The period of fifteenth and sixteenth centuries marks a great epoch in the history of Assam. This period saw a surging wave of reformation and renaissance swept over the eastern part of India revolutionising the society. This wave touched all aspects of life — social, cultural and religious bringing about considerable changes in man's outlook on life and mode of worship.

The guiding personality of this religious revolution was Saṅkaradeva, a kayastha by caste. He was born in 1449 A.D., at Alipukhuri near Bardowa in the district of Nagaon, Assam. He was thoroughly educated in Medieval Sanskrit lore and he settled down as a householder. But after the death of his first wife, he went out on a long pilgrimage of twelve years and visited almost all the sacred places of India. Having returned from pilgrimage he propagated a new faith of Vaisnavism.¹

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¹ Kakati, B.: The Mother Goddess Kāmākhyā, p. 72
Cantlie, A.: The Assamese, p. 152
Some form of Vaisnavism was already flourishing in India. A new form was given by Śaṅkaradeva characteristic to the north-east India. Śaṅkaradeva's faith came to be known as neo-Vaisnavism.

Śaṅkaradeva taught a simple creed which is called Ekāsarana nāmadharma, the religion of supreme surrender to One, and that One is Kṛṣṇa-Visnu, who in the form of Nārāyaṇa, assumes incarnations from age to age to redeem the world and to grace His devotees. The most favourite incarnation in which Visnu is to be worshipped is that of Kṛṣṇa. The mode of this nāmadharma is simple which consists in the performance of nāma, the calling out or singing the acts of the Lord and listening to His glory. The faith propagated by Śaṅkaradeva is based on these two aspects. That is why it is called nāmadharma.

For an ekaśaraniya or one who follows the nāmadharma, the surrender to one is very strictly imposed. The worship of other gods and goddesses is very strictly forbidden. It has been said by Śaṅkaradeva himself that, "a Vaiṣṇavite should

2. Neog, M.: Socio Political Events in Assam lending to the Militancy of the Māyāmariya Vaiṣṇavas, p. 5
not worship any other god except Viṣṇu, he should not enter into any other god's temple, nor should he partake of the offerings made to any other god. In so doing Bhakti would be vitiated."

The central texts of the Vaiṣṇavism of Assam are the Bhāgavatagītā and the Bhāgavata Purāṇa which have been rendered into Assamese verse and prose by Śaṅkaradeva himself and by his followers. Idol worship does not have any prominence in the ekāśaraṇa system. In performing all religious ceremonies, the Assamese version of the Bhāgavata is placed on a pedestalled tray and all offerings are paid to it as to the Lord. In the Vaiṣṇavite shrines also a sacred book particularly the Assamese version of the Bhāgavata is always placed on an altar.

Amongst all the founders of religious sects in India, even among his contemporaries, Śaṅkaradeva has enjoyed the unique honorific title - Mahāpurusa. Hence Śaṅkara's

3. Kakati, B.: op.cit., p. 73
4. Different saints in India have different honorific titles. Caitanya is called Mahāprabhu, the saints of Sikhism are called Gurus, Tulsīdāsa is called Goswāmī and so on.
Vaiṣṇavism is also popularly known as Mahāpurusīya.

It was a characteristic of the new faith that the literature, the verses for recitation in prayers individually or in congregation were all in the local Assamese language and therefore it could make a wide appeal both to the men-folk and the womenfolk. Vaiṣṇavism of Śaṅkaradeva was catholic in its outlook and even the tribal people who followed their traditional faith, were drawn to it. Moreover, the ideals of a clean and simple way of living that the Vaiṣṇavite ideals taught became other sources of attraction to the villagefolk. The new faith thus went down to the very base of the society and became the religion of the people, not of the elite alone.

Holding of general religious discourses was the mode of spreading the faith among the people. By way of providing accommodation for such religion Śaṅkaradeva gave rise to nāmgār or kirtangār, the village level institution and the central institutions called satras. Those in the course of

5. Kakati, B.: op.cit., p. 78
7. The term satra here indicates the meaning of devagrha but not the systematised institution.
time, have undergone a number of changes in its structural as well as organisational aspects and have come out to be the cultural centres of the Assamese society. "To the Assamese the distinctive features of their culture are inseparably connected with their religious institutions." 8

Religious condition:

During the time of emergence of the neo-Vaisnavism in Assam there prevailed some sort of social and religious disharmony. People were believers in diverse religious faiths, prominent among them were Saivism and Saktism.

