CHAPTER-I

Introduction

1. Origin and development of Vaiṣṇava faith in Assam

The study of neo-Vaiṣṇavism in Assam is important in the historical and social sphere as its initiation brought considerable change amongst the various ethnic groups on the social and cultural aspects. Śaṅkaradeva (1449-1568 A.D) under whose stewardship the movement took place in Assam did not differ in essential points from the similar Bhakti movements of India. Each regional Bhakti movement shares something in common with each other. Śaṅkaradeva’s neo-Vaiṣṇavism stresses the right of individual to communicate directly with God without passing through intermediaries or performing prescribed outwards. In propagating the order he did not altogether reject at least the Vedic saṁskāra but only relegated them to a secondary position.

Monotheistic devotionalism has its roots in certain religious texts which belong as early as to the period between 2nd centuries B.C- 4th century A.D. There was hiatus in Bhakti movement due to the reassertion of Brāhmaṇical tradition. Quite naturally this religion challenged the sacerdotalism of Brāhmaṇical Hinduism which maintained among other things that man must first undergo either severe austerities seek to gain knowledge live a virtuous life make sacrifices, engage in charitable activities or perform meritorious deeds before hoping to escape from the cycle of rebirth to experience final union with God.¹ Pre-colonial-devotionalism creed first came into being as a reaction to the extreme castism and polytheism of Brāhmaṇical tradition. The importance of

Bhāgavata lies in the emphasis pays to bhakti or devotion to Viṣṇu and his various incarnations. It breaks away the traditional religious ceremonies restricted to the birth status background. Taken from the empirical point of view they accepted the basic tenets of the Vedas and Upanisadas.²

Vaiṣṇavism is one of the oldest living religions of India, is a monotheistic system, which upholds Viṣṇu as ultimate reality (parattava). The origin of the religion can be traced back to the Rgveda. Some traditions however ascribe its origin to the oral teachings imparted by Viṣṇu himself to goddess Lakṣmi and in turn to Visvaksena, the divine angel.³ Pre-colonial devotional creed first came into being as a reaction to the extreme, Casteism and polytheism of Brāhmaṇical tradition. The importance of Bhāgavata lies in its emphasis given to bhakti or devotion to Viṣṇu and his various incarnations. It breaks away with the traditional religious ceremonies restricted to the birth, status background. In the Besnagar Column, to which more than once referred Heliodora represents himself to have erected a Garadhvaja or column with the image of Garuḍa at the top in honour of Vāsudeva the god of gods.⁴ The inscription shows that by the end of the second century B.C. the cult of Vāsudeva was receiving the support of the ruling classes. Soon after this Vāsudeva was identified with the Vedic god Viṣṇu, if indeed the identifications had not already been made and further syncretism were taking place.⁵ Though his counterpart Siva has a ferocious and dangerous side to his character, Viṣṇu is generally thought of as wholly benevolent and more acceptable among some

² D. Dawee, Brahmanism in South east Asia, pp.19-25
³ S. M. Srinivasa Chari, Vaiṣṇavism, p.1
⁴ R. G. Bhandarkar, Vaiṣṇavism, Śaivism and minor religious systems, p.4
⁵ A. L Basham, The Wonder that was India, vol. II., p. 298
communities. Some of the Gupta sovereigns as opined by H.C. Roychoudhary were unquestionably great champions of the religion of Vāsudeva. With the rise of their power Bhāgavatism that was now synonymous with Vaiṣṇavism, naturally came to forefront and spread to the remotest corners of India. The Ālvars popularized the Vaiṣṇavism largely among the masses during the period from the seventh to tenth century A.D. and Vaiṣṇavite regeneration took its deep root from this time.

From very beginning of the historical records, it appears that politics and religion were influenced by each other. Chinese traveller Hieun Tsang who visited Kāmarūpa in the first half of the seventh century wrote about the political economic and religious states of this land. According to them people at that time believed on the Vedic poly-theism. According to his information, Bhutivarman a king of sixth century A.D. was the paramabhāgavata. At that same time, he was also known as paramadaivata (the great worshipper of deity). Here is the indication that though Vaiṣṇavism prevailed in some way or other yet it was mingled with Vedic rites and rituals. An important reason for the popularity of Bhakti movement was its openness and all-inclusiveness while the earlier two main Hindu traditions of Vedantic contemplative mysticism or search for moksha (liberation) and Vedic Dharma shāstra, ritualism were both meant for upper castes, bhakti was meant for all.

Viṣṇu worship was prevalent in Kāmarūpa from early times. As of the Heun Tsang’s report, the Barganga Rock inscription of Bhūtivarman (A.D.554) also refers the King as Parama-Bhāgavata. The Umācal rock inscription of Surendra Varma

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6 ibid.
7 D. Sarma (ed.), Kāmrupaśāsanāvali, Texts, Part-II, p.4
records the establishments of a Cave temple dedicated to Lord Balabhadra in the 5th century A.D.\textsuperscript{9} The ancient Kings of Kāmarūpa claimed their descendant of Viṣṇu. According to tradition, the first Asura King of Kāmarūpa is said to have been born out of the union of Viṣṇu with Mahi. However, the most important and popular avatar of the province of Assam is Kṛṣṇa, whose account became the main themes of early Assamese religious literature. The Kṛṣṇa legend seem to have formed an essential element of Viṣṇavism in Kāmarūpa as early at least as the 7th century A.D.\textsuperscript{10} Various sources confirms that Viṣṇavism prevalent in Assam before Śaṅkaradeva was mainly Vāsudavaism of the Pancarātra cult. Although Śaṅkaradeva did not preach the pāncarātra cult he respectfully mentioned in his Kirtana and translation of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa canto XI including Caturvṛtya. KP\textsuperscript{11} mentions different mantras for the worship of Vāsudeva and Hayagriva-Mādhava in different places of Kāmarūpa.\textsuperscript{12} The mode of worship of Vāsudeva as propounded in the KP corresponds very much to the directions laid down in the pāncarātra samhātis.\textsuperscript{13} This sākta-upapurāṇa exhibits a Catholic outlook by eulogizing Viṣṇu-Vāsudeva in many places and the opening mangala caraṇa śloka indicates that the writer was probably of Vaiṣṇava religious faith for he concludes the work with salutation to Viṣṇu. This Purāṇa refers to the following five manifestations of Vāsudeva in Kāmarūpa with their pithas,

\begin{footnotes}
\item[\textsuperscript{9}] It is the earliest rock inscription discovered from the north eastern slopes of Kāmākhyā or the Nilachala Hill called Umācal hill in Assam by R.M. Nath in A.D. 1955.
\item[\textsuperscript{9}] D. Sarma (ed.), \textit{op. cit.}, p 2
\item[\textsuperscript{10}] B. K. Baruah, \textit{A Cultural History of Assam}, p.174
\item[\textsuperscript{11}] The Kalika-Purāṇa (KP) (ca.10th. century) is a Hindu religious scripture, considered as one of the 18 Upapurāṇas. The extant text contains 98 chapters with over 9000 stanzas and is the only work of the series dedicated to the worship of the goddess Kāli her manifold forms such as Kamakhya, Girlja, Devi, Bhadrakali, and Mahāmāya.
\item[\textsuperscript{12}] KP., Ch.817
\item[\textsuperscript{13}] B. Kakati, \textit{The Mother Goddess of Kamakhya}, pp.71-72.
\end{footnotes}
i) Viṣṇu as *Haya-grīva* form who killed Jvarāsura in Manikuṭa. (v.81/75)

ii) Viṣṇu as fish incarnation (*matsya-avatāra*) in the Matsyadhaja mountain (v.82/50)

iii) Mādhava in the form of a Bhairava named Pandunātha in Rakṣakūṭa (v.82/65)

iv) Viṣṇu as Boar incarnation in the Citravaha Mountain east of Pandu (v.82/74)

v) Vāsudeva – Viṣṇu in the Dikkaravāsinī region (v.83/90)

