CHAPTER-VII

Contribution towards the upliftment of backward classes

1. Background

The neo-Vaiṣṇavite movement of Śaṅkaradeva played a culminating role in the social, religious and cultural spheres of the people living in the Brahmaputra valley. Socially it marked the beginning of the emergence of an egalitarian society cutting across caste taboos and restrictions. It aimed at embracing all including the Garo, Bhoṭa and Yavanases in the fold of fraternity with the right to chanting Rāma-nāma which was intolerant of the creeds that close the door on the 'impure caste.' In the words of L.N. Bezbaruah, an exponent of Assam neo-Vaiṣṇavism, ‘Śaṅkaradeva declared spiritual equality for all men irrespective of caste and creed, and loudly proclaimed that even a Candala is superior to a Brāhmaṇa if that he becomes a bhakti parayana. He also rejected the caste superiority as a ground of respect among men, otherwise equally venerable as lovers of God’. With the teachings of liberalism it marked, the beginning of the process of detribalization. Its impact on the religious transformation of the tribal societies or non-Hindu tribal population and ethnic groups cannot be ignored. Citing some extracts of KGC, M. Neog says, in neo-Vaiṣṇavism the non-Hindu population found an attractive portal into Hinduism and through it they entered a clean and disciplined way of individual social life. The old ways of unclean food, clothing and general behaviour of some tribes were replaced by cleanliness and decency.

715 M. Neog, SHT, Preface, ix
716 L. N. Bezbaruah, Religion of love and devotion, p 17
717 M. Neog, op. cit., p.370

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Conversion is a lengthy process. In the first stage people desiring to get converted must forsake pork and then get a status called \textit{mahadi}. In the opinion of Hiren Gohain, Hinduised process was institutionalised by the religious pontiffs of the \textit{sattras}. One who desire to come under the system must forsake rice bear (\textit{zoo}) and get the status of \textit{sam$\text{k}$ara}. In the next stage they get the status of Koch and finally with the approval of the \textit{gos$\text{\text{"a}}$ins} they reach their desired status of Kalita.\textsuperscript{718} The process of bringing backward tribes into fold of Vai$\text{\text{"s}}$avism was inaugurated by \textit{S$a$\text{\text{"a}}$k$ara$\text{\text{"d}}$e$\text{\text{"a}}$}va himself as soon as he accepted Govinda, a G\textit{\r{a}}ro, Jayhari, a Yavana, Paramananda a Mising, Jayarama a Bhutiyas his disciples and made them leaders to preach his religion. In this context, the role played by apostles Varnisigopal deva, Aniruddha Bhuyan, Bar-Yadumani of Dihing and \textit{\r{S}$\text{\r{r}}$i$\text{\r{r}}$\text{\r{a}}$m$\text{\r{a}}$} of Budhb\textit{\r{a}}ri \textit{sattra} in uplifting the backward classes deserves special mention.\textsuperscript{719}

Admitting all the groups into his fold, \textit{S$a$\text{\text{"a}}$k$ara$\text{\text{"d}}$e$\text{\text{"a}}$}va boldly asserts that all the communities living in his time are equal and pure and there could be no caste and distinction. In translating certain verses of the \textit{Srimadbh\text{\text{"a}}$g$av$\text{\text{"a}}$}ta, (Book-II) into Assamese he nullifies caste divisions among the \textit{bhakatas}, which runs thus -

\begin{table}[h]
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\begin{tabular}{ll}
\textit{Kir\text{\text{"a}}$\text{\text{"a}}$} & \textit{Kh\text{\text{"a}}$\text{\text{"a}}$}, \textit{G\text{\text{"a}}$\text{\text{"a}}$}, \textit{M} \text{\text{"i}$\text{\text{"a}}$} \\
\textit{Yava}na, \textit{Ka$\text{\text{"a}}$n$\text{\text{"a}}$}, \textit{Gov\text{\text{"a}}$\text{\text{"a}}$} / \\
\textit{Asam}a \textit{muluka} & \textit{dhovaye, turuka} \\
\textit{Ku}v\text{\text{"e}}$\text{\text{"a}}$, \textit{M\text{\text{"e}}$\text{\text{"a}}$}, \textit{Ca$\text{\text{"a}}$d$\text{\text{"a}}$}la // \\
\textit{Anop$\text{\text{"a}}$pin$\text{\text{"a}}$} & \textit{Kr\text{\text{"a}}$\text{\text{"a}}$} na \textit{sevaka}
\end{tabular}
\end{table}

\textsuperscript{718} H. Gohain, \textit{Nairajya aru nir\text{"a}n}, p.61
\textsuperscript{719} S.N. Sarma, \textit{NVMSIA.}, p 217
He also learnt to be emancipated one Sambhu who suffered from leprosy and set an example to his followers to worship God through humanitarian service.

After Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva, the neophytes of their order found easy access to the liberal and modified form of Mahāpuṣṭyā dharma that made them easily accessible to one and all with the power of chanting name of God (‘nābāsē nāme jāti ajāṭi’). With the catholicity of the Kāla samhāti, along with some others of its kind that was mostly responsible for bringing large number of devotees into the fold of Assam Vaiṣṇavism, including a considerable number of people belonging to various communities in eastern Assam. It was interesting to find how the spirit of Assam Vaiṣṇavism appealed to all sects of common people irrespective of caste and creed as they could share spiritual ties with one another as the simple word ‘Hari bhakat’ that kept room for caste mobility in a great way. A thin stream of proselytizing and tradition of uplifting the tribal and other backward classes of the society have been observed in later phase of neo-Vaiṣṇavite movement pursued by some apostles of the Narowā and Salaguri sattras. The three early Adhikāras, Dāmodara, Ramākānta and Rāmacandra and their associates started liberal reform agenda and the process in the succeeding periods. In some interior localities of Nagaon and Morigaon districts where

720 The Kiratas, the Kacharis, the Khasis, the Miris, the Yavanas, the Kangkas, the Govālas, the Assam (Āhom), the Mulukas, the Rajakas, the Turukas, the Kuvacas, the Mlecha, the Candālas and all other communities become pure in the company of the servants (devotees) of Kṛṣṇa. Vide Kṛtana Ghosa, Śrīkṛṣṇa Vaikuṇṭha Prayāṇa

721 After the death of Śaṅkaradeva, the original order was divided into four sanhatis viz., Brahma, Nikā, Kāla and Puruṣa. This point has been discussed elaborately elsewhere.

722 Archana Barua, ‘Some key concepts of Assam Vaishnavism’, retrieved from the Journal of Assam Society of America, July, 2005
some *sattras* of the Narowā group were actively functioning some plains tribe people belonging to Tiwā and Mising communities came into their fold. As a result good number of people of various tribes, castes and creeds are found among the laities of the Narowā group of *sattras*.

The Census Report of India records a general distribution of each religion at each of the last five censuses conducted in Assam in between 1891-1931 A.D. This record records number of Hindu and tribal population which stands 34, 09,854 and 2, 77,440 in 1931 A.D. It reflects that the growth of Hindu population within forty years shoot up from 9.9 % to 28.6 % with an aggregate growth of 99.3 % from the earliest census. The same source furnishes that tribal population within this period substantially decreases.\textsuperscript{723} The Hindus who formed 56.3 % out of the total population of the whole province which stands 54.6 A.D. and 54.54 % in 1921 and 1911. Thus the actual increase of Hindus was 841,520.\textsuperscript{724} The Director General of Statistics of India, W.W. Hunter earlier recorded Hindu population in Nowgong district as 2, 45, 615 (95.8 % of the total population) in A.D. 1871.\textsuperscript{725} The account proves that the variation occurs when large group of tribal followed the mild tenets of Vaišnavism within this period. It happened mostly for the liberal attitudes and the activities undertaken by the principal

\textsuperscript{723} Census of India , Ch. XI-Religion, Vol.-III, G. S. Mullan, 1932, Shillong, p.198 ; A subsidiary table II of the said account gives the figures of tribal population in Nowgong district as 3,343 in A.D. 1891 The figure drastically comes down to 944 in 1931 A.D., p.199

\textsuperscript{724} ibid, p.191

\textsuperscript{725} W.W. Hunter, *A Statistical account of Assam*, vol. 2., p.179

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priests of some satras including the Narowā satras of Bardowā in Nowgong district who exercised ultimate authority in religious and social matters at that time.\textsuperscript{726}

2. Kaivarta, Boḍo-Kachari and Koches

It was Śaṅkaradeva who first set an earliest examples in proclaiming Rādhikā, a lady from a low born caste Kaivarta as the chaste woman; who could only safe the entire Bhuyan Kingdom of Bardowā miraculously from the high currents of Brahmaputra; while all other woman belonging to high caste like Brāhmaṇs failed and stepped back. In another instance, he appointed one Rām Ātoi, a devotee from the Kaivarta caste as his personal attendant. In later period, some of the sattras ushered and fostered the same spiritual and social bond by reducing the rigour of caste distinctions by bringing non Aryan tribes such Koch, Moran, Chutiya, Ahom, Kachari and other non-Aryans to the fold. During last three decades of the nineteenth and early decades of twentieth century, by weaning them away from the grasp of alien ways and faiths some Adhikāras of Narowā sattra followed the aforesaid process. It seems that the preachers of Narowā-Bardowā, Bālisattra and Kuji, had played dimensionally an important role in converting such tribes by visiting in person interior villages of Nagaon, Morigaon, Jorhat and Lakshimpur districts of Assam. Sivendra Ātā (A.D.1889-1967) of Narowā-Bālisattra was well ahead of others who not only brought a major portion of the Tiwā,

\textsuperscript{726} In this context, one high profile census official remark in the Assam Census Report in 1921 is noteworthy. He says, the border line between Hinduism and Animism was very vague owing to primitive practices so often continuing side by side with Hindu ceremonies and contributions to Hindu gosains. Observing this trends W.J. Robinson also comments, 'unlike Koches the Chutiyas and the Ahoms, these hilly tracts can't be regarded as completely hinduisised, they may be classed as semi hinduisised only'. Census of India ,vol. III, Part I, Report, G. S. Mullan ,p.188; W. J. Robinson, A descriptive Account of Assam , p.263

