VAISNAVISM, ITS MEANING, HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE

Vaisnavism or Vaisnava dharma is the religion of the Vaisnavas. The word 'Vaisnava' comes from the word 'Visnu' and it means the followers of Visnu. We get reference of Lord Visnu in the Rg Veda\(^1\) that Visnu is the manifestation of the Sun. In the Satapatha Brähmana\(^2\) we also find the equation of Visnu with the spirit of sacrifice. In Baudhayana-Dharma-Sûtra\(^3\), Visnu has been described as Govinda and Dāmodara (cow keeper and herdsman).

After Vedic period, Rudra and Visnu got an important place in the Brahmanya religion and literature. From the beginning of Pāñini's Aṣṭādhyāyī\(^4\) to the literature of different periods, we get reference of Lord Visnu-Nārāyaṇa and Vaisnava sects. So Vaisnavism literary means a kind of religio-philosophical system of worship that has developed round the central figure of Visnu as the Supreme Being. This sacrificial religion got a different form at a later period. It is, however, very difficult to determine when the conception of devotion and grace came into the picture. It may be borrowed from the non-Aryan religious thought.

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1  1. 1566
2  1. 9.3.9
3  II.5.24
4  IV. 3.98
With the development of conception of avataras or incarnations, one god later on came to be identified with many and so, Vāsudeva, Nārāyaṇa, Kṛṣṇa, Gopāla and a host of dignified personalities came to be regarded as the manifestations of God Viṣṇu. The identification of Nārāyaṇa, Viṣṇu and Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa with one another took place at least in some parts of the country by the time of the first Maurya emperor. The Gupta kings (4th-7th century A.D) were all the champions of the religion of Vāsudeva. With the rise of the Gupta power, Bhāgavatism came to the forefront and spread all over India. The prevalence of this religion is attested by numerous inscriptions and sculptures. But among all the various names noted above, that of Kṛṣṇa is of primary importance to us.

The chief characteristic of a true Vaiṣṇava, (he may be a follower of Rāmānuja or Caitanya or Sāṅkara) - is Selfless Bhakti which also means adoration of or loving devotion in God. The first great definite presentations of Bhakti in literature are found in the Mahābhārata, in the Bhagavatagītā and it what is known as the Nārāyanīya section. Sir R.G. Bhandarkar in his "Vaiṣṇavism, Śaivism and Minor Religious systems", has traced the process by which the religion of the Bhagavatagītā with its worship of Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa, developed and was modified.............. The second important characteristic of Vaiṣṇavism is "Nāmadharma" or "Nāmāsam kātana". Caitanya believed that in Kāliyuga, the only

5 John Mckenzie, "Hindu Ethics," P. 166
form of worship is "Nāmasamkritana". The Vaiṣṇavism preached by Śaṅkara is called "ekāṣāraṇa-nāma-dharma" - the religion of supreme devotional surrender to one, i.e. Kṛṣṇa, whose name is Rāma, Hari, Vāsudeva, Janārdana and a thousand more.

Most fanciful interpretation has arisen amongst uneducated people about Vaiṣṇavism, most of whom embrace this religion only to give free scope to their desires and passions. But real Vaiṣṇavism is far from it. It is the purest and noblest thing of love. The essence of Vaiṣṇavism is the liaison of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa and all men should follow them in this. Rādhā is the embodiment of love to Lord Kṛṣṇa. She is the Energy Divine called "Hīladini" and hence Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa are one and the same. But for the sake of the Divine play, they are separated into two bodies. But Śaṅkara built his system upon the ethics of the Gītā and the Bhāgavata. Kṛṣṇa was the all-supreme God of adoration for him; and he rejected the feminine element of the Rādhā-cult.

The different Sects of Vaiṣṇavas:

The Vaiṣṇavas, those who are originally, "Bhaktīvādīs", gradually formed the four main sects or Sampradāyas, viz, Rāmānuja, Viṣṇusvāmī, Madhyārṇava, and Nimāditya. All other current minor sects are said to have been included in these four main Sampradāyas. Rāmānuja was the founder of Śrīsampradāya.

7. Ibid., - P. 6
Madhyaśārya of Brahma sampradāya, Viśnusvāmī of Rudra Sampradāya and Nimāditya of Nimārk Sampradāya.

POLITICAL, SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS BACK-GROUND ON THE EVE OF THE REVIVAL OF NEO-VAISHNAVISM IN INDIA

Tenets and practices left behind by decadent Buddhism and already deepseated in current Hinduism must have gone far into the religious thoughts and practices of the time. The teaching of the Vāmācārī Tantric schools with their mystic exaltation of the female principle in the universe and their emphasis upon the religious value of the sexual passion of women formed an undesirable effect on Vaiṣṇavism. In short, the medieval period was remarkable for a lamentable decadence of religious and social life all throughout India. The Brahmans were the pioneers of the society.

During the 12th century A.D. with the spreading of Muslims in India, the Islamism started to flourish. Thousands of lower-caste Hindu started to follow Islamism. The tyranny of an alien rule was aggravated by the greater social tyranny of dominant Brahmanism with its despotic spirits. This spirit afforded little room for expansion and progress and little escape from the bondage and burden.

Along with this, after the downfall of Buddhism, with the evil influence of different religions and formalities, a chaos

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8 Satyendranath Sarma, "Assamiyā Sāhityar Samikṣātmak Itibṛtta" - P. 93
started in the society. So, in this very sad and dark period of Indian civilization, when there was corruption all through in the Indian religious and social life, fortunately through the grace of God, a great number of sages, saints and philosophers were born in India to save the Indian religion and almost all of them were Vaisnavas who preached salvation through "Bhakti-marga." Centering Rāmānuja, the different philosophers propagated their own philosophical views based on "Bhaktimarga" between 12th to 16th century A.D.9.

According to Rabindranath, during the 12th - 13th century A.D., the movement that took place in Japan on the basis of Buddhism is similar to the Vaisnavism of our country10. The most illustrious of the saints, reformers and philosophers that were born during this period were—

(1) Śaṅkara, Mādhava, Dāmodara and others in Assam.

(2) Jaydeva, Vidyāpati, Candīdāsa, Caitanya and his followers in Bengal. Jaydeva's "Gītagovinda" gave a great impetus to Caitanya during his life and cult in the beginning of the 16th century.

