CHAPTER 3

Naamghar - Political Dimensions

The study of Political dimensions can be divided into four phases. The first phase concerns the political dimensions of the Naam-Dharma as formulated by Srimanta Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva, the formation of Than or Sattra, the re-inclusion into Bharat-Varsha i.e. India in the 15th and 16th century, the democratic and secular aims of the new religion and the attitude of the Saints vis-à-vis the Koch Royalty. The next phase lasting two hundred years is about the phenomenal growth of the Sattras, Schisms in the Order, the changing attitudes of the religious leaders (Sattradhikars) and the stances taken by the Ahom Royalty to neo-Vaishnavism. The third phase is about the Mayamara Rebellion, its causes and effects and the last phase is about the British take-over and their administration of Assam.

Information for this dimension is derived from a number of different sources. The early part is concerning the lifetime of Srimanta Sankaradeva, Madhavadeva and their disciple-saints. Their life-histories, which had been existing in oral tradition in the sattras, were compiled and recorded as Guru Charit Katha, documents of great historical value. Many versions and copies are preserved in the Sattras and Naamghars. The Guru-Charit-Katha has been extensively quoted in the secondary sources studied, which relate to different aspects and the growth phases of NeoVaishnavite Bhakti Movement of Srimanta Sankaradeva in Assam.

The Ahom Burunjis are a series of records kept by the Ahom Kings regarding the events of their times. Earlier written in Tai language, they soon shifted to Assamese after the invaders had settled down and converted to Hinduism. The word Burunji came to mean
‘history book’ which word did not exist earlier in Assamese language. They are a great source of information to confirm the records of Vaishnava sources.

The important secondary sources referred for this chapter include a posthumous compilation of Maheshwar Neog’s unpublished works ‘Cultural heritage of Assam’. Besides this there is ample source of literature and evidences relating to later spread of the Naamghar Culture. Documents and evidences are well preserved in the Sattras. For a study of the two later phases of this dimension, the English language accounts of the British and European officials like W. Robinson, David Scott and A. J. Moffat Mills are good sources. Mohammedan travelers, British travellers and American missionaries etc., describe places and events from another perspective where allegiance to Vaishnavite religion does not color their writings.

Two Assamese officers in British employ, Anandoram Dhekial Phukan and Maniram Dewan had written detailed reports and petitions to the British authorities which yield plentiful information regarding conditions of the people, post- the Mayamara rebellions, and during British colonization. The list of the still- existing Vaishnava Sattras are also given. Secondary sources like the book by M. Hussein, ‘The Assam Movement’ which are actually relating to contemporary history, give some insights to the researcher into the period of this study, as historic events are better understood in the light of current consequences.

**Religion and Politics**

Religion around the world has always worked as a factor in nation-building more than other factors like language. In India particularly, religions have been the major cause for the country holding together or falling apart. The formation of India and Pakistan was based on religious forces in the society.
In the north-east of India, the *Ek-Saran-Nam-Dharma* religion, characterized by the presence of the Naamghar institutions in every village, grew to be the greatest bonding factor for the diverse ethnic groups starting from the medieval period. It was the first time in the history of the region in the 16th century that, for the warring tribes and clans in the Brahmaputra valley, a bond was realized amongst them through worship of one God, through singing together God’s name (*Ek-Saran-Nam-Dharma*) in the Naamghar.

**Assam as a part of India**

It was since the arrival of Srimanta Sankaradeva, the one-man cultural Institution, in the public scenario around 1530s, that a wave of spiritualism began to spread amongst the people. Says J.P Rajkhowa, “Sankaradeva broke the barriers of separatism and contributed to the formation of a general Assamese society. What’s more, he brought Assam closer to India by instilling in the minds of the Assamese people, the idea of ‘Indianness.’”  

That Sankaradeva sought to emphasize the linkage of the Assam region with the rest of the country through the *Naam-Dharma* is quite obvious from his literary emphasis. Whether he was the first to do so is worth looking into. The region is geographically isolated from Indian mainland and the population was predominantly mongoloid from across the mountains.

Even if one ignores legendary links like King Bhagadutta of Mahabharata fame, it is said by Chandra Dhar Tripathi in his study that many ancient historical facts can be quoted to prove that Assam was always strongly linked with the mainland. Samudragupta subjugated Kamarupa in 4th century A.D. Bhaskaravarman played an important role in 7th century as one of the four most important rulers of his time along with Harsha, Sasanka

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and Pulakesin. Even epigraphic records of ancient kings like Pusyavarman, Salastamba and BrahmaPala provide ample evidence of Kamarupa having a common culture with rest of India.²

But in 1200 A.D. the picture changed. Foreign (Ahom) invasion took place followed by social, political and commercial isolation. No Indians of Assam were allowed a say in affairs of the Ahom state. Cultural links between Assam and the rest of the country became weak due to the policy of Ahom rulers.

Hence Sankaradeva had to re-establish the link. He made Bhakti as the vehicle for re-integration of Assam with rest of India. Bharat Varsha, he said, is a land coveted by the Gods. One can be born here on the strength of piety acquired through many births.

“This India is the best of all lands. Even the Gods find pleasure in being born here. We do not want a living in the imaginary world of heaven; we would rather die young while living here. To be born in India is like having the nine treasures of Kubera... how virtuous are we that we have had the land we were yearning for day and night.”

so he wrote in the play Anadi-Patana.”³

It was a conscious effort on his part to re-integrate Assam with its vast and glorious heritage. “Sankaradeva in his Sanskrit anthology, ‘Bhakti Ratnakara’, devoted a

complete chapter to nation –building entitled ‘Bharat Varsha-Prasamsa’ (In praise of India).”

“In many places in the biographies of Sankaradeva, there are records of the pan-Indian influences on his thoughts and the philosophies of Advaita sanyasins like Sridhara-svamin and Vishnupuri.

Sankaradeva also consciously adopted Brajabuli as the language of a number of his poetic works. Perhaps he aimed at creating in the people a sense of oneness with rest of India, as Brajabuli was the common language of North India.

Stories about exponents of Bhakti like Kabir, Chaitanya, Hari Vyasa, and Ramananda are found mentioned in the Guru-Charita-Kathas. This book also records that Madhavadeva observed carefully the peculiar ways of life in different parts of India and recounted his experiences to his own people on his return home from pilgrimages.”

Thus Madhavadeva too is known to have promoted the concept of belonging to BharataVarsha. Again, Madhavadeva expresses a similar emotion in his great spiritual anthology ‘Naam-Ghosa’ i.e. the good fortune for being born in India –

*Dhanya Dhanya kali kaala, Dhanya Dhanya Nara tanu bhaala ,Dhanya dhanya Bharata Varsha ……”*

“Glory! Glory! for this Kali- Age!, Glory! Glory! for this human body, Glory!Glory! for this India”

Secularism in Naamghars

Sankaradeva was a staunch believer in Secularism. He admitted into his new religion people from all social castes and even a Muslim, Chandsai, who was a tailor, became his disciple. Lower castes and chandalas (out-castes) also were integrated lovingly into the Naamghar. He did his best to keep his faith aloof from politics of the time. He perhaps knew that if religion mingled with politics, its spiritual sanctity will be lost. If religion is imposed on the people with the help of royal power, it cannot win the hearts of the people. Rulers came and went, their kingdoms perished, but Sankaradeva’s religion endures to this day in the hearts of men, his power survives.

His philosophy was keenly brought to the fore when Koch King Naranarayana, Sankara’s patron king, ardent supporter and dear friend, asked him for initiation into the faith of Ek-Saran-Naam-Dharma. **Sankaradeva gently turned down the King’s request.**

“Had Sankara willed to take royal help for propagating his religion, king Narayana would have acted as King Asoka and King Harshavardhana did for propagating Buddhism”, says B.P. Chaliha. “But Sankara kept his religion away from political order. He did not receive any political gain from his benefactor, King Naranarayana of Koch Behar. In doing so however, his long term gain was that his religion was established in the minds and hearts of the common people. The democratic religion remained pure and unshaken in the teeth of all political storms that swept Assam”.  

