months for the whole village of weavers to make it. It is now lost from India.

(A Piece of the Brindabani- Bastra now lies in Prince Albert Museum in London. Also, Percival Landon, a British journalist collected a piece of textile in 1905 from Gobshi in Tibet and gave it to the British Museum which is now identified as a Vaishnavite textile of the 15th century.)

21 Ibid, p.159
The story of the Elephant in the Lime-pot

The King held many debates in his court between the Pandits and Sankaradeva.

King Naranarayan once asked the court poets to give him, in one day, a condensed version of the entire ten cantos of the *Bhagawat Purana*. When all Pundits said it was not possible to do so in such a short time, Sankara took up the challenge and accomplished the feat in one night.

After he had condensed the substance of the ten chapters of the Bhagawat Purana into a small booklet, he put it into a small wooden box. Then over this, he painted with *hengul-haital* (yellow and red) an elephant squeezed inside a circle.

He called it *Bhurukaat Haathi*—meaning an elephant squeezed into a lime-pot!

The pleased King honoured Sankaradeva.

Sankara, in gratitude has penned three panygrics (called *Bhatima* in Assamese) in praise of the King—a very rare thing to do for a saint devoted solely to God.

The King asked Sankaradeva to accept him as a disciple. Srimanta Sankara breathed his last in Patbausi without acceding to the King’s request to give *saran* (initiation) into *Naam Dharma* to the King.

The King himself, died a sad man as he had to split his Kingdom between his own son and Raghu, son of Chilarai. The Crown Prince had died in battle before the King, and his son claimed the throne.

The above account shows that with King Naranarayana’s patronage, Sankaradeva and his great disciple Madhavadeva, together could created enough corpus of Bhakti literature to
last for posterity. Devotional songs **Borgeets** were composed and **Kirtans** (Hymns), were penned down in the **Kirtan-ghosha**. The **Gunamala** condenses the entire ten cantos of the Bhagavata into very brief verses which were easy for recitation. The **Bhakti-Ratnavali** and six **Ankiya-Nats** (one-act plays) were written by Sankaradeva.

**Formation of Assamese Culture**
Sankara developed and evolved the common language for the people - Assamese. All the villagers including women could recite his compositions easily, even though they were quite illiterate. They learned it in the Naamghar.

**The Use of Brajvali**
The One-Act plays called **Ankiya-nat** and some of the **Borgeets** written by Sankaradeva were written in the stylized language of Brajabuli or Brajvali. The plays were about the life and activities of Lord Krisna, Lord Rama and other common themes from the Puranas. The plays, being written in the Koch Kingdom, Sankaradeva perhaps used a medium of stylized expression commonly used in the entire region. He wanted an all-India audience.

In this goal too he was successful as the simple, but uniquely interesting plays became popular even in Bengal as ‘Kaliya-damana Yatra’. The plays obtained popularity in Mithila too.22

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Leading scholars of Assam like Dr. B. K. Baruah, Kaliram Medhi, Dr. Maheshwar Neog and Dr. S. N. Sarma echo the views of Dr. Sukumar Sen that Maithili was the base of Brajavali. On it the Assamese grammatical and lexical forms were assimilated.

However, the latest theory given by Narayan Das is that Brajavali was a natural language, a heritage of all the Aryan languages prevalent in India- Avahattha. This language is the origin of Brajabuli.\textsuperscript{23} Other authors in Bengal, Nepal and Mithilia forming the Odhra Magadhi group, also wrote plays in the language called Brajabuli.\textsuperscript{24}

To quote S. K. Borkakoti, “It may be noted that \textit{Shanta Rasa} prevails in his plays. All other eight \textit{Rasas} were secondary or not present\textsuperscript{25} The plays were full of dances and songs and provided wholesome and spiritual entertainment for the people. It was all about wearing colourful costumes and masks, soul-ful music and fire-works adding to the sense of thrilling dramatic extravaganzas. All this happened at the \textit{Naamghar}.

All the members of the community, the \textit{Keot}, the \textit{Kaibartas} (fishermen.), the various tribesmen and even the Turukas (Muslims) were treated alike and accepted into the \textit{Naamghar} community.

Sankara taught habits of cleanliness, outward and inward, and the values of truthfulness, contentment and devotion to one God. He unified all the social forces and formed the Assamese as a distinct community having a unique Culture. \textit{It was not a racial binding},

\textsuperscript{24} Natya-Shastra Chapter 14 Slokas 43-45 state that Eastern Provinces comprise of Anga,Banga, Kalinga,Vatsu,Odhra, Magadha, Pundra, Nepal, Antarigira, Bahirigira, Plavanga, Malada, Mallavartaka, Brahmottara, Bhargava, Margava, Pragjiyotisa, Pulinda, Videha, and Tamralipti. All these take to local usage of Odhra Magadhi.