Saivism:

The worship of Śiva, the tutelary god of ancient kings of Kamarupa from the seventh to the twelfth centuries, was prevalent in Assam. During the reign of the Koch kings (sixteenth century A.D.) Saivism came to prominence. It is said that Saṅkaradeva, the founder of the neo-Vaiṣṇavism in Assam, was so named because his father secured the birth of

a son in him by propitiating Śiva. Śaivism was also a popular religion during the rule of the Ahoms. Most of the prominent temples for the worship of Śiva came to be constructed specifically during the later part of the Ahom period. 

Śaktism:

Śaktism was a dominant faith in ancient and medieval Assam upto the advent of neo-Vaiśnavism. Adoption of Śākta Hinduism by the Ahom kings and their nobles introduced a new factor in the social and political life of the people. The kings cherished the ambition of becoming devout Śākta worshippers, spent more time in religious observances, patronised Brahmanas, made endowments, erected temples, became direct and indirect propagandists of Śaktism. It is a historical fact that the ancestors of both Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva, the fountainheads of the neo-Vaiśnavism of Assam were Śāktas. Śaṅkaradeva's forefathers also bore Śākta names (Candibara).

10. Ibid, p. 289
Madhavadeva himself also was a Sākta and he offered arguments in favour of Saktism when he first met Śaṅkaradeva at Dhuwahat (in Majuli) in Jorhat district of Assam.

In the Western Assam the Koch kings patronised Śaṅka Hinduis. In 1565 A.D. Naranarayana (1534-1587 A.D.) rebuilt the Kamakhya temple with bricks and made grants of land for the maintenance of the shrine.

Saktism was the state religion, but Vaisnavism was more than tolerant and great honour was paid to Śaṅkaradeva by king Naranarayana and his brother Cilaraya, the General of the Koch kingdom during the reign of king Naranarayana.11

Socio-political condition:

Prior to the advent of neo-Vaisnavism in Assam the ancient kingdom of Kamarupa was slowly undergoing a process of disintegration. Small independent kingdoms grew on all sides of the Ahom principality (comprising the modern districts of Sibsagar and parts of Lakhimpur districts) ruled by the Chutiyas, the Kacharis, the Bhuyans (both Brahmin and

11. Acharya, N.N. : The History of Medieval Assam, p. 205
and non-Brahmin including the Kayasthas and Kalitas). The western part of Assam comprising the modern districts of Kamrup, Goalpara and parts of Cooch Behar (during fourteenth and fifteenth centuries A.D.) was known as Kamatarajya which also witnessed the rise and fall of several dynasties to and from the royal power. The dominant among such powers were the Koches under the leadership of Visvasimha by the end of the fifteenth century A.D. He was succeeded by his eldest son Malladeva or Naranarayan to the throne. During his reign "people enjoyed great prosperity, while Naranarayana gave such encouragements to religions that he became known as the "pious king."*

When neo-Vaiśnavite faith emerged and flourished in Assam, the Ahom and Koch kings in the eastern and western parts of Assam who patronised such an emergence were as under:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ahom kings</th>
<th>Koch kings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Suhuṅgmuṅg (1497-1539 A.D.)</td>
<td>Biśvasimha (1515-1533 A.D.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sukleṅgmuṅg (1539-1552 A.D.)</td>
<td>Naranārāyana (1534-1581 A.D.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sukhāṁphā (1552-1611 A.D.)</td>
<td>Laksminārāyana (1587-1627 A.D.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

12. Sarma, S.N. : op.cit., p. 3
Under such a situation in the political and the religious fields, to bring these diverse beliefs and practices into a common fold with a simple mode of worship, accessible to all, was the need of the hour. In such a time neo-Vaishnavism came like a cleansing storm.

