CHAPTER - 2
CHAPTER-2

BACKGROUND OF VEDANTA AND THE VAISHNAVISM OF ASSAM

2.1. GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE VEDANTA:

"Among the many systems of Indian thought, the Vedanta is the most alive and is bound up with the religion of the people; it is both a philosophy and a religion. Different vaisnava sects in particular have been built upon it" (Neog, M. 1998:222). The term ‘Vedanta’ literally means “the ultimate part of the vedas”. It includes, first, the unsystematized thoughts of the Upanishads in their free growth and secondly their systematic treatment in the Vedanta-Sutra. “The Vedanta philosophy deserves closer attention not only on account of its philosophical value, but also because, it is closely bound up with the religion of India and is much more alive in that continent than any other system of thought. In one or the other of its forms the vedanta determines the worlds view of the Hindu thinkers of the present time.” (Radhakrishnan, S. Vol-II: 1989:430). Vedanta examines and clarifies the nature of Brahman or reality as propounded in the Jnanakanda of the vedas. “Vedanta attempts to sum up the whole of human knowledge, as far as possible. It considers every kind of human knowledge or experience to be a step on the ladder. At one stage it is religion, at another it is mysticism, and so forth.” (Cultural Heritage of India, Vol-III: 1931:211). Naturally, Vedanta starts with an inquiry into the nature and the means of satisfying human desires which, when not satisfied,
beget sorrow or sufferings. All systems of philosophy, wherever found or
developed are approached to the common end of Vedanta, which is the highest
truth in Vedanta consists in the inconceivability, and consequently the
impossibility, of difference in it. "Mere satisfaction, joy, or bliss experienced
by one is no criterion of truth in Vedanta. The two must go together, though

The upanishads are said to be the Vedanta or the concluding portion of
the vedas. The seeds of the vedantic philosophy lie in the Upanishads which
were later systematized and explained in the Brahma sutra and make a bundle
in the Bhagavad-gita. The Vedanta philosophy not solely based on the
upanishads, though Vedanta means Upanishads. The foundation of Vedanta
philosophy is formed by three great works i.e. - upanishads, Srimad
Bhagavadgita and the Brahma sutra, known as Prasthanatraya of Vedanta on
which most of the great Acarya has commented. Prasthanatraya, of which
the basic pillar is sruti which is supported by Smriti and rearound out by
yukti and tarka. Vedantic literature mainly in the form of commentaries on
the prasthanatraya from different standpoints -like of Advaita, visistadvaita,
Dvaitadvaita, Saddha-dvaita, acintya-bhedabheda.

The vedanta Sutra is called Brahma Sutra, because it is an exposition of
the doctrine of Brahmans and also Saririka Sutra, because it deals with the
embodiment of the unconditioned self" (Radhakrishnan S. Vol. II : 1989 : 430). Vedanta Sutra of Badrayana is the coherent interpretation of the teaching
of the Upanishads. Vedanta-Sutra is the basic text of the Vedanta and it is
also called Uttara-Mimamsa of Badrayana which describes the philosophico-theological views of the upanishads. It is because, the Vedanta philosophy deals with the Jnanakanda of the vedas and jnanakanda is the last part of Uttarakanda of the vedas. “Vedanta is what may be called a rationalistic religion, or a religion satisfying the demands of reason. It is not mere speculative thought nor it is a faith in dogmas. The spiritual truths that constitute it are revealed in the Vedas (Sruti), realised by the risis (Seers) in their mystic intuition of Brahman, and justified by reason or critical intelligence (Yukti)”. (Cultural Heritage of India, Vol-III : 1931 : 300).

Before, going deep into the Vedanta philosophy, it would be better to know what is philosophy and what Advaitavada, visistadvaitavada and other Vedantic schools of Indian Philosophy.

Philosophy is variously defined and described by many scholars of different times from early civilization to modern scientific age. “The etymological meaning of the word ‘philosophy’ is love of learning’. It signifies a natural and necessary urge in human beings to know themselves and the world in which they live and move and have their being”. (Sharma, C.D. : 1987 : 13). The generally accepted definition of philosophy is that it is an attempt to study the universe as a whole in contrast to different sciences like Physics, Chemistry Biology etc. which study the universe as piecemeal. It should be noted that before growing up of these particular branches of science, there was philosophical enquiry prevalent in India and Greece. “It is therefore not correct to say that philosophy studies the universe as a whole
as opposed to particular science. Again, philosophy does not study the
phenomenal aspect of the universe as it is done by the science.” (Chetia,
B.P. : 1999 : IV). Thus, philosophy studies some vital problems relating to
origin of life, origin of the universe, mind-body-soul, God etc. Therefore, it
is not proper to define philosophy as study of the universe at large.

The philosophy is called ‘Darsana’ in Sanskrit. The term ‘Darsana’ is
derived from the root ‘Ödrs’ which means to ‘see’. actually, ‘Darsana’ means
the vision of truth. By ordinary perception, we can only know the phenomenal
aspect of a thing. Real nature of a thing can be known by vision not by
perception. This vision or realisation of the real nature of a thing is called
philosophy. Western Philosophy is essentially an intellectual quest for truth,
but Indian philosophy has been always emphasized the necessity of practical
realisation of truth. Radhakrishnan explains the term ‘Darsana’ as spiritual
perception, a whole view reveal to the soul sense. This soul sight is possible
only when and where philosophy is lived “See the self” (atma-va-are
drastavyah) is the key role of all schools of Indian Philosophy.” (Sarma,

Indian Philosophy is broadly divided into two classes - one is Vedic or
orthodox system and the other is Heterodox or non-vedic system. These
two systems are known as Astika and Nastika respectively. One who believes
in the authority of the vedas is called Astika and Nastika systems cannot
believe in the authority of the vedas.
There are six chief philosophical systems under the orthodox class. These are - Sankhya, Yoga, Nyaya, Vaisesika, Mimamsa and Vedanta. Again, Carvaka, Bauddhas and the Jainas are under the Heterodox group. These nine systems of Indian Philosophy are in a tabular form.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indian schools of Philosophy</th>
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<tr>
<td>Schools rejecting Vedic authority (Heterodox or Nastika, e.g. Carvaka, Bauddha, Jaina)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Schools is directly based on vedic texts</td>
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<tr>
<td>School emphasising the ritualistic aspect of the Vedas (viz. Mimamsa)</td>
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(Dutta, D. and Chatterjee, S.: 1984 :7)

Among these six astika systems of Indian Philosophy, the Mimamsa and the Vedanta may be regarded as the direct continuation of the vedic culture. Ritualistic or Karma and speculative or Jnana are the two aspects of the Vedic tradition. The mimamsa emphasized the ritualistic aspect and the Vedanta emphasized the speculative aspect of the Vedas and developed an unique philosophy out of vedic speculations. So, Mimamsa is called "Purva Mimamsa" or "Karma Mimamsa" and Vedanta is known as 'Jnana Mimamsa' or 'Uttara Mimamsa'. "Uttara Mimamsa" or Vedanta examines the nature of

The place of the Vedas and the Upanisads are very prominent in Indian philosophy. Because, Vedas are the origin substance on which the origin of Indian philosophy may be easily traced. ‘Upanishads which are the concluding portion as well as the cream of the Vedas are therefore rightly called Vedanta.” (Sarma, C.D.: 1987: 17). The word ‘upanishad’ is derived from the root ‘sad’ which means (i) to sit down, (ii) to destroy and (iii) to loosen. ‘Upa’ means ‘nearby’ and ‘ni’ means ‘devotedly’. Upanishads are the sources of Indian philosophy and the secret meaning of the Vedas. The third basic work of Vedanta philosophy in the Brahma Sutra of Badrayana. This is the first systematic work on Vedanta Philosophy and Systematizes different philosophical teachings of the Upanishads. The first systematic work on every philosophy was written in Sutra literature. In philosophy, ‘Sutra’ means aphorisms.

‘Vedanta is knowledge that has for its aim the solution of the mystery of all existence.” (Cultural Heritage of India, Vol.-III: 1931: 211). There are different schools of the Vedanta and they are divided depending on the most common question, i.e. - what is the nature of the relation between self (jiva) and ‘God’ (Brahman). There are five schools of Vedanta philosophy-Advaita schools of sankara, Dvaita of Madhava, Visistadvaita of Ramanuja, Dvaitadvaita of Nimbarka and Suddhadvaita of Ballava.
"The greatest and best known system is Advaita". The Advaitism is mainly spoken of in connection with Sankaracharya's philosophy. "Philosophy of the Advaita is the title under which the Metaphysics of the Vedanta will be treated here." (Cultural Heritage of India, Vol.-III : 1931 : 219). The greatest exponent of Advaitavada is Sankara, who systematized the teachings of the Upanishads in his comments on the Brahma-Sutra. In his comments on the Brahma-Sutra, the Upanishads, and the Bhagavad-Gita, we find a rational, consistent and exhaustive treatment of all the problems of truth and reality as they arise in the course of his exposition of vedic monism. According to Radhakrishnan, "it is impossible to read Shankara's writings, packed as they are with serious and subtle thinking, without being conscious that one is in contact with a mind of a very fine penetration and profound spirituality............. His philosophy stands forth complete, needing neither a before nor an after............. whether we agree or differ, the penetrating light of his mind never leaves us where we were." (Radhakrishnan, S. : Vol-II : 1989 : 446-48).