\textsuperscript{25} S.K.Borkakoti, \textit{Op.cit.},p.84
but a cultural one! The Assamese are a conglomeration of various ethnic peoples and a sprinkling of upper castes gelled together under the Naamghar to form a community.

The Sattra and the Naamghar
Sattras are the Vaishnavite monastries built by the Vaishnavite apostles or Gurus to live with their disciples. Many Sattras were established in different parts of the region during the 17th and 18th centuries. Their purpose was to train young monks in the Vaishnavite traditions and guide and proselytise amongst the populations.

The Structure of a Sattra
‘It should be noted that though the origin of the Sattra (i.e. the monastic wings of the Ek-Saran Naam Dharma) was associated with Sankaradeva, he was not the real founder of the Sattra or monastery as an institution of a permanent nature. It was during the life times of his great disciples, Madhavadeva and Damodaradeva that the Sattra was given a structural and organizational shape, which took on a definite monastic turn only in hands of Vamsigopaladeva, towards the end of 3rd decade of the 17th century.’

All the Sattras monasteries have their Naamghars where the Prayers are conducted by the monks. They set down the practical norms of worship for villagers to follow.

E. Martin in his book Eastern India refers to Vaishnavism, saying “These instructors (meaning monks) have large thatch houses where they reside and instruct their disciples.”

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27B.N.Dutta, Folk Culture of Goalpara Region of Assam, University of Gauhati, Publication Dept., 1995, p.50
**Origin of the word –‘Sattra’**

B. J. Mahanta in his book *Sattras and Dargahs of Assam* gives information about the term ‘Sattra’. He, in turn quotes Sankaradeva himself in the tenth canto of his Bhagavata, “In the pious land of Naimisa, twenty-eight thousand sages, who were masters of the Vedas, set up a Sattra as a gesture of respect to Suta, the Great Sage. All including Shaunaka listened there to his discourse of the Bhagavata.”

The Sattra, in Assam, has a different meaning than that in Sanskrit (where Sattra or Sattram generally means an alms-house or dharamshala).

In Assam, Sattras have emerged and developed on the basis of the social, cultural, natural and geographical peculiarities of this region. They are Monastries, dwellings of the monks, who stayed in it and spread the Dharma amongst the surrounding villages by guiding them to set up Naamghars. Sattras have their own Naamghar where villagers congregate on special occasions.

“The importance of Sattras to the development and proliferation of Naamghars cannot be over-stressed. They are the very origin and cause of the Naamghar Culture spreading to the nooks and corners of Assam and surrounding areas. Local sentiments are thus very deeply intertwined with the Sattra institution in the state. The Sattra came to be the nerve-centre of the religious, social and cultural life of the Assamese people.”

**Lay-out of Sattra (monastery)**

*(See PLATE VI- (ii) Plan of a typical Sattra and PLATE VI (a) Models of Sattras)*

Refering to lay-out of the Sattras or Monastries, Neog has also given the opinion that it resembles the lay-out of Jagannath- Puri temple-complex, having the Bar-Deul (Naamghar in our case) in the centre, with a multiple of smaller shrines set in a square on the sides.

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29 Ibid., *loc.cit.*
The typical Sattra has a Naamghar in the centre with rows of residences for the monks on all four sides around a square, called HATI. The residences of important personages like the Sattradhikar were also located around the Naamghar. The Sattra had ponds surrounding it, for water storage. Each water-body had it’s function, like Chaawl – dhuwa (rice-washing), Gao-dhuwa (bathing) etc. The approach to the Sattra was through the main Gateway called Baat-Chora.

(See PLATE V – Sattras-I)

The people and their Naamghar
Since the time of Srimanta Sankaradeva, the Naamghars have been so constructed that people of all races and tribes living in this part of the country could easily enter and take part in the congregational prayers and other activities. Thus, the village Naamghar is significantly built without walls.\(^{30}\) This is quite a departure from other Hindu closed temples, where not even visual entry is available from outside.

Since inception of the religion, the Vaishnavite saints and their followings had only themselves to depend on to construct their village Naamghars.