(3) Rāmānuja, Rāmānanda, Kaśī, Dādu, Nānak etc. in the rest of India. Through Vaiṣṇavism, they preached the supremacy of inoffensiveness (ahiṃsa), pity (karuṇā) and love. Neo-Vaiṣṇavism imbibed a new spirit during this glorious period. A good number of devotional biographies were also written.

9 Ibid., P. 94
10 Rabindranath Thakur, "Rabindrarancanāvalī", Vol.II, P. 481
A SHORT SURVEY OF DEVOTIONAL VAISHNAVISM IN SOUTHERN INDIA

The seed of Vaishnavism in South India was sown by the Alvars, who were the earliest Brahmin messengers to the South. From the 9th century down to the end of the 15th century, an unbroken line of Vaishnavite reformers existed in Southern India. The Alvars were twelve in number who hailed from different parts of the Tamil region including the Chera kingdom. They composed four thousand verses which were associated with the temples of South India in classical Tamil, known as "Divya-Prabandham." They were worshippers of Visnu and Ekantikas, Andal, the Alvar poetess in one of her songs described that Krsna had a special attraction for one of her lovers named Nappannai who may be identified with Radha.11

Nathamuni, the great Vaishava, sage, was born in the first quarter of the 9th century. He is traditionally considered to be the founder of the Ramanujan school of thought. He was the last devotee of the Alvars. After him, many Vaishava preachers flourished following this path. Among them, Jamunacarya and Ramanuja were renowned. Janunacarya was the grandson of Nathamuni. At first he was a householder, but at last when his awakening came, he became a monk. Ramanuja was the practical founder of the Visistadvaita school which is a qualified nondualism.

During the 13th century, Madhvacarya flourished in the village Belli in Tamilnadu. He was the founder of Brahma or Madhya sect. Nāmadeva also propagated Vaiṣṇavism in Maharāstra. Thus during the 12th to 14th century, throughout the South and West India, this bhakti-religion was spread by the various Vaiṣṇava saints. But it was Rāmānuja and his followers who made this religion popular and were responsible for spreading this throughout the length and breadth of the country. The movement was so great that it passed the borders of Southern India and entered Northern and Eastern India also.

VAIṢṆAVISM IN NORTHERN INDIA

It cannot be correct to state that the Vaiṣṇavism found in Northern India was imported from the South. But it cannot be denied that Vaiṣṇavism in the North received a fresh impetus from the South from the great Acārya Rāmānuja and his successors' teachings and powerful propaganda.

In this part of the country, Vaiṣṇavism first propagated by Rāmānanda and then followed by Kaṭhākā, Vallabha, Dādu, Nimūḍitya, Śaṅkara and Caitanya etc. At the early part of the 16th century, Vallabha propagated this religion in Mathura, Vrīdavan and Guzrat. The pupils of Rāmānanda were mostly from lower castes. Kaṭhākā was a Mahomedan weaver, Ruḍā - a cobbler and Pipā - a Rajput.

12 Lakshminath Bezbaroa, op. cit., P. 6
Ramananda formed a system whose object was to amalgamate Hindus and Mohamedans, Guru Nanak of Punjab (1469-1538 A.D) was a contemporary of Caitanya. He also carried out the same purpose of reconciliation of Hindu and the Mohamedans in the Punjab. Rabindranath also opined that Guru Nanak believed in a supreme God, not in religion. For him, every person was equal whether Muslim, or Sikh or Hindu. Nabhāji - a pupil of Ramananda belonged to the Kaivarta caste wrote the famous "Bhaktamāl". Tulsīdāsa, who was seventh in descent from Ramananda wrote the Hindi Ramāyaṇa - a text book on religion for millions of people in Upper India.

EARLY HISTORY OF ASSAM VAIṢṆAVISM

It is very difficult to indicate the origin of Vaiṣṇavism in Assam. During the Gupta period, along with others, Bhāgavata dharma also took entrance in Assam. Upto 13th century in Kamarupa, Bhāgavata dharma flourished out of the favour of the kings and the subjects. These are evidenced from the excavated idols of Viṣṇu found in different parts of Assam.

In early times, Pragjyotis-Kamarupa was the centre of Sun worship. We find reference to it in Grhyā-Sūtras, Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa and Kālika-Purāṇa. The kings of Kamarupa claimed themselves to be the descendants of Viṣṇu. Naraka, the first asura-

13 "Rabindraranāvalī", Vol XIII, P. 456
14 66; 109
king of Kamrupa is said to have been born as a result of the union of Višnu with Mahī in Kokāmukhatīrtha. However there are different legends in the Kālikā, Viṣṇu and Bhāgavata Purāṇas about the origin of Naraka and his association with Viṣṇu, Janaka, Kṛṣṇa and goddess Kamakṣa. It is definite that the influence of Bhāgavatism of the Gupta kings was spread over Assam. The earliest definite reference to the worship of Viṣṇu is found in the rock inscriptions made by Bhutivarman (A.D. 553-54). This inscription refers to the great grandfather of Bhāskarvarman (7th century A.D).

In the medieval period, due to friction and conflict amongst the various parts of Assam, the political condition was unstable. We came to know from different biographies that from the middle part of the 13th century to the 15th century, the king Durlobhanārāyaṇa, Dharmanārāyaṇa, Indranārāyaṇa, Nālāmvara etc. ruled over the Kamrup-Kamata kingdom. This condition helped to bring a chaos in the religious sphere also. The majority of the people belonged to Non-Aryan tribes having distinct manners and customs and religious beliefs.

Saktism: In the 15th and 16th centuries, many debased forms of Hinduism were prevalent in Assam. The most popular form of religion among these various cults and faiths was Tāntricism or Śakti worship i.e. Saktism. This Saktism became the biggest

16 A.M. Mukherjee, "Vaisnavism - Assam and Bengal," P. 7
17 Satyendranath Sarma; op.cit., P. 58
religion of Kamarupa. The Nīlacal hill near Guwahati became the centre of this religion. Vairavī of Sonitpur (modern Tezpur) and Jayantesvari of Jayantapur (on Jayantiya Hills) were worshipped according to Tantric rituals. Another form of ritual was virgin (Kumārī puja) in which a girl is considered to be fit for representing the Devī. It is said that Cāṇḍīvara, the great grandfather of Śaṅkaradeva was born as a blessing of Cāṇḍī. 

