CHAPTER VI

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STATE AND SATRA

From the ancient time the kinship in India was never regarded purely as a political office devoid of any religious significance. The king was the upholder of Dharma and the defender of the established faith. Therefore, any religious movement of revolutionary nature was naturally looked upon with an eye of suspicion and hostility, until it could prove itself to be beneficial to society and largely accepted by the public.¹

The neo vaisnavite movement initiated by Sankardeva was not exceptional to it.

6.1 EARLY RELATION

The neo vaisnavite movement and Satra institution of Assam had to face many difficulties for its existence in the early part. In the initial stage of the movement Sankardeva had to move out with his followers to the Koch kingdom about the middle of the 16th century A.D. due to the hostile attitude of the Ahom monarch. In the Koch kingdom also he could not peacefully pursue his religious activities. He was misrepresented several times before Naranarayana, the contemporary Koch king, by some opponents. They complained against him that Sankardeva did not observe the established practices of the Hindu religion. Rather he prohibited these practices. Like Sankardeva, Madhabdeva and Damodardeva were also expelled from eastern Koch kingdom by Raghu Narayana and Pariksit Narayana for their alleged revolutionary religious ideas and believes.

But later on, inspite of royal indifference or hostility, when it was firmly established and widely spread, the government had to acknowledge it as an
established fact and afterwards patronised some of the Satras. In the koch kingdom during the reign of Lakshminarayana, Virnarayana, Prannarayana and Mohendra Narayana the Satra institution widely spread. From the middle of the seventeenth century the Ahom kings began to patronise vaisnavite Satras and other religious institutions. However, the Satras received brute treatment in the hands of Gadadhar Singha in the Ahom kingdom. When Gadadhar Singha came to power, in 1681 the royal persecution of the innocent vaisnavites reached the climax. It is said that while Gadadhar Singha move from place to place in order to save himself from being killed by the agents of the king, he was maltreated by some of the devotees of Dakhinpat Satra. Therefore, when he came to power he confiscated the properties of the Satra and idols of the Satra were thrown away and some of them melted down. The Satradhikars of Auniati Satra was exiled to Sadiya. Some of the heads of the Satra (Gosai) put to death and some were sent to Namrupa. Some of them were engaged in manual labour. Sir Edward Gait writes "Many of them were deported to out of the way places and made to work as coolies on roads, others were put to death and few were offered up as sacrifices to idols."

During the reign of Chakradhaj Singha and Rudra Singha the vaisnavite Satra fully developed. When Rudra Sinha ascended to the throne he recalled and reinstated the deported gosai in their former position. He gave official recognition to the Satras. Most of the principal Satras in eastern Assam were established under the patronage from Joydhaj Singha to Ratnadaj Singha (1663 to 1681). In the royal court a special officer was appointed to look after the workings and management of Satras. This officer was known as Satriya Baruah whose duty was to recommend steps to be taken by the Satras. During the Ahom rule it was one of the principles that the king should
visit the principal Satras at least once a year. According to Tungkhungia Buranji Gaurinath Singha and Kamaleswar Singha visited Auniati, Dakhinpat and Narowa Satra.

During the period between 1817 to 1825 Satras were badly affected by the Burmese invasion and oppression. Many valuable manuscripts and images of the Satras were lost forever. But with the establishment of British rule in 1826 the Satra could regain their status. The British rulers did not interfere in the religion, on the contrary, for the development of the Satras, they granted lands free of revenue or at a nominal revenue.

The four principal Satras, i.e. Chari Satras of Majuli including the Garmur Satra received preference over the other Satras from the Ahom kings. Even in the coronation ceremony of the kings they were blessed by the Satradhikars. Moreover the kings visited the Satras occasionally. When the kings were visited the Satras, an elaborate arrangement was made by the Satras and they were escorted from the baisora to the inner gate, by the gayana and bayana.