“Each house in the village contributes equally towards the cost of construction, both, in money and in labour. A poor house may be given time to pay. All families in the village are considered as units and contribute cash or kind to the Naamghar.” \(^{31}\)

\(^{30}\) Abhijit Bhuyan, *Socio-cultural and Political Role of Naamghar in Assam*, Towards Freedom, Kolkata, 2007, p. 32

\(^{31}\) Audrey, Cantlie, *op. cit.*, p. 133
The village Naamghar Hall is used for daily prayer meetings, distributing of the Prasad after the daily Naam and social gatherings. On special occasions, the Naamghar Hall is used to stage the One-act plays called Ankiya Nat. The players perform in the midst with the audience seated around on three sides. Ideally the Naamghar is a covered hall with only half-walls on three sides and the Guru-Asan on the fourth side.

“All male members are required to work for Naamghar on Sundays or pay a fine. Rich, senior and influential people generally take the decisions but mainly everybody’s views are taken as a whole.” says Audrey Cantille in her study. 32

**Structure of the Naamghar**

The Village Naamghar (literally, Name House or Prayer house) is mainly a large hall built upon two rows of very stout and high pillars. It most often, has an East –west axis. This big hall is used as a place of congregation for prayers, called Naam.

It is said to have a similarity to Chaitya Halls of the Buddhists. (fig.2)

Another view is that the shape is more related to early Orissa Temple style. It does have a striking similarity to temples in Orissa, which was prevalent in the early period.

See PLATE VIII- Fig.1 A Typical Naamghar, Fig.2 An Orrissa Temple and Fig.3 A Buddhist Chaitya and PLATE XI-(v) Model of Naamghar Structure.

It may be remembered that Sankaradeva had travelled extensively in Orissa during his first Pilgrimage in the 15th century.

Thus it is seen that Sattras and Naamghars were adopted more from the living Hindu traditions of culture of the fifteenth century India, rather than ‘buddhist’ structures which according to records were already dead around the 12th century, some even being converted to Hindu temples.

32 Ibid., p.87
Manikut
On the eastern end of the Hall of the Naamghar, and perpendicular to the main axis, another hut is constructed whose length roughly equals the breadth of the hall. This is a structure which is enclosed by walls with a roof sometimes emphasized with a shikhara. This is generally called **Manikut.** *(house of gems)*. This structure is the shrine room and holds the object of worship. The shrine is not an icon but a wooden pyramid called Singhasana, holding Holy Books.

The function of the Manikut varies from Naamghar to Naamghar. In Madhupur,(Koch-Behar) it is known as **Bhaj-ghar** and houses an Idol of Krishna. Sometimes it is **Bharal-ghar** or store-house, depending on its use. In some Naamghars, the Singhasan or shrine is placed in the Manikut. In some Naamghars, the room is used for the visiting Guru for stay. Some do not have a manikut at all.

*(See PLATE XI- Naamghar –Manikut)*

The origin of the Manikut is not very clearly recorded. But a Manikut in a Vaishnava temple is common **feature** in other parts of India too.

In SriNathji temple at Nathdwara, Gujerat, the **manikuta** is the chamber between the **Nijamandira** (main shrine) and **Doltewari** (room where Dol-Yatra is celebrated).

In Jagannath temple at Puri, the **Manikut** houses the Main Shrine of Sri Jagannath, Subhadra and Balabhadra.

In the Assamese Naamghars, Manikutas do not have a fixed function. Some are used as the Shrine Room. But some Naamghars use it as a store, or a kitchen or even a room for VIP guests like Sattradhikars.

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33 D. P. Barooah, *Assam District Gazeteer, Goalpara Dist.*, Neo-Vaishnavite Culture and Practice, Govt of Assam, 1979, p.313
Some Naamghars, particularly of the Kala Samhita group in Upper Assam, do not have separate Manikuts, and their Naamghars are fully enclosed.

Singhasana (Guru-Asana)
See PLATE IX – (v) Thapona or Singhasana and PLATE XII (ii) Singhasana

All activities inside of the Naamghar are directed towards the Singhsana, the wooden Pyramid-shaped throne for the object of worship (Holy Books) kept at the Eastern end.

The wooden shrine, also called The Guru-asana or thapona is draped over and decked out with a richly woven piece of textile known as Gohain-Kapor. These intricately woven cotton textiles, known as the Gohain–Kapor are woven by the village women.

Guru-Asana can be three, five or seven tiered. The symbolism, as told by the seniors is that of Seven Vaikunthas, or Heavens. The tiers are carved at the four corners with tortoise, elephant and winged-lion motif.