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7 Devdas Kakati (ed) *Brahmaputra Bekons*, United Printers Syndicate, Chennai, 1982, p.34
King Naranarayana insisted on being initiated into the new religion. At last Sankaradeva, when he had to accede, fixed a certain day for this purpose. When that day arrived, Sankaradeva lay down and breathed his last, apparently due to a carbuncle.\(^8\)

But it is seen again as per *Katha- Guru-Charit* (verses 1516-21) that he had gladly initiated the Kachari Raja of Herambhapur to *Ek-Saran-Naam-Dharma*. In the second case, the Saint would have sought to introduce the love of God in the wild Kachari tribes through the influence of their King. He carefully avoided using his religion as a political power. **These incidents clarify the purely social motives for formation of his religion.**

**The tribulations of Madhavadeva in Koch-Hajo**

After the death of his Master, Madhavadeva remained in the main Sattra established in Lower Assam (Koch-Hajo). He soon developed a very great following, but life was not made easy by the envious people who were out to discredit him.

He also had to contend with Damodaradeva, who had seceded from the Order and proselytized on his own.

His leading disciple and friend, Narayanadasa, urged him to build a large Naamghar at Tantikuchi, where various music, dance and dramas could be performed. Such showmanship was not recommended by Sankaradeva. Madhavadeva, much against his wish, built a beautiful *Kirtan- Ghar*. It was called *Rang-ghar*. It was a hall decorated and carved by local artisans. The *Katha-Guru- Charits* describe in detail all the elements of this building. (The *Rang-ghar* was burnt down in a fire sometime later. A pillar belonging to this ancient Naamghar is preserved at the State Museum at Guwahati.)

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\(^8\) J. P. Rajkhowa, *op.cit.*, p.238
Tantikuchi soon started reverberating with the sounds of Ankiya-Nats and Naam-kirtans. The envious people reported to King Raghudeva of Kamarupa (Koch-Hajo) that “Madhavadeva had temples built of gold and silver where he enjoyed dances by maidens and embraced them in the open.”

“The King sent an officer with army to investigate. On examination, ‘the gold and silver’ were found to be tin-foil and sand-mica sheets, and dancers were just young lads with coconut shells for breasts! But the Officer was corrupt. He demanded two thousand Rupees and arrested Madhavadeva when he refused to comply. Luckily, Madhavadeva’s disciple saved him, and he was released with honour. Later, the corrupt officers threatened to arrest him again, and he had to go into hiding.”

Finally, he left Kamarupa and reached the capital of King Lakshminarayana in Koch-Behar.”Here, the King and the rich people generously supported the Saint and his disciple monks. The King’s son, mother and nurse all came to him and got initiated into the bhakti-cult. The benevolent King Laxminarayan not only supported him and his monastic disciples but even offered him the position of spiritual head of the kingdom and the King himself requested that he would continue as its temporal head. This, to Madhavadeva, smacked very much like a political post.

Madhava said, “They wish to install me as sovereign over the Bhakats! What a big man they decide to make of me!”

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10Ibid., p.555
11Ibid., p.556
12Ibid., p.562
When the Queen mother sent the royal vehicle for the third time to fetch him, he said “Ah! If go I must, then I must go well”. He went in, dressed himself, and came to the courtyard, where he had his seat, lay down and breathed his last.”

Thus, Madhavadeva too saved his religion and ideologies from political compromise.

**Panegyrics in Praise of the king**

In the Medieval period, we find many historical mentions of tension or disgust amongst the poet-saints working under royal patronage. For example, S. K. Das quotes the poet Harihara who was in the service of Hoysala King as saying—

If the king says ‘come’ one has to present himself

If the king says ‘shut-up’ one has to keep quiet…..

.. From the ignomies of such life, I have freed myself,

For your favour, O Hampai- Siva!

-As he abandoned the Court and took to serving God only.

But Sankaradeva seems to have served God and King without contradiction. There is, of course, no record of the King demanding anything but spiritual work from Sankara, like making of the Textile called Brindabani Vastra, or writing a summary of the Bhagavat.

Sankaradeva did not accede to the king’s request to be initiated, but he acknowledged his great indebtedness for the royal patronage offered by Naranarayana. Even though he worshipped only Krishna, Sankaradeva actually did his patron the singular honour of writing many Raja-Bhatimas (Panegyrics) i.e. Poems in praise of the King Naranarayana (fondly called Malla by his subjects)! He wrote thus in Brajabali language:

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Hasi sabha sada karu bahu thira  
Malla Nrpati sama nahi koyi bira  
Kasi Varanasi, Gauda paryanta  
Malla nrpatika saba mahima kahanta.

(There is no greater hero than King Malla
From Kasi-Benaras upto Gauda,
All praise King Malla)

Sankara’s words were charged with feeling and sincere appreciation of the king’s humanity. It was written on acquaintance with the King Narnarayana, when perhaps, the inhumanity of the cruel Ahom King who beheaded his son-in-law unjustly, was still fresh with him. So the panegyric could also be taken as a comment on the state of affairs in the Ahom kingdom.

The Bhatimas (panagryic) yield other vital clues to an understanding of the political turmoil of the time in the Koch kingdom. For example, in the second Bhatima, mention is made to Koch-Afghan hostilities. His naïve presentation details the sensitive issue without embarrassing the King. Again writing in Brajavali, Sankara says,

Pathan sakala kahe GadaraGhat mari yanu,
Harama, vama hathe rutiya khanu,
Yuddha lagaavali bada tane,
Khedela chedela palaavala prane

( In the second line, reference is to the ignominious act (harama) of the Pathan, i.e. Afghan Sulaiman Karanani who attacked the Koch Kingdom at Gadaraghat, as “Eating bread with left-hand”!! It refers perhaps to the rule ‘to honor right hand over the
left (i.e. to use right hand for honorable purposes and left is reserved for acts which are unclean')\textsuperscript{15}

In another ‘Bhatima’, Sankara praises King Naranarayana (called Malladev ) thus:

\begin{verbatim}
Ja\text{\textit{i}} Jai Malla Nripati Rasa-van,
Jakeri guna-gana nahi\text{\textit{e}} samaan,
Nijkul kumud praka\text{\textit{a}}shaka indu
Gahin, gambhir d\text{\textit{e}}er pekhite Sindhu.
\end{verbatim}
(\textit{Glory! Glory! To King Malla the powerful and cheerful, Whose virtues and fame have no parallel Lotus flower of his Dynasty, shining like the Sun, Dignified, majestic and steady like the Sea!})\textsuperscript{16}

According to clues provided by an 18th century biographer, Sankara’s \textit{Bargit} – “\textit{Narayana kahe bhakti karu tera}” was also addressed to the King. Thus Sankara paid his debt of gratitude to his friend and patron.\textsuperscript{17}

\section*{Formation of schisms or groups}

In 17\textsuperscript{th} century when Sankaradeva passed away, Madhavadeva, acceding to his master’s wishes, succeeded to the vacant spiritual seat of his guru.

According to historical records, the Vaishnava elders in general were in accordance with this move, but not Damodaradeva the leading Brahmin disciple of Sankaradeva. He did

\textsuperscript{17} R. K. Debgoswami (ed), \textit{Op.cit.}, p.275
not relish this appointment and expressed his resentment by not attending his guru’s first annual ceremony.

He was a Brahmin by caste, hence, Sankaradeva, in humility, had asked him to initiate the new disciples. Damodara took it as his right to take the lead. He also continued his brahminical religion - something expressly forbidden by his Master. Finding him unfaithful to Sankaradeva’s works, and taking note of his act of accepting into his fold a few persons whom Madhavadeva had expelled, the latter severed all connections with Damodaradeva.