Though many difficulties were faced by the Satras in initial stage, it is also true that from its early period there was a close relationship between the king and Satradhikars of Satra. While Sankardeva was in Koch Behar he was highly honoured by the Koch king Naranarayana. Like his master Madhabdeva was also highly honoured by the Koch King Lakshminarayana. He initiated queens of Lakshinarayana to Ek-Sarana-Nam-Dharma. The image of Kalia Thakur or Syam Rai of Barpeta Satra is said to have been presented by Koch king Roghudeva Narayana (1581-1603). Besides these, the king provided the Satras with the requisite persons, financial help and other accessories from the Royal Treasury. These works of Koch kingdom
inspired the Ahom kings. So, Joydhaj Singha constructed the four Satras – Auniati, Dakhinpat, Garmur and Kuruwabahi in eastern Assam and donated properties and land. The Satras of Kamrup were able to receive land and properties from the king Siva Singha. Thus like the Koch kings vaisnavism also received great importance under the Ahom rule. It should be noted that Joydhaj Singha was the first Ahom king who was initiated by the Satradhikars Niranjandeva and Bonamalideva.

According to Tirtha Nath Sarmah, the Auniati Satra is the main Satra to receive the land and money donated by writing in the copper plate, from the Ahom king. Tanagehu Phukan the officer of Chakradhaj Singha helped Kanaklata Ai to discover the Bordowa Thaan. The copper plate inscription recording the settlement of a dispute over the Bordowa Thaan, Nowgong, 1721 Saka / 1799 A.D. By this copper plate inscription the Ahom king Kamaleswar Singha settled the disputes over the Bordowa Thaan and equally divided the thana campus between the two groups. The description of the plate of Barpeta Satra is also found in the "pracya Sasanavali" edited by Maheswar Neog. This document was issued by Siva Singha and Ambika Devi conferring on the porabhiita (Barpeta) Satra 280 families of paiks and a plot of specified land.

During the Ahom rule the Satra also helped the kings when ever they were in need. During the time of Dandua revolution and Daffola warfare, soldiers were paid from the treasuries of the Satras. The Satra helped the king even with the finance and man power whenever necessary. The disciples of Garmur Satra even fought against Moamaria for defence of the king. The king also constructed many houses for stay of the Satradhikars and provided them with all amenities namely foodstuff, firewood and such other articles.
Towards the later part of the Ahom rule, a new custom in the shape of blessing the king by the heads of the principal Satras on the occasions of the coronation ceremony came into vogue. When the Satradhikars visited royal place for participating special functions, the kings extended all courtesy to them.

From the above discussion it can be noticed that, though in the initial stage the vaisnava movement and the Satra institution did not find favour with the ruling monarchs but in the later period these institutions were recognised by the monarchs. Most of the important Satras of eastern Assam were established under the patronage of Ahom monarchs from Joydhaj Singha (1649-1663) to Ratandhaj Singha (1679-1681). The royal patronage placed many Satras on a sound economic footing and thereby helped them to pay exclusive attention to the pursuit of religion and culture. It is also noticed that the Satras which largely contributed towards the cultural development of Assam and have still functioning as a major religious cultural institutions, are those Satras which received royal help at one time or other.

6.2 STATE POLICY TOWARDS THE SATRAS AND THEIR ESTABLISHMENT IN THE POST INDEPENDENCE PERIOD

India gained her independence on 15th August, 1947 and with the consequent declaration in 1951. India has become a Sovereign, Democratic and Republic. By the 42nd amendment to the constitution of India the terms socialist and secular were incorporated in the preamble of the constitution and religion became a secular subject. Assam as a part of India came under the obligation of the Indian Constitution. The state government, therefore, did not pay serious attention to the Satra institution which had been managed under scheme of management from time to time by the district judge.
Directive principle of state policy is the outstanding feature of our constitution. These principles are simply directives given to the state for all round development including religion.

6.2.1 Legislature and Satras

Being a democratic country the public may persuade the department concerned to undertake the legislation for the development of religious institutions. In our state also the conscious citizens and voluntary associations may feel the necessity for certain changes in this respect. Therefore, the government of Assam proposed to introduce a Bill for the development of religious institutions. Accordingly the Governor of Assam issued an order to publish a Bill entitled the Assam Hindu Religious Endowment Bill, 1957, by which was intended (a) to appoint a commissioner of Endowments for the general superintendence of all Hindu religious endowments in the state, (b) to acquire all rights in lands (except the lands included in the compound or orchard) of a temple including the rights of any intermediaries in such lands by the state government and (c) to frame a scheme of management of the temples in the Legislative Assembly, it was argued that the Bill should cover all the religious and charitable endowments of public nature and so the title of the Bill should be changed. After its deliberations, the Bill was sent to the President of India, who gave his assent on 2nd April, 1961 and the Bill became an Act to be known as the Assam State Acquisition of Land Belonging to Religious or charitable Institutions of Public Nature Act, 1959 (Assam Act IX of 1961).