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Koches in Barapujlya in Morigaon district but also Tea-tribe people and encouraged them to build nām-ghars of their own to give them the right place and ambience to congregate.\textsuperscript{727} One Adhikāra was Tilak Ātā, grandson of Naranātha of Narowā-Talibil sattrā came forward to preach the religion and gave a new boost to the process of Aryanisation among the Bođo and Kachari tribes at Dhing in the first quarter of the last century. Pitambar Devagoswami of the Gaḍmurt sattrā of Majuli was the first Sattrādhikara who responded boldly to socio-political problems of the 20th century. When the demand for eradication of untouchability and upliftment of the backward faced stiff resistance from the principal sattras of Majuli, Pitambar Deva Goswami allowed the depressed or the untouchable communities to enter the nām-ghar of the Gaḍmurt sattrā and associated them with its cultural activities.\textsuperscript{728}

In erstwhile Nagaon district we have come across scores of villages where disciples of the Narowā sattras are found in good numbers at Rāmpur, Balikatiyā, Rāidongiyā, Doomdomiyā, Salaguri, Sonārigāon, Camuāgaon, Bēktāti, Bāruāti, Botābāri, Āthgāon, Dhing, Bhakatgāon, Geruā, Lelāibori, Kasari, Dagaon. Thia-tangani, Telīā-gaon, Juriā, Barōdowā, Bhejiyāni, Bhumuraguri, Aibheti, Bar-raiṇgānyā, Kuji, Gakhajua, Singiya, Pahukatiya, Kahuaati, Nanoi, Potani, Bhebheri, Barhampur, Mājpatani, Pānigaon, Bhaḷukmārī, Mājārati, Rupahi, Bhotāigaon, Bhelaguri, Ghahi, Barjoha, Phulaguri, Kacua, Saragaon, Dighiati, Khaḷoigaon, Laharighat, Huj, Torabori, Gayanagaon, Caraibahi, Mikirbheta, Barangabari, Belaguri, Jajori, Majgaon, Manipur–Paghali, Bebejiya, Sensuwa, Raha, Barapujiya Mikirgaon, Keutaguri, Jorabari, Sonaruguri, Owaguri, Dhenuḍhar, Barbhagiya, Cikabori, Odari, Telahi, Telah-

\textsuperscript{727} Informant. Mahat ch. Deka (102) of Paghāl Mikir Gaon

\textsuperscript{728} D. Nath, Sattra Society and Culture, Pitambar Devagoswami and History of Gaḍmurt sattrā, p 132
Bhakatgaon, Jagiyl, Kampur, Bhalbholiya gaon, Caparmukh, Basundhari, Bilatiyagaon, Jamunamukh, Kaki, Naltoli and Gatanga etc.\textsuperscript{729}

Activities of some of the Adhikaras of Narowa reach far and wide when they set up some nām-ghar and went on preaching the Bhakti dharma in the interior villages of Dhekiajuli, Barchala moujas, Biswanath Chariali Sub division in Sonitpur district. In old Darrang district of Assam disciples of these sattras grew in number in villages namely Śingari, Jōhamari, Barcila, Barkala, Puthimari, Thekerā, Pānbari, Becariyā, Ketekibāri, Nāgsankar, Narowā-Thāān, Catiyā-Salālgāon, Chāriali, Lohgaon, Gomiri, Bihāli and Biswanath etc. In Lakshimpur district where Vāsudeu Thāān, one of the main shrine of the Narowā group of sattra is being seated played an important role and inflicted great influence upon the vast majority of the people belonging to Mising and other backward classes living in Mornoi-Bebejiyā, Jālūhā, Dhakuākhana, Kalābari, Hāwājan, Dhalpur, Nārāyanpur, Bihpuriyā, Letekupukhuri, Kāśikata-Vāsudeu, Gahpur and Akhaiphutiā etc.

Haladhar Bhuyan,\textsuperscript{730} a great patron and preceptor of Śaṅkaradeva’s Bhakti dharma in 20\textsuperscript{th} century once hoped that following the path of the inhabitants of Barapujiyā village people will come forward to carry further the flag of Śaṅkaradeva’s nām-dharma propagating pure devotion (nimal-bhakti), putting an end to all caste

\textsuperscript{729} Śaṅkaradevar porā Šivendraoloi, (Ms.)