**First Schism**

Thus in the first year of the pontifical career of Madhavadeva a schism was marked in the Vaishnava order. The split however promoted a hectic proselytizing activity in both the factions.

Both Madhavadeva and Damodaradeva promulgated the new Vaishnava creed by appointing the delegated preachers to administer Saran (initiation) to neophytes in Upper Assam.¹⁸

With the spread of Vaishnavism, Sattra institutions (i.e. monasteries) and the Naamghar institutions (which were for congregational prayers in villages), came into existence.

The Sattras in Upper Assam originating from Madhavadevadeva and his disciples were later called **Mahapurusia Sattras**.¹⁹

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¹⁹ *Ibid, loc. cit.*
And those originating from Damodaradeva with pronounced acceptance of Brahministic rituals, were called **Damodaria Sattras**. They sought and received royal favours. These constitute the most important religious institutions in Assam to this date.\(^{20}\)

The apostles of the Naam-Dharma were very successful. They helped and followed the King’s ministers in organizing the peasants and settling them into villages. Cultivable land grants were made by the Royal decree to each and every adult male in the Valley.

Soon, many villages came up and almost every village in the entire Brahmaputra Valley had its own Naamghar. During the 17\(^{th}\) Century, Sankaradeva’s tenets were adopted by the people throughout Kamarupa (mid-Assam) and upper Assam districts.

The land now came to be divided into **Tini- Rajya** (three entities). “By the time the *KathaGuruCharit* (biographies of the Saints) was written, the *tini- rajya* concept was a *fait-accompli.*”\(^{21}\)

This consisted of:

- The Ahom Kingdom in the East, which in the 16\(^{th}\) century was away from Bhakti Movement ever since the exit of Sankaradeva from there.
- Kaamarupa in the middle region of the valley
- Behar or Koch Behar to the west

These were known as *Tini Rajya*.

It is interesting to note that in spite of the schism between them, the two saints Madhavadeva and Damodaradeva combined to send the same apostle, Vamsigopaladeva,

\(^{20}\) *Ibid,* loc. cit.
\(^{21}\) *Ibid,* p.146.
to spread the faith in the Ahom Kingdom. This saint Vamsigopala and his deputies came to have very large followings.\textsuperscript{22}

### Second Schism

“Sankaradeva’s line of descent ended with his grandsons Puroshottama Thakur and Chaturbhuj Thakur. They were the next generation of Sankaradeva’s family. It appears that the Thakurs, though held in great veneration, lost their importance as they had no pontifical authority. \textbf{The lure of power and authority was too much to ignore}. The simple question ‘Is it Sankaradeva or Madhavadeva who is to be called the Guru of the order?’ drove a wedge between the Thakur family and the head and successor of the important Sattra at Barpeta (Mathuradas Ata).\textsuperscript{23}

The descendants of Sankaradeva’s family staked their claim to the leadership of the Order. Kanaklata, wife of Chaturbhuj Thakur was the leading person to establish a different Order based at the original birth-place of Sankaradeva at Bordowa, Nagaon.

Kanak Lata was a resourceful person. She started a new order (a schism) with Purushottam and Chaturbhuj at the head. She organized the Thakur following into a neat group around the geographical area of Bardowa – the birthplace of Sankaradeva. She amply vindicated the cause of the progeny of the daughters of Sankaradeva who came to be considered as direct line of progeny of Srimanta Sankaradeva and also as a distinct sect within the larger sect.” \textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Ibid}, loc. cit.
\textsuperscript{23} \textit{Ibid}, loc. cit.
\textsuperscript{24} \textit{Ibid}, p.147
Another Schism
Kala Sanghati was not really a schism. Rather it appears from a study that the Gurus of other three Orders would have distanced themselves from these Sattras.

_Guru_ Aniruddhadeva appears was a highly talented person. Due to his large catholicity and democratic outlook (he proselytized in the backward regions of upper Assam), his following increased at a great pace, specially among the tribal populations in the East. Perhaps, they saw the monastery as a way of escape from the burden of the King’s taxes and reprisals.

They did not immediately give up their animistic beliefs or modify their aggressive nature.

Hence, the Sattras established by Anniruddhadeva and his followers came to have a distinct character of their own. They were categorized and much maligned as the Kala Sanghati.

The Mayamara Rebellion, a people’s movement which is really the most important and earth-shaking event in the whole history of Assam, is perhaps a good deal responsible for the malicious propaganda against this sect.

The Vaishnavites of Aniruddhadeva’s following, being mainly of tribal origins, made adequate space for animism in their lives. “Their Guru allowed such mixed beliefs because of which it was very popular among the Mising Tribes”. They were the main targets of Ahom armies during the Mayamaria uprising. They adopted many modifications into their Naamghars to disguise their religious activities and remain hidden from the Ahom armies. This compulsion, combined with their animistic culture,
gave them a different cultural turn and set them apart from the other Brahminical Vaishnavite Satras.\textsuperscript{25}

Many stories have been invented to blacken the name of this sect nick-named as Moamaria (fishermen). The real word ‘Mayamara’ appears in many references:

D. Neog quotes the biography of Annirudhadeva, “Gopaladeva of Bhavanipur (1541 – 1611) bade his disciple Aniruddha to spread the religion. Aniruddha refused to become a preacher as he “was under the control of Maya” But his guru Gopaladeva insisted that if he became a preacher, Maya would be in his control. (Mayamara) He also handed over to his disciple the scripture ‘Kalpataru’ which fell to his hands through Madhavadeva and through Sankaradeva to Madhavadeva. Some people believed this to be a book of Charms.”\textsuperscript{26}

This incident is distorted and quoted as Aniruddha having in his possession a book of magic charms by which perhaps he got such a large following.

Aniruddha wrote a rendering of Chapter five of the Bhagawat which contains an autobiographical account. Chidanandadeva (1825-1880) compiled his biography which is considered authentic as it agrees with Aniruddha’s own autobiographical note.”\textsuperscript{27}

“Also it is not true that he was antagonistic to Sankaradeva. The autobiography clearly shows that Aniruddha’s mother was Sankara’s own uncle’s daughter. And he was barely

\textsuperscript{25} S. K. Borkakoti, \textit{Unique Contributions of Srimanta Sankaradeva in Religion and Culture}, published by Reception Committee, 75\textsuperscript{th} Annual Conf of Sankaradeva Sangha, Nagaon, Assam, 2006, p. 139
\textsuperscript{26} D. Neog, \textit{op.cit.}, p.267
\textsuperscript{27} \textit{Ibid, loc. cit}.
fifteen years old when Sankara died. Also, Aniruddha wrote many songs in imitation of the Borgits of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva showing his great reverence to both Gurus."

Thus the Vaishnavite religion suffered many a crack and crevice throughout its turbulent early history. "The emergence of four subsects (sanghatis) seems to have synchronized with the writing of the Katha-Guru-Charit (where the fact was earliest recorded). The names of only three of these four subsects are inserted in a superscript in the Document."28

Thus it is possible to date the recognition of the divisions or Schisms as they are called.

**Sattras become feudal**

This state of affairs was permanently recognized by the Ahom regime. The Vaishnavas came to be referred in terms of four groups, each called a ‘Sanghati’. This became a matter of much public significance as almost the whole Hindu population of the valley got affiliated to one Vaishnava Sattra or other and Vaishnavism itself became a very much deciding factor in the social and political life of the country. Sattras had gradually formed themselves into different Power-groups:

The Bramha-Sanghati was formed by the followers of Damodaradeva and other Brahmin dissenters. It admitted Brahminical rites along with general bhakti – practices and took a rigid view of caste distinctions. This Sanghati is sometimes colloquially known as Bamuniya. The abbots were (are) Brahmin and leadership (Goswami) became hereditary.

