PREFACE

The sattras are vibrant entities even today through which the neo-Vaiṣṇavite faith was propagated and established in Assam in the 16th century A.D. They still command devotion from the more traditional Assamese people and attract new followers into their fold. The sattra system introduced by Śaṅkaradeva attained a concrete shape to its organizational setup under the guidance of his two great apostles - Mādhava-deva and Dāmodaradeva. Practically every Assamese household is affiliated to one or other of the five hundred sattras in the Brahmaputra valley. Sattras both big and small existed as most conspicuous Vaiṣṇavite institution during the Colonial rule also. It contributed immensely in the growth of the greater Assamese society in all spheres. The whole range of the process of formation and development of neo-Vaiṣṇavite movement and sattra institutions can be divided into the two broad periods

1) Early or Śaṅkaradeva period and 2) Later or Post-Śaṅkaradeva period

Śaṅkaradeva’s neo-Vaiṣṇavism centered round a sattra was popularly known as Mahāpuruṣiyā-dharma, ‘Ekaśaraṇa-dharma’, Bhakti-dharma or Bhāgavati dharma. It emphasized on ethnic integration, societal reforms and spiritual upliftment through an innovative mode of religious conduct based on indigenous elements of the region, at a time when the society in Assam was in turmoil, fragmented and faction-ridden.

The Narowa group of sattras emerged at the later phase of Assam Vaiṣṇavism. It deserves a good deal of careful analysis than it has received thus far. The prime aim of this study is to understand the various contribution of this group of sattras when the stream of Vaiṣṇavism received thinner current from the original order. This group claims to have retained the original features of the Vaiṣṇavism of Śaṅkaradeva with full vigour carried out their activities in the field of religion, literature, art and culture with great zeal and success.

The term ‘Narowa’ in Assamese stands for plantation (na = new, rowa= plantation). Here it means a newly established sattra. The Narowa group of sattras emerged for the male lineage of Śaṅkaradeva was totally stopped from his grandson
information regarding the Mughal expeditions and the reaction of the Koches, Tangcu arranged for a meeting of Kanakalata and Damodara with the reigning King. Thus, with the royal patronage, the ancestral site of śaṅkaradeva was discovered and in no time it regained its old fame and name as a prime centre of neo-Vaiṣṇavite activities. Following the social tradition, hereditary law and prevailing custom Damodara, the maternal cousin of Kanakalata was allowed to be the first Adhikāra of the newly established sattra of Bardowā in 1656-57 A.D. Before and after the discovery of Bardowā, a number of new sattras had been grown at different places in and around Bardowā and Narowā. The new sattras established after the re-discovery of Bardowā brought the first flame from the original sacred diya of the Bardowā sattra. It is but natural that all the rites, rituals and way of worships of Bardowā were followed by these new sattras. In case of any confusion and dispute they remained obliged to the recommendation and guidance of the original sattra. Thus the entire Narowā group of sattras emerged from 17th-19th century.

Both historical and analytical methods have been followed in carrying out the study. Materials both primary and secondary, used in the study can be broadly divided as follows:

1) Literary 2) Archival and epigraphic 3) Field survey and personal observation.

Literary sources consist of biography of saints, sattra chronicles compiled before and during the colonial rule, literary compositions of the neo-Vaiṣṇavite religion viz., Ankiyā Bhāonā, bargī, traveller’s accounts, and personal records of some of the sattrādāhikārs and their descendants both published and unpublished. A major portion of our study based mostly on biographies (Carita-Puṭheis) of Śaṅkaradeva, Mādhavadeva, Dāmodaradeva and later group of preachers. Among the Caritas, we have selected and consulted Harinarayana Dwij’s Sri Ṭhākur Carita, Āi Kanaklatār Carita, Guru Carita Kathā, (1999 ed.) Katha Guru Carita, (1987, ed.) Sāṁśāvālī by Dwarika Dwij Mishra (Ms.) Aniruddha Carita or Sri Guru Varnanā. Ātā puruṣ sakalar Vaṁśāvālī and Bhakat-mdālā (Ms.). In Prācin Kāmrupiya Kāyastha samājar itibrittya (2000 ed.) Distinguished neo-Vaiṣṇavite scholar, Maheswar Neog who spares two pages in his Śaṅkaradeva and his times’ (1965 ed.) gives a small account of the origin and early
period in 2009, helps us in getting some information on the sattra and their functioning. A good number of wood carvings, metal objects, paintings and some other accessories used in dramatic performances help us in learning some tradition and practices of the Narowā sattra.

For the conveyance of our study a detailed survey have been conducted in the four major districts of the present day Assam wherein most of the Narowā group of sattras are located and working. Some questionnaires were prepared and distributed among certain families of the sattra villages. We have also observed the rituals and customs of the sattras and noted down and also tried to find out answers to the queries. We have consulted various books, Journals, periodicals and newspapers.

We have not only utilized materials from all the available sources but also interacted with the sattra heads, different functionaries, and elderly persons living within the sattra peripheries. Articles and research papers, relating with the neo-Vaiśnavite movement have also been thoroughly consulted.

Thus we have come across a total of seventeen (17) sattras in numbers, out of which four are now ceased to exist.

Primary and secondary data thus collected were then assimilated and verified to use as per demand of the study. The study has been framed under two broad divisions. The first three chapter deals with the neo- Vaiśnavite movement and the growth and expansion of the Narowā sattras. The remaining four encompasses the contributions of the Narowā group of sattras to the neo-Vaiśnavite movement in various aspects viz. art, architecture, music, painting and musical and dramatic performances.

In chapter one an attempt has been made to present and trace out the origin and development of the neo- Vaiśnavite movement, and the back ground of the emergence of the sattra institutions. It is followed by a brief survey of the salient and features of the neo-Vaiśnavite movement and Śaṅkaradeva time. In second chapter a brief history of changes that occurred in post-Śaṅkaradeva period is discussed. The chapter three deals with the historic growth, development and functioning of Narowā sattras in three major locations of the Brahmaputra valley from 17th- to 20th century.