\textsuperscript{730} The Loka shevak Haladhar Bhuyan was born in 1894 A.D. at Kampur in Nagaon district. He was a renowned freedom fighter and the brain behind the foundation of Srimanta Śaṅkaradeva Sangha in Assam that had an unflinching faith on Bhakti-dharma. There had been a revival of reform activities of ekaśaraṇa nāmānāma all over Assam in first quarter of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. For this some units were created as a reforming body under initiative of Ramākanta Muktiyar Āṭa of Bardowā Narowā sattra and Haladhar Bhuyan which ultimately came under the umbrella of Śaṅkara Sangha established at Palasani Village of Nagaon district in 1930 A.D.
distinctions. He was one of the founders of the ‘eksarana-nāmdharma’ at that time and highly impressed when people belongs to three different communities, viz., Lalung (Tiwā), Nath and Kaivatra who presented three different Bhāonās of Śaṅkaradeva using the same stage and equipment at a village nāmghar in the present district of Morigaon in A.D. 1932.731

The above discussion reveals that the process of uniting different ethnic groups and castes carried out by the Narowā sattras with the message of nāma-dharma has been profound and far reaching. It has been seen more conspicuously in the case of plains tribes, the Tiwās of central Assam.

3. Tiwā

Śaṅkaradeva became successful at least minimizing the rigour of caste discriminations by pronouncing that caste never be a bar for a devotee be a Brāhmaṇa or so called outcaste-in participating in the congregational prayer nāma-kīrtana. What drew attention of the tribal masses towards Śaṅkaradeva’s pantheon was its simplicity, and soberness in both the theory and practice. To be converted into this fold one does not have to pass through any elaborate ritualistic process which could easily draw a parallel between their loyalty to one chieftain and the loyalty to one Guru without much confusion. This was clearly manifested in the case of the tribal disciples of the Māyamorā sattras of upper Assam who, during the rebellion vowed never to bow their heads before any one except their own king and their own Mahanta.732 The śaraṇāyās,

731 Haladhar Bhuyan, letters to the editor, dated 24 November 1932 A.D., published in the Tinidiniya Asomiya,( newspaper) Guwahati , April 3 , 1932
732 S Barman, ‘Neo-Vaiṣṇavism and the extra Aryan religious cults of Assam, Mahāpuruṣa Sri Sri Mādhavadeva-Neo-Vaiṣṇavism’ Essays on Śaṅkaradeva (ed.), p.37

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the reign of Jayadhvaja Sirīha (1648-1673 A.D.) Rahiyal Baruah 735 (Telekā Sandikoi) with the help of one Jayram Kataki brought twelve families of Mikirs and Lalung from Gobhā and established them on the south shore of Trihuliā bil and Burhagaon.736 This chieftaindom called Mikirgayārājya was placed under one chieftain of Rangkhāngphu clan of Lalung. Five such chieftaindoms established in the present district of Nagaon were Mikirgayā, Topākuciyā, Bārapujiyā, Khāīgarh, Sarā and Phulaguri.737 Another group called sāturajiya (seven rajas) includes Kumoi, Teteliyā, Bagharā, Sukhnāgug, Tarānī, Kacārīgaon, and Ghaguā sprang up in Morigaon district.738 The earliest known one of the chieftaindoms of the Mikir refugees Mikirgayārājya was established in A.D 1650-51.739 Some local accounts 740 throw lights on the relations that developed between Tiwā people and Vaiśṇavite sattras like Narowā and other sattras functioning in that area. Earlier, Topācusiya Tiwā chief took his initiation from the Āuniāti Sattrādhikāra, and from that time onwards he was honoured as Deu-raja.741 During the period of Bardowā-reclamation, Dāmodara, Kanakalatā and their followers passed through the territory of the Pācuraṣṭiyās and the Mikirgayā, ruled by Cetuā 742 under

735 A frontier governor deputed to govern Rahachowki area of central Assam during Ahom rule.
736 S.K. Bhuyan (ed.), Deodhai Asom Buranjī, p.133-135
737 M. Deuri, Sāturāyār paricaī, Rahār Raḥdol, Souvenir, Asom Sahitya Sabha, 1980 , p.531
738 M. Deuri, Morigaon jilār Loka sanskriti, Morigaon, p.8
739 For details of these Chieftaindoms one may consult Hatem Alī's Ph.D. thesis, 'A study of the history of the vassal Kingdom under the Āhom', Gauhati University, 2004.
740 Moni Konwarar Akhyan' or a Gaid, a kind of traditional chronology of the Tiwā tribes.
742 According to a Mikirgaya genealogy the chronology of their chiefs runs as - MikirBurhā> Cetuā> Āfuā> Ransingh > Pāhusingh > Simbhu (Bāngikouā) and Baruah Deka (Pāći-baruah)
Mikirbheta mouja.\textsuperscript{743} The Tiwā chief patronized them with men and materials. Once they reached Monipur and Pāgañīli, two places under Cetua’s territory. It is said Dāmodara refused to take his meal as he came to know that Ceuta was an ‘a-śaraṇīya\textsuperscript{744}’ However Cetua readily offered him to receive ordination and became the first among the Tiwā chieftains to be converted into neo-Vaiṣṇavism of Śaṅkaradeva. As a mark of honour to his guru he granted a village at pāglīli.\textsuperscript{745} An old road exists between Bārapujīya-Mikirgaon and Bardowā is called as Kordhara ali was also built within this period.\textsuperscript{746} Sometimes later, in the month of Bohāg (April–May) coming to Mikirgaon, Dāmodara handed over an old Vaiṣṇavite scripture (pufhi)\textsuperscript{747} to Cetuā and enquired whether he observed ‘Doul-utsava’. The king replied in negative; however he immediately issued an order for making necessary arrangement for organizing a melā, where the idol of gosāin was taken out following the tradition of the ‘Doul-utsava’ observed at Bardowā. Some scholars have attempted to put forward three different

\textsuperscript{743} Mikirbheta is the biggest mouja under undivided Nagaon district of Assam. The Mara sonai forms its northern and western boundaries. On the east it is bounded by Hatichung and BarapujīyaMauja. Vide; Village note, Mikirbheta Mouja.