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The Nika Sanghati tried to clear the religion of impure and degenerating practices and adhere to the original tenets formed by Madhavadeva a hundred years ago. It was characterized by its great attention to bodily cleanliness and no importance to Brahminical rites. The monks (Goahains) were celibate, like their Guru Madhavadeva. Leaders were democratically elected.

The Purusa Sanghati comprised the Sattras emanating from Purusottama Thakur, Chatur Bhuj Thakur and Kanak Lata. It claims to have retained the original features of Sankaradeva’s faith. Leadership (Mahantas) was mostly hereditary, but not necessarily Brahmin.

Kala Sanghati originating from Gopaladeva of Bhavanipur and Aniruddhadeva, had some qualities as would render them democratic in character. It maintained a pronounced indifference to Brahmanical rites, adhered rigidly towards central monotheistic doctrine of Sankaradeva and placed absolute faith in adherence to a guru.29

“Though the schisms started as a result of ideological and personal differences among the leaders, it finally made the Sattras an inheritable institution, turning them into a kind of personal and communal inheritable property which the original thinker Sankaradeva would have never dreamt of. This division weakened the old unity and strength of Neo-Vaishnavism. It also created a force within each sect to compete with each other to expand into different parts of the state.”30

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29 Ibid., p.146-147
30 Prof. D. Nath, Satras in Colonial Assam, Indian Council of Historical Research, N. E. Regional Centre, Guwahati, 2007, p. 3.
Royal recognition

Meanwhile, due to fratricidal wars in Koch royal family, the Koch Kingdom was divided in the end of the 16th century into Koch Hajo (in lower Assam) and Koch Behar in far western Assam. This provided good opportunity for the imperialist Mughals to move in and subordinate Western Koch Behar. Ahom rulers meanwhile swallowed Koch Hajo in the east.

Ahom Kingdom now extended after the battle with the Moslems at Saraighat in 1671 A.D., from Sadiya in the East to river Manah and Goalpara in the West.

(See PLATE IV Map-9 -17th century Mussalman and Ahom Kingdoms)

If one asks the question as to “How many Sattras were there in Assam?”, historians would differ in their estimates….According to one estimate, there were more than one thousand at the close of the 17th century of which more than a hundred were in Majuli Island itself: including the grand ones like Auniati, Dakhinpat, Garamur, Kamalabari, Benganaiti and others.

The Kala Sanghati Sattras were confined mainly to Sibsagar and Lakhimpur districts, with Dinjan and Mayamara Sattras exercising the most influence in these ethnic and tribal regions.

The Purusa Sanghati spread in Kamarupa region..

Similarly, Brahma and Nika Sanghati Sattras, including Sattras of Auniati, Dakhinpat and Kamalabari at Majuli had more than ten lakh disciples each. They together controlled more than half the population of the entire State.
The Ahom rulers could ill afford to ignore this state of affairs. A special government department had to be built up under a *Sattriya Phukan* (Official in-charge of Sattras) who maintained a liaison between the capital and the *Goswamis* and *Mahantas*. The Kings became disciples of the Auniaiti Sattra. The successors of at least a few important Goswamis and *Mahantas* had to be recognized by the state and given seats in the Royal Court.

“The *Sattras* of the *Kala Sanghatis* with their ever-expanding following reaching liberally down to what we call today the SC and ST, came to play a vital role in the social life of the people. Two of these in particular, the Mayamara and Silkhattal (Dihing) operated amongst the tribal populations with a vehemence and acquired stupendously large number of disciples even among royal high castes down to Kaivartas (fisherfolk) and non-Hindu tribes.”

Thus these Sattras gained much in people power.

S K Borkakoti defends the Sattras and opines on Sattra power thus - ‘The *Than*’ (original name of a Vaishnavite monastery) was the only island of democracy in the feudal set-up both in the Koch as well as Ahom Kingdoms. But there was no attempt to create a state within a state in this process as wrongly surmised by some scholars.’

‘Democracy inside a *Than* was not a political concept, but a spiritual one. The belief that God resides within all creatures was practiced successfully by all disciples in their lives.’

‘Unfortunately, *Thans*, now wrongly called *Sattras*, had lost that democratic spirit and become feudal organizations. Damodaradeva it was who started the practice of collection

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of taxes from the devotees. **Such a tax was not in the order in the days of Sankara.** It has given some opportunity to leftist writers to accuse Sankara of feudal inclinations’. 32

As the Kings abstained from controlling the power of the Sattras, the influence and power of Sattras increased unabated amongst the people.

According to K.L. Barua “**It was not the widespread adoption of the Vaishnava faith, but the religious organizations called Sattras which no doubt sapped to some extent the authority of the Ahom kings in the 18th century.**” 33

**People Power- Naamghar Institution united people**

The modern concept of the Right to Self Determination evolved only in the 18th century in the west. In the rest of India, it took one century more to evolve. But in the Brahmaputra valley, the teachings of Sankaradeva began to have an impact on the people as early as the 16th century. By the 17th century Naamghars had networked amongst the people and they came to have a common philosophy and a common Assamese culture.

The Vaishnavite Movement thus, in the words of Dimbeswar Neog – “awakened the population and particularly the lower classes, as in the great Elizabethan age in England. They now became indeed self conscious and could not be used as mere tools in the hands

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of those who victimized them earlier. They became aware of their own power in the Kingdoms of God and Man.”

The Naamghar institution had served to open the channel of communication amongst the people. They spoke the same language and had the same culture. Hence, they were united.

This movement encouraged the so-called lower classes and tribal people to aspire for and receive promotion to higher castes. Such people were considered as salvaged (uddhar).

Vaishnava Goswamis continued to proselytize, if not for the sake of religion, for the interest of power over the people.

But this period of growth of people power synchronized with the growth of the Ahom rule. The Ahom power also reached its zenith around the same period, i.e. the reign of Ahom King Rudra Singha.

(See PLATE IV Map-10- Kingdom of Rudra Singha -1714 A.D.)

As Myron Weinard, the well-known political scientist puts it, “Wherever there is power, there must be politics- A law as fundamental in Political Science as supply and demand is in Economics.”

**The rising power of the Ahom Rulers**

The Ahoms, who were people from across the border, had followed their own tribal religion when they first conquered the north-east corner of the valley in 1228 A.D. They perhaps had Tai or Burmese origins. Their priests were called Deodhai, Mahan and

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Bailung. The priests administered the worship of their gods and sometimes advised the monarchs on matters of polity. When Sudangpha (1397-1409 A.D.) ascended the throne, he was known as Bamuniya Raja. As a prince, he was brought up in childhood by a Brahmin in whose house his mother, the queen had taken shelter. This was when, in the words of Maheshvar Neog, that “the thin edge of the Brahminical sword entered the body-politic of life in the Ahom capital.”

King Suhungmung ascended the throne in 1497 A.D. He assumed the Hindu title of ‘Swarga Narayan’. It showed the influence of the Brahmin priests who assigned him with divine status. He was better known as Dihingiya Raja, as he made his capital at Bakata on the river Dihing. His reign had witnessed the spread of Sankaradeva’s Vaishnavism during the saint’s lifetime.

His successor the patricidal Suklenmung was also called Garhgaya Raja (1539 – 1552 A.D.) as he built his capital at Gargaon. His reign was marked with commencement of a series of conflicts with Koch King Naranarayan who was rapidly becoming the most powerful ruler in this part of the country. (Sankaradeva, who faced severe persecution at this time, left the Ahom kingdom for the western Koch kingdom, where King Nar Narayan ruled with wisdom and justice.)