Origin of the **satra** institution:

The **satra** as a neo-Vaishnavite religious institution is nearly five centuries old. Throughout such a long course of history, it is probable that the institution has faced many changes in its development and extension. During such a long time the **satra** institution has multiplied in number and it has become a characteristic of Assamese society and culture.14

The present day Assamese Vaishnava **satra** consists of a large assembly hall or prayer hall called **nâmgâr**, sometimes called **kîrtaânhâr** (as in lower Assam) supported by two rows of pillars. Traditionally the pillars were made of wood and the roof covered with thatch, but now-a-days **nâmgârs** are

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14. An exhaustive list of three hundred and eighty satras under different sects with the names of their founders and approximate time of their foundation is given by S.N. Sarma in his book Neo-Vaishnavite Movement and the **satra** Institution of Assam. An estimate of six hundred and fifty satras is given in A. Cantlie's book, The Assamese.
usually built of bricks and corrugated iron sheets roofs. These more permanent structures withstand the storms and also carry greater prestige. It is the centre of all religious activities of a satra. It serves as a prayer hall as well as the seat of all meetings and discussions. The eastern end of this hall opens into the manikuta (house of jewels, i.e., supreme one) where the sacred book representing Krsna is placed on a multi-tiered wooden throne (thāpanā) and the satra-images and other paraphernalia are kept. Sometimes the whole thing is also referred to as Kīrtanghar. All these constituent structures are surrounded by a wall according to the length of the main prayer hall (as in Barpeta and Sundaridiyā) with openings or gates, but sometimes they are without the compound wall (as in Pāthausi Satra near Barpeta, one of the earliest satras of Saṅkaradeva line). The enclosure also includes rows of huts or spacious houses at the sides divided into a number of rooms for the accommodation of the resident monks or celibate devotees (Kevaliyā bhakat) who have renounced the world. In satras where the tradition of celibate monks is current such

15. Cantlie, A.: op. cit., p. 161
as Āuniāti, Kamalābāri, Dakṣinpāt, Kuruwābāhī and so on situated in Majuli.  

Such structural features of satra evoke a comparison with other religious institutions as Buddhist vihāras, where there is also a provision for residences of monks. Whatever be the similarities or influences of such institutions, the neo-Vaiṣṇava establishments of Assam have got the characteristics of their own. It is generally observed that the word satra is used in the common parlance, which is a corrupt form of the Sanskrit word sattra.  

Origin of the term satra:

If we look into the history of the term satra we see that it is as old as the Vedic age. The uses of the word are also found in Sanskrit literature in the sense of a sacrificial session lasting from a few days to a year or more. The idea

16. Majuli is the biggest river island of the world which is situated in the midst of the river Brahmaputra, having an assemblage of a number of prominent satras.


that the word carries in Assam, was taken from the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* where it is stated that at a place called Nāmiśa Kṣetra a great number of sages assembled to perform a long session of sacrifice of a thousand years duration called *satra*. It is narrated that in such a sacrificial session one sage Sūta Ugrasravā recited and explained the entire *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* to the assembled sages. In analogy to such a session of reciting and listening to the exposition of the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* most probably gave currency to the word *satra* in Assam Vaiṣṇavism. That nomenclature was possibly applied to mean an assembly of devotees in a religious sitting where the divine sports of Viṣṇu or Kṛṣṇa were discussed.

It is probable that Saṅkaradeva initiated the movement by reciting and expounding stories from the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* to a band of followers who gathered round him to listen to such religious discourses.

20. Sarma, S.N. : *op.cit.* , p. 103
   Neog, M. : *Saṅkaradeva and His Times*, p. 311
Stages of evolution of the satra institution:

The early stage of the satra institution can be traced back to the days of Saṅkaradeva. The beginning of such an institution was characterised with the formation of a religious sitting around him. There are references that in those days the daily sittings of the monks and other lay disciples were held sometimes in the open or under the shades of trees. Such a gathering, (in the open air) probably formed the beginning of the satra. But during the time of Saṅkaradeva the satra did not have all the features of a permanent institution. Naturally such regular sitting necessitated the construction of a shed which in the course of time became a prayer hall or a Kirtanghar. The satra at this stage was referred as deva grha or deva mandira. The absence of the office of the Satradhikāra (Head of the satra) during the time of Saṅkaradeva indicates that existing formal type of organisational structure of satra is of later period. There was also

no regular source of income at that time. As there is no reference relating to the existence of carihāti (four rows of residential huts around the namghar and mānikūṭ) in the preliminary stage of its growth, it is assumed that management of satra with the help of the resident devotees is a later phenomenon. Management at that time simple, self sufficiency in terms of economy had hardly developed.