\textsuperscript{744} ‘Aśaraṇīya’ means a person who has not yet come under the fold of the particular Vaiṣṇavite sect.

\textsuperscript{745} M. Deuri, op. cit. p.362 ; In a letter Lt. Col. F. Jenkins (vide letter no.327-13-06-1853) addressed to Moffat Lal Mill explained the nature of some land grants made by Lahing (Lalung ?) to gosāins which were supposed to be allotted by the Ahom Kings. It runs as - ... the holdings of these grants free at later period was entirely denied and though in Nowgong division the grants did not came originally from Assam Rajas and they did not consider it necessary to make any register of them.

\textsuperscript{746} Souvenir, published on the occasion of the Golden jubilee, Bārapujīya H.S. School, 2007. p.71

\textsuperscript{747} Nandi Deka, brother of Padmadhar Deka, a descendant of the Mikir King and an inhabitant of niz- Mikirgāon preserved the Holy Scripture.
opinions connected with the origin of the festival. It appears from one account that under Bhadradeva the melā was started with full vigour. But according to an informed source, Bhadradeva, a descendant of Dāmodara became Adhikāra at Bardowā in 19th century. Hence we may conclude that the melā is dated back to the time of Dāmodara Ātā and became popular under his successors at a much later time. To commemorate the occasion, a richly decorated Khātulā or litter resembling a temple structure is carried through the village roads. This commemorates the annual journey of Lord Jagannathna to Ghunusā’s place which usually starts on the first Thursday, falls after Bohāgbihū where team of dancers, musicians, soldiers armed with shield and jhāru (a kind of sword) chanting Nām-kārtana with drums, cymbals. In every year, devotees congregate and throng in large number for this annual event. It can be said that coming under the influence of a neo-Vaiṣṇavite nām-ghār of Narowā sattra, people of Mikirgāon (Mikirgaya) began to celebrate the traditional ‘gosāin uliyā melā’ in a new way by incorporating some neo-Vaiṣṇavite customs.

The following neo-Vaiṣṇavite features can be gleaned embellished in this festival celebrated by them.

1) Mikirgaya tradition and some elderly people believe that the custom is nothing but a rechristened version of the neo-Vaiṣṇavite festival or ‘Doul-

749 A kind of specially decorated litter made of bamboo and wood for carrying out the image or deity of melā. The earliest tradition associated with the melā like creating akarāni (a basket like object) with bamboo sprinkles for carrying the idol of gosāin is now not found.
Utsava or 'Ghuṇusā-yātrā' based on the Ghuṇusā Kīrtana of Śaṅkaradeva.750

2) Following the Vaiṣṇavite tradition and customs louds that a section of Tiwā people started construction of nām-ghār and manikūṭ at their own villages. The khāṭulā used in the melā, which was earlier kept at the king’s house used to put in the courtyard of the community nām-ghār.

3) Earlier, deities of Lord Siva or Viṣṇu were taken out in the litter. Coming under the influence of Vaiṣṇavism, the new custom of carrying Bhāgavata, the religious scripture started. At Mikirgāon, where the melā was originated the devotees started following the custom of installing Bhāgavata on the litter.751

4) When the statute is ceremonially taken out, devotee utter hari-dvani (victory to hari) by beating of dobā, (drum) śankha (konch) and Kāṭh following some neo-Vaiṣṇavite traditions. Beating of traditional Bor-dhol (big drum) and other instruments of Tiwās is also a common feature.

5) The melā comes to an end when the gosāin is taken back to the sacred altar. Likewise the ‘Doul-utsava’, on that day the devotees observe a ritual called ‘gosāin-bheta’ or (blockade to the re-entry of gosāin) at the gate way of the

750 Atul Deka (72) a villager of Nijmikir gāon claimed that the first melā among the Mikirs began in the time of Cētu raja at Trihūlyā in 17th century. The melā has been celebrated traditionally for more than three hundred years. Vide; an Interview taken on 22 June, 2008 at Nizmikirgāon.

Enacting a dramatic scene, the entry of gosain is thwarted by the accompanying devotees dividing themselves into two separate groups.