During the reign of Pratap Sinha who died in 1641 A.D. after 38 year rule, a census of the people was taken and where this was not already done, they were divided into Khels and officers appointed to oversee them at Dergaon and Biswanath. But at the instigation of the Brahmins, he subjected the Mahapurusias (Vaishnavites) to much persecution and several of their Gosains (Sattradhikars) were put to death.

King Surampha (1641-1644 A.D.) also called Bhaga Raja, had Nityanandadeva of Mayamara Sattra killed when on the highway he rode in procession on an elephant in pomp and splendor vying with the king himself. The Mayamaras were very angry and restive.

King Udayaditya (1669-1673) became a disciple of Chamuguri Sattra. He fought and drove away the Mughal army from Gauhati. It was the army of Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb led by the Rajput Raja Ram Singh which attacked and were badly defeated by Ahom general Lachit Borphukan.

Since the death of Chakradhar Singha in 1669 A.D., i.e. in a short span of eleven years, no less than seven kings came to power – and, not one of them died a natural death.

It is said that Rajput General Ram Singh who led Aurangzeb’s army gave gifts and introduced Opium to Ahom Kings. This insidious gift is said to have affected the mental conditions of Ahom Royalty. Hereafter, there were terrible rifts in Ahom court which soon started to go into decline.36

The Army of the Mughals, it is recorded by them, were mortally scared of the Black magic practiced in Assam. Hence, they were accompanied by Guru Teg Bahadur, who built a Gurudwar with the help of the Mughal soldiers at the spot in Dhubri where the holy feet of Guru Nanak had touched the earth of Assam 37

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37 Note: The Mughal Army, led by the King Akbar’s trusted general Raja Ram Singh, notwithstanding, Guru Tegh Bahadur also accompanied them. ‘It is said that the army was in mortal fear of previous experiences of black magic in Assam. The army was promised that if they were turned into sheep as they feared, they had their own Guru who would protect them and convert them back to humans’ - information gathered from oral history sources.
In 1679, Dakshinpat Goswami Rambapu disdainfully refused shelter to refugee Prince Gadapani, rightful claimant to the throne.

When, after many vicissitudes Gadapani (Gadhadhar) at last regained the Throne in 1681, he immediately had the Goswamin’s eyes plucked out and ears chopped. Other Goswamis were not very kindly treated, and Udasin Bhakats ‘ specially the KalaSanghati, spending ‘idle’ lives as monks were made to take hoes and baskets and raise a road in Sibsagar. This road still goes by the name of Dodhar Ali- Road of the Sloths.

**Gadhadhar Singh adopted Tantric Hinduism and patronized Brahmin priests. Vaishnavism received a setback when the Brahmin Sattraadhikars were given special privileges in court and non-brahmin Sattradhikars were insulted.**

The Vaishnava sects certainly had reason for dissatisfaction, but there can be no doubt that the power of their priesthood was already becoming excessive and the history of the Mayamaria insurrection in later times proved that was not only it was prejudicial to progress, but may easily become a very serious menace to the safety of the established institutions.

Gadhadhar Singh (1681 – 1696) died and was succeeded by his elder son Rudra Singha (1696 – 1714). Rudra Singha was a powerful king, maintained relations with Bengal, Koch Behar, Manipur etc. He conquered Kamarup and planned more battles to captur the West, but died at the eve of battle.

He tried to contain the Sattra powers by ordering that they make their headquarters on the Majuli Island only, which from that time onwards became their chief seat. The Sattraadhikar of Auniati was specially honoured as the king not only recalled him, from
his exile, but appointed him as his own spiritual preceptor. Although the persecution of the Sudra Mahantas also ceased, he compelled them to wear a distinctive badge on a string round their necks.

Increase of his Hindu proclivities in his old age culminated in his resolve to formally embrace **Tantric Hinduism**.  

It was in his time that listening to the Brahmins, he imported to Assam, **Krishnaram Bhattacharya of Navadvip Bengal** as a person to initiate him. This was to be a politically disastrous move.

**The root cause of ‘breaking the country’** as Maniam Devan the astute politician and political martyr later termed the Bengal Brahmin, was planted in the soil of Assam with vast land grants and titled to the hill of Nilachala, enshrining the Goddess Kamakhya (on which account he came to be known as Parbatia Gohain). The princes and all his noblemen were initiated by him and after winning royal favour, he started importing to Assam his kith and kin, near and distant and within a short time, a major portion of Kamrup district became his estate by royal charter.

The import of alien elements into the religious life of Asam created a hiatus between central political authority and the people at large, and led the country to social and political upheaval with disastrous effects.

Rudra Singh shifted his capital from Gadgaon to Meteka near Sibsagar. The new city was done up with tanks and temples to promote Tantric Hinduism.

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40 *Ibid, loc. cit.*
Ahom king vs. Vaishnava population – 18th Century

It is at this time that the next Ahom Ruler Sivasingha (1714-1744), who had practically the entire Eastern sector under their control, made some very unconsidered political moves which changed the peaceful course of life in Assam.

The Brahmin Pandits brought in from Bengal by Rudra Singha (1619 – 1714) and promoted by his weak successor Siva Singha (1714 – 1744), played political games to drive wedges or cracks between the Brahmin Sattradhikars and Sudra Mahantas in the order. This they did by claiming that initiation to religion by non-Brahmin Gurus was not acceptable --without giving any value to the Ek- Saran -Naam- Dharma tenets set by Sankaradeva himself. This created dissensions amongst the Gurus themselves and undermined their solidarity.

“Some of the Sattradhikars particularly the upper caste sought and received great favours like large land grants, villages and many costly gifts from the Ahom rulers.

Some other Sattradhikars who did not seek such favors and remained aloof (Kala Sanghati Gurus) were troubled greatly by the royalty.

Unfortunately for the Assamese people, the king was very weak.

Siva Singha handed over all powers to his queen Phuleshwari, who was earlier a court dancer, on the advice of the Brahmin ‘astrologers’. (It is not known if there was any politics in this astrology).”

He also proclaimed Tantric Hinduism as the State religion.

41 Ibid, p.150
Queen Phuleswari had Sakta rites conducted with blood sacrifices and the Kala sanghati Vaishnavite Gurus were called and their creed was insulted by anointing their proud foreheads with the blood of the sacrificial animal.

**Causes for Discontent of the population**
A disgust for the royalty sprang up in the Vaishnavite masses for this impudent act.

Sivasingha was succeeded to the throne by three of his brothers Pramatta Singha (1744-1751), Rajeswara Singha (1751-1769) and Lakshmi Singha (1769-1780); and all of them had leaned towards Tantric Hinduism of the Parvatia Gosain. The Ahom nobility dissented this attitude.

There was also the general dissatisfaction amongst the independent tribal people due to the all pervasive system of taxation and punitive, repressive measures. Rather than pay heavy taxes in lieu of the compulsory physical service to the state, they preferred to become slaves under benevolent masters or join the Sattras as monks.

Added to this was a simmering discontent among Ahom princely families, particularly as some princes were deliberately “scarred” so that they were disqualified to ascend the throne. Many Ahom nobles had also become Vaishnavas and persecution of their Gurus disturbed them. Thus the discontent was not restricted to the *Kala sanghati vaishnavites* as generally assumed.

Slowly over a century the bottled anger of the whole population grew. They were spoiling for a fight,

But the people were restrained by their peaceful *gurus*. 
Successive kings for next five decades continued the repressive measures and support of the Parvatiya Gohain’s progeny and disciples etc.

**Net-working through the Naamghars**

The Vaishnavite religion being directly growing out of and touching the life of every Assamese, the clamorous cleavages in the different orders became a matter affecting every Assamese citizen personally. They gathered at the Naamghars to discuss the situation and through networking of Naamghars from the east to the west of Assam along the river-banks, the Vaishnavas soon grew into a tremendous force.