The top of the wooden throne holds a shrine which has sacred books composed by Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva. These include the Dasham, Kirtanghosa, Bhaktiratnavali and Naamghosa. Sankaradeva gave highest importance to the formless Universal Self. It is represented not by any idols – but by Holy Books.

The sacred manuscripts, (called Puthi) are hand-written on the bark of the Aguru-trees known as Sanchi-pat. Some books are written on paper made from silk-cotton called tulapat. These are inferior to Sanchi-pat A similar feature is in Sikh religion where the Granth-Sahib is the object of worship.

34 S K Borkakoti, op.cit., p.68
35 Ibid., loc.cit.
36 Ibid., p.69
The Shrine also has a decorative cloth canopy hung from four corners called ‘Chandrataap’ [37] The wooden columns are also draped with colourful woven textiles.

See PLATE XI- (vi) Interior of Naamghar.

Paraphernalia of Worship
See PLATE IX- Art in the Naamghar-

Many articles are produced for use in the Naamghar for beauty as well as utility.

The stands for holding the oil lamps are planned as in the form of large trees ranging in height from two to six feet. The central shaft has a broad base and branches hold many tiny earthen lamps, shedding a dim mystic glow in the dark, high structure. Bell metal lamps are also lit at prayer time in front of the Guruasana, the top of which holds the sacred books composed by Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva.

Sarai are Receptacles or a raised Tray to hold Prasad and offerings. They were made of brass or wood, called Bata or just a bamboo basket, depending on the economic conditions of the community.

The Pathak (reader) has a lamp to read the scriptures. The Scriptural texts are placed on a stand called ‘Thoga’.

Seating mats woven from rice straw are hung neatly on the walls when not in use. It is called Kath. It was Madhavadeva who first made a Kath as a gift for his Guru. He also set the trend for embellishments of Naamghar. [38]

Art in the Naamghar

[37] Ibid., Loc.cit.
[38] Ibid., p.139
In Barpeta while constructing one of the initial Prayer halls, Madhavadeva initiated the varieties of art. The Pillars, the Singhasan of the Keertanghar, the wooden images of Garuda and Hanuman, the beams and uprights supporting the roof were carved beautifully as per his instructions and wooden doors and wall-panels were painted with themes from the Bhagawat Purana. The ten incarnations of Vishnu form the common theme in most Naamghars for paintings inside the door-panels. This later became the norm for village Naamghars too.

See PLATE XII –Carved Roof Truss, Carved Singhasana

It was in this Naamghar at Barpeta that Madhavadeva covered the side- walls with ‘Kundraksha-jaala’ perhaps meaning wooden beaded lattice-work. It is mentioned further in the Katha- guru- charit that the openings had coloured mica sheets, shedding colored light in the dim interior! It was like the stained –glass of Gothic Churches.

Other Vaishnavite Shrines in India like Srinathji have painted Backdrops to the shrines. In Assam, although according to records, Sankaradeva did create painted backdrops for his first drama (Chinha-Yatra), the feature was not adopted in Naamghars, perhaps due to the humid weather conditions in the region!

Musical Instruments

Sankaradeva had set the method of prayers in such a manner that it had to include singing, and playing on musical instruments. It was a part of the proceedings in the Naamghar that at first the big Dhaba or Kettle-drum is beaten in a rhythmic manner to gather the people together.39


(A kettle-drum in the Indian museum is described as 4’ in length, 3 1/2’ in diameter shaped like a boiler. Inscription in Sanskrit says King Siva Singha and Queen Pramatheswari had this brass dundubhi made. Weight is 620 1/2 seers (it was found in possession of a Khamti chief in 1835)
Then for the singing, the different musical instruments are played upon. It was very attractive for the villagers to participate in these audio-visual events. They took pride in excelling at playing the instruments. There is place in the Naamghar to keep the Kholes (two-sided drums). The drum, made of baked clay, is typical of Naamghar music.

Large cymbals called the Bhor-taal, (perhaps originating from Bhutan) are another very characteristic of Naamghar music.

The deep sounds of the Gong found place in Naamghar too. Manjira (small cymbals) are also used and kept in the Naamghar.

Stringed instruments like sarengdhar, (bowl made out of baked earth), tokori, etc. were more an individual’s accompaniment. Such instruments are mentioned in Katha- Guru-Charit. Kamalpriya, niece of Sankaradeva is described as playing one such instrument as she sang a Borgeet.  

See PLATE XIII- Musical Instruments

Seating in the Naamghar

See PLATE VI- Fig.1-Plan of Seating and PLATE XIV- Seating in Naamghar

The Seating in the Naamghar during a Prasanga (prayer gathering) follows an established pattern’. A minimum of eight persons are required to conduct a Naam-prasanga.  