Two Copperplate grants of the two Chutiyā Kings of Lakshimpur region (Habung) dating A.D. 1392 and 1401 evidently speaks about the prevalence of this cult in Dikkaravāsinī region as cited in *Kālikā-Purāṇa*. It is referred to be the earliest form of Vaiśṇavism, (Tantric-Vaiśṇavism) where tantric rituals were performed. From another account it is known that a *Kalīta desha*, a colony of Vaiśṇavite and Aryan settlement occupied by the *Abors* and *Miris* in northeast India where the forefathers of Gopala Ātā, a neo-Vaiśṇavite preceptor were living. The people of that region bore some of the Hindu Vaiśṇavite names like Vāsudeva, Harideva, and Sāpkarṣaṇa etc. Among the kings and other high personnel the adoption of Viṣṇu’s name as a personal name and surname became common practice in early Assam. In the grant of Balavarman, Vanamala is referred to as devoted to the faith of Bhava (Siva) but his name Vanamala an epithet of Viṣṇu, indicates his devotion to Him.

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14 ibid, p.67
15 U.C. Lekharu (ed.), KGC., Foreword
16 B.K. Baruah, op. cit., p.169
The earliest version of the doctrine of Viṣṇu is contained in Bhāgavata Gītā wherein Krṣṇa reveals himself as the ever-active godhead incarnate. From the beginning of the Christian era if not before, most educated Hindus have been either Vaiṣṇavite or Śaivites— that is to say, they have looked on either Viṣṇu or Śiva as the supreme God.

The Gupta Kings (4th-7th Century A.D.) were all the champions of the religion of Vāsudeva. Besides describing themselves as Parama Bhāgavat, the mantra ‘om namo Bhāgavate Vāsudevaye’ came to be regarded as the mantra of worshipping the deity. In Assam, reference of Viṣṇu in its boar incarnation is found in the Puspabhadrā grant of Dharmapāla which begins with adoration to god. In the grant of Balavarmana, Vanamālī is referred to as devoted to the faith of Bhava (Śiva) but his name Vanamālī, an epithet of Viṣṇu indicates his devotion to the common deities of popular worship, as seems to very likely what we know of the custom prevailing today. Epigraphic and archaeological finds, folklores and traditions, compositions of the pre-Śaṅkarite poet testify the existence of Vaiṣṇavism as a living faith and cult in Assam. Bana in Harsha Carita describes Bhaskarvarman (C.606-647) the great king of Kāmarūpa as belonging to a Vaiṣṇava family. The period of Dharmapāla definitely points to the predominance of the Vaiṣṇava cult in Kāmarūpa. The worship of Hayagrīva as one of the incarnations of Viṣṇu possibly existed in Assam from very early period. Indication of a feeble stream of Vaiṣṇavism in Assam can be gleaned from two Devi Purāṇa, Yogini Tantra and Kālikā Purāṇa. As of the Gupta Kings of northern India, the Barganga plate also mentions Bhaskar Varma’s great grandfather Bhutivarman as Paramadvaita-Paramabhāgavata. The Dubi Copper plate grant of Bhaskar Varma (7th century A.D.) and other such grants pay rich tribute to Viṣṇu instead of Pīnākapāṇi or Mahādeva. Reference to earliest record of prevalence of Hari nāma-Kīrtana of Gauri Swami, Śiva
and Nārāyana in Assam is found in Deopani inscription when an engraver started his work only after chanting the names of Śaṅkara and Nārāyaṇa.¹⁷

Viṣṇu images of various dates have also been discovered in different parts of Assam during Śaṅkaradeva’s time. The saint himself described to have unearthed a four armed Vāsudeva image of shining black stone at his native place Bardowā.¹⁸ In the two copperplates grants of Lakshimpur cited above record the names and surnames of Viṣṇu like Saṅkarsana, Mādhava, Nārāyana, Gadādhara, Balabhadra, Hari, and Kāmadev etc. In this context M. Neog points out to some kings pertaining to the period of our study bore some of the names of Viṣṇu like Pratyakshya nārāyana, Satyanārāyana, and Lakṣminārāyana of Sadhayāpuri (Chutiya kings) Naranārāyana and Viśvanārāyana (Koch King) Durlabha Nārāyana and Indranārāyana (Kamatā).¹⁹ The feeble under current of Vaiṣṇavism encouraged Mādhava Kandali, the court poet of Mahāmāṇikya, a Kachāri King to translate the Ramayana and Harivara-viṣṇu, Kabiratna Saraswati and Rudra Kandali and some other Vaiṣṇavite writers to translate several episodes of the Mahābhārata into Assamese versions. Śaṅkaradeva appearing in the firmament of Assam and propounded the neo-Vaiṣṇavism by introducing his Bhakti pantheon based on the works of the Bhakti Ratiṇāvalī, the Bhakti Ratnākara, the Bhakti pradīpa, the Bhakti Viveka, Kīrtan-ghosā and scores of other such theological literature. All the works are unanimous on one point that the path of bhakti is superior to the path of knowledge and rituals. S.N. Sarma rightly sees the early stage of Vaiṣṇavism as the Vaiṣṇavism of epics embellished in literatures when he writes; the cult of Vāsudeva

¹⁷ Śaṅkaranārāyana (Harihara) stone inscription from Deopani, No.1, vide D. Sarma (ed.) Kāmarūpasāsanāvali, pp.60-63

¹⁸ U.C. Lekharu, (ed.), op. cit., p.34

¹⁹ M. Neog, Śaṅkaradeva and His Times, p.88
mainly flourished in the temples and the Vaiśṇavism of the epics appeared to have influenced a certain section of the mass.\footnote{S N. Sarma, \textit{Neo-Vaiśnavite Movement and Sattra Institution of Assam}, p.9} In association of one or more of the four elements, guru (preceptor), \textit{deva} (God), \textit{Nāma} (name of the God) and \textit{bhakata} (holy association), a suitable atmosphere is created when \textit{bhakti-dharma} unfolds in Assam in 15\textsuperscript{th} century A.D.\footnote{A. M. Mukherjee, \textit{Vaishnavism in Assam and Bengal}, p.127}