The people also congregated at night in clubs, took vows of brotherly unity, demonstrating the sincerity of purpose by eating and drinking together. (Such clubs, called Ratikhowas are claimed to be still existent.)\(^{42}\) This fact hints at the involvement of non-Vaishnavite tribals. Slowly an underground movement began to take shape.

It is said that the Sattra of Mayamara, and others of the Kala Sanghati had so much gold that it was stored in Baskets.\(^{43}\) The fact that almost all the followers of the Mayamara Gosains lived along the river banks from Sadiya to Manah made for the excellent net-working. It is said that when Astabhuj Thakur gave a call, eight lakh people from the length and breadth of Brahmaputra valley from Sadiya to Manas responded.\(^{44}\)

This together with the money power of the Sattras gave enough confidence to the Mayamaras to raise their banner of revolt against the formidable Ahom King.

They used guerrilla warfare techniques.

\(^{42}\) *Ibid., loc. Cit.*

\(^{43}\) *Ibid., loc. Cit.*

\(^{44}\) *Ibid*, p.151
At the coronation ceremony of Lakshmi Simha, (1769-1780) the Mayamara Mahanta was again insulted and two of the leading disciples, Raghava Neog and Khora Saikiya were publicly flogged on pretext of some fault.

When the Ahom Rulers wrongly insulted the Gurus of the order, particularly the Kala Samhita, the entire population was angry and incensed. The masses had awakened to the cruel reality of political callousness. The great spiritual renaissance begun by Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva and all their dedicated apostles had been extremely successful in achieving its goal of an egalitarian society. All people were living together in self consciousness and self-respect. Then there was great unity amongst the vast population. All offered obeisance to their guru only.

**This great spiritual force of the Assamese people was cruelly diverted in a tragic direction by the scheming Brahmin priests and misguided Ahom rulers.**

“Although the immediate cause was religious persecution of the Vaishnavites, the basic cause of the revolt was economic. At first, it was started by the Marans, but later, it became a truly mass uprising, including all like Kayasthas, Ahoms, Chutiyas, Kacharis etc.”

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**The Mayamara Rebellions**

“The Mayamara Vaishnavas found out their hour to strike, now that the days of the powerful Ahom monarchs had long receded to the past. The Mayamara Sattradhikar had been killed. Gajini Deka, a young man of the Mayamara Mahanta’s family took a test of the strength of the laity by way of building a Namghar at a place called Malau near

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Jorhat. It was found that eight lakh people joined hands in this project. The King smelt a rat and took the Silikhatal Mahanta into closer confidence.\textsuperscript{46}

The Mayamaras marched towards the capital in Saka era 1768. The royal army was completely routed. Lakshmi Simha was captured and the Mayamarias set up a king of their own in spite of the guru’s advice to put a suitable prince on the throne. Raghava Neog took charge as \textit{Barbaruwa}. There were large reprisals, particularly against the other Brahmin Mahantas, even though they were not directly responsible for the happenings.

But Kuranganayani, the beautiful Manipuri princess and queen of Rajeswar Singha, successfully arranged a coup, killed Raghava, and put Lakshmi Simha back on the throne. Now it was the turn of the Mayamara Sattra to be sacked and laid waste and the Mahanta with his family put to death.

Next when Gaurinatha Simha came to the throne in 1707, the \textbf{Mayamaras raised the banner of revolt for a second time}. But this time they lacked cohesion and organization. They were easily crushed by the Ahom king.

\textbf{The King, not very wisely, ordered a general massacre of all Vaishnavas of Mayamara denomination, wherever they were found. In this senseless killing, half the population was destroyed.}

According to Oral accounts, the Naamghars of Upper Assam stopped lighting lamps and playing the Bhot-tal (a cymbal which makes a loud sound) so as the enemy soldiers would not be able to find the Naamghars.

\textsuperscript{46} \textit{Ibid}, p.152
The Mayamaras rose in dissent for a third time. This time they burnt down the palace at Gadgoan. In 1793 the rebels took possession of the country and set up one among them –Bharat Singha- as king.

The Ahom rulers had no standing army. It was only the citizens who were recruited as *paiks* in times of war. But unfortunately, the King went to war with his own subjects.

“Gaurinatha Simha sent a frantic appeal to Lord Cornwallis at Calcutta to send British troops to quell the rebellion. The Mayamara rebellion was suppressed when Captain Welsh came with his troops.

When he left, there were again severe reprisals by Gaurinatha Simha. E. Gait comments that Gaurinath was the ‘most incompetent, blood thirsty, disreputable and cowardly of all the Ahom Kings.’

Capt Welsh had rightly judged Gaurinath’s character.

He had kept Gaurinath as prisoner in his palace under pretext of protection, but unfortunately, he received instructions from the new Governor-General, Sir John Shore, to immediately abandon the support and return to Bengal. Capt Welsh warned that if the British left, there was no reprieve for the people from Gaurinath. But the new Governor-General who took over was adamant in his new policy of non-interference. **It is said that the population at this hour was reduced to three-eighths due to massacre ordered by Gaurinatha.**

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Although the rebellion was suppressed, a general discontent and fear caught the country like a fever. Assam’s cup of misery was filled to the brim.

But more was still to come.

**Burmese invasions**

After a stint of peaceful rule by the Buragohain Purnananda, again feuds amongst the nobility surfaced. The British army was requested to help by the wicked Borgohain Badan Phukan. But the British did not accede. So, the Burmese armies were invited by Badan Phukan. They made terrible incursions. The first time, they were sent back with loads of gifts and an Ahom princess for the Royal harem. Next time, seeing the chaos, they came on their own and finally annexed Assam. They were extremely cruel and lay waste the entire country-side.

“It is impossible to say what would have been the ultimate fate of the hapless Assamese had the British Army not intervened at this stage and ejected the Burmese.” 48 But they lost their independence. The country of Assam, held by the Ahoms for six centuries, even in the face of seventeen massive Moghul attacks, was now slipped easily to the British hands in 1826 A.D”. 49

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A comparison of Mayamara Rebellion with Sikh uprising

Bains and Jain remark in their book on Political Theory that with regard to the use of arms by saints, “Authority in every sphere derives its validity ultimately from God. Christian thinkers say spiritual as well as secular authority is derived from the same source.”

While Guru Gobind Singh favored the use of peaceful means for resolution of conflicts and had even advised the people to be loyal to the sovereign, he also advocated the use of extreme means in order to vindicate one’s own case. This approach is quite evident from the following couplet which is part of a letter which he addressed to Aurangzeb.

When all means have proved ineffective,

It is right then to take up sword.

The unique contribution of Guru Gobind Singh in the realm of politics and society was the remarkable way in which he organized his followers into a militant group so that they could be able to not merely withstand but also counter the oppressive politics of the Government of the day.”

“Guru Nanak preferred the use of method of dialectic to expose the fallacies of the prevalent customs and traditions and won followers thereby. While such a method had its own charm, incidents occurred which were exploited by authority to commit atrocities on the Sikh leaders, and took advantage of the peaceful nature of the Sikh Movement.

Guru Nanak had said he who has a moral cause to fight for, always keeps God in his heart. He was (one of the) the first Indian leader to not only advocate but also practice the

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50 J. S. Bains, R. B. Jain, (ed), Perspectives in Political Theory, Radiant Publishers, New Delhi, 1980, p. 121
principles of equality, fraternity, and democracy. He stood for basing all human activity – political, social, and economic on ethical or spiritual foundations.”

Similarly, Sankaradeva, in his religion, had always promoted a spiritual approach to all human activity. While the Mayamaras were as devoted and religious as the militant Sikhs, the chaos resulting from their rebellions was perhaps due to lack of a spiritual leader and no less, the unjust unwise and cruel policies of the King.

The Treaty of Yandaboo

It was concluded on 24 Feb 1826 between the British and the Burmese aggressors on British territory on the border of Assam, **although Assam itself belonged to neither party.** At this time the Tea-plant was discovered in Assam by Robert Bruce. The British changed their “hands-off” policy and came forward to “help” the Assamese.