Śaivism: The worship of Śiva was also very popular in Assam from ancient times. The earliest Hindu faith to have had a place in Assam was Śaivism. King Naraka was also a votary of Śiva. During his time, the great sage Vasiṣṭha worshipped Śiva. According to Yoginī Mantra, the number of Śiva-linga in Assam was more than a crore. In the 9th century, Harjarvarma & Banamālavarmā performed 'Śivavandana'. The Śaiva temples at Hajo, Gopesvara etc are famous from ancient times. Hariya Mandala, father of Koe-king Viśvasimha and twelve other Mech chiefs were also the votaries of Śiva. The kings of Cooch-Bihar claimed their descent from Lord Śiva. The Prājaśamśāvalī states that Śiva was worshipped according to both Hindu and tribal rites.

Vaiṣṇavism - Another important sect of Hinduism that prevalent in Assam was 'Pāncarātra Vaiṣṇavism'. It was introduced by Śaṅkaradeva and his followers. In preaching Vaiṣṇavism, Śaṅkaradeva upheld the theory of Bhakti-cult. But this cult was not a new

18 Anon "Kathā-Gurucarita", P. 10
19 2.5 29-31
discovery of Śāṅkaradeva It existed from earliest times. The Vaiṣṇavas pay homage to Viṣṇu, Nārāyaṇa, Kṛṣṇa, Vāsudeva. Images of Vāsudeva and his manifestations found in different parts of Assam also help us come to the conclusion that Vāsudevaism was the earlier form of Vaiṣṇavism in Assam.

Tāntric and Buddhism - Tāntricism was also prevalent in Assam. The Cutiyas worshipped the various forms of goddess Kālī. This Tāntricism began to be practised in Assam probably from the time of the Pala Kings of Gaurā and Magadha in the 8th century. The image of Buddhas with their female energies were also worshipped. Buddhism in the form of Vajrayāna penetrated into the land and lasted till the Neo-Vaiṣṇavite movement obliterated it. Śāṅkaradeva also had to face with the Buddhist magicians 20.

ADVENT OF ŚĀṄKARADEVA AND HIS IMPORTANT FOLLOWERS

When such was the social and religious condition of Assam, the great reformer Śāṅkaradeva appeared. He brought a religious upsurge which swept all over Assam. He was the initiator of the Vaiṣṇava era in Assamese literature. He was also the central figure of a renaissance that touched all aspects of culture.

Śāṅkaradeva was born in 1449 A.D at Alipukhuri near Batadraba in Nagoan district. He was the grand son of Candīvara

20 Anon "Kathā - Gurucarita", P. 57
who was a devout śākta. His father Kusumavara was also a Śiromoni Bhūya. He had enough money but he had no son even though he married for the second time. Then by worshipping Gopeśvara Śiva he got a son who was named Śāṅkara after the name of Lord Śiva. Much controversy exists so far as the year of birth of the saint is concerned, Sri L.N. Bezbaroa accepted the year 1449 A.D. as authentic based on the mentions made in the book "Gurucarita" found at Bardowa. Dr. Biman Bihari Mazumdar has admitted 1463 A.D. as the probable year of birth of Śāṅkaradeva. Dr. B.K. Barua, D. Neog, Dr. M. Neog, Dr. S.N. Sarma in their books respectively have accepted 1449 A.D. as the birth year of Śāṅkaradeva.

Śāṅkaradeva was endowed with natural gifts and as he grew up, he became as erudite scholar, and at the age of seventeen he completed his education under Mahendra Kandali. At the age of twenty-one, he married and a daughter was born to him. Soon his wife died leaving the child. After some years he completed his daughter’s marriage first and then he set out on pilgrimage in Northern India. The pilgrimage covered a period of twelve years during which he visited almost all the holy places of India. He spent maximum time at Puri. He was naturally religious and pious minded. This inborn tendency led him to study religious scriptures, such as Bhāgavata, Purāṇa, the Gītā,

21. Ibid., P. 26
22. "Śri Śāṅkaradeva āru Śrī Mādhavadeva", P. 13
23. "Caitanya Cariter Upādān", P. 510
the Vedas, Vedāntas etc. At the end of his travels, he returned home and began to preach his tenets of Neo-Vaiṣṇavism with full vigour far and wide.

Again, he married Kālindī in 1497 and earlier resumed his duties as Śiromoni Bhūyā. But he could not take his mind away from the scriptures and had a small temple built at a lonely place. This became a great institution called satra in the style of Vedic sacrificial sessions. A new light of self-realisation led him to find a new creed with a new order and ceremonies in the form of neo-Vaiṣṇavite tenet with a firm belief of devotion to one god:

'Ek deu, ek seu, ek bine nāhi keu'

(There is only one God, there is only one devotion, there is none but one)

His popular masterpiece is "Kīrtana-ghoṣā" which contains several kīrtana songs. The age of Śaṅkaradeva marks a literary and cultural resurgence. His other works are 'Hariscandra- upākhyāna", "Rukminīharaṇa", the "Rāmāyaṇa" etc. His genius is also reflected in the Bārgītas and Aṅkargītas.

The Brahmans became alarmed at the popularity of Vaiṣṇavism and reported against Śaṅkaradeva to the Ahom king. Shortly after, he migrated (1537 A.D) with all his followers to Barpeta. Here he met his Brahmin followers Dāmodaradeva, and king Naraṇārāyaṇa. The King became so much pleased with him after an interview that he was eager to embrace Vaiṣṇavism. Śaṅkara then advised the king to build a temple to god Madanmohan. The temple still exists in Cooch-Bihar.
The Neo-Vaiṣnava movement of Assam is associated with the personality of Śaṅkaradeva. The doctrine of "bhakti" or "love" is traced back to great antiquity and is to be connected with early Vaiṣṇavism. There arose several schools of Vaiṣṇavism with its democratic outlook in form and contents. In Assam, the message of bhakti was made by the property of all through the activities of Śaṅkaradeva and in Bengal by Caitanyadeva. These two leaders created a great revolution in the country.²⁴

In the biographies of Śaṅkaradeva we do not find any mention of his guru. The biographers are silent over this point. It is said that he took Lord Jagannātha at Puri as his guru as well as his only worshipful. For like Kaṅkī, he did not have a human guru and was criticised by his contemporaries on that account. From Puri, he carried with him a deep impression of the Neo-Vaiṣṇava movement. His religious tour of Northern India inspired him to undertake the task of re-orienting the religious set-up in the country. Now he took the vow to spread the Vaiṣṇavite cult in Assam. The religion preached by him is known as 'Mahāpuruṣīya Dharma', or generally Vaiṣṇavism. According to this religion, the source of all energies or śakti is the Supreme God Viṣṇu who is formless. He introduced a simple mode of worship consisting of prayers and hymns composed in the peoples' language. He taught it in a popular language called Assamese.