Although, Sankaracharyya was the consolidation of Advaita, he was not the first to advocate Advaita. "Advaita-vada in Indian philosophy is said to have originated from Gaudpada who was the teacher of Sankaracharyya's teacher Govinda' (Radhakrishnan, S.:Vol-II : 1989 : 452). But, Sankaracharya is by far the greatest thinker of 8th and 9th century of the Vedanta philosophy. He is called Advaitavadin.

Advaita Vedanta is the most important system, not only of Vedanta
philosophy but also of all the system of Indian philosophy, from the point of view of its contents as well as its influence. Advaita means 'nadvaita' and 'Dvaita' means dual. According to Advaita philosophy, the nature of relation between self (Jiva) and God (Brahman) is absolutely identical. There is no difference between them. "The Advaitism of Sankara is a system of great speculative daring and logical subtlety. Its austere intellectualism, its remorseless logic, which marches on indifferent to the hopes and beliefs of man, its relative freedom from theological obsessions, make it a great example of a purely philosophical scheme." (Radhakrishnan, S. Vol-II :1940: 445).

The Advaita philosophy of Sankara deals with the nature of ultimate reality, i.e. Brahman. It also deals with the nature of individual self or Atman, Jagat, Maya, Jnana or wisdom which is the direct means of Moksha.

Sankaracharya's ontology of the Absolute is neither a poetic creation nor a mystic revelation but a reflective study of the ground of our being. The originality of Sankar consists in his intelligent appropriation of the prevailing doctrines in a new direction." (Sarma, Nilima (ed) : 2008 : 83 article by Chakravarty, Dilip K.).

Sankara shows that Brahman is the ultimate ground or logical pre-supposition of the world. He is not interested how the world evolves out of Brahman. Sankara is interested in the ontology of the self, not in the mythology of creation. His philosophy expresses in a, half verse -
Brahman Satyam jagat mithya
jiva Brahmaiva and parah

[Brahman is the only Reality, the world of multiplicity and plurality is false and ultimately the Atman and the Brahman are not different].

The non-duality of Brahman, the non-reality of the world and the non-different soul from Brahman-these three constitute the essential teaching of Advaita. “Brahman and Atman or the supreme self are synonymous terms.” (Sarma, C.D.: 1987:273). The world is a creation of Maya. The individual selves on account of their inherent Avidya imagine themselves as different from Brahman. They mistake Brahman as the world of plurality. Sankaracharya took the example of a rope as a snake to explain the mistake of individual selves. Avidya or ignorance vanishes at the dawn of knowledge. According to Shankara, liberation means the Supra-relational, direct and intuitive knowledge of the non-dual self.

The abstract philosophical speculations of Sankara could not make much appeal to the common people. They found sufficient spiritual food in the bhakti, which has been progressively gaining in strength. “Visistadvaita is a philosophy of religion and therefore it gives a synthetic view of the spiritual experience of God or Brahman. It affirms the Upanisadic truth that by realizing Brahman everything is realized.” (Cultural Heritage of India: Vol-III: 1931:300). Ramanuja’s philosophy, visistadvaita, which holds that Brahman is having parts i.e. matter and finite selves and there are as real as God or Brahman. According to Radhakrishnan “Ramanuja’s theory is an advaita
or non-dualism, though with a qualification (visista), viz., that it admits plurality, since the supreme spirit subsists in a plurality of forms as souls and matter. It is, therefore, called visistadvaita or qualified non-dualism.” (Radhakrishnan, S. Vol -II : 1989 : 661). Ramanuja starts from Saguna Brahma or God. According to him, qualityless Brahman is a void, a blank. Such a Brahman cannot be known by any means. ‘Ramanuja’s view in visistadvaita or non-dualism qualified by difference. The absolute is an organic unity, an identity which is qualified by diversity.” (Sarma, C.D. :1987 : 346). He holds the view that God is real and independent, but the souls of the world are real also, though their reality strongly depend on God. Ramanuja said that Maya is God’s energy and it creates a real world. Among the three bhedas, i.e. - Svajatia, Vijatiya and Svagata, he accepts Svagata-bheda. Which is a relation of whole and parts belonging to the lower level of existence. Ramanuja clarifies through Svagata-bheda, the difference in the absolute or God and admits Brahman or God has whole part relation. Again, he admits that God is saririn and possessed of Jivas (individuals) and the universe. God possess parts which are real.

Acharya Vallabha, whose view is called Suddhadvaita or pure non-dualism and his interpretation of the Vedanta is different from both Sankara and Ramanuja. Vallabha has tried to show that the Advaita of the upanishads is thus Sudha (Pure), unalloyed with Maya, both the cause and the effect being pure and one. Therefore, his system is known as Suddhadvaitavada from the philosophical point of view. According to Vallabha, “Brahman is the independent reality and is identified with Srikrishna. His essence is Existence
(Sat), knowledge (chit) and Bliss (ananda). Souls and matters are His real manifestations. They are His parts. He is the abode of all good qualities and includes even the seemingly Contradictory qualities.” (Sharma, C.D.: 1987: 378). Vallabha accepted four basic works as authority viz. - the vedas, the Bhagavad-Gita, the Brahma Sutra and the Bhagavata.

Vallavbha has made a special contribution to the vedantic thought. “The conception of parabrahman as full of rasa, although found in the Upanishads, first received systematic attention from the Acarya.” (Cultural Heritage of India, Vol-II : 1931 : 359). He accepted the vedas as the highest authority and followed them most faithfully, with the result that logic can never get the better of faith.

Another school of Vedanta is in the Dvaita-dvaita or Bheda-bheda. “Acharya Nimbarka, a Telegu Brahmana whose philosophy is called Dvaita-dvaita or Bheda-bheda or Sanakasampradaya or Vaisnavism is very much indebted to Ramanuja.” (Sharma, C.D.: 1987 : 375). “Nimbarka is another Vedantin whose philosophy may be called both monistic and pluralistic. The universe, the individual self and God are distinct from one another as well as identical.” (Bhandarkar, R.G.: 1928 : 63).

Nimbarka’s Vedanta may be called both monistic and pluralistic. Which holds that the universe, the individual self and God are distinct from one another as well as identical. “According to Nimbarka’s teaching the jiva is of the from of knowledge (Jnanasvarupa), though not in Shankara’s sense. It is knowledge as well as the possessor of knowledge, even as the sun is light as
well as the source of light” (Radhakrishnan : 1996 : 752). Nimbarka, like Ramanuja admits three realities - God, soul and matter. Soul and matter being independent on God. The individual soul is essentially of the nature of knowledge.

Again, “Madhva-charya, the leading dualist, has many points in common with Ramanuja.” (Chetia, B. : 1999 : 55). His hatred of Advaita is great. Madhva advocates the reality of five fold differences between Soul and God, Soul and soul, Soul and matter, God and matter and between matter and matter. Like Ramanuja he also accepts the three sources of knowledge - perception, inference and testimony and also hold that God who is Hari, Visnu, Narayana or Vasudeva can be known only by the Scriptures like Ramanuja. According to him, God is independent reality, while the individual soul, and the universe are dependent on God. “God is both material and efficient cause of the universe. God is a person having his body the individual souls and the inanimate worlds.” (Bhandarkar, R.G.: 1928:57).

All of them, Advaitavada of Sankara and visistadvaita of Ramanuja are more prominent. “Ramanuja’s philosophy, visistadvaita has little to do with Sankaradeva’s philosophy, for, the latter is advaitist or unqualified monist.” (Chetia, B. : 1999 : 51). But there are some points of similarity between Sankaradeva and Ramanuja. Both Sankaradeva and Ramanuja are propagator of the bhakti cult and believe that through bhakti alone one can attain liberation. Some teachings of Advaita Vedanta of Sankaracharya are there in Sankaradeva’s Neo-Vaisnavism.
2.2 VAISHNAVISM IN ASSAM IN THE PRE-SANKARITE PERIOD:

The eastern most state of Indian Union which is known as Assam at present was called by different names in different period of history. The most ancient name of Assam was Pragjyotishpura. It was a place of Saivism and Saktism. But Visnu-sadhna was also there in the name of Pancharatrasadhna.

"Vaishnavism was established in Assam at a time when Surya worship and Brahmanical culture made considerable progress, and as the evidence shows, the worship of both visnu and his incarnations was prevalent in the land from early times." (Choudhury, P.C.: 1987:409). The association of visnu-krsna with Pragjyotisa is a well known fact. In the Mahabharata, visnu is named as Pragjyotisajyestha (Murthy, H.V.S.: 1973:12).

The Kalika-purana describes clearly about the worship of visnu-vasudeva with rituals and also mentions five incarnations of the deity as being worshipped in different places of Assam. i.e. Hayagriva, worship in Manikuta (Hajo). Fish incarnation, worshipped in the Maysyadhvaja mount to the east of Manikuta, Madhava in the form of Bhairava, named pandunatha in Raksa-kuta; The boar incarnation in the Citrabaha mount and Vasudeva-krsna in the Dikkaravasini region. "Banabhatta in his Harsha-charita describes the king Bhaskar Varman as belonging to vaisnava family (Vaisnava vamsa). The Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Yuan Chawang also states that
Bhaskar-varman was descended from Narayanadeva.” (Murthy, H.V.S.: 1973: 8).

The origin of vaishnavism in Assam is said to be uncertain. Hence from when and how it originates can never be definitely accounted for. The vaisnava religion surely came to Assam along with the vedic religion and culture. From legends and History, it is also evident that vedic civilization and culture along with Saivism and Saktism was prevalent in Assam since the time of Aryanization.