2. Śaṅkaradeva and his times

The political situation of Assam in the mid-15th century was in a state of turmoil. The process of disintegration of the country started from the early decades of 13th century A.D. The eastern part commonly known as upper Assam was under the sway of the Ahoms, the Western part was under the Koches and the Chutiyas in the Sadiya area held Khens, the north-eastern part. Ethnic groups often engaged themselves in bloody feuds that took toll of many lives. Śaṅkaradeva himself faced a number of such feuds and had to change his abode from place to place. It was also the time the society was making strides from tribalism towards feudalism.\footnote{S. Barman, 'The quest for an egalitarian utopia: A critique of Śaṅkaradeva philosophy', \textit{Essays on Śaṅkaradeva} (ed.), p 182}

The following two rival political systems were existed from 13th -16th century i) A loose confederacy of hierarchical petty feudal chiefs, who built their system of administration on the ruins of the imperial Kāmarūpa. ii) Semi feudal state formations that continued under Chutiyas, Kachāri, and Ahoms.\footnote{A. Guha , \textit{Neo-Vaishnavism to Insurgency}, p.7} Although the old tribal bonds were still extant, new feudal relations were taking shape resulting in the formation of a
general Assamese society and the emergence of state powers. Śaṅkaradeva was never satisfied with his time when as many of the small kingdoms could not survive even for a decade because of the onslaughts of their rapacious neighbour kingdoms. Assam during his tenures presents a motley picture of diverse shades and grades of culture. The region was ruled by different political powers each desperately trying to eat up other power and territorial loot.

Under this situation Assam better known as Kāmarūpa earlier became a soft target for a series of foreign invasions. A series of attacks by Mughal invaders beginning with the invasion of Sultan Ghiyasuddin took place from the year 1321-1322 A.D. That followed by two subsequent attacks led by Muhammad Bin Tughlaq (1337-1338 A.D) and Hussain Shah of Gauḍa (1493-1519) who invaded both Kāmarūpa and Kamatapur.²⁴ The third invasion under the command of Turbak in April 1532 A.D. attacked the country and encamped opposite the Ahom fort at Śingari. Suklen the commander of the Ahom army proceeded to Śingari and the king himself commanded a contingent to Salā. But he suffered reverse. The final battle took place between the two forces near the Bharali river in which Turbak himself was pierced with a spear and died.²⁵ The Ahom then chased the Muhammadans and drove away beyond the river Karatoya where they dug a tank and erected a temple to commemorate their victory. Returning to his capital Suhungmung performed the Rikkhvan ceremony.²⁶ The Ahoms under the rule of Suhungmung or Dihingia Raja (1497-1539 A.D) successfully resisted a series of attack. In A.D. 1529, Āhoms first dispatched an expedition down the river Kalang and went up the Bharali and booties and slaves collected in the mission were

²⁴ E. A. Gait, History of Assam, p.94
²⁵ ibid., p.89
²⁶ Ibid., pp 95-96
handed over to the king. After a lull, hostilities were soon renewed when the alien forces advanced up the Brahmaputra and a battle was fought at Temāni. After an initial reversal, Muhammadans attacked the Singari garrison of Ahoms but they were defeated and pursued as far as Khāgarijān (Nowgong) and their commander Bit Malik was slain.

In the midst of 15th the century the central Assam had the rule of the Bhuyāns; Kachāris from Dimapur ruled the southern part and various tribes who never recognized any outside ruler inhabited the hill tracts. The Bhuyāns who dominated northern bank of the Brahmaputra and to the West of Chutiyā kingdom during the time of entrance of the Ahoms into Brahmaputra valley had their territory extended from Subansiri in the east to Barnadi in the west. Prior to the fifteenth century, these Bāra-Bhuyāns maintained their independence against the Kachāri and Chutiyā kings. However, with the entrance of the Ahoms they faced a decline. From the middle of the fifteenth century, the Ahom kingdom expanded towards West at the expanse of the Bāra-Bhuyāns, Kachāris and Chutiyās. In 1553 A.D, Ahom King Dihingia Rajā defeated the Bāra-Bhuyāns and made them feudatory.27 Before coming to Assam the Bārabhuyāns as a ruling class acted as provincial governors under Durlabhnārāyaṇa, Dharmapala and Durlebhendu of the Kāmarūpa Kamata kingdom. H.N. Dutta Baruah, a Kāyastha chronicler presents a detailed account of the origin of the Kāyasthas of Assam. Noted historian K.L. Baruah termed the attempt of Dutta Baruah as praiseworthy; who tries to dig and throw much lights in the history of a dark period of Assam from 1200-1500 A.D. The aforesaid account helps us in drawing the table which shows expansion of some dynasties of the Kāmarūpa- Kamata and Bāra-Bhuyāns.28

27 Gazetteer of India, Assam, Nowgong district, 1978, p.56
K.L Baruah also traces the origin of Bhuyāns of Eastern Assam valley claiming a different origin. They traced their descent from Sāntaṇu and Sāṃanta, the two grandsons’s of Samudra as has been mentioned in the above genealogy by H. N. Dutta baruah.

When the last king of this lineage Mrigāṅka, the great grandson of Ārimatta died childless, the ruling line of the Kamata kings appears to have been supplanted by a ruler

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29 K.L Baruah, *Early History of Kamrupa*, p.236
named Niladhvaj (Nilambara) of the Khen dynasty. During Nilambara’s time, the boundary of the country extended up to Barnadi. Taking advantages of loose administration of some later kings like Indranārāyaṇa, Bhavacahndra and his grandson Durlabhendu, the Bhuyān chiefs including Caṭḍibara, the forefather of Śaṅkaradeva threw away shackles of the Kamata Kings and became independent.30 But the entire territory subsequently came under the dominance of the Mughals in A.D 1498. From that time onwards, the Bāra-Bhuyāns who ruled over lower part of the Assam maintained their independent status. The previously mentioned period expand from 1316-1400 A.D and 1498-1515 A.D. Śaṅkaradeva’s group of Bāra-Bhuyāns seems to have had some administrative relations with the Ahom capital.31 The relations became strained with them when the Ahom King Suklengmung awarded capital punishment to Śaṅkaradeva’s son in law named Hari on the pretext that the Bhuyān under Śaṅkaradeva did not co-operate with the King’s men in khedā, an elephant catching operation.32

While the Chutiya kings ruled the country east of Suvansiri and Disang during the thirteenth century, the Kachāri kingdom extended on the south bank of Brahmaputra at least half and way across the Nowgong district. Some sources referred the aggression as the Ahom. Before coming to central Assam, Rāmcaraṇa Ṭhākur, the earliest chronicler of Śaṅkaradeva, states that the forefathers of the saint established their independent rules in some of the specific areas of Kāmarūpa showing allegiance to a king named Dharmapāla. Another biographer Bhuṣana dvija, says that Laṅdavara, the earliest recorded forefather of the saint’s family was one of the leading Bhuyāns of Gauḍa. Some subsequent accounts state that as per provisions of a political treaty between the