With the passage of time the word received the extended meaning and the notion of a satra came to include besides the Kīrtanghar where prayer meetings were regularly held, a separate house called bhājghar or mānikūṭ when the system of installing an idol or its replica or of a sacred book came into vogue. The satra institution thus continued to develop and became full-fledged with the Kīrtanghar, the bhājghar or the manikūta and the residences of the monks who stay cloistered together. It may be noted that the earliest face of the satra institution initiated by Saṅkaradeva got its second stage of evolution during the time of Dāmodaradeva, the founder of the Brahmasamhātis and Saṅkaradeva's chief apostle Mādhava-deva. They constructed their own satras on a definite plan.
with respect to its management and economy. Through the creation of the posts of Rajmedhi, Barmedhi, Medhi, Pācani, etc., the contact between disciples of far-flung villages and the Adhikāra were maintained. Their duties were to keep a watchful eye on the religious life of people under his care and to maintain a regular and close connection between disciples and the satra through various forms of religious intercourse.  

The final phase of growth of the satra may be attributed to the extension of royal patronage to the important satras by the Ahom kings at Majuli and other place. Land grants free of any charges and certain number of persons to act as pāiks (persons engaged to render definite services) were placed at the disposal of certain satras. This kind of royal patronage raised many satras to a sound economic footing. Patbausi and Baikunthapur satras of Dāmodaradeva deserve due credit for having been the first in respect of distinct physical structure. It is said that Nārāyan Das Thākur Ātā, an old

colleague and disciple of Sāṅkaradeva advised Mādhavadeva to plan and build a satra at Barpeta on the model of Dāmodara's satra. Though Mādhavadeva at first showed disinclination towards that suggestion but later on deemed it necessary to reconstruct Barpeta Satra in a planned and attractive manner. Under the guidance of these two religious leaders, who were celibates, the satra institution took a monastic turn. There were hundred and twenty celibate devotees on the campus of Barpeta Satra during the time of Mādhavadeva. Thus the increasing number of celibate devotees belonging to different castes and communities within the satra campus may indicate a mode of living where a bond of fellowship grows.

One of the important features of the satra at this stage was the attainment of self-sufficiency in respect of economy. With the introduction of the system of gurukar (fee to the

26. Sarma, B.N. : Auniāti Satrar Buraṇji, p. 27
        Neog, M. (ed.) : Gurucaritkathā, p. 158
        Sarma, S.N. : op.cit., p. 106
Guru) by Mādhavadeva\textsuperscript{29} and sidhā-bhojanī, the institution, for the first time came to be associated with a regular source of income. The gurukar is a direct type of tax imposed by the satra on its disciples. The sidhā-bhojanī is an indirect type of tax, i.e., every householder disciple had to contribute foodstuff to the satra according to his capacity whenever he visited the satra. These organisational measures gave rise to the development of the department of finance in the satra with definite sets of office bearers. This also led to an economic interaction between satra and its disciples of farflung villages leading to the emergence of a similar type of functionaries in village nāmghars. Allocations of functions specially in respect of songs, dance, i.e., music, artifacts and so on were made on the basis of performance.\textsuperscript{30}

The first satra according to the source material, is Vatadrava in the present district of Nagaon, where Śaṅkaradeva

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{29} Lekharu U.C.(ed.): \textit{op.cit.}, p. 357
\item \textsuperscript{30} Neog, M.(ed.): \textit{op.cit.}, p. 160
\end{itemize}
after his return from first pilgrimage, used to convert his school mates, sworn comrades, some of his family members and his school masters. Vatadrava, as satra, did not have the structure of a permanent institution and it ceased to exist for more than a hundred years after Saṅkaradeva's departure from Vatadrava to Pātbausi via Gāṅgmo (north bank of the Brahmaputrad) and Dhuwāḥāt (Majuli). The importance of Vatadrava as a sacred place came to be recognised towards the middle of the 17th century after the discovery of Vatadrava by Saṅkaradeva's daughter-in-law Kanaklata.31

Saṅkaradeva after leaving Vatadrava, with his relatives and faithful followers used to settle at different places and finally settled at Pātbausī (Kamrup, now Barpeta) when religious and cultural restoration gathered momentum. The principal apostles of Saṅkaradeva during his stay at Pātbausi were Mādhavadeva, Dāmodaradeva, Harideva and Nārāyan Dās (Thākur Ātā). Very near to Saṅkaradeva's abode, Dāmodaradeva, for

Goswami, K.D. : Satra Saṅskritir Ruprekhā, p. 11
the first time, established his Patbāusi satra during the period 1560-1590 A.D. and Mādhavadeva built his Barpeta satra in 1583 A.D. The first satra established by Harideva during the period 1560-1580 A.D. was Māneri (Kamrup). Therefore the early satras of Assam are situated within the Koch kingdom. The establishment of early satras in Koch kingdom indicated that the Koch monarchs of both eastern and western Assam (Kamrup) took a sympathetic attitude towards Vaiṣṇavā saints.