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²⁴ Satyendranath Sarma, op. cit., P. 92
Though he had many opponents, but Sāṅkaradeva by virtue of his wide and deep learning in the śāstras, defeated his opponents. Throughout the course of his preaching Vaiṣṇavism, he had to tackle those Brahmins who were against Vaiṣṇavism. At last Sāṅkaradeva completely devoted himself in propagating Bhakti dharma and studying in literature. The King openly announced that Sāṅkaradeva's doctrine is pure and blameless. Now there was no barrier in the way of preaching Vaiṣṇavism in Assam. All the efforts of the Brahmins to oppose Sāṅkaradeva proved abortive. Sāṅkaradeva made a synopsis of the Bhāgavata at the request of the king. The King appointed Sāṅkaradeva as a leader of headman of Patbausi and its neighbouring places.

His eventful carrier came to an end on 21st Bhādra in 1569 (1490 Saka) and his last physical remains were consigned to fire on the banks of the small river Torocā.

His prominent followers:

(1) Madhavadeva - Madhavadeva was born in Jyaistha, 1411 Saka/May-June, 1489 A.D. in a village at a small distance from the town of Narayanpur. His father was Govindagiri Bhuyar and mother was Manoramā. He was the greatest disciple of Sāṅkaradeva. He was to Sāṅkara what Plato was to Socrates. He was almost as genius as his master Sāṅkaradeva.

25 Dailyāri, "Mahāpurusa Śrī Śrī Sāṅkaradeva-Madhavadeva carita", PP. 79-84.
26 Anon "Kaṭākha-Guru-carita", P. 224
27 Maheswar Neogj, "Early History of The Vaiṣṇava Faith and Movement in Assam", P. 123
Mādhavadeva was before a famous exponent of Śākta religion. Once Gayāpāṇi, a disciple of Śāṅkaradeva brought Mādhava before Śāṅkaradeva in the belief that he would be able to convince him. Mādhava was well-versed in Śāstras. He defended Śaktism quoting many verses from the scriptures. But Śāṅkaradeva succeeded in establishing the glory of Viṣṇu by refuting all the arguments made by Mādhava. He read out a verse from the Bhāgavata which clearly speaks that all the Gods propitiated when Acyuta (Viṣṇu) is worshipped. The discussion continued for four hours and a half and at last Mādhava was convinced and admitted Śāṅkaradeva as his guru. He took initiation from him. Like Śāṅkaradeva, he also took to the propagation of tenets and doctrines through songs as 'Borgīta' and dramas. He is famous for his work "Nāmghoṣa". He wrote one kāvyā named 'Rājasūya kāvyā'. "Bhakti Ratnāvali" is his another important book in Assamese.

In 1568, Śāṅkaradeva appointed Mādhavadeva as his successor. Some time after he established a satra in Sundaridiya and completely devoted himself in propagating bhakti dharma. He appointed twelve principal apostles to initiate disciples at various parts of the country. He codified the daily prayers held at satras. He never encouraged the worship of the image of a deity. After Śāṅkara's death, his followers became divided into two groups. Those who accepted Mādhavadeva, known as "Mahāpurusīyās" those who

followed Damodaradeva, known as 'Bamuni Gossain'. The jealousy of Damodaradeva found it difficult to regard Madhavadeva as his superior. Madhavadeva successfully carried out the mission of his Guru without carrying the personal comfort and did not hesitate to risk anything in the cause of his faith.

(2) Damodaradeva: Damodaradeva was born in the year 1488 A.D. in the village Nalaca on the South of Bordowa. The name of his father was Sadananda and mother was Susila. They lived at Patbausi. Damodara had two brothers Sarvesvar and Ratnakar. According to the biographer Ramaraya, Damodara got his name from Sankaradeva. He was younger than Sankaradeva. So, he also called as "Saru guru". It is said that the ancestors of both came to Assam at the same time.

He studied the Gita and the Bhagavata near Kalapacandra Dvija. It is also clear that he owned his religious impetus to Sankaradeva. He was not a literary man like Sankaradeva or Madhavadeva but he was a religious organiser like them. He was upset at the death of his wife and brothers and after that he completely devoted himself to the propagation of "Bhagavati Dharma". Except Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva, Damodaraveda was also a principal propagator of "Ekasara Bhagavati dharma".

After the death of Sankaradeva, Ramaraya received initiation from Damodaradeva and donated a plot of land for
satra. Dāmodaradeva now established his first satra at Patbaisi. His contribution towards the growth of satra institution was very great. He had also some hand in the structural growth of the satra institution.

(3) Harideva: Harideva was born at Narayanpur in 1415 śaka (1493 A.D). He finally settled himself at Maneri after staying for sometime at Hajo. The sub-sect of Harideva is known as "Haridevi sect". He was a follower of Śaṅkara. He joined Śaṅkara's Vaiṣṇava order and used to come everyday to the Patbaisi satra. It is said that like Dāmodaradeva, he is said to have appointed the following Medhies or heads of satras - Yadumanideva, Haricaranadeva, Narayānadeva and twelve weavers including one Bar-tāti. The "Brahma Samhāti" was originally constituted by the followers of Dāmodaradeva and was later by the Haridevīs or followers of another dissenter, Harideva. This "Samhāti" admitted Brahmanical rites very liberally.

In Madhavadeva's time, no image was installed in the kīrtanaghar of the Barpeta satra. But after his death, Vamsīgopāladeva, Harideva etc. installed an image in the mandira at Maneri. To him, there was no distinction between Viṣṇu and the Vaiṣṇavas. Once three bhaktas were given food to eat. Harideva asked his wife to clean the ground, she denied. Then Harideva did the work with his own hands and said to her,

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29 Tirthanath Sarma, "Āumāṭi Satrar Burañji", P. 27

'Tore kathā nahay bhāl āī
Hari bhakatak bole sālai' 31

(Thy words are not good now that thou callest votaries of
Hari Sālais)

Most probably, Harideva himself did not disown his relationship
with Śaṅkaradeva and it was after his death that his followers
seceded from the original sect of Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva. Maneri
in Kamarupa, Narayāṇpur in Lakhimpur and Haripur in Cooch-Bihar are
considered as the three chief satras of the Haridevi sect.