Vaisnavism was also simultaneously practised in Assam along with saivism and saktism. “The Kalika-purana in recounting the sacred places of ancient Kamrupa mentions fifteen places sacred to Siva against five sacred to Devi and five sacred to visnu. Even in Modern Assam, Saivite temples out numbers those sacred to other Gods and Goddess” (Kakati, B. : 1967: 10). The ancientness of the Visnu in his incarnations is associated with the Hayagriva - Madhava worship in Hazo. According to Puranas, it was Visnu, in his Hayagriva form who killed the demon Jvarasura on the Manikuta, where stood a temple of Hayagriva Visnu. The Garuda purana gives the mode of worship of Hayagriva which was a mixture of the pauranic and tantrik faiths. The earliest reference to Visnu worship can be found in the ‘Badganga epigraph of Bhutivarman and the king is here mentioned as ‘parama daivata - parama bhagavata’. At that time, the Vaisnava king is referred to as ‘parambhagavata’ and the king who follows the Saivism as ‘parama Maheswara’. It is noteworthy that the king Bhutivarman is
mentioned in the inscription as the performer of 'Asvamedha Sacrifice' which indicates that the vedic culture was in full bloom in his time. But it is also clear from the inscription that he was a devotee of Visnu and in his kingdom vaisnavism was widespread. The biographer of Sankaradeva mentioned the name of Dharmapala in association with the faith.

Hence, we find no such time in History in which any one of these Religions were practised in complete isolation. "In any case, the worship of visnu is as old as the Rg. veda, where he is called one of the adityas and Grierson urgently holds that the Bhagavata doctrine was a development of the Sun-worship, common to both the Iranians and Indians" (Choudhury, P.C.:1987 : 408). But still during that period Visnu was regarded as a minor God and Vaisnavism as a faith, is fully developed at the time of the Mahabharata. "There is infact little connection between the cult of visnu of the vedas and the Bhakti cult or what may be called the sectarian vaisnavism of later times." (Roychoudhury, Hem. Ch.: 1936 : 6f-17f). The name 'Vasudeva' is mentioned in the post vedic literature and the name 'Visnu' is cited in 'Panini' and the earliest reference to the Bhagavatas has been made in the Brahmasutras. "In any case, the divine character given to krsna was a later development. Vasudeva had little connection with visnu of the vedas, and the origin of sectarian Vaisnavism - cannot be traced to the visnu cult of the vedas." (Roychoudhury, Hem. Ch.:1936 : 6f-17f). But, gradually with the introduction of the idea of incarnation both the cult became synthesized as vaisnavism. Hence, in course of time, visnu of the
vedic period, Narayana of the pancarataras, vasudeva krsna of the satvats and Gopala of the Abhiras became unified and worshipped under the name of ‘visnu’ in and through his different manifestations.

The Yogini-tantra offers a different account of the origin of the Hayagriva worship in the Manikuta. The tantra also gives an account of the systems of worship in different visnupithas specially pandu-natha in Raksakuta. The method of worship of vasudeva-krsna as shown in the Kalikapurana is to some extent similar to the rules laid down in the Pancaratra Samhitas. The Vaisnavism enunciated in the pancharatra Samhita is no doubt an early form of Vaisnavism. “The Samhitas are historically noteworthy in two ways. They make the first emergence of Sakta principles in the vaisnavite sects. But they are also notable as being the first manuals formed to express both the beliefs and practices of vaisnavas.” (Farquhar, J.N.:1920:183-186). The Yogini-tantra links Hayagriva image with that of Jagannatha Puri. “However, conflicting the accounts may be, it is certain that Vaisnavism made its way into Assam through the elite part of the society very early sometime before Christian era” (Murthy, H.V.S.:1973:10). “The Aryanised names Pragjyotisa and Kamarupa, which find mention as early as the Brahmanas and the Grhya Sutras, also point to the same conclusion. Yuan Chawang’s testimony that hundreds of Deva temples, evidently of Aryan or Brahmanical Gods, existed in Kamarupa, indicates that during the seventh century A.D., Brahmanical culture or Aryan dharma was wide-spread in the land. This is confirmed by the Bidhanpur grant, which states that

All the different grants which have been discovered in ancient Kamrupa agree on the point that the kings of Varman and Pal dynasties as defendants of the boar incarnation of 'Lord Visnu'. "In different grants of Copper plates which have special reference to the kings of Kamrupa the king of the varman and Pal dynasties were mentioned as the defendants of the Boar incarnations of Visnu. Just as the name of Maheswar, Siva whom they worshipped the name of Visnu as the Progenitor of their generation or somehow the name of visnu was associated with those grants." (Sarma, Banikanta (ed) : 1991 : 8-9 (article by Sastri, M.R.).

Like other sources of information the sculptural representation of the period provide us a welcome evidence of the prevalence of vaisnavism during this period. They give us an indication of the popularity of vaisnavism from seventh century onwards. "We have extensive archaeological remains of temples dedicated to Visnu and his incarnations and icons of the deity throughout Assam. The remains show that beginning atleast with the fifth and sixth century A.D. Visnu was worshipped in his icons graphic representations and vaisnavism was wide-spread in the land (Choudhury, P.C. : 1987 : 412-413).

Again a large number of images have been discovered in Assam since early times. "A fine representation of Visnu in his sthanaka variety is found
at Deopani.” (Choudhury, P.C. : 1987 : 456). Different icons of visnu discovered from different religiously important places lead us to believe that from very ancient time vaisnavism or visnu worship were prevalent in Assam, either of the main deity or the forms of its ten or twenty four incarnations.

It may be noted in passing that the references are made in the Sankara Carita of Ramcharana Thakura to the prevalence of vaishnavism before Sankardeva. It is said that Sankardeva with his relatives shifted from Alipukhuri to Bardowa in the Nowgong district. At the New place when Sankardeva was himself cutting the earth with a Kodali (axe) to built the plinth of the proposed Kirtana-Ghar, he struck upon a visnu-image of Shining black stone. He took out the image from under the ground and explained that everybody will give up the worship of the Devi and take to the worship of krsna. He installed the image on the platform in the newly built Namaghara (Gurucharit-Ramcharan Thakur). To sum up the facts recounted above definitely prove that vaisnavism penetrated into Assam even before the Christian era and began to attract the attention of the masses and the state in the succeeding centuries.

Biswa Narayan Sastri in his article “pre-sankarite vaishnavism in ancient and medieval Assam” said as “In the puranic age the story of Krishna, the supreme Lord has been described in the Visnu Purana, Hari-vamsa, Matsya-Purana, Brahma Vaivartha Purana and finally in the Bhagavata Purana from the Visnupurana to the Brahmavaivarta purana is a period of four to fifth
centuries and in this period Krishna katha through the puranic stories was made very popular among the people. The process is gradually replacement of Visnu by Krishna” (Mahanta, P. (ed) : 2001 : 55).

It is evident that ‘Bhakti’, the main root of vaisnavism was accepted in the Pre-Sankarian vaishnavism also. But, there is a distinct difference between pre-sankarite bhakti-dharma and bhakti-dharma preached by Sankaradeva. The former was confined among the elites and in the process the image of Visnu or Krishna was worshipped but Neo-vaisnava movement by Sankaradeva made all the people equal partners of the bhakti, which has only one deity in Krishna. Moreover, the bhakti cult swept away or submerged little differences that existed in the performance of ritual bhakti.

The social and political condition of pre-sankarite period which help sankaradeva to propound creative humanism in the form of Neo-Vaisnavism in Assam. “On the Royal Patronage, the expensive ceremonies such as worship, sacrifice etc. were organised among the aristocrats with Brahmanian customs. The effort made by the Brahmanism to advance the tribals into a wider Hindu society was totally pole.” (Bora, Dilip : 2008 : 108). Again, with the trend of Aryanization, the different religious conceptions entered into the society of Assam i.e. Saivism, Saktism, Tantrism and Vaisnavism. During this period, kings were the followers either of Vaisnavism or Saivism. “The worship of Siva was prevalent in Assam from ancient times. Siva was the tutelary God of ancient kings of Kamrupa from the fifth to the twelfth centuries. The Kalika-purana and
Yogini-tantra have mentioned several laces sacred to God Siva and there still exist many Saiva temples in Darrang and Kamrup districts”, (Sarma S.N.: 1996 :5).

The Siva temples of Hajo (Kedaresvara and Kamatesvara), Biswanath Singari (Guevara), are famous from ancient times. Siva was the exalted God, even influence of Siva was at Sankara’s home or significantly the name of Sankaradeva was ‘Sankar’ - the other name of Siva. “Sankaradeva has given Siva too equal status with visnu. Though, in Harmohana (Kirtanghosa) Siva was degraded into a low level in comparison to visnu or miserable condition of Siva was shown in Harihara battle.” (Bora, Dilip: 2008 :109). Though, Siva has been degraded by the prevalent songs of Siva in vaisnava society, such as ‘ki khai pagala holi.......’ etc. Yet Siva and visnu are the same in the opinion of vaisnava people. It seems that behind the conflict between Siva and visnu, presented through these stories, reflect the contemporary social conflict and in these conflicts superiority of Visnu is established.