The Act consists of three chapters. The first chapter deals with its preamble, title and other definitions. Regarding definition of the title, the Act explains that "Religious or Charitable Institutions of Public Nature shall include Satras, Mathas,
public temple or similar institutions or endowments for public purposes of charitable or religious nature." Therefore it also includes the other religious institutions like public Mosques and Durghas, Gurudwaras and also the Churches. The second chapter deals with the mode of acquisition of lands belonging to the religious establishment and their future management. The same chapter also provides for compensation to each and every religious institution whose lands would be acquired under provision of the Act. The principle of determining such compensation would be "the gross income of land" which has been acquired. The gross income to be calculated by taking the gross annual income from rent, fisheries, forests, hats, bazars, ferries, roads, grazing reserves, mines and minerals for the agricultural year proceeding the date of notification under section 3.10

Thus according to the provisions of "Assam State Acquisition of Lands belonging to the religious or charitable institutions of public nature" Act of 1959, the government has the power to acquire land from Satra but also made provision for claiming due compensation for those lands. Through this Act now the government may determine administrative areas of the Satras and may frame laws whenever situation arises.

The Legislature may amend or repeal the existing legislation for which the institutions and organisations would be deprived of their powers. In the Legislative Assembly a particular member may spotlight the activities of a particular institution. The legislature may order enquiry into the working of any religious authority. As a result all the institutions and organisations of the state have to act as a subordinate organisation. However it may be noted that the legislative control is not powerful, because the legislative power is diffused and the functions of the legislature are so
wide that it can not look into the details of any subject. There is no adequate machinery to look after, whether the institutions and their authorities conform to the laws passed by the legislature.

The interpretation of laws depends upon the judges of the Court. Hence the effect of the legislation also depends upon the verdict of the judges. Despite its limited power, the legislative control produces a good result in this regard. On account of the influence of the legislature, the departmental head of the state government may take a positive attitude towards the Satra institutions. In this manner the Assam government have grant of Rs. 25,00,000.00 (Rs. Twenty Five Lakhs) to each to Bordowa Thaan, Barpeta Satra and Madhupur Satra respectively in 2007.

6.2.2 Administrative control over the Satras

The administrative control is more effective than the legislative control, because legislative control may be influenced by party consideration. Generally administrative control is exercised by a body of officials who are regarded as non-partisan and non-political. It also depends upon capacity of a department to exercise powers effectively.

After the enactment of "The Assam State acquisition of Lands Belonging to the Religious or charitable institutions of public nature" in 1959, the Assam government interferes the administrative area of the Satras. For example, out of 22 thousand puras of land, 19 thousand puras were acquired by the government in Garmur Satra.11

Appeals: The government has the power to hear appeals from the people and the institutions. The Satradhikar of Madhupur Satra appealed to the government for raising the amount of financial help for the repairing and renovation of Madhupur
Satra in 2007. It is provided by in the Assam Act No. IX of 1961 that an appeal against the order of Deputy Commissioner, or any other officer shall lie to the District Judge. The decision of the District Judge or order of the Deputy Commissioner shall be final (vide clause 14 of the Act 1959).

**Appointment:** According to the religious Acts the government has the power to appoint certain members on behalf of the state administration to be the observer in the activities and functions of the Satras.

**Budget:** Generally the Satra institutions do not frame budget in the true sense of the term. They simply make some broad outlines about the income and expenditure. But Bordowa Thaan and Barpeta Satra are exceptional from other Satras of Assam. Both the institutions frame budget in each year. There is a special provision for the preparation of budget in both the institutions. The Managing Committee is the final authority to scrutinise the budget.

**Audit:** According to the religious Act of 1959, all the accounts "shall be audited each year by such person and in such manner" as the government may determine. In view of this the accounts of Bordowa Thaan and Barpeta Satra are audited by an auditor appointed by the Managing Committee. The secretary will place the audit report in the general meeting of the Committee. After examination of the audit the secretary of both the institutions publishes the report along with the statement of income and expenditure in written form. This report is published in the news paper also.

**Formulation of Rules:** In some of the Satra institutions some rules and regulations are made for the effective administration of the institution. For the smooth administration of the satra they may frame some rules in the religious, social and
cultural fields. Each and every disciple of the Satra is bound to follow these rules and regulations. Those who violate the rules some kind of punishment is given by the Satra authority.