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30 H.N. Dutta Baruah, Pracin Kamrupiya Kayastha Samajar Itibritta, p.25
31 M. Neog, SHT, p.112
32 ibid., p.62
kings, Durlabhnarayana of Kamarupa handed over Candivara and some Kāyasthas along with some families of the Brāhmaṇas to Dharmanārayaṇa or Dharmapāla.33 Though independent, the Bhuyāns had confederacy of their own with one Bāra-Bhuyān or Śīromoni Bhūyān as the leader. Some of them wore the title ‘kha’ indicating that they had once been vassals to the powerful Gauḍa Kings. Rāmcarana Thakur, states that the forefathers of the Saint established their independent rules in certain areas of Kāmarupa owing allegiance to its King Dharmapala. Some other sources claim that Candivara, with a group of people of his own clan migrated to Assam, and settled first at Lengamaguri when the reigning King conferred him the honorific title of Śīromoni.34 Subsequently they left Lenga-maguri, and settled at Bhalukaguri on the southern bank of Brahmaputra. They further went towards west through Kājālimukh and entered into the sparsely located uninhabited high sandy banks (cāpari) and built their two earliest habitats, first at Kuthārdubi 35 and next at Pheṭṭāśimalo on the north bank. Sometimes later, sailed over to the south bank, Candivara made his abode at Rauta and after a brief stay decided to settle at Ṭembutwāni bandh36, which became to be known as Bardowā. Tracing the history of the early migration of Bhuyāns, Daityari, son of Rāmcarana Ṭhākura states that he came over to Kāmarupa with a group of twelve Bhūyān families,

33 Datta Baruah, op.cit., p.20
34 Devidāsa loka bīta āse jata māna / Dāsi dāsa sakalaka nilā niya sthāne , Lengāmāgurika lági sabe laiya gaila / Brahmaputre ujāi caidhyadine pālla// v.113. Ramcaran Ṭhākur ( meaning, Devidāsa or Candivara took all the resources including their maid servants from his own place. After sailing Brahmaputra upstream for fourteen days they reached the spot called Lengamaguri.
35 Kuthārdubi is located on Bhūra cāpari on the south bank of Brahmaputra; Dutta Baruah, op. cit., p.29
36 Tembutwāni banbh is a cāpari of Brahmaputra located twelve miles south west of Pheṭṭāśimalo or Ālipukhuri, vide., ibid. p.30
about whom different accounts are found. The boundaries between the tract ruled by these chiefs and the kingdom of Kāmarūpa altered from time to time.

The entire tract of the present district of Nagaon where Śaṅkara deva’s forefathers made their first settlements formed an integral part of the old Kāmarūpa kingdom during the reign of Bhuti Varman or Mahābhūtavarman (c.512-42 A.D) who was eight in descent from Pushyarvarman(c.350-74 A.D.) of Bhauma-Naraka dynasty. Bāra-Bhuyāns were called as the fair weather friends of their immediate ruling monarchs. When the king or central power was strong, they were submissive to him while as soon as the King proved to be weak they shifted their allegiance to suit their vested interest.\(^{37}\) *Carita puthies*, historical chronicles and his own writings have established Śaṅkara deva’s origin to Bāra-bhuyāns. The Bhuyān were a class of petty chiefs exercising some royal authority over small tracts of territories under the central authority of the kings of ancient Kāmrupa. The term Bhuyān is not caste based. It is related to land standing for lord of the land and is synonymous with the term Bhowmik.\(^{38}\) The Bhuyāns of Bardowā received a major jolt when Śaṅkara’s father Kusuma died and the territories were assigned to the care of Jayanta and Mādhava Dalai, his two brothers. After his marriage, Śaṅkara deva became *gomoṣṭhā* or overlord over hundred families and later on wore the title *Śiromoni*. Śaṅkara deva shouldered the responsibility of administration of the Bhuyān kingdom with much dexterity to avoid any friction with Kachāri interest. Ramānanda states that due to the inroads of the Kachāris or Kirāta, Śaṅkara deva and other Bhuyāns living in Bardowā area ultimately decided upon migrating to Gangmukh, a place under the Āhom dominion in saka 1438-


\(^{38}\) E. A. Gait, *op. cit.*, p.38
39 (A.D.1516). With this migration, independence of the Siromoni Bhyuăn-chief that traces its origin from the time of Candivara thus came to an end and the chieftaindom of Bardowā also ceased to exist. From Gangmukh they shifted to Dhuwāhata at Majuli.

For the execution of Hari and the confinement of Mādhavadeva Śaṅkara understood that he could no longer hope to see thriving his order under the Ahom territory. Meanwhile Pratāpnārāyaṇa and Gābahrūkhā, his two close relatives made a short of alliance with Koch king Naranārāyaṇa (1540-1587 A.D.) who offered secured and safe passage for Śaṅkaradeva and his followers for coming to Koch Kingdom. It was in A.D. 1546 the Koch general Chilarai sent an expedition along the northern bank of the Brahmaputra and fought with the Ahoms. In A.D. 1547 Chilarai moved up to Nārāyanpur and fortified that village. Taking advantages of the imminent attack of the Koch, Śaṅkaradeva made good their escape to Kāmarūpa first. The saint and his followers settled finally at Pāṭbāusi in the present district of Barpețā. Here the cult fast began to gather strength and bulk. Śaṅkaradeva refers to Naranārāyaṇa as Mallanripati in his literary works like Rāja-bhatimā and Rāma-Vijayanātaka. In some of the Caritas, Chilarai is called Dewan or Chotarājā. Here from he went to a visit to Puri covering a few months at the age of about ninety seven. No sooner had he returned then a Vaiśṇava camp abused the ears of Naranārāyaṇa with vilely distorted accounts of the saint’s activities. However it proved to be blessings as the meeting with the King turned the tide of affairs in his favour and the two remained friends for the rest of their lives.

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39 M. Neog, SHT, p.69
40 Dutta Baruah, op. cit., p 37
41 U.C. Lekharu (ed.), op. cit., p.43
42 Gait, E.A., op. cit., p.52
43 M. Neog, op. cit., p, 61; See the footnote
44 M. Neog, Śaṅkaradeva and his Predecessors, Introductory
Śaṅkara later on propagated his pantheon from Pāṭbaṇī and left the place for the last time in 1489 saka /1568 A.D. and breathed his last at Koc Behar on 21st Bhādra (September), the 2nd day of the bright half of the lunar month 1490 Śaka /A.D.1569.45

The political instability of the time tended to produce a chaotic condition in the religious spheres also. There were challenges and counter challenges among the believers of Śaivism, Śaṅkism Tantricism and prevalent Vaiṣṇavism. In addition to this some local tribal gods and goddesses were also propitiated with typical traditional rituals including sacrifices of human being. Certain Parallel armed engagements took place among the ruling authorities of the Ahoms and the Koches. Under the able leadership of Naranārayana and the general-ship of Chilarai a large part of Assam came under the Koc territory. The state developed cantering round Koc Behar, including Goalpara, parts of present day Kāmarūpa, Darrang and Sonitpur districts. The erstwhile district of Goalpara and a part of the old Kingdom of Kāmarūpa were under the Koc kingdom, better known as Kamatāpur Kingdom.