(4) Ratnākar Kandali: Ratnākar Kandali was a Brahmin disciple of
Śaṅkaradeva. Probably he adopted the "Mahāpuruṣīyā cult" at
Belguri. He was well-known as "Sukāvi śekhar" or "Kavi Śekhar".
He used to read the Gītā in the satra and also explained its
inner meaning. The "Sahasra Nāma Brāṭanta" included in "Kirtanaghoṣā"
was written by him. Most probably he was the translator of "Skanda
Puraṇa" and also the writer of "Brahma Gītā" and "Gītā-kīrtana".

(5) Sarvābhaṃva Bhattācārya: He was the court-poet of the king
Naranārāyaṇa of Cooch-Bihar. He was a great scholar, and a very
obedient devotee to Śaṅkaradeva. He wrote "Bhābīṣya Purāṇa", "Svarga
khaṇḍa Rahasya" and "Bhāgavata". In "Svarga khaṇḍa" - we find
the autobiography of the writer and also the biography of
Śaṅkaradeva. Formerly he was a Śākta, but after coming in contact
with Śaṅkaradeva, he accepted him as his guru.

31 Anon "Kathā Gurucarita", P. 453
(6) Ramrām Guru: Ramrām Guru and Šāṅkaradeva were two friends from their childhood. Šāṅkaradeva after returning from pilgrimage took the help of Ramrām Guru and started preaching the "Bhakti religion" and also propagated this by establishing several namghars.

HISTORY OF THE MAHĀPURUŚṬIYA VAIṢNAVISM

The Vaiṣṇavite movement of Assam started by Šāṅkaradeva and continued by his principal followers towards the end of the 15th century, made remarkable contributions in the cultural history of the land. It swept the entire Brahmaputra valley and parts of Cooch-Bihar which was then a part of Assam. After the demise of Šāṅkaradeva, there was a cleavage between his apostolic successor Mādhavadeva and Dāmodaradeva. Since then the sect has been divided into two. The term 'Mahāpuruśiyā' is believed to have been derived from the epithet Mahāpuruṣa (the great being), an honorific title of Šāṅkara who propagated the new faith. On the other hand, the term 'Mahāpuruṣa' is also an epithet of God Nārāyaṇa. As the importance is attached to the worship of only Kṛṣṇa-Nārāyaṇa in this cult, the cult came to be known as the 'Mahāpuruṣiyā-dharma'. However, the popular belief which was in unison with the former one led the followers of Šāṅkara to style themselves as 'Mahāpuruṣiyā' or 'Šāṅkari'.

32 "Bhāgavata Purāṇa", II, 1.10; XI.5.33
The main features and the principal elements of Mahāpurusīya Vaiṣṇavism:

The term 'Mahāpurusīya' particularly includes the followers of the three sub-sects of Assam Vaiṣṇavism, namely, Nikā, Kāla and Puruṣa Saṁhātis. The members of the two other Sects (Damodarīyā and Harīdevī) do not acknowledge Saṅkaradeva as the originator of their respective orders. The Assam Vaiṣṇavas generally call themselves as 'Mahāpurusīyas'.

The philosophy of Mahāpurusīyaism is Saṅkaradeva's own philosophy. Saṅkara was against idolism. He worshipped God through prayers. His conception of Godhead is that of one who is ever-living and loving. Both Saṅkaradeva and Madhavadeva taught that God is invisible and formless but sometimes he is visible to his worshippers for the sake of their concentration of mind. In this new faith Saṅkaradeva laid stress on the purity of heart for which truth, kindness, mercy, charity, respect and control of senses are essential.

Eka-Sāraṇa:- The essence of the Gītā and the message of Kṛṣṇa is -

'Sarva dharmanparityāya, māmekam ṣaṇātābraja'.

(Seek shelter in me alone by leaving off all other religions)

The 'eka-sāraṇa' of the Gītā superimposed upon the idealism of 'Dāṣya Bhakti' with the 'Sat-Saṅga' or companionship with
bhaktas of the Srimadbhāgavata. The Vaiṣṇavism of Saṅkaradeva is uncompromising in its attitude against the worship of other gods and goddesses. That is why it is called 'eka-sāraṇa-nāma-dharma' - the religion of supreme devotional surrender to one God, i.e., Kṛṣṇa.

Nama-dharma: It is called 'nāma-dharma' because it stresses on constant recitation of the nāma of God in Prayer. There are nine methods of bhakti - hearing, singing, thinking, worshipping, prostrating, behaving as a slave or as a friend, invocation or by dedicating the body. Of these nine methods, Saṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva extol kīrtana as the most suitable method of Sādhana.

Attitude towards incarnations: Assamese Vaiṣṇavas believe in the theory of incarnations. They believe that God's appearance on earth has two objectives -

1. to redeem the world from evil forces and
2. to favour his devotees.

The character of Kṛṣṇa of Assam Vaiṣṇavism based on the description of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa and the dual worship of Rādhā based on erotic sentiment (mādhurya bhāva) is absent here. Saṅkaradeva preached the 'Dāsya-Bhakti' as the relation between ŚrīKṛṣṇa and his devotees. To him 'Dāsya-bhāva' was the real goal.

World: The world has no reality apart from God. God is the only reality. He is the Lord of this universe. The whole universe is
nothing but the manifestation of Brahma who exists in the beginning, in the middle and in the end. The nature of the world is asaṁta and māyāmaya. It may be real empirically. The diverse forms of the world are false, only Brahma underlying them is true. The Jīva is not different from Tārvāra. It is also immutable and tranquil by nature – Saṅkaradeva also makes no distinction between Jīva and Tārvāra.

Liberation or Mukti: The Mahāpuruṣya Vaiśnavaas like the other Vaiśnavaas prefer Bhakti to Mukti if it is offered without providing any opportunity for practising devotion. It is thus clear that the Vaiśnavaas prefer Bhakti to Mukti. Saṅkaradeva told that Bhakti is necessary because it breaks the fetters of māyā. So, according to him, if devotion is directed solely towards attainment of Mukti, it would come automatically where there is Bhakti. There are two types of liberation in the Bhāgavata – Jīvan-mukti and Videha-mukti, (liberation during life-time and after death) Saṅkara has recognised both of them. In his 'Kīrtana', he says —

"Viṣṇumai dekhai yito samaste jagat
Jīyante mukuta haie achir kālat" 35
(He who sees Viṣṇu in the entire world gets salvation forthwith even when alive).