The influence of sattra has also brought and popularise some Vaiṣṇavite and satrīyā titles like deuri, khātaniyār, medhi, āḍpāriyā among the Tiwā community. According to one such account after coming into the Vaiṣṇavite fold Cetua donated a separate plot of land on the bank of Kujibil, where Dāmaodara Ātā raised the sattra. Thus from the time of Dāmoḍara, some rāja-powālis of Tiwās came under the fold of Vaiṣṇavism and following them mass conversion from other community like Koches, Bođo-Kachari etc. also began. In the melā organized on that occasion helped in generating sense of economic awareness, and sense of communal harmony where different groups of ethnic people assembled and exchanged their essential things by way of binimoy-prathā (Barter-system) or traditional exchange system.

According to some account, one Narowā Adhikāra devised a secret plan to become a King during the Moāmoriyā rebellion with the mass support of his Tiwā inhabitants of pācaraṇyā area with the power of a mystical book ‘Dhatu Tamrakshar or such type of scriptures. In this context, S.K. Bhuyan writes, following the path of Moamoriyas, one Narowā Medhi, with the support of the rāja-powālī or petty Tiwā chieftains hatched up a conspiracy to become a king dethroning the shackles of the Ahoms. It further says that taking advantage of slackness of administration some Tiwā

753 Editorial, Silpukhuri, Souvenir, Morigaon jila sahitya Sabha, 2005
754 Barter is a method of exchange by which goods or services are directly exchanged for other goods or services without money. It is usually bilateral, but may be multilateral, and usually exists parallel to monetary systems, vide, O’ Sullivan, Arthur; Steven M. Sheffrin, 2003 Economics: Principles in Action. Pearson Prentice Hall. p. 243

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chiefs of Bārapujyā and Mikirgaya rājya decided to raise one *medhi* of a Narowā *sattra* to the post of King. When the conspirators were caught one *Borto*, a brother of the conspirator confessed, ‘at Rohā, my brother (Narovā-medhi) converted some *raja-powālis* (vassal kings) into *bhakatas*, some of them were drawn into their fold by luring with gold ankles and other such valuables. This episode clearly testifies that number of Tiwā disciples of Narowā *sattras* grew in numbers and some of them adopted their faith.

The *na-śaraviyās*, (new converts) of the Tiwās and other group of plains tribes generally goes to the *sattra* now and then on occasion such as the *guru-Kirtana* and *Doul-Yārā* festival etc. It is to be pointed out that earlier at Bardowā *sattra* Kirtanaghar one sacred seat (*khātulā*) being used at the ‘gosāin uliyā melā’ was preserved for the people of Mikirgaya village and the king’s clan. According to one source, this tradition continued till the end of the twentieth century, when Padma Deka, a descendant of Cetua along with his associates visited the *sattra*, before taking his seat he showed due reverence to the holy seat.

While paying a visit to the villages inhabited by Silpukhuri moujā of the erstwhile Mikirgaya rājya we have come across some descendants of the original families of Mikirs, who informed us that their ancestors were reluctant in changing their surnames and some of the ancestral rituals were continued to be performed even after their conversion to Vaiṣnāvism. However their successors have been deviated to a large extent and began to accept new surnames viz. Deka, Pator, Senapati and Deuri etc. The first instance of such deviation is noticed in the family of Late Kahbor Mikir (90).

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756 M. Deuri, op. cit, p.362

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Kahbor's three brothers namely Monbhāl, Geralā, Āhubor and Bhamal who never showed any interest to change their old titles. But their recent off-springs have adopted new titles like Deka and Pator instead of ancestral surnames Mikir and Lalung. One of his grandsons of Puspa (67) gave up his ancestral surname and took the title Deka fifty years ago. Likewise Puspa's son and grandson also follow their father.

One Gobin Senapati (57) of Nijmikirgāon, belonging to the Śukāi-clan of the Tiwās apprised us that some of their ancestors were traditionally bonded and attracted towards the nāma-dharma of Śāṅkaradeva from 18th century. Coming under the influence of certain Adhikāras all of his kith and kins also followed the religion of neo-Vaiṣṇavism. They are now fully accustomed to the satṛiyā environments and behaviours. In this context, he cited names of three harbingers of his own community, Bhadrakanta Senapati, Maheswar Pator and Kantaram Pator who inspired others to take śaraṇa (initiation) under the Narowā Adhikāras. One Mahat Ch. Deka (95) informed that Śivendra Ātā alias Śurachandra of Narowā-Bālisattrā offered large scale śaraṇa to 54 families at a function organised by the inmates of Paghali Mikirgaon held in 1969 A.D who used to visit the villages of his disciples in those days. Most of the villagers of Brapujiya area were inspired and attracted with the personality and teachings of Śura Simha Ātā. Following this, Śivendra’s two sons, K.D. Goswami and S.D. Goswami and some others adopting some flexible and acceptable measures have pressed themselves into the service of attracting more and more people into their fold. Even in 2011 A.D., S.D. Goswami gave śaraṇa to forty people, bhajaṇa to sixty and mālā-baṣṭu (holy-rosary) to five Tiwā neophytes at niz- Mikirgaon. In the same way, Krishnananda Devgoswami, Adhikāra of Narowā-Bheṭiyaṇī sattra offered ordination to thirty