Before Sankaradeva, along with Saivism, Saktism and Tantrism were also the pre-dominant trend of the state of Assam. “Saktism was dominant cult of Assam in ancient and medieval times upto the advent of neo- vaisnavism, and even today it holds a place next to Vaisnavism.” (Sarma S.N. : 1996 : 6). The two Sanskrit works composed in Assam, the Kalika-purana and the Yogini-tantra have mainly dealt with the Shakti cult. The various forms of Shakti was worshipped in different temples dedicated to
her. In this regard, Banikanta Kakati has identified “Dikkara Vasini of Kalika Pukara with goddess Tamresvari or Kecaikhaiti (eater of raw flesh).” (Kakati, Banikanta: 1967: 21-24). The main radiating centres of Saktism has been the shrines dedicated to Kamakhya and Dikkaravasini.

Eliot defines Saktism in ‘Hinduism and Buddhism’ as the worship of “a goddess of many names and forms, who is adored with sexual rites and the sacrifice of animals, or when the law permits of men.” (Eliot, Sir Charles, Vol.-I: 1921: xxxvi). Shakti was worshipped according to Tantric rites and sacrifices in these two Shrines situated in the western and eastern parts of country. In Saktism “Human Sacrifice was also performed in the Jayanyesvari Temple of Jayantapura located in modern Jayantia hills.” (Sarma, S.N.: 1996: 6). The worship of Snake-goddess Manasa, who is believed as the manifestation of Shakti in Assamese kavyas was very popular in western parts of Assam. “The Padma-Purana and the Beula-Upakhyana, the two Assamese Kavyas composed by Mankar and Durgabara during the closing decades of the fifteenth century definitely prove the existence and popularity of this cult o the eve of the neo-vaisnavite movement. Besides kamakhya, Sakti in her different forms like Ugratara, Mangalcandi, Siddheswari, Bhairavi, Camunda, Burhi Gosani, Durgeswari etc. were worshipped in different places.” (Sharma, S.N.: 1996: 7).

Though, Vaisnavism prevailed on the eve of Neo-vaisnavite movement in Assam, it was quite different from the one introduced by Sankaradeva and his followers. Bapchnadra Mahanta explain the various form of Visnu
worship prevailed in Pre-Sankaradeva period in Assam.

Supreme Brahman or Lord Visnu

1. Pancharatra
   - Narayana Visnu
   - Visnu is the only tutelary divinity

2. To be worshipped
   - Visnu with Sakti of Ramanuja and other vaisnava teachers

3. Worshipping
   - Visnu with pilgrimage
   - fast, sraddha ceremony etc.

(Mahanta, Bapchandra :1987 : 33)

Though, Yogini-tantra or different references have put comment on the superiority of Visnu in pre-sankarite Assam, yet this idea was inclusive in the third form as shown above. Of course, the presence of the second form too cannot be ignored in which Visnu is worshipped with sakti which is known as Tantric Vaisnavism. The superiority of Visnu as shown in pancharatra was followed by tantric path.

In Pancharatra system “Visnu was the only cause of all - The universal ceaseless consciousness of Mahapurusha is the essence of Bhagavata Purana also.” (Mahanta, Bap Chandra : 1987 : 223). It is worthmentioning that there are some ideas amidst the followers of Vaisnavism, though they centres round Bhakti yet they did not deeply consider their hearts as spiritual.

Caste system was prevalent during this period Bap Ch. Mahanta has shown that women in the form of Shakti were worshipped along with Visnu. Even
there are so many descriptions of accomplishment ways like Tapa, Japa, Yagya etc. in reference of different tales of Bhagavata Purana. (Mahanta, Bap Ch.: 1987 : 203). “The worship of Visnu in the form of Vasudeva seems to have been prevalent from early times. The Baraganga Rock inscription of Mahabhuti Barma (554 A.D.) which refers to the king as Parama-Bhavata is the earliest recorded evidence of the existence of Vaisnavism.” (Sharma, S.N.: 1996 : 7).

According to Kalika-purana the adoration of Hayagriva Madhava of Hazo in Assam is performed in accordance with the rites of pancaratra and the name of Vasudeva is mentioned in different places. It is remarkable that Sankardeva has also mentioned about Pancharatra in the Kirtanghosa as-

\[
\begin{align*}
vailaha narada risi name avatara \\
pancaratra name tantra karila prasar \\
yaka asarile mohamoksa pada pai \\
harira kirtana kari phura vina bai
\end{align*}
\]

(Kirtanghosa:16)

[As Sage Narada didst Thou incarnate, to preach Pancharattra Tantra far and wide. Its practice helped one attain highest seat of liberation; singing Hari’s nama on the lyre thou moveth on].

“The mode of reign of Tamras of Kamrupa has shown that especially Saivism got expansion here. But during the time of Indrapala, Gauri (Parbati) has got preference to Hara. But the alter of Dashavatara at
Bamunipahar of Tezpur has proved the supremacy of Visnu. Kalika Purana and even Yogini Tantra also show that the advent of Visnu has put an end to the misfortunes of the inhabitants of Kamrupa.” (Gohain, Hiren: 1987: 226(A). This statement of Kalika-purana and Yogini-tantra has indicated of a developed Aryan Culture of later stage. However, Siva, Shakti and Visnu - all three were adorned in ancient Kamarupa and its forms are of two types - i.e., Vedic and Tantric. There may be some ritual differences but its unity of divinity is remarkable. Sivnath Barman has said that Shakti tantric goddess of Manusmriti as shown by Kuluk Bhatta is non-vedic. (Barman, Sivnath: 1989: 287).

Thus, we find that Tantrism, was prevalent and the worship of various gods and goddesses with elaborate ceremonies, both esoteric or exotic, was also very popular. “Monotheism and the cult of Bhakti did not thrive for want of a proper atmosphere though the belief in one Supreme God was not altogether alien to the learned section of the people.” (Sharma, S.N.: 1986: 11). In order to bring all people of different sects under systematized religious codes and conducts of life, do away with the extreme tantric rituals connected with Saivism and Shaktism which encouraged sensuality in the name of religion and to supply the mass with a mode of worship which would be simple and accessible to all. At this hour of need, Sankaradeva came forward with his Neo-vaishnavism or Eka Sarana Nama Dharma.

“While the cult of vasudeva mainly flourished in the temples, the
vaisnavism of the epics appeared to have influenced a certain section of the mass. The Assamese translation of the Ramayana by Madhavakandali, the Court poet of the kachari king Mahamanikya of the fourteenth century and popular translations of several episodes of the Mahabharata by Haribara Vipra, Kaviratna Sarasvati and Rudra Kandali, all belonging to the fourteenth century A.D., establish that vaisnavism as found in the two epics was not unknown to a section of people (Kakati, B. (ed): 1959 : Ch.-II, 16ff).

Therefore, both literary and archaeological sources signify that the worship of Visnu and his incarnations was established in the land from early times. It is admitted by all that during the pre-sankarite period a large number of poets, writers in ancient Kamarupa professed and actively supported Vaisnavism. A significant number of Vaisnava thinkers wrote on early Vaisnavism and practised it to save the society from further degeneration and disintegration.

Though, Sankaradeva was not first introducer of ‘Vaisnavism’ in Assam, yet his thoughts with a new shape attracts the common people and his ideal philosophy of life based on humanism.
2.3 NEO-VAISNAVISM OF SANKARADEVA:

"The current of the religious history of Assam took a new turn towards the closing decades of the fifteenth century of the Christian era. It was caused by the Neo-Vaisnavite movement initiated by Sankaradeva. Within two hundred years of its inception the movement firmly established the vaisnava faith as the Supreme religious order of the Brahmaputra Valley." (Sarma S.N.: 1996: 1). It is noteworthy to say that the Neo-Vaisnavite movement initiated by Sankaradeva was a turning point in the history of religion and philosophy in Assam. The Vaisnavism became the faith and culture of Assamese social life under the stalwardship of Sankaradeva and his followers. 'Sankardeva generated a Copernican Revolution in the socio-cultural life of Assam and he could foresee the intimate bond existing between culture and society. To establish a close rapport between culture and society, he successfully synthesized folk culture of Assam with classical Indian culture." (Sharma, Nilima (ed): 2008 : X).

Sankaradeva is the great spiritual and cultural leader of Assam and he contributed immensely to the medieval cultural renaissance. It is known fact that all the founder of religion were great revolutionaries. They always protested against injustice, inequalities and religious - cruelty of higher classes. Sankaradeva is also a revolutionary in the proper sense of the term. "Both Brahmanism and Tantricism had failed in giving direction to a developed society. Because, Brahmanian culture and customs became narrow and on the other hand convertion into Hindu religion could not give proper
Hindu social status to the so called low castes and creeds” (Bora, Dilip : 2008 : 108). Again Tantrism is also an utmost vile and human sacrifice was a vile shape of it. Amid these religious practices the preference of Visnu as God has been gradually developed and it has distinct semblance in pre-Sankarite literature. Therefore, Vaisnavism had developed as a high social stream through the conflict against the established social norms. Vaisnavism is the second stage of Aryanization.

The Vaisnavism practised in Assam before Sankaradeva was restricted to a limited number of people and that was also in a scattered form. The highly ritualistic Brahmanical culture of the society were not considered suitable by the majority of the people who also belonged to the Non-Aryan ethnic groups. They were with little or no knowledge of Sanskrit language in which the Hindu rites were conducted. These circumstances created some social conflicts and the rise of Vaishnavism i.e. Sankaradeva’s preaching became necessary. Naturally, the vaisnavite movement under the leadership of Sankaradeva, convert these inner conflicts of human mind to create something new and original, i.e. creative humanism and it strengthened the way of progress.