Moreover, there were the local tribal chieftains and in the hilly terrains, constituting large segments in Assam. Each tribal community had rulers in their own territory, religious faith, languages and culture. Assam was a medley of various tribes and castes, languages and cultural varieties, each independent to one another in every respect. There was hardly any binding or integrating bond to club together all these ethnic language communities and religious faiths. The situation did not allow any of the local powers to thrive and consolidate. People by and large depended on destiny designed by the unseen spiritual powers. This community of landlords were conquered by the Chutiyās, Ahoms, Koches and Kachāris at different situations of Assam's

45 U.C. Lekharu (ed.), op. cit., p.224
history. They survived so long as they were allowed by the adjoining powers to live in peace. Peace however proved to be a mirage for them. Gluttonous eyes of the ruling powers were fixed on them. The family of Śaṅkaradeva had to humble pie and got uprooted from their ancestral land and had to suffer onslaughts from the marauding conquerors. Political identity of the Bāra-Bhuyāns finally got ceased out of the political map of the erstwhile Assam. By the early 16th century the on-going process of a new ideology of abridgement of political fragmentation, warranted the advent of a great universal religion—the neo-Vaiṣṇavism. Śaṅkaradeva therefore thought of a Kingdom where in people belonging to every caste and creed may live in peace with a common ideology of life and society. He found the teachings of Śrimadbhāgavata more suitable being the people under a common flag of Vaiṣṇavism. This sacred book advocated for the supremacy of Viṣṇu over all the god and goddess. The ideology was in favour of a strong and central power instead of centrifugal powers. Moreover, it stresses on personal faith and self-sacrifice and became, “the best religion” to hold a peasant society and “its states together.”

Some of the important events of Śaṅkaradeva’s life and time are given here in chronological order—

1449 A.D. - Śaṅkaradeva was born to Kusumvara and Satyasyandha at Alipukhuri near Bardowā.

1466-70 A.D. - Śaṅkaradeva received the post of Siromoni Bhūyān and on the wake of Kachāri- Bhūyān struggle he shifted his abode

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47 A. Guha, op. cit., p.7
from Alipukhuri to Bardowa and built the first *Kirtanaghar* and celebrated *doul utsava*.

1480-98 A.D. - Nilambara became the king of Kamata.

1481 A.D. - Manu, the only daughter of Šaṅkaradeva was married to Hari.

1490 A.D. - Ahom Kachari struggle started.

1498 A.D. - Badshah of Gauḍa invaded Kamata Kingdom.

1512 A.D. - Dihingia King occupied Habung Rajya.

1515 A.D. - Biswa Simha established the Koch –Kingdom.

1517-18 A.D - In the wake of Bhūyān and Kachari struggle, Šaṅkaradeva left Bardowā for good.

1522 A.D. - Mādhava received his ordination from Šaṅkaradeva through Rāmdāsa. (*Manikānchan sanjog*)

1524 – 43 A.D. - Šaṅkaradeva started living in Dhuwāhata in Majuli.

1532 A.D. - Chutiya Kingdom was occupied by Dihingiyā Raja.

1540 A.D. - Naranārāyana ascended the throne of the Koch Kingdom.

1547 A.D. - Chilarai occupied Āhom territory up to Narayanpur. The post of *Gomoṣṭhā* of Barpeṭā was offered to Šaṅkaradeva by Naranārāyana. He has finished the composition of the *Kirtanaghoṣā* and completes translation of first, second, and the ninth book of *Ādyodaśama, Madhya Daśam, Ekādaśa*, the eleventh book of the Bhāgavata.

(18)
1547-68 A. D. - Śaṅkara and Mādhava migrated to Pāṭbāusī. Śaṅkara went on his second pilgrimage in A.D. 1550 from Pāṭbāusī.

1552 A. D. - Sukhampha or Khorā Raja ascended the throne of the Ahom kingdom.

1569 A. D. - At the request of Chilarai, Śaṅkaradeva wrote Rām Vijaya nāta.

1569 A. D. - Śaṅkaradeva died on 21st Bhādra (September), the 2nd day of the bright half of the lunar month of 1490 Śaka in Koc-behār. He was cremated on the bank of Torsā river at a place Bhellā-Kākatkutā.49

3. Role of Śaṅkaradeva in spreading neo-Vaiṣṇavism

The neo-Vaiṣṇavite movement initiated by Śaṅkaradeva in Assam may be called a part of the erstwhile all India Vaiṣṇavite movement, although it had its own distinct features in the principles and tenets of the faith best suited to the nature of the people. The age of Śaṅkaradeva was an age of great religious upheaval all over India which produced great saints of revolutionary views. Śaṅkaradeva adapted the religion to the needs of the parables and democratizing the monotheistic Vaiṣṇava cult, so long not accessible to the common man. Like many other contemporary schools of India, the neo-Vaiṣṇavite movement propounded by Śaṅkaradeva is essentially based on devotional elements. Self-surrender to the feet of Lord Viṣṇu Nārāyana and the feeling of ecstatic joy and happiness in serving and worshipping him are two fundamentals of

49 K. D. Goswami (ed.), foreword, Śrimadbhāgavata, pp.15-18; S.N. Barman, Srimanta Śaṅkaradeva Kṛti āru Kṛtilya, p.86

(19)
bhakti as means and end of human existence. In 1481 A.D. at the age of 32, he started his first sojourn covering most of the holy places and temples of northern and southern India like Jaganatha–Puri, Ganga, Gaya, Varanasi, Prayaga, Vrindavana, Mathura, Kurukshetra, Badarikāshrama from his native place Bardowā. At the end of his tour he returned home and remarried having been convinced that in order to elevate oneself spirituality and to be of service to humanity at the same time, one need not renounce the World. He then began to preach his tenets of neo-Vaiṣnavism with full vigour far and wide and found it convenient to dive deep into content of Bhāgavata–Purāṇa received from one Jagadīśa Misra, and started translation of some portions of it into Assamese verse. Therefore, after intensely immersed in the pages of the holy script he ventured to proclaim his creed, although it is much earlier that he had his revelation. Following this Śaṅkaradeva decided to preach actively the message of Bhāgavata—the religion of absolute surrender to one and that one being Viṣṇu Kṛṣṇa, the supreme Lord. During his twelve years sojourn he learnt theology and liturgy of Vaiṣnavism. Śaṅkara now set him to the task of propounding and propagating bhakti. His sojourn and stay in holy places mentioned above carried deep influence into his carrier and were, to a great extent, responsible for shaping it. He set up his first prayer hall at Bardowā, which became the nucleus of Vaiṣṇava monastery. Three earliest works, the ‘Katha Guru Carita’, the Bardowā Carita, and Ramcaran’s account carry the impression that it is only after the successful performance of the first ever-dramatic performance at his native place Bardowā ‘Chīhna-Yātra’, Śaṅkara expressly declared him a preacher.