The Burmese army was cornered by the British in capital city of Rangpur. The surrender of Rangpur and the ejection of the Burmese terminated the army campaign.

After the Treaty many of the Burmans went back to Burma. Those that were pacifically inclined remained behind. E. Gait notes, “Most of these eventually settled down at Singimari in Goalpara district, where lands were assigned to them for cultivation. Those who had no wives married women of the country……” Their progeny, the Assamese Maans still live in several villages from Phulbari to Rambalapara.

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As E. Gait commented, the ease with which the Burmese had been ejected was no surprise to the officers on the spot, and even before the hostilities, David Scott Agent to the Governor-General for Eastern Frontier, had written to the government that “their (Burmese) expulsion would be a matter of no difficulty, although the unhealthiness of the country would make its permanent occupation by us a matter of regret in some respects.”

In November 1823, the management of the country was entrusted as per E. Gait, to David Scott, who was appointed Agent to the Governor General for the whole of eastern frontier from Cachar and Sylhet in the South to Sikkim in the North.

**Under British Rule**

*(See PLATE IV Map-11 –When British first annexed Assam-1826 A.D.)*

“It was not to be expected that David Scott would be able to affect many reforms in the Brahmaputra Valley. He was most persistent, however in his efforts to correct the worst abuses such as the abolition of slavery but his energies were in main, directed to assessment and collection of revenue.”

The state of anarchy of the Assamese and the lawless conduct of the frontier tribes still afforded plenty of employment for the British troops after evicting the Burmese.

Motok and the country around Sadiya were excluded from the direct administrative control of the Agent to the Governor General. This area was inhabited by the Mayamara Sect (who were still fiercely militant). Their chief, the Bar Senapati, had protected his

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55 *Ibid.*, (letter no 1 dt 14.11.1823 from Sec. Govt. of India to D Scott), p.276
56 *Ibid.*, (Dispatch to court of Directors dt. 20.7.1823), p. 272
83 people during the Burmese occupations from the Burmese as well as from the raids of the Singphos who harried other parts of Assam during troubled times.

Similarly, the Khamtis a fierce tribe, who occupied Sadiya were left alone under jurisdiction of their own chief. It was the British policy to impede any further Burmese invasions by settlement of friendly war-like tribes along the route which they would have to follow.  

The introduction of peace and a settled Government soon led to a marked improvement according to E.Gait, in the condition of the cultivating classes, which was described a few years later, by the British, as one of “great comfort both as regards living and clothing”.

In 1836, the British took over the region of Upper Assam from Ahom King Purander Singh. It was at this time that the Assamese culture was dealt a cruel blow of having their own language replaced by Bengalee in the Courts and also in the schools established by the British.

Said D. Neog, “the far-reaching negative impact of a foreign tongue that retarded the progress and growth of the Assamese language and literature, unfortunately still remains.”

A.J. Moffat Mills wrote in a report, “We are constrained with regret to acknowledge that education in the country under the Govt. of England is in a retrograde state.”

The Assamese population were reluctant to go to these Bengalee schools.

57 Ibid., p. 293
“That the schools have not done more good is attributable to the substitution of Bengalee for the vernacular Assamese” was admitted in the A J Moffat-Mills Report.

American Baptist Missionaries who had come to Assam saw the problem. It was due to the efforts of the Missionaries that text books, Grammer, Dictionaries etc were brought out in the Assamese language for the schools. (Lack of text-books in Assamese was the main reason cited by Bengalee officials in recommending the change of Court language.) The American Baptists also published the first Assamese journal, a monthly called ORUNODAI.

Finally as a fruit of all their earnest efforts, Assamese was reinstated as the language of courts and medium of instruction in schools, but only in 1873 after 56 years.

Amidst all these efforts to reinstate the culture of Assam, the Auniati Sattradhikar and some other leading Vaishnavite Gurus stand out for supporting the British policies. “They promoted Bengali language, composed verses in Bengali and even advised disciples to do the same. They adopted the title’Goswami’ which is after all a Bengali title.” 60

But later, there emerged a second phase wherein the Sattradhikars wrote plays in Assamese for the people for the first time. It is noted by D. Nath that”In totality, however, the Sattra contributed significantly, maybe in later stages of the movement, towards the growth of the Assamese as a major language in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” 61

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Thus the nineteenth century marked the third phase of development of Assamese culture under totally changed circumstances to the one in the 16\textsuperscript{th} to 18\textsuperscript{th} centuries.

**Political re-distribution and its Cultural implications**
(See PLATE IV Map-12 – Under the Chief Commissioner-1874 A.D.)

Politically, Assam was cut and trimmed by the British to just a fraction of her former self. “Districts such as Rungpur, Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri which formed a cultural whole with the rest of Assam, were cut piece- meal and redistributed for convenience of British Rulers. Assam was robbed of Cooch- Behar, the thrice sacred Jerusalem, hallowed with the graves of Sankaradeva, Madhavadeva, Damodaradeva, King Naranarayana and Chilarai.”\textsuperscript{62}

**Koch Behar was unfortunate.**

Srimanta Sankaradeva had developed the Assamese Culture in Koch Behar. It had spread to Mythila, Orissa and Newar in his life-time. But Koch Behar and Goalpara were annexed by the Afghans of Bengal in the 16th cent. leading to a spread of Islam. There was a gap between Koch and Assam. At this time Chaitanyadeva’s Vaishnavism made inroads into Goalpara. Also Damodaradeva’s disciples disowned Sankaradeva and moved away. Also, a powerful ‘Shakta’ culture pre-existed in the region. Thus very soon, Sankari culture was lost to the very region of its origin. Modern historians have reversed the equations and talk about Brajawali as originating in Mythili, Newari, Oriya and Bengali.

**Koch –Behar was annexed to Bengal. It became ‘Cooch-Bihar’.** Even after independence from the British, Koch-Behar was not returned to Assam. “Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel came under the influence of Chief minister of West Bengal, Shri B C

Roy and West Bengal PCC Chief, Atulya Ghosh. As a consequence of this undue influence and internal politics, the state of Koch Behar was unilaterally annexed to West Bengal in January 1st, 1950”. ⁶³. Even today, the ethnic culture of Cooch-Behar is gasping for life under Bengalee cultural domination. “It is an up-hill task to unite the people under a common ethos of cultural heritage and tradition”. ⁶⁴

Although the British in 19th cent. put Goalpara back into Assam, it had lost precious time of influence for Sankara’s Vaishnavism and remains to this day, a different culture from the rest of Assam and even from neighbouring Barpeta. The remainder of the broken Koch Kingdom had been already annexed by the Ahoms, and hence became part of Assam.

**Thus, only Barpeta the original seat of Sankaradeva’s Order had an unbroken continuity of Vaishnavism from Sankaradeva’s time to the present day.** It was too far from Ahom capital to be affected by the Mayamaria rebellions and Burmese atrocities which tore through Upper Assam. For this reason, the purer and undiluted Sankari culture of the Barpeta Sattra adherents differs much from the Vaishnavism developed in Upper Assam by mixing with the Brahminical Hinduism on one side and ethnic tribal elements on the other.

With lost self-confidence, lost cultural heritage, and frightened out of their wits with the inhuman tortures inflicted on them from all sides, the Assamese of the 19th century as a people were enfeebled and deprived. The people were dispersed into surrounding areas.

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leaving their original homes. They were also greatly reduced in numbers due to genocide, epidemics, and famines which affected them one after the other.

But there was one outstanding cultural trait which made them unique in the population of Bharata varsha. The common Assamese was the owner of his own plot of land, and with the lifting of the Ahom rule, they were no longer slaves of the State. They were free to till their land and grow their crops.