“The different theories of humanism arose in the world as movements against the established order of human existence. Sankaradeva’s creative humanism also appeared as a protest against polytheism, paganism and other social prejudices and evils which cropped up from the mal-practices of rituals in the name of religion.” (Sharma, Nilima (ed) : 2008 : 333).
The Neo-Vaisnavism of Sankaradeva based on Bhagavata. It was a carrier of upright and preceding thought which created a new social consciousness against the expensive ceremonies of sacrifice, strict control of Brahmanism, caste system or dogmatism of tantra. "But Sankaradeva did not pelt everything of old traditions, rather he showed proper respect in many subjects. For instance Sankardeva gave equal importance to Siva along with visnu. So, those who stood against the new social rising created by this religion, had also defeated as its philosophy or thought.” (Bora, Dilip: 2008:110). Sankaradeva had to propagate His Vaisnavism to establish creative humanism which was being inherent in his thought. He thought that religion could motivate and accelerate the pace of social change by repudiating the prevalent superstitions and value structures and by offering satisfactory values. Nilima Sarma said that “Sankaradeva’s humanism is not a mere extension of traditional spiritualistic humanism. His humanism is creatively concerned with the re-organisation of society as a necessary condition for the ethico-spiritual development of man” (Sharma, Nilima : (ed) 2008 : 333).

Sankaradeva gave importance on Bhagavata Purana and he tried to assemble - the spiritual sense of the people around a central thought which is only possible by worshipping one God. He took the sound shelter of Bhagavata Purana and Pancharatra system to give rise his distinct thought. "Sankaradeva covers the main tenets of the major Upanisads and the teachings of the Bhagavata Purana and few other vedantic texts. The Bhagavatgita is said to be the essence of the Upanishads. In Assam vaishnavism of
Sankaradeva, the Bhagavatgita has been acknowledged as the supreme scripture under various contexts.” (Chaliha, B.P. (ed): 1998 : 106 (article by Das, Kalicharan). Sankaradeva said in his Kirtanaghosa as -

cari veda astadasha purana yateka
parama vedanta bhagavata Sastra
sanaka sananda muni yoga jnana vicariya
uddharila Tara Sara Tattva

(veda stuti : 1673)

[The Bhagavata is the Supreme vedanta among the four vedas, eighteen puranas and other sastras. Sagas Sanaka and Sananda in quest of yoga and knowledge discovered in it the essential truth].

Again, Madhavadeva also said in his Namaghosa as “Samasta Vedanta Sara Mahabhagavata Sastra”. The Bhagavata Purana is the essence of all the vedanta. It was also called the crown jewel of all religious Scriptures. (Sarva Sruti Siro-ratna).

“Awaking of consciousness towards the realization of eternal truth, prevention of perelexity of karma-dharma, deep-belief of accepting pure heart as the main play ground of spiritual realisation, expulsion of social class intervention - these four aspects are said by Banikanta Kakati as ‘Saturanga dana’ of the Mahapurusa. Sivnath Barman has also said that these are the main aspects of Bhakti Movement (Barman, Sivnath : 1989 : 33).

Sankaradeva has generated his philosophy from the contemporary
situation in Assam before him. Before the advent of Sankaradeva the religious condition of Assam was far from satisfaction. The tantric practices which were debased and dreadful in character had a baneful effect on the minds of the people. And in doing so he has renounced the sacrifice or other expensive religious ceremonies of vedic culture and the worship system of heterodox followers of the tantras. He believed heart as the best place of worship and Bhakti was the main path to devote. For this reason, Lakshminath Bezbaruah has defined the vaisnavism of Sankaradeva as “plain but invaluable religion” (Bezbaruah, Lakshminath: 1988: 427).

A most noteworthy aspect of Sankaradeva’s thought is that he did not imitate from other, rather he has developed something unique and original based on humanism and all the aspect of present social relevance. Again his religious philosophy was based on the twelve years experience of pilgrimage. “After twelve years of such wandering through many sacred seminaries of vaisnvite learning, Sankaradeva returned home acquiring first hand knowledge of vaisnava theology, texts, mode of worship and management of the institutions.” (Kakati, B. (ed): 1959: 62). In fact from his pilgrimage “He carried a deep impression of the nascent Neo-Vaisnava movement that was pulsating in the heart of northern India and manifesting itself in devotional songs. He had now a widened outlook of life. With a wide experience of religious life in particular.” (Neog, M.: 1998: 106). At that time, one Jagadish Misra of Tirhut brought to Sankaradeva from Puri a copy of the Bhagavat-Purana with Sridhara Swamy’s commentary on it. It is said that the Brahmin
scholar explained the whole of the Purana before Sankaradeva and died thereafter. "When Sankaradeva had listened to Jagadisha's discourses on the Bhagavata Purana, he was convinced that this work had no peer and that its purpose was to fix Krishna as the sole worshipful and that the celebrating of his acts in the company of holy men and the taking of sole refuge in him was the greatest religion of men." (Daitvari : 93 quoted from M. Neog's 'Sankaradeva and his times' : 1998 : 107).

Sankaradeva had no guru and he did not propagate his religious thought under the guidance of any spiritual Guru by whom he was influenced.

Like Guru Nanak, Sankaradeva too, had no earthly Guru". This he himself said as -

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hrdayara parama Isvara mora guru
prabhu bhagavanta bhakatara kalpataru
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[O' Supreme Lord of my heart, thou my guru, the redeemer of the bhakatas just like the wish fulfilling tree].

Maheswar Neog has distinctly said that when Sankaradeva took the social and political responsibilities of the Bhuyans, during this time he wrote a few about religions and through it Sankaradeva has shown the humanitarian point of view. (Neog, Maheswar : 1987 : 47-48).

The first concern and consideration of Sankaradeva was the emendation of the prevalent religious and social abuses. Because, "before Sankaradeva's time, the religious life of Assam was far from satisfactory. It was an age of
tantriticism which is characterized by the worship of Divine Energy in the female form called by many names such as Kali, Durga etc. It combined many magic.” (Chaliha, B.P. (ed) : 1998 : 32 (article by Murthy, H.V. S.).

For this reason, Sankaradeva was not at all happy to find the people selfish, eager for royal favour and adverse to religion or culture. The mentality of the people as hopelessly degraded.

During the period of Sankaradeva, the political situation was very sensitive. The Kacharies were encroaching upon half part of Nagaon before he took the administration. In such a situation Sankaradeva seems to be a perfect administrator. Because, he thought and realised that the act of strengthening the social leadership through peace and prosperity amidst the cultivators, is the best mean to extend his thoughts and works. That is why, it seems that he was immensely inspired to create a new world by the demand of creating a humanistic solution to the problems than to propagate his religion. After the death of his first wife, Sankaradeva undertook a pilgrimage lasting for twelve years. “Whereever he went, he met the religious preachers and shared with them his thought and aspirations centred in bhakti. To him Srikrishna was a vital living and life-giving force.” (Chaliha, B.P. (ed) : 1998, 41 (article by Choudhury, M. M).

Sankaradeva also introduced his ideas with the wind of All India Bhakti Movement. He came back to Assam with comprehensive plans and built lasting foundations for the Bhakti movement among the people. “After his pilgrimage Sankara had his second marriage at the age of fifty four and his
grand uncles wanted him to be Barbhuya; but this he bluntly declined.” (Neog, M.: 1998 : 69). But Sankaradeva took a little responsibility of worldly affairs, yet he made efforts to give an integrated form of his thoughts. “It seems that instead of transforming from theology to action, Sankaradeva transformed from action to theology and that act is the struggle of forming a peaceful and tranquil life of the people. Hence, human values have made his religious movement alive all time.” (Bora, Dilip : 2008 : 117).

Initially, it is evident that ideology of Sankaradeva cherished an attitude of non-violence. He taught the ideal of considering all living creatures are equal and Sankaradeva expressed in his Bargeetas.

Though, Kacharies were politically against of Sankaradeva yet he opposed the act of killing them.

Sankaradeva’s all works endeavour to preach both the divine and human values of non-violence and universal love. He is against of hating and objecting the other different ways of religion that makes his philosophy pertinent even today. Thus, he become a universal prophet for all ages.

Sankaradeva said as -

parara dharma nihinsiba kadachita
kariba bhutaka daya Sakaruna Citta
Huiba Santa citta Sarva dharma batsala
ehibhagavata dharma jana mahabala

(Bhakti Pradipa : 141)
Never do any harm to other’s religion. Be merciful to all beings. Be compassionate to all sects, O’ Mahabala. This is the religion according to Bhagavata.

Sankaradeva’s teachings would have gone against the idea of euthanasia. The Sankari path always tries to relate life to a more meaningful reason of living, that is to say, had there been occasions. There is a story which tells of Sankaradeva’s direct opposition to violence. It was the time when Sankaradeva started his journey on the down stream of Brahmaputra with an intention to leave the Ahom territory. Ramadasa, a prominent disciple of Sankaradeva, brought some fishes caught in a net and placed before Sankaradeva. Sankaradeva was hurt by this action of his disciple and asked for an explanation for killing so many fishes. Then Ramadasa said - Fishes were just about to die as the ponds were almost dried up. As such I thought, it would be better to gift some to Guru.” Sankaradeva dissatisfied with the answer of Ramadasa and asked Ramadasa “Would you then kill a Brahmana who is about to die? Would it not amount to killing of a Brahmana (Brahmanbadh)?”