Among his first group of converts include the family priest Rāmrāma, his teacher

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51 L N. Bezbaruah, Religion of love and devotion, p.14
52 M. Neog, op. cit, p.109

(20)
Mahendrn Kandali, wife of Jayantä Dalai and a leper named Harirāma. When attained
the age of sixty years, he had to move from place to place due to various socio-political
condition of the state. The movement was well received in his native but the Bhuyāns,
to which clan Śaṅkaradeva belonged had to migrate to the north bank to avoid clashes
with the neighbouring Kachāris.

Migrating from his ancestral abode Bardowā in A.D 1516 he first settled
temporarily for a brief period at Rautā, Komarākatā and Gangmāu and finally reached
and settled for a long duration at Dhuwāhata Belaguri in Mājuli. The simplicity and
purity of the faith in contrast to the ritual dominated Brāhmaṇical cult was the prime
factor in attracting unsophisticated masses to the devotional path. Despite political
unrest and turmoil he was always engaged in performing his activity wherever he went.
At Dhuwāhata Śaṅkaradeva made many converts and his fame spread wider and wider.
He administered ordination to Govinda Ātai of Gāro and Rāmacandra of Mising (Miri)
community, hitherto treated as untouchables by the orthodox Hindus. It was at this
place that Śaṅkara won to his side his greatest disciple Mādhavadeva in A.D.1522.
Śaṅkara’s hand was greatly strengthened and looked upon Mādhava as his proper co­
worker and associate. With his joining, the fraternity of Assam Vaiṣṇavism, religious
discourse had their scope widened and the music of mass prayers increased in volume.

54 Dvarika Dvija Misra’s Šantāvallī, (Ms.) v.604
Dvarika Miśra’s Šantāvallī, a modern descriptive biographical work gives historical analysis
of Assamese Vaiṣṇavite sattras and minute details of the development of various sanhātis. L.N.
Bezbaruah in his work ‘Śri Śaṅkaradeva aru Śri Mādhavadeva’ has mentioned about the author
Dvarika as his contemporary. Dvarika gives his identity from verses 1666-1693 (Ms.) as the
seventh descendants of Krishna Bharati, a disciple of Vamsigopāla.
55 Daityari Thakur, Mahapurusa Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva Jīvana Carita, 285-ff.
However the popularity of the 'ekaśarana' faith of Śaṅkaradeva gained popularity, the more hostility of the Brāhmanical sacerdotalism he had to face.

For the tragic incident of the murder of Hari, his son-in-law and confinement of Mādhavadeva and the growing hostility of the priestly Brāhmaṇs, he was highly embittered and left the Ahom kingdom under the reign of Suhungmung (1497-1539 A.D.). On his way to Western Assam, at Barpeṭā a merchant Nārāyana Ṭhākur Āṭā, formerly known as Bhavānanda, and Harideva, along with the two notable Brāhmaṇs were converted by him. With his entry into Kāmarūpa the third phase of his career as a preacher commenced. M. Neog calls this period as the fullest development of the order. Major portions of his literary works and treaties were composed within this period of eventful stay at Pāṭbāusī. Conversion of some Brāhmaṇs also helped him in drawing sympathy of other Brāhmaṇs who as a class had remained so long outside the fold of his influence and neo-Vaiśṇavism.

Accompanied by one hundred and twenty bhakatas, Śaṅkaradeva set out for second pilgrimage in A.D 1550. After a great deal of moving including six months long pilgrimage he settled at Pāṭbāusī near Barpeṭā and constructed a Kirtana-ghar there. Following this, he resumed his customary work of organizing congregation, receiving neophyte and writing books. Some of the people he initiated were Chakrapani Dwija Daityari Thakur, son of Ramcarana said to have composed the Mahāpurṣa Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadevar Jivana Carita (pub.1900) in metrical form at the request of some holy men. In writing the Carita, Daityari was greatly helped by his father Ramcarana and Buhirpo Govinda, the head of Madhupur sattrā in Koc Behar. M. Neog says the work must have been composed between 1619-1648 A.D. In this work the disruption of Vaiśṇava order comes to be distinctly mentioned

56. S.N. Sarma, op. cit., p.21
57. Ibid.

(22)
and Sarvabhauma Bhattacharya (Brāhmaṇa) : Ketāi Khan, (a Kayastha) ; Govinda, (a Garo) ; Jayarama, (a Bhutia) ; Murari, (a Koch) and Chandsai (a Muslim). He also befriended Ananta Kandali, a profound scholar of Sanskrit, who translated parts of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa. Dāmodardeva, another Brāhmaṇa, was initiated and he later became the founder of the Brahma Saṅhati sect of the order. He had learnt scholarly disposition of the reigning Koch King Naranārāyaṇa and his brother Chilarai. Śaṅkaradeva’s life under the Koch territory is marked by a comparative calm, which gave him opportunity to fulfil the mission of his life. During his stay under Koces he attracted many important disciples to his fold. Because of Chilarai’s marriage with Bhubaneswarī, nieces of Śaṅkaradeva, the faith received full support and patronage and his place of residence grew into a centre of dissemination of nāma-dharma.Śaṅkaradeva expounded the main principles of his nāma-dharma, thereby defeated his opponents by his dignified mien and subtle arguments and rooted out the malice of Brāhmaṇa who became jealous of him when the order thrived vigorously. Koch-King Naranārāyaṇa was so pleased at this that he honoured Śaṅkaradeva with not only valuable presents but expressed his desire to become his disciple. In the kingdom of his patron Koc-Behār, Śaṅkaradeva died in A.D 1568. Thus, Śaṅkaradeva went on preaching his faith, giving a simple interpretation of the doctrine of bhakti in three states of Assam, Behār and Kāmarūpa with great success.

As primarily, a religious and social reformer Śaṅkaradeva devised his religion supported by discursive reasoning and abstract thinking, but to propagate a simple system of faith based on devotion. For stabilization and propagation of his faith, he made an initial provision for nām-ghar, which now characterise every Assamese

58 K.D. Goswami, Mahāpuruṣa Śaṅkaradeva. p.46
village. Finding the atmosphere very calm and quiet, he set himself to the task of
propagating his creed through religious discourse, congregational prayers, and recitation
of the sacred texts, songs and dramatic performance. With collaboration of his cousin
Ramraya, Šaṅkaradeva established the first community prayer hall not only for the mass
prayer, but also for religious discussion, teachings and occasional dramatic performance
at Bardowā. It developed into well-organized religious institution which came to be
known as sattra with four types—i) In the first type (monastic sattras) Adhikāra with
clerical devotees leads a life of a celibate ii) in the second type called semi-monastic,
here Adhikāra and devotees lead house holder's life and iii) in the third type the
Adhikāra and the dekā Adhikāra remain as celibates iv) the last one is an admixture of
first and second type, here both the Adhikarās are married but their devotees consists of
both celibates and non-celibates. Pure monastic institutions are mainly confined to
Majuli (Jorhat district). The other two classes are mainly found in Barpeṭā, Nagaon
(undivided), Sibsagar (undivided) and Lakshimpur districts of Assam.