The role of Madhavadeva in the growth of satra was of far reaching significance. Being the successor of Śaṅkaradeva, Mādhavadeva appointed a number of apostles for preaching neo-Vaiṣṇava ideals among the village folk. Out of the 12 apostles appointed by him the contributions of Vaiśīgopāladeva (initiated by Dāmodaradeva), Gopaladeva and Padma Ātā in respect of creating a Vaiṣṇavite atmosphere in eastern Assam appear to be noteworthy.

The man who felt the necessity of extending the satra-Vaiṣṇavism through organisational effort in Śaṅkaradeva's own line of descent was Puruṣottama Thakur (1561-1619 A.D.),
the eldest grandson of Šaṅkaradeva. His first satra was Jania, about 10 Kms away from Barpeta. Here he selected 12 disciples (6 Brahmins and 6 non-Brahmins) to establish satras in different parts of Assam in order to propagate Šaṅkaradeva's faith. Following his elder brother Purusottama Thakur, Chaturbhuj Thakur (son of Haricaran, Purusottama's own uncle) also appointed 12 disciples. After the demise of Chaturbhuj Thakur (1648-A.D.) his first wife Kanaklata acted as a religious head and appointed 12 apostles. It was for the first time in the history of Assam that a woman played an active role in the establishment of satras.

Divisions in the Vaiśnava sect of Assam and Extension of satra

It is perhaps the nature of religious orders to get divided. The Vaiśnava order of Assam also underwent the schisms. After the death of Šaṅkaradeva the orthodox Mahāpuruṣīyā cult had undergone changes which resulted in distinct four sāṃhātis, (association or group) viz., Brahma, Kāla, Puruṣa and Nikā or

32. Neog, M.: Socio-Political Events Leading to the Militancy of the Māyāmārā Vaiśnavism, p. 15
organised efforts in the establishment of satras of Brahma-
samhāti in central and upper Assam. The most influential
royal satras of Assam popularly known as cāri-satras (four
satras) namely Āuniati (1654 A.D.), Dakṣinpāt (1653 A.D.),
Kuruwābāhi (1600-1625 A.D.) and Garmur (1715 A.D.) belong
to Brahma-samhāti. Āuniati, Garmur and Kuruwābāhi satras trace
their geneology to Vamsigapaladeva, who was a direct disciple
of Damodaradeva and Dakṣinpāt to Vanamalideva, another dis­t
inguished disciple of Dāmodaradeva.

After the death of Madhavadeva (1596 A.D.) the Mahāpuru-
siśya group again took the form of three distinct schisms.
The cause of further sub-division seems to be the dispute
over succession to the office of the guru among Gopāldeva,
Mathurādās Ātā and Puruṣottama Ṭhākur. Subsequently three
more sub-sects namely Puruṣa, Kāla and Nikā developed with­
in the main body of the order under the leadership of Puruṣo­
ttama Ṭhākur, Gopāldeva and Mathurādās Burhā Ātā respectively.
These three sub-sects together with Dāmodarī and Haridevi
(collectively known as Brahma-samhāti) are traditionally
Nitya. Some of the apostles of Śaṅkaradeva deserved religious headship after him. But Śaṅkaradeva did not confer this charge on his son Rañānanda or on Damodaradeva. But Mādhavadeva was selected as his able inheritor. This latent conflict gave birth to the germ of schism among the Mahāpurusīyās. Though they accepted Śaṅkaradeva as guru, they were not mentally prepared to install Mādhavadeva on the same position. Ultimately Damodaradeva seceded from the Mahāpurusīyā fold now headed by Mādhavadeva. Another Brahmin, Harideva also separated from the fold and joined with Damodaradeva. Thus as a result of the joint effort by Damodaradeva and Harideva a separate group known as Brahmasamhāti was created. The Brahmasamhāti thus consists of satras deriving from Damodaradeva and Harideva. The predominance of Brahmanical rituals is the basic feature of Brahmasamhāti.³³