(Kathagurucharita : 579)

It is seen that non-violence (ahin-sa) or mercy towards all creatures has been recognized as a great virtue by neo-vaishnavism of Sankaradeva. The conduct of right living has been extolled and vices have been depreciated. Besides, non-violence or mercy, other moral qualities like truthfulness, kindness, hospitality, temperance, contentment, patience, purity of heart etc. are also recognized by Sankaradeva. He stated in his Bhagavata VIII V-100 -
yadi maha satru asi howanta atithi
deva hena mani kariba bhakati
purva dosa-guna kichu nakari bicara

[Even if arch enemy happens to come as a guest he should be served like
God, without regard to his previous inimical behaviour].

Again, Sankaradeva always stressed on truthfulness. He stated in
Harichandra-Upakhyana -

satya nei urdhaka asatye adhogati
hena jani satyaka rakhibe kara mati.

(Verse : 265)

[Truth elevates us to the higher regions, while untruth degrades us to the
path of ruin. So, try to maintain truthfulness].

The importance and significance of guru-sewa is celebrated in vaisnavism.
Bhakti is impossible without a guru or advice of the guru is a strength towards
attainment of bhakti. “But, the mentality of Sankaradeva is promoted into an
affectionate human relation rather than the relationship of Guru and disciple
(Bora, Dilip : 2008 : 118).

It is noteworthy that though Sankaradeva himself had started his journey
of Bhaktism from a prosperous situation yet his religious society is
constituted with the poor and emaciated sect of the society. “His religious
movement is of common people which is formulated with the force of poor
people, not out the pride of the boastful Brahmans” (Neog, Maheswar (ed):
1987 : 127). Sankaradeva made efforts to establish ‘Nama Dharma’ as all
credible path and in this regard he reflected his strong personality, his attitude of sacrifice, generosity and broad humanitarian mind. The attitude of Sankaradeva towards caste-discrimination have already analysed by different scholars. Maheswar Neog said in his book “Sankaradeva and His Times” that Sankaradeva did not venture to pull down caste distinctions” (1998 : 116). Sibnath Barman also says “Sankaradeva’s was not opponent of Caste-distinction, rather he criticized those who broke the rule of caste system” (1989 : 95). In these discussions the effort has been going on to accept the opinion of Banikanta Kakati whose main statement was “Sankaradeva did not accept caste-system in his spiritual side, but he followed it socially or opened up the door of his spiritual society irrespective of caste and creed.” (Barman, S. : 1989 : 98).

Sankaradeva preached the equality of men before God irrespective of Caste and Creed and abolished the idea of special privileges for Brahmins. Though, spiritual thought is the realisation of heart, yet this heart in carried on by a socially acknowledged body and a society is formed with the union of such bodies. So, deep, spiritual realization is in heart, still there is no way to escape from social criticism. Banikanta Kakati himself realised and wrote as “The Mahapurusha contributed to the Assamese society how to proceed in the way of salvation by realising the ideology of God and by paying Homage to Him who is omnipotent of this entire universe.” (Kakati, B. : 1962 : 7).

According to Sankaradeva all the living beings are creation of God, with no inferiority complexity related to birth. In this context, Hiren Gohain in
his book “Kirtan Puthir Rash Bichar” says that “Bhakti can easily overcome the invincible caste distinction of society. Caste system can also become heir of high spiritual might on the influence of Bhakti.” (1987 : 49 : B). To create human is the prime motto of Sankaradeva’s preaching. His creative Humanism adopts a secular ethics which stresses upon the reformation of the individual first and then society can be reformed gradually. According to Sankaradeva, without moral consciousness, social awakening is impossible. The significance of the ‘Niskama Karma’ of the Gita has been given importance in his thought. His ‘Mukti mangal bhatima’ bears the idea of the human welfare and arouses social consciousness of the people.

Sankaradeva could use the connotation of the term secularism.

“Sankardeva’s thought has a democratic appeal. To have a better interaction with the common masses, he lays emphasis more on faith and less on logic, more on love and less on intellect.” (Sarma, Nilima (ed): 2008 : 340).

Another pioneering feature of the Neo-Vaisnavism of Sankaradeva was the introduction of mother-tongue in the promulgation of education. One of the main achievements of Sankaradeva is that he wrote most of his works mainly in Assamese, the language of the common people, so that they can easily follow them.

In a persuasive manner, he could bring Mohammedans and tribal folk to his fold and this planted the seed of national integration. Rise of Bhaktism had created an emotional influences on all stages of society. In all aspects,
enchanting the name of God had became a Common culture. An all pervading
influence was alluded to all.

sankaradev jeeyaree
madhavadev bowari
rangpur nagarat ghar

(Jikir by Abdul Malik : 58)

Sankaradeva was the first who created a religious revival by uniting the people of all communities without royal patronage. Both the Gurus had their intense apathy toward the feudal supreme power and their arrogance. Even those who donot belong to the doctrines of the Mahapurushia, they also deeply realise that there is a great influence of Neo-Vaishnavite movement on their customs, conducts, thoughts and values till today. The element of humanism in Sankaradeva’s religion is evident in the recognition of Jivan Mukti, i.e. liberation can be attained even during one’s life time.”


Great importance was given to human life and the performance of good works during one’s life time was the main aim of Sankaradeva. The philosophy of devotion and love has universal humanistic appeal and as such people from all castes are attracted towards to Neo-Vaishnavite thoughts. In this matter, Banikanta Kakati has said “Sankaradeva has given Assam a new life, letters and a state. Rulers have come and gone and their kingdom perished in the dust, but Sankaradeva’s state endures and broad in the general heart of men his power survives.” (Kakati, B. 1967 : 87).
2.4 UNIQUE FEATURES OF SANKARADEVA’S VAISNAVISM:

“Srimanta Sankaradeva brought about cultural revolution in Assam. He opened not only the door of religion for the laity, but also the doors of language, literature, art and culture for all. It is the fortune of the entire Assamese race that Sankaradeva was born in Assam to lay the firm foundation of the Assamese language, literature, dance, drama, music, art and culture as medium of his faith. And for this religio-cultural renaissance in Assam, the entire Assamese people, irrespective of castes and creeds may justly be proud of Srimanta Sankaradeva as their real Guru” (Chaliha, B.P. (ed) :1998 : 85, article by Saikia, Pumananda).

“The official name of Sankardeva’s vaisnavism is Eka-Sarana Dharma - the religion of Supreme surrender to one”, and that one is Visnu who in the form of Narayana assumes incarnations from age to age. The most favourite incarnation in which visnu is to be worshipped is that of Krishna.”(Chaliha, B.P. (ed.): 1998 : 7 (article by Kakati, B.).

Sankaradeva is unique in many respects because his thought was not to propound a religion supported by discursive reasoning and abstract thinking but to propagate a ‘simple and easy system’ based on devotion and faith. His successful fight against the elaborate and costly rites and rituals prevalent in Assam before him and the replacement of them by simple religious practices is the most important characteristic of Assamese Vaisnavism.

S.N. Sarma said that “the simplicity of the cult is one of the main
Neo-Vaisnavism is very simple and it prescribes a simple form of worship by means of congregational and individual chanting of prayers and recitations, instead of elaborate and costly rituals. That is why “Idol worship does not occupy any prominence in the Eka-Sarana system. In performing all official religious ceremonies a sacred book (esp. the Bhagavata in Sankara’s translation) is placed on a pedestalled tray, and offerings and homage are paid to it as to the Lord. (Chaliha, B.P. (ed.): 1998 :10 (article by Kakati, B.).

The character and personality of Sankaradeva and his ideal conduct gave additional strength to his character, the spiritual and scholarly attainments. The literary and musical accomplishment of Sankaradeva easily attracted people to their side. Even during his tenure as the chief of the Bhuyans, Sankaradeva wrote a few things on religion which reflected his spirit of universal humanism. “Although the movement was basically concerned with the propagation of the religion of devotion (bhakti) to Lord Krishna or Visnu based on the ekasarana faith encapsulated in the Bhagavata-Gita and the Bhagvata - Purana, its upshot went far beyond that bound to give it the dimensions of a great social and cultural resurgence unprecedented in the History of Assam.” (Mahanta, P.: 2007 :2).

Neo-Vaisnavism is a modified form of monotheism, advocating the worship of one supreme Being visnu and take emotional devotion as the way of salvation. “Sankaradeva was a monotheist and he preached a religion of supreme surrender to the one and therefore his creed is known as ekasarana
Sankaradeva’s theology was greatly influenced by the theology of Bhagavata-Purana. “Sankaradeva acknowledged the Bhagavata Purana as the holy book of authoritative character under various contexts. It is accepted as the Crown-jewel of all religious scriptures. (Sarva-sruti Siro-ratna)” (Sarma, Nilima (ed): 2008 : 5 (an article by Goswami, N.).

Sankaradeva is unique in the sense that he not only introduced local elements in his teachings but also took audio-visual media within the framework of vedanta philosophy and Indian art which made his religion highly acceptable to the poor, uneducated and exploited section of the society. Sankaradeva took Indian cultural elements to the nook and corner of Assam by this way. The Vaisnavism is a protest against the various social inequalities in our society. The caste system, untouchability are such problems. Sankaradeva himself considered caste system as a social injustice. “He taught the people that all creatures are the creations of God and as such they should be treated with love and no harm should be done to them.” (Sarma, Nilima (ed): 2008 : 391 (article by Singh, S.K.). Sankaradeva recognised the equality of all castes and boldly asserted that a devotee belonging to the lowest social stratum is superior to a Brahmin without faith and devotion. In this context, Syam Kishore Singh in his article, “The relevance of the teachings of Sankaradeva to the present day society” says that the concept of Daridra-Narayana was inherent in his perception of the Godhead. Moreover, the respect for the so called low-caste people in vaisnavite teachings permeates
a democratic outlook (Sarma, Nilima (ed), 2008 : 391-92). “With such a backdrop the Sankaradeva movement also laid the foundation of democratic norms, tolerance, non-violence and consolidated the forces of solidarity by giving all individuals from all creeds the sacramental right or the equality of privilege to profess religion.” (Mahanta, P. : 2007 : 5). Sankaradeva said in Kirtanaghosa as -

brahmanara candalara nibicari kula
datata corata yena drsti ekatula
nicata sadhuta yara bhaila eka jnana
tahakese pandita buliya sarvajana

(Verse : 1821)

[Having no caste discrimination between Brahmana and Candala, having same regards for the pious and the mean, if a person lives, he is called really wise by all men].