All the devoutes are seated forming a U-shape with the open end facing the Altar.

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40 J. P. Rajkhowa, op. cit., p.59
41 Sarbeshwar Rajguru, Medieval Assamese Society, Assami, Milanpur, Haibargaon Nagaon, Assam,1988, p.301
Significance of the North-eastern pillar
The first pillar in the north-east corner next to the Singhasana (altar) is an important place and it is offered to the senior-most of the members of the Naamghar. This place is offered to a dignitary when he visits Naamghar (eg. a Sattraadhikar). It is said that Madhavadeva had invited a Muslim to lay the foundation of the Naamghar in the North-east pillar. He said “la-Ilaahi” Hence the Pillar is called Laai Khoota42 (Khoota means a pillar.)

“Weatings along the row of pillars facing north are all given to the senior devout in the village. It is known as Dohaar sari or Chorus singers’ row.

The seats directly opposite the altar- the round of the U, is meant for the Naam acharya or Naamlogova- literally, the Naam leader.

On his side is the reader or the Pathak of the Scriptures or Kirtans (Hymns).

In the same line are the musicians i.e. Gayan-bayans, (cymbal players and Drummers) and behind them are the chorus –singers (paalor sari).

On the northern stem of the U are places for the Bhakats (monks of the Naamghar) and the Bilaniyar(distributor of the Prasad).”43

The Prasaad
The Prasaad generally consists of soaked green gram, horse-gram, and soaked rice along with bananas and other seasonal fruits and vegetables. While distributing the soaked grams, it is mixed with salt, fresh ginger bits and coconut pieces. After the prasanga, the Prasada is mixed and distributed by the Bilaniar (distributor) in banana-leaf plates or bowls made from banana stem.

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42 Abhijit Bhuyan, op.cit., p.22-23
43 Sarbeshwar Rajguru, op.cit., p.69
The treasurer (Khataniar) who collects the subscriptions and the Naamghar store-keeper (Dhaan-Bharali) are the other officers of the Naamghar.

“All the office–bearers are democratically elected from amongst the villagers and are all voluntary. The only paid person is the Keeper of the Naamghar (Naamghariya), who cleans, sweeps, lights the lamps and maintains the Naamghar. Sometimes, houses do it by rotation. Status in the Naamghar is based on age and piety. Status in the village is based on wealth and influence.”\(^{44}\)

**Atmosphere in the Naamghar**

There is no wonder that European visitors to the monastery compared it to a Gothic Cathedral. “The monastery at Barpeta with its rude but ample chapel, its continuous rounds of chanting services, its lamps ever burning on its altar, shedding dim, religious light, produces on the visitor a not unsimilar impression from what is felt on witnessing the Roman Catholic form of worship.\(^{45}\)

Clearly, even the Englishman, a non-believer, was moved to religious feeling on entering the charming interior of the Naamghar.

**The Devotional worship in a Naamghar**

The well-known Chinese proverb says- I hear- I forget it, I see - I remember it, I do- I know it.

Mahapurush Sankaradeva made each person to participate and know their religion by doing it.

\(^{44}\) Audrey Cantlie, *op.cit.*, p.121

\(^{45}\) Major Adam White (ed.), *A Memoir of Late David Scott* Compiled by S K Bhuyan, Dept of History and Antiquarian Studies, Gauhati, 1988, (1st edited 1938) p. 151
Building of Naamghar, beating the drums, playing the Taals, singing the songs, and staging the performances— all had to be done by the people.

A typical Prasanga
(See PLATE XIV-(iv)- A Typical Prasanga)

At the head of the hall, in front of the Guru asana the brass lamps are lit. The lamp- trees holding ‘a myriad lamps’ light up the Naamghar. A bell-metal raised tray (sarai) is placed which has the prasaad (offering) of soaked pulses and fruits. Betel nut and betel leaves, and some coins make up the offering, which each day is contributed by some member.

The Dhaba – a large Kettle drum of four feet diameter is sounded by the Naamgharia. At least twice a day—morning and evening, at the start of a prasanga (a gathering for prayer) the Dhaba sounds. 46

Its loud, deep drumming sound floats across the country-side. The women folk stop their chattering and other activity, cover their heads with the ends of their cloth, and silently convey their mental presence in the Naamghar. The men-folk congregate at the Naamghar.