Out of the twelve principal apostles of Mādhavadeva, Vamsigopāladeva and Jadumanideva were prominent for their

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³³ Neog, M. : Śaṅkaradeva And His Times, p. 154
known as samhatis. The samhatis exist only as categories and each satra is autonomous in the regulation of its affairs. 34

The Puruṣa Saṁhāti consists of satras deriving from Puruṣottama Thākur, the grandson of Saṅkaradeva. According to the traditional belief of Puruṣa Saṁhāti, Puruṣottama is the real successor of Saṅkaradeva. Explanations given by the men of this Saṁhāti is that Lord Nārāyana being the real Puruṣa whom they worship, the name Puruṣa Saṁhāti is given. By another explanation all the religious and cultural characteristics of the faith propounded by Mahāpuruṣa Saṅkaradeva are preserved and exercised in the satras of this Saṁhāti and hence the name Puruṣa. According to still another explanation the man of great personality Puruṣottam Thākur was the originator of this Saṁhāti and hence the name 35.

Kāla Saṁhāti consists of satras originating from Gopaldeva, one of the Brahmin apostles of Mādhavadeva. He also claimed to be the real successor of Mādhavadeva. Gopal

34. Cantlie, A. : op.cit., p. 176
35. Goswami, K.D. : op.cit., p. 5
Sarma, S.N. : op.cit., p. 70
Ata lived at Bhawanipur near Barpeta. His principal satra was Kālījhar from where he used to preach neo-Vaiṣṇava ideal. The name of Kāla Saṁhati seems to have its origin from the name of the locality, Kālījhar, which was the head-quarter of Gopal Ātā till his death. The sub-sect lays special emphasis on Guru. Other important satras of Kāla Saṁhati are Bhawanipur, Āhatguri, Hāladdhiāti, Kāthpar, Dihing, Māyāmārā etc.

The satras of Kāla Saṁhati draw their membership largely from the lower castes, although they, too, include Brahmanas, Kayasthas, Kalitas among their disciples. Gopal Ata was a patient, liberal and farsighted man. While proselytising among the Mongoloid people such as Ahoms, Kacharis, Chūtias, Morans, Tiwas etc. he liberally exempted them from other observances.36

The Nikā Saṁhati seems to have taken shape after the formation of the other three sub-sects. The three sub-sects having gone somewhat astray from the original path formulated

by the two Gurus, this cleaner sect, as its name Nikā Samhathi implies, was formed under the leadership of Padma Ātā, Mathurā Ātā and Kesāva Ātā. The satras of Nikā Samhathi elevated Mādhavadeva as the Guru of the movement. Mathurādāsa argued that Sāṅkara was an incarnation (avatār) and therefore Mādhava was the first Guru.

In this Samhathi the bhakats are given an authoritative position. The distinguishing characteristic of the satras of Nikā Samhathi is their emphasis on celibacy and ritual purity. Barpeta Satra, Kamalābāri Satra of Majuli and Madhupur Satra in Cooch Behar, now in West Bengal, are the most influential satras of this sub-sect. Nikā Samhathi is the smallest of the Samhatis both in respect of the number of satras and that of disciples.

The satras of Assam can be set out on a genealogical chart on the relation between founders of the sub-sects.

37. Sarma, S.N. : op.cit., p. 96
38. Cantlie, A. : op.cit., p. 171
For the spread of the satra institution there are two methods working: (a) by the establishment of new satras and (b) by the division of existing satras. The first method was general in the early stage. The satra institution appears to have reached its final stage of expansion by the close of the eighteenth century with the acceptance of Vaishnavism by the Ahom kings.

* Relation between founders of sub-sects.
Source: Cantlie, A.: The Assamese, p. 170
With the extension of the royal patronage to a number of satras towards the second half of the 17th century which continued till the end of the 18th century, the development of satra reached a higher stage. Such patronage placed the satras on a sound economic footing and gave rise to a series of functionaries in the organisation of the satras. As royal help was given mainly in the form of land, the department of revenue emerged in the satra management. Through patronage, the state achieved some degree of control over the religious organisations and thus limited the autonomy of the satras. Adhikarship was subject to the approval of the king. Satra under royal supervision came to be associated with ceremonious and complex formalities. 40

Contributions of the satra institution:

The neo-Vaiṣṇava order in Assam is characterised by the satra institution which has sustained for nearly five centuries and has contributed immensely to the social structure of

the Assamese people. As a great gift of the Vaiṣṇavite move-
ment of Assam this institution acted as an aid in making the
Assamese society united.