According to Sankaradeva, a Vaisnava, without inquiring into caste or creed should treat equally a Brahmin to a candala. He preached equality in the spiritual domain. It is noteworthy that “It was not the aim to Sankaradeva to do away or interfere with the caste system, he rather tacitly accepted the prevailing social system based on castes. His sole concern was to see that social distinctions based on caste system did not hinder one’s inherent right to spiritual development.” (Dev Goswami, R. (ed) 1996 : 18) (article by Sarma S.N.).

Sankaradeva united heterogenous society on the basis of his new faith of equality. He brought the message of the religion of love to the people and
released from the oppressive burden of the Brahmin priests in the name of rituals, ceremonies etc., the soul of the common people. His religious activities formed the basis of the growth of a culture and a literature and a new society - "Vaisnava Samaj." Sankardeva also created an assimilated cosmopolitan society within his disciples ‘Bhakat Samaj’ and he gave ‘Sarana’ to all classes of people irrespective of caste, creed. A man takes ‘Sarana’ to him, he is a ‘bhakat’. Sankaradeva said “nabashe bhakati jati ajati.” (Neog, M.: 1998 : 368). Again he says -

chandalo hari nam lave matra
karibe usita yajnara patra

(Kirtanghosa : 118)

[The moment an outcaste takes resort to Hari’s name he deserves to be a priest of sacrificial fame].

It is to be mentioned that the disciples of Sankaradeva were Muslim, Bhutiyas, Marans, Chutiyas, Bodos, Garos, Koches and many others. In this way he followed a policy of equality towards his Bhakatas and tried to establish a caste free society on the basis of assimilation. He said -

kirata kachari khasi garo miri
yavana kanaka govala
asama muluka rajaka turuka
ku vaca mlechcha candala
ano jata nara krishna scvakara
sangata pavitra hoya

(Bhagavata Book-II-53)
Another unique feature of Neo-Vaisnavism is that Sankaradeva lays emphasis on the indispensability of four fundamental elements or agencies of cultivating devotional faculty. The four fundamental reals are - guru, deva, nama and bhakat, which are called ‘Cari-Vastu’. Sankardeva in his Bhakti Ratnakara explains the necessity of a guru and guru occupies the first place in the system. As he says -

\[
\begin{align*}
guru \text{ seva vine ana yateka upaya} \\
durjaya manaka ara jinana \\
sansaraka tare guru carana sevaya \\
hena jani guru-seva kariyo sadaya.
\end{align*}
\]

\textit{(Bhakti Ratnakara : 29-32)}

[Other than by serving the guru, the un-conquerable mind cannot be controlled by any other means. By serving the ‘Guru’ one can overcome the cycle of birth and death; knowing this, do always serve the Guru].

“The four main substances of vaisnavism formulate a path of salvation rejecting varnasrama dharma (the caste system).” (Deva Goswami, R. (ed): 1996 : 171) article by Bhattacharjee, K.). These ‘Cari-vastues’ are inter-linked and they are nothing but four aspects of the composite doctrine of bhakti.

“Thus, by the guidance of the guru and the help derived from the association with devotees (Satsanga), bhakti can be attained and depended.” (Deva Goswami, R. (ed) : : 1996 : 17 (article by Sarma, S.N.).
According to Sankaradeva, Deva (adorable deity), “God is the supreme reality and the only worshipful deity. His incarnations and forms are not ultimate truth.” (Goswami, K.D.: 2007:82). Sankaradeva lays great emphasis on chanting the name and glory of God. Due to this reason, the faith of Sankaradeva is also known as Nama-dharma. The four or the last element of cari-vastu is sat-sanga or bhakata. Vaisnavism of Sankaradeva put great stress on the company of holy persons for the cultivation of bhakti. Mahantasavara Sanga anga bhakatira [i.e. the company of holy persons is a part of devotion] (Goswami, K.D.: 2007:83).

Namghar is a unique contribution of Sankaradeva towards the Assamese society. For the first time, Sankaradeva established a Namghar at his ancestral village Bordowa in Nagaon district and kept its doors open to all irrespective of caste, colour, age and sex.” (Sarma, S.N.: 1996:155). The Namghar has been considered to be the most significant one of all the vaisnavite institution in Assam. It is commonly means, the prayer hall. “The Namghar, also known as Kirtanghar, finds place in the texts of the biographers of Sankaradeva with some more terms such as Gosaighar, Hari-griha, Deva-griha etc.” (Goswami, K.D.: 1999:67). “Generally the term Kirtanghar and the three others mean the prayer hall of the Satra institution and a Namghar stands for the same of a village.” (Mahanta, Bap Chandra: 1987:396). In the word “Namghar”,

Kabirdas- (Sakhi poem)
“Nam” signifies “The name of God.” In Sankaradeva’s philosophy, uttering the name of God is the best way to salvation. Lakshminath Bezbaruah, referring to the biography on Sankaradeva written by Ramcaran Thakur, mentions how the vaisnava preacher excelled in preaching vaisnavism in Assam even before his first marriage and was also credited for evolving a prayer hall for discussing religious matters.” (Bezbaruah Lakshminath: 1963: 22-23).

The Namghar is a composite phenomenon. Thus, Sankaradeva’s vaisnavism has many institutional aspects of which the most prominent one is the ‘Satra’ and the Namghar. “Both are the most powerful religious institutions through which the ‘Eka Sarana Nama Dharma’ is propagated and stabilized on a firm footing.” (Kalita, B.C. Goswami, Dhing Mazumdar, H. (ed): 2005 : 201 (article by Goswami, N.).

The word ‘Satra’ is used in Neo-Vaisnavite religion in the sense of a religious association, where recitation of the Bhagavata took place daily. To chant (kirtana) and to listen (sravana) to the Bhagavata is one of the most important parts of the daily affairs of the Satra. Though, Sankaradeva first established the Namghar in Bardowa but later on Namghar were spread at different places where Sankaradeva stayed during his movement from Bardowa to Barpeta. ‘Satra’ resembles to a certain extent to the Buddhist monastery or maths of the medieval period. But this similarity does not imply the influence of Buddhism on Assamese vaisnavism.” (Kalita, B.C., Dhing Mazumdar, H. (ed): 2005 : 201 (article by Goswami, N.).
"A Satra is more than a Buddhist-Vihara or a Hindu math. The Satras in Assam are a peculiar type of institution. The place where Sankaradeva stayed and preached through congregational prayers and religious discourses came to be known as Satra." (Goswami, K.D. : 2007 : 27). Bardowa or Batadrawa is the first Satra of Assam where Sankaradeva constructed a prayer hall known as Namghar or Kirtana Ghar. He held there discussions of religious matters along with prayer services. The concept of Satra might have taken from the Bhagavata Purana. Thus, the establishment of Sattra was the landmark of Neo-Vaisnavism of Sankaradeva in Assam. It was the gift of Saint Sankaradeva to the people of Assam. A proper Vaisnava Satra consists of a square enclosure wall, varying according to its strength, with four openings or gateways. It contains four rows of four long houses, each divided into a number of rooms at the sides. The central temple composite of a Shrine called 'Manikut, and an assembly hall, satras of Assam for organizing the socio-religious life and for the progress of spiritual, intellectual and cultural activities of the people. Even, when there were no political and administrative unity in the state, these Vaisnava Satras brought about unity of religion, culture and literature. The head or superior of the Satra institution is called Mahanta, Adhikar or Satradhikar and his relatives are also situated within the Satra campus.

There were some important satras in Assam in that period viz. - Bardowa, Auniati (Majuli), Dakhinpat (Majuli) and Garmur Satra (Majuli).

Moreover, it is noteworthy that before, Sankaradeva, there were no cultural unity in Assam and both Satras and Namghar had attached the isolated
classes of society under the direct form of unity in one platform. It was the institution of common people and the centre of saints. The Satra had indirectly helped the establishment of Sanskrit tolls and schools.

As a religious institution, the primary function of both Satra and Namghar is to propagate vaisnava faith and movement and to develop the religious feelings and faith in man. So, its main function is to arrange 'Nama' or Kirtana. So, it is called Namghar or Kirtanghar.” (Sharma, Nilima (ed) 2008 : 291-292 (article by Goswami, N.).