757 Informant : Ahubor Mikir (75) of Nij Mikirgaon of Barapujiya, 15-12-2008

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households under the Doloigaon Bagariguri Tiwã sattra sabha of Hatichung Mouja in Nagaon district in 2010-11 A.D. Amongst them one Nagen Bordoloi from Tiwã community received bhajana and Rohit Bordoloi and Rabi Ram Bordoloi were appointed medhi and nãmlagua of the village.\textsuperscript{758}

That the practice of conversion of aboriginal tribes like Lalung and Kacharis of Nagaon district which continued since long may be understood from an observation made by the then Deputy Commissioner in A.D 1891. The observation runs thus:

\begin{quote}
\textit{The gosãins (Adhikāra of the Narowã) and his subordinates select certain families of the original tribes, who reside in the vicinity of Hindu villages and at a distance from the main villages of the aboriginal tribes. These are frequently lectured upon the purity of the Hindu religion and the easy in which they can get salvation and how they can acquire a position in the Hindu society if they give up their habits of eating pork and other forbidden food and drinking strong liquor and conform to the Hindu methods of eating and drinking and worship. As these people frequently feel the inconvenience of their isolated position they are easily tempted to become Hindus, and thereby be enabled to associate and move with their Hindu neighbours, by whom they are looked down upon as a degraded class or so long as they remained in an unconverted state. When these people after frequent lecturers show some inclination towards giving up their religion and becoming Hindus, a certain propitious day is...}
\end{quote}


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selected, and they were questioned as to whether they would like to give up their former habits and customs, and become perfect Hindus or that they simply take saranās (religious) form the Hindu Gosāins and remain free as to their habits of eating and drinking. When they express a desire of entire conversion to Hindu religion, they are made to fast for a day or two, and then to undergo a prayachit (…) for which they have to spend some 5 to 10 Rupees according to their circumstances. They then receive their sarana and Bhajana from the gosain. For the first three generations from their conversions they are looked down upon a little by their Hindu comrades and they are not allowed to take any leading part of their society. From the third generation they become quite as good as any other Hindu of the Koch caste.” 759

The above statement has clearly evinced the proselytizing activities of the Narowā group of sattras among the Tiwās and other backward tribes in central Assam.

4. Mising

Many neo-Vaiṣṇavite sattra abbots proselytized people from most of the tribes and backward castes and bringing them to the fold of Vaiṣṇavism in eastern Assam following the great ideals set by their early preceptors. In Nām-ghoṣā of Mādhavadeva we find Mising among the three tribes who sing the glory of hari-nāma.

The following verse is a testimony to it -


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The Misings migrated at different times to the plains of Assam and were accustomed in worshipping *Don-Nyi-Po-Lo* (Sun and Moon). They also believed in some supernatural power for their curse and fortunes.\(^\text{761}\) The neo-Vaiṣṇavism of Śaṅkaradeva (1447-1569 A.D) and his disciple had some impact on the Misings living in Brahmaputra valley. It is believed that under the leadership of Paramānanda, whose original name was Pankong\(^\text{762}\), the first group of Mising converted into Vaiṣṇavism. Some *sattras* like Jokai, Elengi, Budhbari, and Kowāmorā went about initiating some tribes into Vaiṣṇavite faith.\(^\text{763}\) Although in the beginning they did not accept it gradually they incorporated some of the beliefs and practices in their own system of religious function. Chanting of *nām-kīrtana* use of *Cāki* (earthen lamp), offering of betel nut and Areca nut leaf has become an integral part of Mising way of worshipping.\(^\text{764}\) Some of the converts became *bhakatas* (devotees) by attaining certain level of perfection in *nām-kīrtana*. Those *bhakatas* who were more diligent in reciting *nām-kīrtana* became acquainted with some ritualistic procedures and thus earned the eligibilities to be placed in the office of the *Sāttulās* of a Vaiṣṇavite *sattrā*. Apart from the practices mentioned

\(^{760}\) Meaning, for uttering the name of Hari or Lord there is no rule. The Miris, the Āhoms and the Kachāris get liberated by uttering the name of ‘Rama’. Earlier the Misings were known as Miri.


\(^{762}\) N. C Pegu, *Mising sakalar Itibritya aru Sanskriti*, p.269

\(^{763}\) M. Narimattam, *The valley in blossom: Neo-Vaishnavism and the peoples of the Brahmaputra Valley*, p.80

\(^{764}\) L. N. Pegu, 'Mising Religious belief, continuity and change', NEIHA proceeding, Dibrugarh, 2000, p.242
above the Misings perform Bor-Sewā collectively in the village nām-ghas. It is performed by bhakatas and Satulas in closed door hall at night for wellbeing of the village community. A similar congregational prayer service, pālnam or Barsabāh without any esoteric rituals has been celebrated by the neo-Vaiṣṇavite usually perform for the wellbeing of the devotees. Some scholars claim that coming under the influence of Hinduism and the Vaiṣṇavite ways of life, a section of the Mising people who earlier buried their relative have changed the practice and begun to cremate them. In some Mising villages nām-ghar has replaced the Murnag-ghar. Pointing out to this, S. Barkakaty asserts that it meant the Murang-ghar had earlier been used for non-Vaiṣṇavite customs, so the new converts stopped to construct it. It is now become a customary to enact Bhāonā every year in most of the Mising villages where the people believe that this act helps in their well-being.