4. Salient features of the neo-Vaiṣṇavite movement of Assam

The Šaṅkaradeva school of Vaiṣṇavism has a monotheistic doctrine as its central
religious tenet and puts its belief in the repetition within, utterance or celebrating in
music the names and divine sports called līlā of Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa as the principal way unto
the Lord, and is called 'eka-saraṇa nām-dhāma. Certain features of Assam
Vaiṣṇavism have strong points of resemblance with some aspects of southern

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69 S. N. Sarma, op. cit., p.160
60 M. Neog, Šaṅkaradeva and his predecessors, p.49
Vaiṣṇavism. In Assam prior to Śaṅkaradeva, Vaiṣṇavism was confined to a limited number of people and was of syncretic nature. Tantricism both Hindu and Buddhist types was widely prevalent and the worship of various gods and goddess with elaborates ceremonies esoteric in nature. According to some scholars, in the early phase (from epic age to the 12th century) of Vaiṣṇavism it was more or less a mixture of the Puranic and Tantric faiths and in the later (15th-16th) it was principally based on the doctrine of Bhakti or monotheism as propounded by Śaṅkaradeva, who purified Vaiṣṇavism in Assam from contaminations and influences of non-Vaiṣṇavite practices and re-established it on purer and broader basis which attracted all sections of the people.

That the Vāsudeva cult of Vaiṣṇavism prevailed in Assam is the earliest one furnished by the practice of worship of Vāsudeva with Caturvyuhas and vibhasa in the smārtta rites still prevalent in a section of Brāhmaṇas who followed the earlier and Kāmarūpa School of codes. The copper plate grants dating A.D. 1392 and A.D. 1401 of king Satyanarayana of Lakshimpur furnishes another evidence of prevalence of the cult before Śaṅkaradeva. The first inscription making a grant of land to one Narayanadvija begins with invocations to Vāsudeva, Iśāna and Ambā. The second grant in favour of Ravidevadvija issued by his brother describes as a devout worshipper of Vāsudeva.

In the Vaiṣṇava sāstras we find elaborate discussion on the nature and types of bhakti and different means or methods propounded by the Vaiṣṇavite saints for attaining the goal in a state of constant playfulness of mind to God with the firm belief and conviction that he alone is the saviour and that there is no other way of attaining the grace of God except by such surrender. The type of bhakti in neo-Vaiṣṇavism as

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61 B. Kakati, The mother Goddess of Kamakhya, p 71
preached by Śaṅkaradeva is a blending of supreme and Bhāgavati Bhakti which constitute desire less devotional services to God with emotional attachment. Though there are nine ways of attaining bhakti of the Lord, Śravana and Kirtana are much superior to others. There are four central categories of Assamese Vaiṣṇavism. These are nāma, guru, deva and bhakata. It is based on the twofold opposition between deva (God) and bhakata (devotee) while guru (preceptor) and nāma (devotional songs) are their mediating categories. All other categories are connected with two pivotal categories of deva and bhakata. What is unique is that the saint prescribed a simpler mode of religious prayer services which could be easily practiced by all sections of people. Of the nine fold ways of devotion he laid special emphasis on chanting of and listening to the names of Lord. Remembering the names called smarana is equally extolled by Śaṅkaradeva and his followers. Preceptors of Vaiṣṇavism laid emphasis on the association of devotees which provides an atmosphere surcharged with spirituality. It is one of the four fundamental elements of the order which he eulogies prominently in his writings. It is said even a moment spent in the association of devotees is worth more than a long stay in heaven. In this respect Śaṅkaradeva writes: ‘devas and tirthas can purify after a long time, whereas, the very sight of a saint or a devotee purges one of the sins.’ The glory of the name and merit of singing it are equally, enthusiastically and solemnly practiced in innumerable passages of religious texts. Śaṅkaradeva and the Vaiṣṇavism preached by him look upon god with an attitude of a faithful and loving servant and the relation of god and devotee is that of a master and servant.

63 A. Cantile, The Assamese, pp.259-260
64 K. Bhattacharjee, 'The ideological structure of Śaṅkaradeva Vaiṣṇavism', Essays on Śaṅkaradeva (ed.), p.172
65 M. Neog (ed.), Teachings of Śaṅkaradeva, p.81
In pursuing his religion Śaṅkaraśeva admits nirguṇa brahma to be the ultimate reality and jīva to be one with Brahma. To him Brāhmaṇa is indeterminate (nirvīṣea) changeless and eternal. With this monistic views Śaṅkaraśeva seeks to combine theistic irreligious idea of determine personal god which is the pivot of his creed. Bhakti or sole devotion to his personal god and transcendent god involves his grace which leads man to knowledge of self-resulting in release. In Śaṅkaraśeva’s philosophy māyā-vāda seems to continue with unspent strength and vigour. In his religion God as Nārāyana Viṣṇu, Kṛṣṇa, and Rāma represents eternal Brāhmaṇ and demands the worship and devotion of man. M. Neog describes how Śaṅkaraśeva always censured the people who pursued the path of knowledge. He even censured one of his relatives for following the doctrine of knowledge and said his finger has entered into the hole of the handle of an umbrella and abandoned. In ‘ekasarana dharma’, the conception of relation between God and devotee is like that of between an all-powerful master and his servant whose humility and self-surrender to his master is extreme.

Śaṅkaraśeva preaches jñāna as the way to know the highest and singular most reality, but the Vaiṣṇava saints have said of bhakti to be real means for attaining God. He always asserts that the path of knowledge is always inferior to the path of devotion. As he says-

\[
bhakti bihin jñāna karma save byarthā / \\
Kahilo svarupe vedantar tattva artha // (Śrimadbhāgavata 9/410)
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66 M. Neog, SHT, p.p. 244-245
67 L.N. Bezbaroa, op. cit., p. 16

(27)
The basis of Śaṅkaradeva’s philosophical thought is Gītā, Bhāgavata and his own understanding of God. Both Gītā and the Bhāgavata which have rendered into verse and prose by Śaṅkaradeva himself became the magnum opus of his religion. In his order, the process of initiation called sarāṇa and not dikṣā and the mantra is called nāma.68 The word sarāṇa also occur in Ramanujan’s three Sanskrit prose pamphlets which he calls saranaṇagati. At the time of initiation, a neophyte of neo-Vaiṣṇavism order has to go through the following four names, Rama-Kṛṣṇa-Nārāyaṇa-Hari. Neo-Vaiṣṇavism did not advocate the uttering of sixteen names preached by Caityana nor did it acknowledge Rādhā as the embodiment of Mādhava (supreme lord).