Thus, the Satra and Namghar have been enriching the Assamese life morally, socially and educationally and have contributed a great deal to the realm of literature. The most important contribution of Satra and Namghar is the uplift of the backward classes and minimization of the rigidity of the caste distinction. Namghar has been playing a vital role in the society since five hundred years. It is nothing but the extended wing or a miniature replica of the Satra. Banikanta Kakati said in his article, “The new life, letters and a state” that “combined the functions of a village parliament, a village court, a village school and a village church. These institutions served as sheet anchors of Assamese society in the midst of continually shifting political circumstances” (Chaliha, B.P. (ed) : 1998 : 15). The namghars worked, to a large extent, towards spreading of intellectual and cultural activities in the village, and in the course of time being nerve-centres of the village came to co-ordinate all aspects of social, economical and political life of the Assamese people.
The namghars further serve as panchayat hall, where villagers gather to discuss and solve many of their day to day problems. These community centres have been found even to play political and religious role. Indeed, Satra and Namghar performed the same functions of the Panchayats of which we hear so much today. S.N. Sarma said in his article “Sattra institution of Assam”, “The Sattra institution contributed considerably to the spread of learning and education in medieval Assam. All principal Sattras used to maintain Sanskrit tolls and services of reputed scholars were requisitioned to run those tolls.” (Chaliha, B.P. (ed): 1998 :79).

Birinchi K. Baruah termed Namghar as ‘Jatia Jibanar Natsal’ - ‘A theatre of community life’ (Bora, Dilip : 2008 :132). This comment definitely shows the real identity of Namghar.

The Satras also played the same role like the Namghar. The satras are the entire religious network. The ethics and ideals made by the satras were caused to prevail in the Namghars of their disciples. Dramas, bhaonas, dance musics etc. were held in the pattern of Satras. Thus, Satras were regarded as an authoritative institute in the social and religious field.

Sankaradeva is unique in this respect that he took cultural development as a tool of the movement. “Literary compositions, dramatic performances (Bhaona) and songs played a great part in attracting people.” (Sarma, S.N.: 1996 : 32). The Neo-Vaisnava movement and Sankaradeva used different cultural elements of the society as a medium to popularise and propagate his new philosophy.
Hence, Neo-Vaisnavism was regarded as a great cultural movement which indirectly highlighted the every element of Assamese society and helped to organize a great cultural renaissance. Sankaradeva successfully placed Assam near greater Indian cultural avenue.

Sankaradeva was the originator of dramatic tradition in Assam and invented the first stage in Assam. The Ankiya-nata or Bhaona achieved immense popularity among other creative activities of Sankaradeva. "Sankaradeva calls his dramatic works nata, nataka or yatra in various parts of them (Neog, M. : 1998 : 263). Sankaradeva was a man of divergent qualities. He was a writer, a musician and an artist at the same time. He served himself as a cultural complex and spirited the age of old Assamese society with the principle of Neo-Vaisnavism." Sankaradeva’s contribution in dramatic show 'chihna-yatra' arranged by them consisted of painted scenes which was prepared by himself. (Kalita, B.C. and Mazumdar Dhing, H. (ed.) : 2005 : 11 (article by Goswami, K.D.). He introduced one act play based on religious themes to educate the common people who were ignorant. Sankaradeva painted on large canvas scenes of vaikuntha in his first drama ‘Chihna Yatra’ to infuse into the minds of the people a sense of religious consciousness. The composition of Ankiya-nata, an audio-visual literary form, is one of the hallmarks of Sankaradeva’s creative genius, Sankaradeva composed the natas through which the common people as audience might appreciate with aesthetic enjoyment, the excellence of bhakti cult. Ankiya-nata and Bhaona serve both as the medium of religious propaganda and a as a source of
entertainment and recreation and have played a prominent role in developing spiritual outlook. It also helped in refining sentiment and temperament of Assamese people. Birinchi Kumar Baruah said about Ankiya-nata in his article “The Father of Assamese Drama and Stage” as that “these plays were written to further the cause of Vaisnavism and they therefore mainly aimed at creating devotional sentiments in the hearts of the audience. A complete effect is attained in arousing a sense of devotion not only by narration and characterization but also through song, dance and dialogue. In keeping this ideal in view, the dramatists had employed in their plays sentiments which have direct bearings on devotion.” (Chaliha, B.P. (ed) : 1998 : 21). The sentiment of Ankiya-natas are love, heroic and filial.

Neo-Vaisnavism of Sankaradeva brought in its train a wide culture of music in Assam which is rich and remarkable in its tone and variety. “Among the different forms of this music, introduced by Sankaradeva himself, the two tuned to classical Indian Ragas (melody-modes) are bargita and ankiya-gita or songs of the ankas (drama).” (Chaliha, B.P. (ed) : 1998 : 54 (article by Neog, M.).

There are 34 songs, known as Bargita composed by Sankaradeva. Bargitas are songs sing of the futility of human efforts and urges upon listeners the need for bhakti.

Bhakti Bhava is the principal sentiment of the Bargitas. Sankardeva expressed his philosophy as all the creatures are parts of God. They are deluded by ignorance which can be cancelled only with God’s grace.
yat jive jangama kita patangama
aga naga jaga teri kaya

(Bargita: 8)

He again expressed the reality of the world as the body of God. But this world, whatever its nature, is extremely temporary and fickle and he said in his Bargita as -

anthira sansara
athira jivana dhana yauvana
athira dhanajana jivana yauvana
atjira chi sansara

(Bargita, 15, 17)

The noble qualities inherent in this cluster of songs, Banikanta Kakati and Kaliram Medhi call them ‘noble numbers’ and ‘songs celestial’. (Kakati, B.: 1921:45) and (Medhi, K.: 1978:47).

Mukunda Madhab Sarma said about the Bargitas of Sankaradeva in his article “on the songs celestial of saint Sankaradeva” as “this is decidedly a type of superior art and no man of taste (Sahridaya) can fail to appreciate its sweetness. This, the songs celestial of the saint are very agreeable to the ears as songs while they can captivate the minds of the devotees with a mead of devotional ecstasy.” (Chaliha, B.P. (ed): 1998:129).

The Satriya dance is one of the finest forms of Indian dances which is unique creation of Sankaradeva in Assam. The history of neo-vaishnavite
There are several types of dances in Sankaradeva’s Satra school of dancing i.e. Satra bhangi or Satradhara nach, Krishna bhangi or Gosai pravesar nach, Gopi bhangi or Pravesar nac etc.

Satriya dance is a marked feature of bhaona performance and Sutradhara is one of the most important characters of bhaona. The Sutradhara dance is one of the preliminary dance in bhaona. Satriya dance is developed in the Satras. Today, Satriya dance is recognised as a classical dance form of India by the Sangeet Natak Academy and it occupies the equivalent status of Bharat Natyam, Kathak, Kathakali etc.

Satriya dance is a powerful device for the propagation of Bhakti, which at the same time combined Nritya, Natya and Sangita. “Although originally preserved and practised in the Satra as a means of cultivating Bhakti and being done even today, the Satriya dance has now also taken the new dimension of a distinct performing art form of secular, aesthetic and academic interest, even then, the basic principle of bhakti is always there because of the sources of the themes being taken mostly from the Bhagavata Purana with special emphasis in Lord Krishna as the only adorable Deity.” (Goswami, K.D.: 2007: 76).

Sankaradeva was a painter of great potentiality. The art of painting in Assam also received a new dimension under the guidance of Sankaradeva. According to Kathagurucharita, Sankaradeva painted on ‘Tulapat’, the scenes of seven vaikunthas for the purpose of the representation of his first one act
play ‘Chihna Yatra’, Katha Guru Charita describes the potentiality of Sankaradeva when he with hengul-haital painted and elephant on a small piece of paper pasted it on a wooden book case with his Gunamala and presented it to Koch-king Naranarayana.

“Sankaradeva also had got the scenes of Krishna’s childhood woven in a large sheet of cloth measuring 180 ft in length to show Cilaraya, the koch prince. This large painted canvas was known as Vrindavani-Vastra (Kathagurucharita 256). “Sankaradeva’s paintings on Tulapat perhaps worked as a source of great inspiration for many of the devotees and artists in the later years to take up the work of illumination of manuscripts on the Saci folios” (Mahanta, P.: 2007 : 239).

Satriya paintings is a religious art and it mainly emphasizes in illustrating the various books of Bhagavata Purana. Dasam Skandha Bhagavata dated 1539 AD from Bali Satra of Nagaon district is known as the earliest example of Satriya school of painting in Assam. Sankaradeva is an architecture of Kirtanghar or the Namghar. “The vaisnavite apostles brought about a new wave of sculpture of wood carvings and architecture of wood and bamboo structures through the namghar and manikuta.” (Mahanta, P. : 2007 : 254). Another, unique feature of art and fold culture of Sankardeva in the mask-making which as taken up by the khanikars in Sattras and villages.

Neo-Vaisnavism of Sankardeva didnot advocate extreme asceticism nor did he plead for a complete renunciation of family life. He preached the religion is more suited to the house holders.
CONCLUSION:

Bhakti movement, started in the earlier period of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva, took an integrated form till their death and strengthened its base also. Satras and Namghars were established from village to village and the wave of bhakti offered to 'Hari' had taught the people in Assam to unite with vastness of the 'Neo-Vaisnavism'.

The most important feature of Neo-Vaisnavism is to felicitate changes in the socio-religious systems of that period. It wanted to do so not by throwing away what had been already existent and in practice but by making sources necessary information and modification.

Sankaradeva’s Neo-Vaisnavism is an offshoot of that social changes. He spread his Neo-Vaisnavism among the common people with a message of universal humanism.

It is very important to note here that the influence of Neo-Vaisnavism can be traced even today in Assamese both vedic and non-vedic form. It is because of that streak of humanism and secular idea which are at the root of Sankaradeva’s Neo-Vaisnavism.

Even in present day we can see many vedic people performing their rites and rituals regarding a marriage, funerals etc. according to the ways made aware by Sankaradeva. It is really unique in the entire Indian society.