34 "Yot dekhā māyāmaya sabe svapnasama,
Harimaya dekhi dūr kara matibhraama" - "Bhāgavata"-XI,V,19262
35 "Kīrtana" V, 1024
Heaven: Vaiṣṇavas have no faith in heaven which is attained by Sakāma Karma, because it cannot free the Jīvātmā from rebirth. Only Bhakti breaks the fetters of māyā and saves the Jīva from fear of constant birth and rebirth.

Bhakti: Śaṅkaradeva was the chief exponent of the Kamata school rather than the Assam school of Vaiṣṇavism. In preaching Vaiṣṇavism, he upheld the theory of Bhakti-cult. Jñāna and Karma cannot lead to salvation without an admixture of Bhakti. It is of two types - Sakāma and Niṣkāma. Niṣkāma or motiveless worship is preferred to Sakāma worship which is performed with the motive of some gain behind. Niṣkāma Bhakti is practised for the sake of its inherent pleasure when the devotee even rejects the highest position in heaven.

Sin against Bhakti: It is of four kinds - sin against Nāma, sin against Deva, sin against Guru and sin against Bhakta. A devotee should observe certain prescribed rules and refrain from doing some forbidden acts, Bhakti will be vitiated and a devotee will be tinted with sin if he performs the forbidden acts and goes against nāma, deva, guru and bhakta. A devotee can purify all the holy places and gods even.

Attitude towards castes: Śaṅkaradeva preached equality in the spiritual domain. He inaugurated a society where all classes of people irrespective of castes were admitted. He recognised only a

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36 "Bhakti-Pradīpa" - V, 124
social signification in the caste-system, and had nothing to say against Varnāśrama-dharma. Śaṅkaradeva's Neo-Vaiṣṇavism opened the doors of the temple of God to all classes of people.

**Attitude towards women:** The Assamese Vaiṣṇavas have not spoken favourably of women and wealth and have described their evil influences which a devotee should try to avoid. Śaṅkaradeva was also against the practice of initiating women. In several passages of his Kṛtana, he mentions the evil influences of wealth and women. Spiritual seekers of all ages decried the sex-aspect of women. But in actual practice, we find that the followers of Śaṅkaradeva initiated women. Śaṅkara's grand-daughter Kanakalatā and Bhubanesvarī devī were acknowledged as the religious heads of the satras. But in the later history of Assam Vaiṣṇavism, we did not find anywhere a woman as religious head. But Śaṅkaradeva did not think marriage to be a drag upon the path of devotion, because he himself was a house-holder. There could be married persons as well as monks in these establishments as divines. There is no order of nuns, and women in general are not allowed to mix with the men in congregations.

**INFLUENCE OF ŚAṄKARA UPON ASSAMESE LITERATURE**

Śaṅkaradeva was not only a great religious reformer and a preacher, but was also a great social worker and scholar in Assamese literature. He had always religious leanings. He realised
that supreme surrender to Viṣṇu was the only religion and people should follow it strictly without giving importance to any other deity. He read the Bhāgavata and other Purāṇas deeply and devoted himself wholeheartedly to the task of propagating and propounding the cult of Bhakti. The new cult is known as Mahāpuruṣītyā-dharma.

Śaṅkaradeva was a great writer also. Besides metrical versions of the ‘Bhāgavata’ he wrote several dramas in Assamese. The religious songs (kīrtana) composed by him are perhaps his masterpieces. With the spread of his new creed, was also introduced the institution known as ‘Nāmghar’ meant for congregational prayers. Every village in Assam valley now has its Nāmghar. He composed the sweet verses of ‘Kīrtana-ghoṣā’. Each of the 25 sections of the ‘Kīrtana-ghoṣā’, the most popular, and important of Śaṅkaradeva’s works, contains several kīrtana songs which relate a story or expound a topic. He is also said to have rendered eight out of the twelve books of the ‘Bhāgavata Purāṇa’ and this was done at the teeth of much opposition.

Śaṅkara’s literary output is considerable and consists of quite a wide variety; compositions in Assamese, Assamese Brajabuli and Sanskrit prose verse and poetical prose. After the Assamese Brajabuli prose of Śaṅkara and Mādhava, came the rhythmic prose of Vaikuṇṭhamātha Kaviṭāna in his Bhāgavatakathā (c.1594-
96) Gitākathā (c.1597-98) and Ratnāvalī. He also rendered the Purāṇas into simple Assamese verse. His relatives and neighbours were struck with wonder when Śaṅkara arranged a pantomimic dance known as 'Chihnayātra'(dramatic representation with paintings). He painted the scenes himself on cotton made paper. All these proved that his contributions were enormous. This influence has been felt for the last few centuries in all fields of the cultural life of the Assamese people. It is true that the age of Śaṅkaradeva marks a literary and cultural resurgence.

Media of propagation: The different media of propagation of the new faith of Vaiṣṇavism in Assam were the followings,

(1) A simple form of worship by means of congregational and individual chanting of prayers and recitations. The prayer services and the reading of sacred texts could be connected by persons able to do it.

(2) Literary compositions - People attracted by melodious songs and verses often lent their sympathy to the new faith.

(3) Dramatic performances and songs.

(4) Religious discussions illustrated with suitable stories or religious disputes and meetings.

(5) Biographies on the lives of Śaṅkaradeva and his followers.

(6) The satra institutions.
The literary works acted as the chief machinery of propagation of the faith. Regarding biographies and the satra institutions, we can say that these are the two principal media of propagation of the cult. We are writing in details herein below.

The biographies as one of the principal media of propagation:

The Vaiṣṇavite movement gave birth to a new branch of literature in the form of carita puthies or the biographical works. These carita puthis cannot truly be called biographies, they may rather be termed as hagiography, i.e. lives of the saints. Written from a devotional point of view, these caritas may be considered to be the most valuable sources of information of the Vaiṣṇava faith and movement. These biographies help us to know about the religious lives of the saints, the social conditions, the history of the development of the Vaiṣṇava institutions, the development of the satra institutions, the origin of different sects etc.