But this trait was not to their advantage. The British were at a loss to understand the reluctance of the farmer to turn laborer even when paid a lucrative amount as wages, an amount which he could not earn in a year on his farm.

Thus, it opened the way for the British to bring in labor from other parts of India on a rather massive scale for tea-gardens, roads, railways, cultivation of waste-lands and other works. Such large scale influx of alien populations had far-reaching impacts on demography and also the cultural identity of the Assamese.

**Reaction to British Raj**

The Assamese people had looked upon the British as their benefactors who saved them from the terrible atrocities being committed by the Maans (Burmese). “It dawned much later on the people that the Raj had come to stay. Its purpose was to turn Assam into an agricultural estate of tea-drinking Britons and to transform local traditional institutions in such a manner as to suit the colonial pattern of exploitation.”

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65 Amalendu Guha, *Planters Raj to Swaraj*, ICHR, People’s publishing House, New Delhi, 1977, p.8
“The traditional popular institution of Raij Mel (public gathering) was resorted to by the people to resist the enhancement of land revenues which took place periodically. There was deficiency of currency supply and extremely limited facilities for marketing farm products. Thus the British policy of extracting revenue in cash from the peasants caused great hardship and resentment.”

“Opium was the only agri-product which peasants could sell for cash. The British banned the cultivation and sale of opium—not for humanitarian considerations but for the revenue considerations.”

Tea and Opium in the Politics of Assam

A background

‘By the end of 1680’s, tea-drinking was becoming popular in aristocracy of Europe.

The European Tea traders and suppliers had to purchase Tea from China paying a very high price.

In 1823, Robert Bruce discovered and reported the finding of tea-bushes in Upper Assam. Immediately, the British resolved to change its hands-off attitude to the suffering Assamese populations.

The Burmese intruders were driven out and Assam was annexed. Then systematic exploitation of the land for production of tea began.

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66 Ibid. p. 9

67 Ibid., loc. Cit.
The growing of Opium or Poppy seeds was already prevalent in Assam, perhaps due to contact of Central Indian soldiers of the Mughal army. It was called ‘Kani’ and given as a black paste on a piece of cloth. The Ahom Royalty and also the Koch Royalty were the earliest to fall victim to this debilitating addiction which ruined both the powerful dynasties.

(Refer Note on “Tea and Opium” at the end of this Chapter.)

**Growth of Tea-Industry**

ASSAM TEA had a big role to play in this political game of Tea and Opium by the British tea-planters. After the discovery of Tea-plants in Upper Assam, British lost no time to establish the plantations. Large tracts of Assam were exploited and cultivated by the British for Tea. The Assamese were not allowed to own gardens or participate in the revenue at any stage. The tea variety of Assam was found to be very hardy and hence it was planted in precedence to Chinese tea or Darjeeling tea by British colonists in Ceylon, Java and later, in Africa.

‘In 1852, at the Great Exhibition in London, promoted by Prince Albert, Assam Tea was proudly displayed!’

Assamese peasants had by now, unfortunately become victims of opium- addiction. In the name of Reform, the British gained control of the growing and trading of opium which was the only means of obtaining cash crop for Assamese peasants.

‘British were known to have given opium as wages to labours on the railroad construction sites and they gave opium to the hostile tribal populations in the hills. The construction of 2100km long Ledo road from Burma to Kunming, Yunan, China during World War II

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went across Assam. The labour was paid partly in opium. British also used Assam opium to recruit Kachin tribals of Burma to fight the Japanese during the War.169 ‘The Pathan contractors appointed to supply opium to the labourers in World War II had their final Waterloo at the hands of Shillong Customs as late as1987.’70

Opium and its derivatives morphine, heroin etc., although removed from Assam has played and continues to play havoc all over the world.

‘Abolition’ of slavery by the British
The British abolished slavery in 1843. In earlier days people would voluntarily sell themselves as slaves in the market. In this period, almost 5% to 9% of the population appears to have been slaves, and a considerable number worked on agricultural farms.

Even though they lacked social status, such slaves were not ill-treated. By giving them freedom, the social and economic condition of the erstwhile slaves did not greatly improve. “The bulk of them emerged as poor tenants. They did not opt for employment in tea gardens or as wage laborers in villages. Slavery was so deep-rooted that it took decades to die out. Also the practice of mortgaging labor to a creditor as a means of settling one’s debt never quite died out.”71

The Condition of the aristocracy, on the other hand, seriously deteriorated. Deprived of their slaves, the services of “likshaws” and “paiks”, and being no longer able to cultivate their lands, they had to be content themselves with small appointments under the British or sink to the level of ordinary cultivator.

69 Ibid., p.11
70 Internet- http://assamteaexchange.com/abouttea/history.asp.
Thus by this ‘reform’, the Assamese people were not done any favor. The opposite is proved by the horrific facts which followed growth of Tea-Industry in Assam:

When the British tea-planter required cheap labor, there was not enough man-power in Assam. They have brought in tribal people of Central India in vast numbers. These hapless innocent people were transported in sub-human ways which resulted in 10% deaths before they even reached their destinations in Upper Assam. Even if they survived this ordeal, the life and conditions of the laborers in the tea-gardens was worse than the slavery which the British claimed to have abolished. Further, movement of vast numbers of non-ethnic people into Assam created so much demographic imbalance that Assam has not since been able to integrate itself into a nation again.

The Relations of the Sattras and the British
The British realized that the Sattradhikars exercised a tremendous influence over the entire population of the region. The Pontiff of a royal Sattra was almost like an incarnation of God for the devotees. So whatever the Guru said was well spoken and whatever was done in the Sattra was well done according to them.

D. Nath says, “There is no doubt that the shrewd British officers planned to exploit the influence and power of the Sattras on behalf of the British Government by convincing the Sattradhikars that allegiance to the Ahom Kings would no longer serve them and they can now retain their wealth and position only if the British Government approves of it. It is on record that the Sattradhikar of Auniati met Jenkins in Gauhati and pleaded for retention of his land grants. Many others also did so”. 72

72 Prof. D. Nath, Satras in Colonial Assam: Their Response to Emerging Socio-Political Issues, Lecture series Publications of ICHR, North-East Regional Centre, Guwahati, 2007, p. 36
The British renewed all their land grants permanently. In exchange, whenever a campaign was sent to suppress some rebellion, the Sattradhikars helped the British Govt. with elephants, manpower, boats and provisions.\textsuperscript{73} They supported all the policies of the British like imposing Bengali language, not condemning opium-eating, increase in land revenue and many of their anti-people policies. Fight for Freedom from British Rule was not supported.

Except for one Sattradhikar, almost all of them toed the British line. This Sattradhikar’s Sattra lost all land grants and he himself was even sent to prison for defying the British Rule.

In summation, it can be said that the Sattras tried their best to retain their feudal powers, medieval values and institutions, notwithstanding the 19\textsuperscript{th} century reform movements. They even opposed modern education. As a result, they appear to have failed to positively impact the society which they governed and over which they had the power to act.

The Ahom Kings, on the other hand, also failed in three ways-

1. to contain the growing parallel power of the Sattradhikars

2. to rule justly and fairly and

3. to have a commitment to support the religion of the people. Hence they went on a collusion course with their own people

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., p. 37
Note on Tea & Opium:

In 1773, East India Company established Tea-trade with China. The British smuggled in opium into China as payment for the Chinese tea. That way, the Chinese were addicted and supply of tea at cheap cost was assured to the British. The Chinese Rulers tried to ban the trade in Opium, for which the OPIUM WARS were fought in 1839 and 1856 and both won by the British. The Chinese had to pay very high amnesty to buy back their cities and also had to give away Hong-Kong to the British.

The British also acquired North Burma, region of Shan tribes where Opium was heavily grown.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Internet.: http://assamteaexchange.com/abouttea/history.asp