When the Vaishnavite apostles, especially Madhavadeva and Purushottam Thakur organized religious prayers services, they ensured that any mode of prayer service was always associated with performing Arts at least singing and playing on the musical instruments.

Generally the prayer service has four parts:

**Borgeet**

Devotional lyrics set to classical ragas attributed to Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva.

They are sung in unison with cymbals and drums to the accompaniment of stylized rhythmic movements. *The Naamlogova* (Name-Leader) sings at least one at the opening of the service.

**Ghosha**

The Naam-ghosha by Madhavadeva is a set of lyrical verses in praise of Guru and God. Almost the whole congregation generally knows it by heart and they sing the passages, repeating the lines after the leader.

**Keertan**

Next, the leader opens and sings the verses and chorus of any *Keertan* (from the book *Kirtan – Ghosa* by Sankaradeva). The congregation repeats the chorus after him.

The *Khol* make rhythm, the *manjira-taal* and the *nagara* drums build up the pitch, the Bhor Taals or Large Cymbals clash in unison and all of them together climax into a rhapsody of sound and rhythm and the entire *Naamghar* throbs to the sounds of the Name of God—"O Hari, O Raam, O Raam, O Hari".

Finally, silence. The leader gets up, removes his mat, makes obeisance with forehead to ground for ‘fault-breaking’ (Seek forgiveness for faults)

**Upadesha**

The ‘Pathak’ or reader takes over for this. He is seated on a mat facing a *Thoga* (wooden stand for keeping the Sacred Book). An oil- lamp is placed next to him. He chants from the Book with his mouth lightly covered with a cloth. He utters words of religious instruction from Sankaradeva’s book, *Daham*. For instance,

“Spreading over the sands of the Jamuna, The gopis begin to call Krisna, That call reaches the skies”
“Let all in the company say Hari Hari-may fire burn our sins”

The congregation Says “Hari, Hari”

The reader now removes his mat and offers obeisance for ‘fault breaking’.

The Leader offers Ashirwad to all in the congregation.

The congregation endorses it with “O Hari! O Ram!”

At the conclusion, Prasad is distributed by the Bilaniyar in pieces of banana-leaf.47

Women conduct their own prasangas in mid-morning at convenient times.

**Naamghar becomes the nucleus of the village**

The *Naamghar*, which the villagers themselves set up, became their centre for religious and cultural activities of the village. The coming together of the community in one house slowly led to a unique bonding amongst them. They became one group.

In the third quarter of the 17th century onwards, the growth of *Naamghars* was phenomenal. There is however, no count of the *Naamghars* until the time of Census by the British. The number of *Sattras* being estimated at 1200, perhaps, a conservative estimate of fifty *Naamghars* attached to a *Sattra* would put the figure of *Naamghars* at 25000. (It is recorded that the Mayamarya Sattra of Kala Sanghati alone had 800,000 disciples in its fold at the end of the 18th century).48

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The Naamghar became a place to coordinate the cultural, social, economical and political life of the people. Not only through the daily musical naamkeertans, but also through the regular arrangement of festivals, the Naamghar created enthusiasm among all ages for cultural activities and entertainment, and through these joyful activities, an unprecedented period of Peace and Harmony in the entire region was achieved.

Festivals and Events in the Naamghar

The Bar-Sabha (great assembly): The Naamghar community meets at least once every year for a Bar-Sabha. It is a sort of General Body Meeting. It is usually followed by performance of a religious drama at night. All affairs of the Naamghar are considered, accounts are submitted, stocks are taken, and the future is mapped out. The Naamghar also hears complaints and tries offences. Temporary structures are set up in the open for accommodating the crowd. Lunches are served and Bhaonas (theatre) is performed at night. The neighbouring Naamghars are invited to attend.

Other important festivals celebrated in the Naamghars with special Naam-prasangas are: Tithi of Sankaradeva, Tithi of Madhavadeva. The birth and death anniversaries of the two Great Saints are marked with prayers and Kirtans. Ankiya nat(one-act-plays) is performed. These events too have great gatherings of people from far and wide.

Janmastami and nandotsav is the celebration of the birth of Lord Krishna-an occasion for great festivity in Naamghars.

Dol-Utsav or Holi is celebrated by setting up a swing in the special Pavilion called dol mandap and placing Sri Krishna’s idol on it. Colours are applied on each other in a spirit of gaiety.
The **Bohag Bihu, Kati Bihu, and Magh Bihu Festivals** are celebrated with Keertans and traditional games, etc.