For the administration of their activities, both Bordowa Thaan and Barpeta Satra established their Managing Committee respectively. The Managing Committee of Bordowa Thaan consisted of the representatives of different parts of Assam. But the Managing Committee of Barpeta Satra is directly elected by the Samuha Bhakata of the Satra. Both the Managing Committee should hold its meeting once a year. A special meeting could be convened by the secretary of the committee whenever it is necessary. The quorum of the Managing Committee of Barpeta Satra was one third of the total number of members of the Committee. In Bordowa Thaan the quorum of the committee is fifteen.

Generally the Satradhikar is the head of the Satra institution. But it may be noted that in Bordowa Thaan and Barpeta Satra the Satradhikar is only a titular head. The real authority is vested to the Managing Committee.

**Default power:** The government has no default power over the Satra institution. It can simply send an officer to enquire whether the Satra is performing its activities properly or not.

**Disputes:** It is noticed that disputes of the Satra institutions are not referred to the government. Various kinds of disputes may arise in Satras. Such as disputes between two or more Satra institutions, disputes between the Officials of the Satra itself or disputes between Satra institutions and the government. All such disputes are settled within the institution itself by the authority of the Satra in consultation with their disciples.
Expenditure: All the principal Satras follows a systematic way for all monetary transaction, though the Satra institution is purely a religious institution. The Managing Committee of Bordowa Thaan and Barpeta Satra made a principle that there must be a cash book, stock book and a book of income and expenditure. Besides the general secretary, an assistant secretary, a treasurer and an auditor is also appointed by the Managing Committee for all monetary transaction. All money transaction are dealt with proper receipt.

Grant-in-aid: Like all other institutions the government may also control the religious institutions through the means of grant-in-aid. The sanction of grant of the government for various purposes is subject to a number of conditions. If the institution does not observe the conditions laid down by the government, it may refuse to pay the grant. In the absence of government grant the administration of a particular institution may be seriously affected because a substantial amount of money is received from the government. The sources of income of Satra institutions are very poor. Therefore, it is more necessity and compulsion of all the religious institutions to follow the instructions of the government.

Investment: The financial conditions of the Satra institutions are not sound. Still if there is any surplus fund that should be invested in the secured institutions for its better financial condition. In his opinion Gakul Pathak said that the Satra shall open an account in any Nationalised Bank under the Reserve Bank of India or any postal account and invest its money. According to the information collected from Sri Bhogeswar Borah, ex secretary of Bordowa Thaan, out of the total income of Bordowa Thaan ten percent is deposited in the fixed deposit scheme of the SBI, Lakhimi Gaolia Bank, Central Bank of India and Apex Bank of Nagaon Branch.
**Taxation:** The satra institution is primarily an independent institution because these institutions are not constituted according to the laws of the State. So the government is not authorised to determine the rate at which tax should be levied.

**Election:** The selection of *Satradhikar* in early days was determined on the basis of their religious accomplishment and aptitude for a particular work. But later on, the office became hereditary in almost all the Satras of Assam. But Barpeta Satra is the only Satra where election is held in a democratic manner to elect the *Satradhikar*. In Barpeta Satra a scheme was recommended for its management. It is already mentioned that all the voters of Barpeta Satra are called "Samuha". Each and every *mahapurusiya* person irrespective of male or female can be the voter. But they must be 18 years of age and reside within the Barpeta Municipality area. The date of election of the *Satradhikar* should be published in the Assam Gazette and the News papers of Assam.

**Inspection:** For the better interest of the Satra institution inspection and supervision are necessary. The main purpose of inspection is to achieve the efficient administration of certain services. Therefore, efficiency and good administration of such type of institution can be secured through the inspection. In Assam most of all the Satras are provided with government grants. Therefore, there must be somebody to see that the grant is properly spent.

**Removal:** Generally the officers and members of the Satra institutions can not be removed, once they are appointed. But if they are found guilty of misconduct in discharging their duties or violate the rules and regulations of the Satra they can only be replaced in consultation with disciples by the Satra Authority. In recent years rules are framed in a few Satras like Barpeta and Bordowa Thaan. As per the rules of the
Management Committee of both the institutions if a particular person is found to be unlawful nature he would be removed from the Satra itself.