Religious contribution:

Assam in the days of Śaṅkaradeva, the architect of the
ṣatras institution, was inhabited by people of various caste
groups and diverse cultural patterns. Their religious practices
were also varied. The people were gradually converted into one
common religious point of view based on devotional principles.
It was the principal achievement of the neo-Vaiṣṇavite movement
to turn the land of Kamarupa, famous from the earliest times
as the stronghold of Tantricism and Saktism, into a predomi-
nantly Vaiṣṇavite land to some extent. Ṣatras institution, the
chief religious organ of neo-Vaiṣṇavism may be credited for the
better part of this unification.

Social contribution:

The social life of any country is intricately related with
religion which is more so in Indian social life. The moral and
ethical basis of the society is derived from religion. In
maintaining the morality and discipline of the society the nāmghars, the extended wing of the satra institution acted as an important organ. It is the institution around which all cultural and religious activities of a village moves.41

One of the important social contributions of the satra institution is the upliftment of the backward castes. The rigours of caste distinctions were considerably reduced as people of all castes and even tribal groups were freely initiated. A significant process of integration has been going on for centuries through the activities of the Vaisnava preachers of Assam. Persons outside the fold of Hinduism were accepted by Śaṅkaradeva as his immediate disciples, e.g., Jaihari Ātai originally a Muslim, Govinda Ātai, a Garo, Bholai Ātai a Mikir and Ram Ātai a Kachari.42 That this conversion of people was not one sided is proved by certain practices of the Vaisnavas and some of the characteristics of their culture were also received.43

41. Sarma, S.N. : op.cit., p. 155
43. Sarma, S.N. : op.cit., p. 160
Cultural contribution:

In the educational and cultural sphere the satra institution contributed a lot. There were also private teaching centres called tols and pāthsālās attached to certain satras under some reputed scholars. Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva also received their early education in such centres. They and their disciples also imparted education to their associates. Bhāttadeva, the Brahmin Śatrādhikāra of Pātbāusi Satra conducted such a tol in the precinct of the satra.

Early Assamese religious literature in the forms of renderings into Assamese from original Sanskrit texts was initiated by Mādhava Kandālī and Śaṅkaradeva and his colleagues and continued till modern times under the guidance and inspiration of the heads of various satras. The most important contribution in the field of literature is the introduction of biographical narratives of medieval Assamese period both in prose and verse on the lives of Vaiṣṇavite saints, such as Śaṅkaradeva (1449-1568 A.D.) and Mādhavadeva (1489-1597 A.D.). Of all the biographies of the Vaiṣṇavite saints of Assam, the Kathā guru Carita (i.e., hagiography in prose) is worth mentioning. Another

44. Sarma, S.N. : op.cit., p. 160
prose hagiography known as Bardowa *Kathāgurucarita* is found in the Bardowa satra.

Dramatic performances generally known as Bhāonā introduced for the first time by Śaṅkaradeva nearly five hundred years ago, as the medium of religious propaganda continued up to the present time. The ankiyā nātas written by Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva including other Vaiṣṇava poets of Assam are still enacted through this Bhāonā performance. The prayer halls of the satras and the nāmghars have been serving as the auditorium and stage for the enactment of the ankiyā nātas. The anniversaries of various Vaiṣṇava saints and other festivals were the occasions for the Bhāonā performance etc.

With the growth and popularity of the Bhāonā performances in the various satra circles a particular class of artisans began to specialise in the art of preparing the various accessories necessary for the performances. The accessories include such things as the effigies and musks representing demons, animals and birds.
The neo-Vaishnavaite movement also contributed to the Assamese society with particular songs, music and dance. The satras have continued to act as the centres for the cultivation of these arts. The Bārgītas are a class of devotional songs, composed by Saṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva, based on classical rāgas. In later periods these became characteristically associated with the satra system and used as part of daily and occasional prayer services.

The satras being the centres for these art forms have produced some experts in various forms of satrīyā music and dance. Such persons act as traditional participants in various devotional services of the satra. Thus the various forms of music, dance and dramas were also the means of attracting people towards the faith and establish a sort of articulation between the satra and the community and the satras became intimately related with Assamese society and culture.