These religious biographies are of two types - the carita-type concentrates mainly upon the individual lives of different saints, like Śaṅkaradeva, Maḍhavađeva etc., while the other type mainly trace the history of different satras in chronological order dealing with the lives and activities of successive heads. Almost all the satras have such chronicles, are found both in vesre and prose.
Biographies depicting the lives and activities of Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva are more than a score in number of numerous such works, those written by (1) Rāmacaraṇa Ṭhākur (16th century) (2) Dāityārī Ṭhākur (17th century) (3) Bhūṣaṇa Dvija (17th century) (4) Rāmānanda Dvija (17th century) (5) Aniruddha Dāsa (18th century) are note-worthy.

Of the several biographies of Dāmodaradeva, the works written by Rāmarāya Dvija (17th century) and Nilakantha Dāsa (18th century) are most famous. In the similar way, life of every important Vaiṣṇava saint or religious reformer has been treated in one or more biographical works. There are a few voluminous biographies running upto several hundred pages or folios, where almost all the early Vaiṣṇava reformers' lives and activities have been narrated. The recently published "Kathā-Guru-carita" is one of such voluminous works. All these types of religious biographies are not only important from the point of detailed lives and the activities of the early Vaiṣṇava reformers, but are also valuable for the expositions of the Vaiṣṇavite ideals and tenets. For these reasons, the reading of carita puthies has been a part of religious service conducted on all important occasions in satras.

The satra institution – as one of the principal media of propagation;

As regards the media of the movement in Assam, the satras founded by the principal followers of Śaṅkaradeva played
an important role. Many branch-satras established (during A.D. 1650-1800) by the disciples and members of the family of chief religious leaders spread their influence into the very core of hundreds of Assamese villages and tribal areas. As a social force, this institution was greatly strengthened for the acceptance of the Vaishnava faith by the Ahom kings and nobles. This satra institution served as a centre of propagation and discussion and played an important role in the religious and cultural life of Assam from more than four hundred years.

This institution with its branch namghar carried the torch narration of the story of Śaṅkara's own days. Many namghars had sprung up from these satras which began to carry on the religious and cultural activities of the people. These institutions impart literacy and learning among the laity. They also give special emphasis on the cultural activities.

Bhawnā, (dramatic performance), Bargītās (singing of devotional songs) and Nāmakīrtana (chanting of the holy names) also served the purpose of propagating the Bhakti-cult among the people. Kaliram Medhi calls these Bargītās as "song celestial" and Devendranath Bezbaroah calls them "Holy songs".

In the days of Mādhavadeva also, the telling and listening of the story of the guru became a part of the daily

37 Maheswar Neog, "Śaṅkaradeva", P.40
38 Hemanta Sarma, "Asamīyā Sāhityat Drstipat", P. 78
religious duty of the satra clerics. A living tradition was thus created. Even to-day, there are many Buddha-bhaktas of many satras whose duty is to keep different guru caritas, to copy them and to narrate the lives of the gurus. Indian musicians have ascribed different melodies severally to the light watches of the day. The satra musicians have also made such assignments in their own way. Thus, we find that the satras played an important role in the propagation.

**EARLY HISTORY OF BENGAL VAISHNAVISM**

From 5th century A.D. Vaishnavism is traceable in Bengal. Then the Gupta rulers ruled over Bengal. Several images in the forms of Viṣṇu found in North Bengal and in Tippera District prove that Vaishnavism was prevalent in Bengal from that time. A good number of Viṣṇu images of the Pala and Sena periods lends support to the prevellence of Vaishnavism in Bengal.

At first, this Vaishnavism was very much confined to a small section of the higher castes of the society. This limitation was all the more limited in Bengal also because the people of Bengal were mostly Sāktas. By and by through the influence of Ramanuja and his followers, Vaishnavism was spread from southern India to Bengal. Jaydeva's "Gītāgīvinda" moved the people from the highest to the lowest class and prepared the ground for the renaissance of Vaishnavism in Bengal. The plain
and simple songs of Sahajiyā poets (Cāndīḍāsa and Vidyāpati) already paved the way for the coming in of a great prophet Caitanya.

Mādhavendra Purī and his dearest disciple Īśvara Purī, though Vaiṣṇava saints of the South, had made immense contribution to the new Vaiṣṇava cult of Bengal, and this new cult could not be possible without the preliminary groundwork of Mādhavendra Purī and Īśvara Purī. The noted literary works like the "Caitanya-Ḍhāgavata" of Vṛndāvana Dāsa, "Caitanya-caritāmṛta" of Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāj and "Gauraganaḍesa-dīpikā" of Kavikarṇapūra clearly admit it by saying that Bhakti cult in Bengal owes its origin to Mādhavendra Purī. Dr. S.K. De has rightly said that "in all this he (Mādhavendra Purī) anticipated Caitanya himself and prepared the way for his advent" 39. Mādhavendra turned the thoughts of Bengal Vaiṣṇava towards the sacred sites of Mathura by recovering an image of Gopāla-Kṛṣṇa and establishing a temple there. His follower Advaita might have tempered intellectual Advaitaism (non-dualism) with emotional bhakti. He was the leader of a small group of Vaiṣṇavas at Navaḍvīpa and it was a response to Advaita's prayer that Caitanyadeva appeared.

Caitanya was one of the most renowned men in the medieval period of Bengal. During his time by his new

39 "Early History of the Vaiṣṇava Faith and Movement" in Bengal" P. 24
inspiration, he thrilled a major part of Bengal. He took initiation from Īśvara Pūrī, and his spiritual life began after he came in contact with Īśvara Pūrī. 40

ADVENT OF CAITANYA AND HIS IMPORTANT FOLLOWERS

The Bengal into which Caitanya was born more than four hundred years ago, casteism and sectarianism were hydraheaded. Out of more or less chaotic conditions left by a disintegrating Buddhism, the Brahmin architects of Hinduism had sought to ensure stability by laying the caste foundations solid and strong. The domination of the Brahmins over much of society was the crowning feature of this social order. In order to prevent the rise of the Muslim rulers, especially to meet the demand of the time and to develop unity and integrity in the Hindu society, a few important saints came forward, Guru Nanak and Caitanya were among them.

Vidyāpati, by his own talent, was renowned as the creator of the Vaiṣṇava kāvya. For centuries together, he was the main source of Vaiṣṇava literature and added different "rasas" or "bhāvas" which were followed by the others in the post-Caitanya literature 41.