**Rule making power:** In some Satras like Bordowa and Barpeta certain rules are written down clearly for the administration of their activities. In Bordowa Thaan and Barpeta Satra there are Management Committees. These Management Committees frame rules for their respective institution to run the administration smoothly. The government can also frame laws through legislature whenever necessary and situation arises. Accordingly the Assam State Acquisition of land belonging to religious or Charitable Institution of Public Nature Act 1959 was passed by the Assembly not only empowering the government to acquire land but also made provision for claiming due compensation for those land. The Act also provides provisions for submission of a return on lands indicating their utilisation before acquisition.

This Act also made provisions for acquiring land from Satra institution. The state may from time to time by notification in the official Gazette declare that all rights in land belonging to a religious or Charitable Institution of Public Nature shall vest in state free from all encumbrances with effect from the first day of the agricultural year next following the date of publication of such notification.

The state government has the power to dispose the settlement of land with certain categories of persons - (a) cultivators who have been rendered homeless due to ejection by the land holder or due to flood, erosion or earthquake within two years, (b) co-operative framing society formed by landless and cultivations & (c) landless cultivations.¹³
Hence it is clear that although India is a secular state, the government may determine the administrative areas of the Satra institutions. However it is noticed that the state government do not pay serious attention to the Satra institution. Practically the state control and supervision over the religious institutions are very little. Regarding the state control and supervision over the Bordowa Thaan and Barpeta Satra it is found from the questionnaire, which were administered on the disciples and functionaries of both the institutions are very little. The Commissioners and the Deputy Commissioners who are the inspecting officers of the religious institutions evinced little interest in these matters. As a result the Satra institutions are not benefited from the guidance of the inspecting officers. For the better development of Satra institutions the government may play the part of a friend, philosopher and guide to the Satra authorities. Through the Deputy Commissioner or such government officials the government may render advice effectively.

6.3 DEMOCRACY IN SATRA INSTITUTION

The Satra Institutions are the nerve centres of religious practices but they are not solely confined only to the spiritual world. In addition to the religious functions these institutions perform certain non religious or secular functions which are also essential for smooth practice of a religion. Alongwith the spiritual upliftment these institutions also contributed to the development and prosperity of the material or secular life of its devotees because Sankardeva fully realised that spiritual upliftment solely based on material well being of the disciples. Therefore, he brought about a proper balance of both spiritual and secular activities in his Satra institution.
The Satra institution is based on certain universal principles which constitute the foundation of a democratic country. The mission of the Satra institution is not confined within the boundaries of religious and spiritualism. Its mission is also to reform and reconstruct the society on democratic and humanitarian ideals.

Sankardeva's neo vaisnavism never insisted on anybody to accept the faith nor it was imposed on any body. It teaches its followers to be secular and to tolerate others' faith. He emphasised on this doctrine and told his disciples to obey it in their private and public life.

\[ Paran dharmaka nihimsiva kadacit \]
\[ Kriva bhutak daya Sakarunacit \]
\[ Huiva santa citta sarvadharmata vatsala \]
\[ Ehi Bhagavata dharma yan a Mahavala.^{14} \]

It means never to look with contempt at other religion. This tolerance of other's faith is one of the greatest ideals of Sankardeva's neo vaisnavism. In one of his teachings Sankardeva again advised his devotees to behave both friends and foes as equal and at the same time held it as the supreme devotion to Lord Krishna. He says -

\"Satru mitra sava kariya sam
Ahise krishna bhakti uttam.\"^{15}

To make no distinction between friend and enemy, i.e. to convert an enemy into a friend through noble thoughts and feelings indicate social peace and progress. Many examples of this kind can be quoted from Sankardeva's work. Thus as democratic thinker Sankardeva not only advised his devotees to follow these humanitarian principles but also he himself implemented them in practice also.
Sankardeva's *Ek Sarana Nama Dharma* knew no caste, creed, colour and a universal spirit is the main principle of this faith.

In *Kirtan Ghosa* he says -

\[\text{Nahi bhakatita jati ajati vichara} \]
\[\text{Krishnata bhakati Samastare Adhikara} \]

In bhakati there is no distinction of caste, everybody has equal right to chant the *Harinam*. Hence Sankardeva opened the door of the Satra to people from all castes. By remembering the name of God even the lowest of the low may obtain liberation. He boldly proclaimed that in the matter of devotion to the Lord all are equal and there could be no caste and race distinction.