One of the notable innovations made by Śaṅkaradeva is the replacement of image of deities by sacred scriptures. Devotees pay their homage to the sacred scriptures installed on the altar (sinhāsana) and all religious functions are held before the altar of the sacred scripture only.69 Assignment of supreme position to the religious guide or guru who is the mundane representative of God is another important feature of the religion.70 Another very important aspect of Śaṅkaradeva religion is the social recognition of man irrespective of caste, creed or status. In his times the most tragic outcome of the Vedic heritage was the ugly concept of casteism in which the so called upper classes closed all doors of wisdom and devotion to the so called lower classes.71

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68 B. Kakati, op. cit., p.73
69 M. Neog, Teachings of Śaṅkaradeva, p.83.
70 ibid
71 P. Saikia, ‘Śaṅkaradeva a revolutionary social reformer’, Śaṅkaradeva studies in Culture’ (ed.), p.82

(28)
Of the different modes of devotion (bhakti), the servile (dāśya) attitude finds special favour in this school. God is the great master, all bliss and all loving kindness.  

The lower caste people who desperately sought a guru and saviour at that time found in him the most sought after leader, rescuer and religious preceptor altogether. It was Śaṅkaradeva who took his first pen for protection, education, social status and emancipation of deprived people, whether as a preacher or as a social reformer or as a literature or as an artist or as an organizer. The saints gave a clarion call to the so-called low casts to come forward for shaking the old customs and superstitions and boldly face the first fight against social evils. Because of this liberal view a large number of people belonging to the tribal background classes embraced Vaiṣṇavism and the rigorous caste distinction was considerably reduced. Creed was made free from ritualistic complexities and no scholarship or high pedigree of birth is necessary to proceed along the path of devotion. A candala who remembers the Lord, heart and soul, is superior to a Brāhmaṇa devoid of faith and devotion. True to this ideal he enlisted large number of low caste devotees. Śaṅkaradeva did not attach any importance to caste system in his religious order. He sang emphatically the following verse in support of his ethics:

Nāhi bhakatita jāti ajāti bicār /

Krṣṇa bhakatita samastare adhikār // (Kirtana-ghoṣā)

Śaṅkaradeva not only preached the principles of fraternity of bhakti in his literary works, but also carried those principles into actual practice. The saint teaches a most refreshing different attitude towards bhakti in his famous work Bhakti-Ratnakara.

72 M. Neog, op. cit., p.49
The work is refreshing on account of the numerous verses he cites from *Srimadbhagavata* and other Purāṇas. It is after Śaṅkara had deeply immersed himself in the Bhāgavata that he ventured to proclaim his creed to the world although it is much earlier that he had his revelation. Śaṅkaradeva’s treatment of the two processes, śravaṇa and Kirtana is quite lively and constitute a real contribution to our total knowledge of devotion. He likes to describe himself as ‘krṣṇara kingkara’, servant of Lord and prescribed the worship of only one deity i.e. Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa, the perfect incarnation of Nārāyana. The neo-Vaiṣṇavite saints believed in absolute monism (advaitavada) and accepted the *maya* doctrine of the Advaitya School as revealed in his numerous writings. The monism in Śaṅkaradeva’s religious thought is ‘eka vine nāhikeva’—there is none else but one—Viṣṇu as the supreme god and only reality. For a devotee of ‘ekaśāraṇīya’ the worship of other gods and goddesses is strictly prohibited. On basis of the *bhakti* cult propounded by the *Bhāgavatapurana* and the absolute self-surrender to the will of God as enjoined in the Gita, he propagated his *ekaśāraṇa dharma* which prescribes the worship of one and only reality in the person of Nārāyana; who according to Śaṅkaradeva represents the *saguna* aspect of the absolute reality. Śaṅkaradeva has expressly forbidden the worship of any deity other than Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa and in fact expelled one of the most favourite disciples named Vyāsa-Kalai from his sect for worshipping Śītalā, a goddess of pox. Thus establishment of monotheism in place of prevailing polytheism and animism was the guiding motto of Śaṅkaradeva. But the most lasting contribution made by the savant of Assam is the emphasis he gives in the eleventh chapter to devotion, not as a means to achieve an end but as the supreme end in itself. In exploring the purport of the second line here Śaṅkaradeva projects brilliant.

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73 R. Devgoswami, Pradipjyoti Mahanta (ed.), *Essays on Śaṅkaradeva*, p.97
74 S. N. Sarma (ed.), *Sri Śaṅkaradeva, a study Teaching of Sri Śaṅkaradeva*, p.81
The abiding and significant features of Śaṅkaradeva teaching is that a selfless meticulous devotee perseveres in his love of God, not as a taste which shall lead him after death to heaven as its reward but as a supremely wasteful exercises, as the highest human itself that can pursue this earth.75

The word kevāṭīya (celibate monks) who lived in small huts within the precincts of the sattras was the creation of Mādhava-deva and prevailed only in Assam Vaishnavism. It does not seem to designate any other system in Northern India who is called by different names. Bhandarkar says Ramanujām has recognized this class of bhakata who desire final deliverance and seek the consciousness of their pure soul, uses the word Kevalin.76 M. Neog say, like gehi in Buddhism, the lay disciples of the guru had to follow certain rules like abstaining from paying obeisance to other gods than Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa and offering of food to God before meals.77

In some Northern Vaishnavism free congregational mixing of men and women devotees has been considered as fruitful exercises. In south, Ramanuja never permitted women folk to mix with men in devotional prayer and never encouraged character of nuns.78 While exposing the tenets of the Vaishnava faith, Lakshmi Nath Bezbaruah, a renowned neo-Vaishnavite scholar has pointed out the total absence of worship of female element in the faith as one of the distinct features of the creed while this element is a common feature in Northern and Bengal Vaishnavism. Bezbaruah argues that madhura type of devotion may be high as personal ideal, but if it falls into less enlightened mind

75 M. Neog (ed.), Śaṅkaradeva, p.99
76 B. Kakati, op. cit., p.74, cited in Bhandarkar, p.54
77 M. Neog, (ed.) Introduction, GCK, p.162
78 ibid., p.76
after the death of the real founder, it is sure to get degenerated.\textsuperscript{79} So, Śaṅkara in a slightest relaxed manner never gave any nama-mantra to women, women devotees are formed in separate group and allotted separate prayer session for them.

In A.D.1934 Lakshminath Bezbaruah, in his two lectures delivered at the Baroda Darbar drew attention of scholars for the first time while he explained how Assam Vaiśṇavism developed its certain distinct features. Bezbaruah maintains, literary activities in Assam within this period reaches to such an extent that it startled people of other regions also. It is very significant; while Bezbaruah says that there is no other Vaiśṇava preacher like Śaṅkaradeva who seems to have done activities of high magnitude in both literary and histrionic fields to preach his creed in India. Pointing out to his huge contribution, he underlines, ‘Had Śaṅkaradeva not composed any other works, he would have remained known to posterity on account of the Kirtan-ghoṣā alone.’ In that sense Assam Vaiśṇavism has developed certain distinct features.

In the words of N.V. Sreenivash Murthy, Assam Vaiśṇavism related to the general history of Vaiśṇavas in India, and on the other some peculiar dogmas and practices as developed by Śaṅkaradeva and his followers give it a distinct character.\textsuperscript{80}

\footnotesize{\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{79} A. Dutta, \textit{Assam Vaiśṇavism}, p 32
\item \textsuperscript{80} N.V. Sreenivash Murthy, \textit{Vaiśṇavism of Śaṅkaradeva and Ramanujam}, p.8
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