Continuing this tradition the apostles and sattrīyas of the Vāsudeu Thān Narowā sattrā of Lakshimpur fostered a spiritual fraternity and bond among the Mising people inhabitants of Dhemaji and Dhakuakhana area by reducing the invidious discrimination among them. Like many other tribal groups, the Misings are also come

765 S.P. Kakati, Mirī Jāṭir Buranji, p.30
766 S. Barkakaty, 'Interaction between tribal missing Culture and Vaiṣṇavite Culture of Assam', Mahāpuruṣa Jyoti, vol. VI, Nagaon, 2004, p.28
768 The impact of Hinduism among Mising community has been felt for several centuries whereas Christianity is the modern force. However Christianity is the most aggressive among the Misings particularly in the locality of Majuli. D. Nath says, to spread Christianity in Majuli, American Baptist Missionaries first made an attempt since the mid-19th century but without any success. Of late Christianity had made its hold in Jengraimukh area with its centre at Kumargari Lakhmigaon. Vide ; D. Nath’s The Majuli island , p.94
under the powerful influence of the neo-Vaiṣṇavite movement who incorporated some of the Vaiṣṇavite beliefs, traditions, ways of worships and customs. Some of the Vaiṣṇavite influences have been practiced in a distorted manner. It is said some gosāins of Sesā, Nomāti, Jokāi, Budhārī, Bāreghar and Kowāmorā sattras were most prominent who inflicted influence in attracting this community to their pantheon. Some scholars have already admitted the role of Kowāmorā sattrā in this respect while the Narowā group of sattras is lying in darkness. We are informed in an interview by some elderly people of clusters of Mising villages located around the sattrā under Gohain Mouja that neo-Vaiṣṇavite religion caused a great change in their religious and customary behaviour. One elderly devotee of this sattrā, Mularam Modak (72) of Patiri Chuk village calls him a sewak (servant) of its presiding deity since long. He also informed that almost all the inhabitants of this village not only take sarcona but also became eligible to be acquainted with bhajana under the Narowā Adhikāras. They often offer tupulā (holy offering) to Vāsudeu Thāan seeking blessings from the deity before starting new works like at the time of first ploughing, and sowing seeds, put rice into the mouth of a baby for the first time and other similar rites and rituals from the very beginning. Some Misings of Majuli area use to vow to offer some naivadyas (sacred offerings) to get rid of the calamities to be caused by an earthquake or flood, erosion, hail storm and the curses of the ill spirits. There is a tradition among the Misings of calling the mibus to know about the past deeds and misdeeds for which they supposed to suffer from disaster. A mibu after following due procedures of worship of Vāsudeu foretells if suppositions bears any truth. It is a clear indication that even the mibus admits the superiority of Vāsudeu Thāan. Some Mising inhabitants of Ālimur, Bāligaon, Informant: Gam Doloi (65) of Barpahua village of Majuli island

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Garakhiyā Chuk, Iyangiya, Payang and some other villages typically bring some symbolic offerings for the regular prayer at the *sattra*. This includes *Cāki* (earthen lamp), *sarāi* with fruits, pulses, grams, rice and other symbols of the bounty of the natural world. In addition to it, they use to perform circumambulations (*padakshina*) in the Vāsudeu Temple and the *sattra Nāmghar* during festival and occasional visits. By making three circumambulations, Mising youths use to seek blessing of God in getting his suitable companion. The lover uses to say to his darling-*Vāsudeu Kumnam*: *pege’kai*, (Salutation to Vāsudeu, let us go together) Some Mising devotees became important functionaries of the shrine since long. Kotang Kaman and Dhenurām Taid of Pārirchuk village were two *medhis* of the *sattra* who performed their duties and succeeded in maintaining regular relations with the *sattra* functionaries.\textsuperscript{772} One such staunch Vaiṣṇava devotee of the *sattra* Dulom bhakata in last century played an important part in spreading the message of *Nāma-dharma* among the Mising community. In early decades of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century Achutya Ātā and his three successors, Muktinātha, Śivendra and Maheshchandra also expedited the process of initiation far and wide by bringing Mising, Koches and Chutiyas living in the greater localities of Dhakuakhana subdivision.

It is because of evangelical activities of some *bhakatas* of the *sattra* in eastern Assam, some people belonging to tea tribe community came into the fold of neo-Vaiṣṇavism in the last century. At the initiatives of one Indra Kr. Duwara (57) of Caring, a good number of tea tribe and ex tea garden people of four tea estates namely Sarujani, Karṇgiani, Longrai Pathar, and Rājghar of Dibrugarh district came to the fold of the *sattra*.\textsuperscript{772}

\textsuperscript{772} Information is found in a series of interviews conducted in some Mising tribe dominated villages of Gohainmouja of Dhakuakhana Subdivision from 12\textsuperscript{th} - 20\textsuperscript{th} October, 2009.