The references here are not only to the so called lower caste within the Hindu fold but also to the tribes of the region as well as to the *Javanas* and *Turukas* (Muslim) who are out side the pale of Hinduism. Hence along with the lower caste, tribal people also recognised by him for the first time in social history through the heart searching message of Sankardeva.

Sankardeva also made no distinction between a Brahmin and a Chandala. In his famous book *Kirtana Ghosa* he says -

\[\text{Brahmana Candala nivicari kul} \]
\[\text{Datata Corata yara drīsti eka tul} \]
\[\text{Nicata Sadhuta yara bhaila eka jnana} \]
\[\text{Tahekesa pandita buliya Sarvaja}.^{16} \]
In devotion of bhakti there is no barrier of caste distinction. In another occasion he also says -

"Stree sudra kare yadi ahmata bhakate
Tahata kahiva ito jana mahamati."

(Even women and sudra offer devotion to me, oh great minded, impart to turn to this knowledge.) By this statement it is clear that on his eyes both man and woman are equal. He favoured the initiation of woman along with man in his faith. Like a true democrat Sankardeva made no distinction between man and woman (in his faith).

The above mentioned democratic outlook could be noticed in the working of the Satra institution and its practices in the initial stage of neo vaisnavism initiated by Sankardeva. In initiating disciples no discrimination was made between Brahmins and non Brahmins, the high and the low. Guruship (headship) was not reserved only for the Brahmanas. The Sudra classes, viz. the Kayasthas, the Kalitas and the others also acted as a Guru in many Satras. The guruship vested to the higher and lower caste people implies the democratic principle in *Ek Saran Nama Dharma* of Sankardeva.

Since the time of Sankardeva each vaisnava reformer desired to educate the masses. In ancient Satras importance was given on reading and listening, writing was treated as a professional job for those who had time, patience, practice and good handwriting. Most of the vaisnava saints translated Sanskrit scriptures into Assamese with a view to provide opportunity to the general people had to read and interpret these scriptures. Before Sankardeva except Brahmanas the other people have no opportunity to read these scriptures. The vaisnava saints challenged this custom and breakdown the monopoly of the Brahmans in this regard. In the congregational prayer all the devotees irrespective of their social position used to participate and received
equal treatment without any distinction. Hence the vaisnava saints spread the
democratic principles among their disciples.

In the earlier satras founded by Madhabdeva and others, democratic principles
were followed in their management unlike the Satras of later period Madhabdeva,
Damodardeva and other vaisnava saints did not considered the Satras as their personal
property over which they presided. The title *Satradhikar* which convey the sense of
ownership was not applicable to them. The Satra collectively belonged to the
community of the devotees and the vaisnava saints simply acted as their guides and
leaders. They did not consider themselves any way superior to the other devotees.

Madhabdeva introduced the idea of spiritual democracy and service of the
highest form like taking care of devotees in illness. He taught people to give priority
in the service of man (*bhakata seva*), to the service of God (*hari seva*). Thus the sense
of humanity was at all time taught and sometimes listed in the Satra institution.
Madhabdeva always followed the principles of equality. This attitude of Madhabdeva
has been best illustrated in the following incident narrated in *Katha Guru Carit*.\(^\text{18}\) The
mother of the Koch king Laksminarayana greatly admired Madhabdeva and his
followers and occasionally sent presents to them one day. She sent several pairs of
dhotis and chadder of unequal size and quality to Madhabdeva and devotees making a
certain distinction between Madhavdeva and his disciples. Madhabdeva was given the
best pair. He immediately returned the presents to the queen mother for making
uncalled for distinction between himself and his followers.