During **Bohag Bihu**, young boys go around house to house dancing the **Huchari**- a light jerking dance to the accompaniment of erotic and humourous songs, and collect money from houses, offering blessings in return. The money collected is given to the **Naamghar**.\(^{49}\)

**Second phase - growth of Naamghar Culture**

The Period of the 17th and 18th centuries saw the spread of Vaishnava Culture through to the upper reaches of the Brahmaputra Valley, from the western (Koch Kingdom) to the Ahom kingdom in the East, albeit in two streams: The stream promoted by Madhavadeva had celibate monks wherein the **Mahantas** did not marry. They had no form of idol-worship and did not conduct any Brahminical rituals.

But the stream led by Damodardeva had Brahmin Gohains as leading **proselytizers**, who became heads of the monasteries. Such monasteries did not give up idol-worship and introduced ritualism in the **Sattras**.

Another stream of **Sattras** claimed descent from Sankaradeva’s family. Being otherwise similar to the Brahmin Gohains, they have successors from the family as Heads. They also conduct ritual worship of idols.

\(^{49}\) Audrey Cantlie, *op.cit.*, p.124
The Sattras and their Sattradhikars were patronized by Royalty and Noblemen. They, particularly Brahminical Sattras, were exceedingly rich with Royal grants and wielded immense power over the people who would never even dream of disobeying the Sattradhikar. He was next to God in status. This obviously led to politics and intrigues in the Sattras.

(See PLATE VII- Sattradhikars)

There was peace and harmony amongst the village people even though political intrigues and disturbances prevailed in the ruling classes and in the Sattras. The Naamghar culture was there to stay.

Third phase- Proselytization in Upper reaches of the valley

Aniruddha, a disciple of Gopaladeva a leading apostle sent by Madhavadeva, is said to have been coerced into proselytizing by his Guru in spite of his other inclinations. He is said to have spread the religion amongst the simple but volatile tribals of the upper Valley regions.\(^{50}\)

Description of the Cultural Developments

The Sattras established by Aniruddhadeva had some exclusive characteristics. B. J. Mahanta talks about the common legend regarding Aniruddha. When he turned a cloth into a snake in front of the king and then removed the illusion, the rumour spread of his

\(^{50}\)D Neog, op.cit p. 121
control of Maya (illusion). This put them in bad books with the royalty. Combined with his phenomenal success in proselytization and his practice of having some secret rituals at night for special disciples created suspicions and the Kalasamhati (the group of Sattras established by Aniruddha deva and his disciples) was looked upon as different by even other Vaishnavite Gurus.\textsuperscript{51}

He was also suspected of possessing a book of Charms. Otherwise how could one explain the gathering of 800,000 people into the Kalasanghati group of Vaishnavas within such a short period?!\textsuperscript{52}

**Civil War leads to Eclipse of the Culture**

Due to wrong policies of the Ahom kings, machinations of the Brahmin priests brought in from Bengal and strained relations of other Sanghatis with the Kalasanghati, there was civil war followed by anarchy in the region of Upper Assam.

The Burmese armies took the opportunity of internal strife and invaded Assam first at the behest of Badan Phukan, a treacherous, vengeful Ahom official, then on their own. By the beginning of the 18\textsuperscript{th} century, they had established their rule and let loose a reign of terror, violence and devastation. They carried away tens of thousands of Assamese men, women and children to work as slaves in Burma.

The Ahom rulers desperately appealed to the British who were in control of Bengal to intervene and save them first from the marauding Vaishnavites of Kalasanghati, and later from the Burmese attackers. The British were very happy to oblige the King.

\textsuperscript{51}W Hussien and B J Mahanta, *Op.cit.*, pp.76- 77

\textsuperscript{52} *Ibid.* ,p.238
When, finally after a hundred years of anarchy, in 1826 A.D., the British signed the Treaty of Yandaboo with the Burmese, the situation of the Assamese people was quite chaotic. The Treaty was signed as the result of which the Burmese (who had occupied Assam) were compelled by the British Army to withdraw from Assam. Thus the British were handed over the region of Upper Brahmaputra valley without fight, and rather, with great sense of “Gratitude.”

A people Traumatized
In 19th century the Assamese people were a traumatized community. They were totally disempowered. One third of the population had been massacred. The population was dispersed. They had been a self-sufficient, strong and independent nation state which had withstood seventeen attacks by the powerful Mohammedan armies. But now, they were hardly aware of the fact that they had lost their independence to the British and were under British rule. Neither, perhaps, were they aware of the price of peace they would have to pay. They, in their innocence looked upon the British as their saviours.