Madhabdeva handed over the management of the Barpeta Satra to the
community of devotees appointing Mathura Das *Burha Ata* as the leader, when he left
for Cooch Behar. At Cooch-Behar also the management of his satra was vested in the
community devotees. After the death of Madhabdeva they selected Achyuta Guru as the leader of the Satra. Damodardeva in the last part of his life nominated Bhattadeva as his successor with the approval of his disciples. Padma alias Badala Ata also left the management of the Kamalabari Satra under the collective authority of the celibate devotees nominating Srirama as the head of the community.\textsuperscript{19} Thus it is found that in the first stage of Satra history democratic method was adopted to choose the best person as the head of the Satra. The selection of the head of the Satra was determined on the basis of intellectual attainment and general behaviour. They were selected from any caste or community without any distinction. The ownership of the Satra and the responsibility of managing its affairs were vested in the assembly devotees residing within the Satra campus. But later on, the office of the headship of a Satra became hereditary in almost all the Satras of Assam. The rule of becoming a superior or Satradhikar is based on two principles according to lineage and according to seniority. The first rule is applicable to Narowa Satra and the second to the Salaguri Satra at Bordowa Thaan. But Barpeta is the only Satra where election is held in a democratic manner to elect the Satradhikar. The system of electing the Satradhikar or the head by voting procedure is still current in Barpeta Satra. The supreme authority of Barpeta Satra is vested in the Samuha. All democratic principles are adopted to manage the Satra affairs. In Bordowa Thaan also except the hereditary principle of Satradhikar democratic procedure is adopted to manage the Thaan. Both the Satradhikars of Bordowa Thaan are only the religious heads. The supreme authority is vested in its Managing Committee. Barpeta Satra and Bordowa Thaan are not the private property of the Satradhikars. Both the institutions are a public property. The ownership of both the institutions is vested in its disciples.
Along with the Satras the Namghars have played a very dominant role in the life of the Assamese people because it is the venue of all types of religious and non-religious or secular activities. It must be admitted that besides the spiritual upliftment the Namghar serves as the forum of discussion relating to moral and social welfare of the villagers. Therefore Namghar should not be treated as wholly religious institutions, they are secular too.

Through the Namghar Sankardeva brought together the different races and tribes and thereby brought about social unity among the people. Like a true democratic person Sankardeva fully realised the principles of equality among the people without any discrimination on the grounds of caste, creed, race and sex.

In simple words Namghars were built without walls so that people of all categories irrespective of their caste, creed and religion could easily enter the Namghar and take parts in all types of religious and non-religious or secular discussion. This proved that Sankardeva always followed democratic and liberal principles for his faith neovaisnavism.

As a public institution Namghars are managed and conducted on a purely democratic basis. Every house holder in the village has an equal voice in the management of their affairs. All the affairs such as relating to the building and repairing these Namghars every one must bear the burden equally by contributing their share which brings about the unity and integrity among the villagers. It may be noted that women have also specific duty to perform in the Namghars. They contributed in keeping the environment clean by their own hands. Women are allowed to receive initiation and they also carried devotional chanting in the Namghars. Hence
like a true democrat Sankardeva made no distinction between man and woman in his faith.

Like present day democracy Sankardeva advocated local self-government in the fifteenth century. Through the institutions of Satras and *Namghars* he united the village communities to discuss their common issues and problems and to settle their disputes in accordance with their judicial procedure and methods. In settling up village disputes and in trials of moral turpitude and social indiscipline, democratic methods were used. No decision was imposed arbitrarily. The head of each family is invited to the *Namghar* to take part in the proceedings. Before the trial is formally opened the complaint as well as the respondent must offer a nominal fee usually not exceeding one rupee, with a tray, full of *tamol pan* to the assembly of villagers. After the trial is over, these are distributed amongst the assembled members. Hence with a nominal fee major disputes can be solved and provides justice to the village communities through the institution of *Namghar*. Even today *Namghars* are served as Panchayat hall, where villagers gathered to discuss and solve many of their day-to-day problems.

The principle of equality is also followed in case of social functions. In the dramatic performances generally known as *bhaona* introduced by Sankardeva no discrimination is made between low and high caste, rich or poor in distributing roles amongst villagers. All the villagers contribute according to their capacity and aptitude to make the performance a success. Those who are not in position to contribute they are required to put additional labour in the arrangement of the *Namghar*. The prayer hall of the Satras (*Kirtanghar*) and *Namghars* were used as the auditorium and stage
for the enactment of *bhaona* performance. Since the time of Sankardeva Satras and *Namghars* have been serving as the auditorium and stage for the same.

After independence our national government launched a series of integrated village development programme to develop the conditions of the rural people. They include namely Panchayati Raj, community development and adult education schemes. But it is more interesting that in the fifteenth century Sankardeva included these programmes in his socio religious and socio cultural programmes and implemented them with considerable success to his credit.

Thus the village *Namghars* a wing of the Satra, have been serving as the centre of democratic activities of the villages.
References:


17. Ibid: V 1862, p 463.