“All men of rank, the heads of the Great Ahom and priestly families, had retired to one district, Gowalparra, having, with little exception, lost the whole of their property. With the nobility and gentry retired the vast body of lower classes. The former mostly returned to Assam after our occupation, but the latter the vast human population, never returned and their descendants now form part of the population of Habraghat and Koontaghat (These are the places in western region of the valley.).”

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Laxminath Bezbarua the father of Modern Assamese Literature wrote in lament about his beloved Assam from Calcutta,

\[\text{Ki} \text{ano} \text{ānili Mān, ai Badan tai, kiano ānili Mān?} \]

\[\text{Yāuti yugalai, khiāti rākihli, Asamar katāli kān.} \]

\[\text{Sonare Asamat, dakāit meli dili, Nandanat melili hāti:} \]

\[\text{Bārgharar majiāt, fetigom erili, bhar dupariā rati.} \]

“Why have you got the Burmese, O Badan, what for should you have got them? You have perpetuated your (ill) reputation, and you have disgraced Assam. You have set robbers in this Asam of gold like setting elephants in (garden of) Eden. You have set the ferocious cobra in the floor of the bed-room at dead of night.”

The Survival of the Naamghar Culture
The culture of Assam, as initiated by Srimanta Sankaradeva, was sheltered in the Sattras of the Vaisnavas and in the hearts of the Assamese. It was a people centric culture, and survived along with the people who had dispersed during the War. When they returned, the culture rose again with the same intensity and vigour, when the crisis blew over.

Some Historic Village Naamghars

Dhekhia-khowa Naamghar at Jorhat
It is situated 9 miles west of Jorhat Town at junction of Lahdoigarh and Cheuni Ali. Legend has it that Madhavadeva, closest disciple of Sankaradeva, returning after his

\[^{54}\text{D. Neog, Op. cit., p. 413} \]
release from prison at Gorgaon, stopped here. He had cooked and eaten Dhekia—a variety of green. Hence the name Dhekia-Khowa.\textsuperscript{55}

This Naamghar has an **Akshaya- Banti**—(an eternal lamp) which is still burning, claimed to have been lit during life time of saints. But almost all authors are unanimous in their opinion that it is not quite true, because the Naamghar was non-existent in the 16th or 17th centuries.\textsuperscript{56} There are no records to show that Madhavadeva ever returned to Ahom territory in his life-time.

It is not attached to any **Sattra** and has its own democratically managing committee and is funded by the people.

**Aat –Kheliya Naamghar at Golaghat**

A place of pilgrimage, this **Naamghar** is located twelve miles south-east of the town of Golaghat in Upper Assam. It lies on the bank of river Kakodonga.

It has a large campus spread over eight *bighas* of land and is said to have been established by people from eight villages or **Khels**

Aat- kheliya is a historic **Naamghar** having existence of well-over three hundred and fifty years (Year of estb. 1714 AD as per the **Namghar** officials).

It is governed by a Committee consisting of nominees of the surrounding villages. Ahom prince Gadapani is said to have taken shelter here during his escape from the capital. The Naamghar is also said to be sanctified with the memory of a visit by Madhavadeva.

\textsuperscript{55} S.K.Phukan, *Toponomy of Assam-, religio-cultural place names in History*, Omsons Publications, New Delhi, 2001, p.240

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid, p.236
**Sattras at Majuli**

The river-island of Majuli in the Brahmaputra is a geographical phenomenon and the largest in the world. Said to have been formed in 1750 AD during the reign of Ahom King Jaydhwaja Singh, it is now a vast living museum of the *Sattra* traditions of Assam.

Three of the four Royal Sattras, Dakhin-pat, Garumur, Kuruwabahi, and Auniati are located here. They lived in comparative safety during the period of anarchy when the marauding armies of the Burmese ruled the land, due to its inaccessibility.\(^{57}\)

Earlier said to have had 70 *Sattras*, Majuli now has 23 *sattras* who constantly are staring at extinction. Each *Sattra* has their *Naamghar* which are Heritage Buildings of unique wooden construction. Surrounding them are villages inhabited by farmer communities who contribute part of their produce to the *Sattra*. The picturesque *Mising* tribal community, whose settlements dot the island, also form the local support of the *Sattras*. Many *Sattras* have branches in the main land in preparation of an eventual erosion of Majuli Island.

The aforesaid accounts of *Naamghars* show that once created, the institution has been having continuity. Assam is distinctly known for it’s *Naamghar* culture.

\(^{57}\) *Ibid*, p. 443