Though in the pre-Caitanya era, we observe a close relation of Bhakti with this worldly affairs in the Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa

40 Sukumar Sen, "Bāṅgalā Sāhityer Itihās", Vol. I (Pūrbāndhā), P. 126
41 Sri Srikumar Bandyopadhyay, "Bāṅglā Sāhityer Bikāšer Dhārā", Vol. I & II, P. 45
songs, yet it was not turned into kīrtana (singing in praise of God) by the influence of Caitanya. From the 16th century, the Radhā-Kṛṣṇa songs took a new shape at the influence of Bhakti. But before Caitanya, the Vaiṣṇava literature had already been flourished. The leading figure in this group at the time of Caitanya's birth was Advaitacārya Brahmin of Srihatta, born in 1435 A.D., who was considered as one of the two prominent followers of Caitanya.

The medieval period in the history of Orissan Vaiṣṇavism begins from the 11th century A.D. In the 14th century we find a sort of early renaissance of Vaiṣṇava Bhakti in Oriya literature. Jagannātha Dāsa was a close friend of Caitanya. His period started from 1510 A.D., the advent of Caitanya at Puri.

In Orissa, Caitanya came to have a number of faithful disciples and intimate friends, namely Balarāma Dāsa, Jagannātha Dāsa, Yosovanta, Ananta and Aacyutānanda. Most of these writers had already been engaged in their literary labours before they met Caitanya. They outwardly professed the Vaiṣṇava faith and propagated the Caitanya cult, yet in their heart of hearts they were but sincere and staunch pioneers and champions of the long neglected and almost forgotten religion of the Mahāyāna school. All of them were pious and sincere Vaiṣṇavas. They exalted the worship of the void no doubt, but they took it to be a feature of Vaiṣṇavism.
Caitanyadeva, alias Viśvāmvara, alias Nemāi was born at Navadvīpa on the 27th February, 1486 A.D. in the evening just before the lunar eclipse. His father was Jagannātha Miśra and another Śacī-devī. Sītādevī, the wife of Advaitācārya gave him the name Nemāi. When he was a student of a tol, his elder brother Viśvarūpa renounced the world and took the vow of an Advaita-sannyāsīn. So, now Nemāi, when found his parents weeping, became grave and paid all his attention to his studies. At the age of eleven, he lost his father and soon became famous in grammar, rhetoric and literature. After finishing his studies, he married Lākṣmīdevī and began to lead a life as a perfect householder. At that time, Nemāi went to Srihatta (East Bengal) and during his absence, his wife died in snake-bite.

Again, he married to Viṣnupriyā, the daughter of Rājpandita Sanatana Miśra of Navadvīpa. Very soon, a great change came over him as he went to Gaya to perform the Śrādhya ceremony of his father and met Īśvara Puri. There he was initiated into Vaiṣṇavite faith by Īśvara Puri. After his initiation, he frequently lost himself in thoughts and yearned deeply for a sight of krṣṇa. Ultimately, he renounced the worldly life and went straight to Katwa and induced Kesāva Bhāratī, an ascetic to initiate him as a sannyāsīn. Kesāva Bhāratī performed the rite of initiation and gave him a new ascetic-name "SīrKrṣṇa Caitanya".

42 Biman Bihari Mazumdar; op.cit., PP. 17-21
After initiation, Caitanya started for Vrndavana but his mother entreated her son not to go to Vrndavana but to stay at Puri. Caitanya complied with his mother's entreaties and left for Puri with Nityananda, Damodara Pandit, Jagadnanda and Mukunda. During his stay at Puri, a large group of devotees came from Navadvipa, Kulingram and Srikhanda of Bengal on the occasion of the Cariot-festival of Lord Jagannatha.

The last twelve years of Caitanya were full of aesthetic love for Krsna. It was his daily routine to recite the name of Hari for hours together. He used to spend the whole night in devotion. At that time his constant companions were Damodara, Svarupa and Ramana. Caitanya was exclusively mad with devine love. His health broke down and he died in 1533 A.D. in the month of Asvina. But the biographers of Caitanya were not in unison in regard to the date of his passing away. There are several stories also about his passing away. Some believe that he met with a watery grave in the sea. Others believe that Caitanyadeva merged in the image of Lord Jagannatha. Jayananda says that Caitanyadeva suffered from a septic wound in his left foot caused by a stone while dancing before the chariot. This resulted in his death.44

His prominent followers:

It is said that Lord Krsna appeared as Caitanya with all his devotees. The chief followers of Caitanya are the followings:

43 Asit Kumar Bandyopadhyay, "Banga Sahityer Itibritta" Vol II, P. 206.
44 "Caitanya-mangala", P. 150.
His prominent followers:

1. Nityānanda: He was the pioneer of spreading Caitanya's "Prema-nāma" in Bengal. He was looked upon by the Vaiṣṇava bhaktas as the elder brother of Caitanya. Caitanya is the Lord Kṛsna of the Dvāpara yuga and Nityānanda is the Balaraṇa and he fulfils all tasks of Caitanya. He settled his main centre at Panihati Khardaha. There are some mysterious hints that Visvarūpa, the elder brother of Caitanya, who left home and became an ascetic in early life, was identical with Nityānanda. But the better opinion seems to be that the two are different. For the similarity of appearance, Gaṭīdevī loved him very much. Nityānanda was a special emissary of the Master who selected him for the mission. Caitanyadeva realised that through him a great deal of work for the Vaiṣṇava sampradaya would be performed. Nityānanda's popularity during his life-time and thereafter rose to such a height that he is even to-day worshipped jointly as Gaura-Netāi. His famous musical choir charmed millions. The song,

'Bhaja Gaurāṅga, Kaha Gaurāṅga
laha Gaurāṅger nām re' - is even very popular to-day.

2. Advaita Ācārya: Among the followers of Caitanyadeva, Advaita Ācārya occupied a very important position. His former name was Kāmakṣā: Bhattācārya. He came from Shlyet to Santipur. He was expert in Vedas. So he got the title 'Vedapañcānon.' It is said that Advaita and Nityānanda were the two main branches of Caitanya-tree who laid the foundation on which the edifice of Gaurīya Vaiṣṇavism took a final shape.
It is through him that Caitanya promulgated Saṅkūṭtana and delivered the world. According to some, he followed the ideals of Śrīdhārsvāmī and Mādhavendra Purī and "believed in tempering intellectual Advaitism with emotional Bhakti". He travelled over South India and there he met Mādhavendra Purī. Advaita believed that Caitanya was the incarnation of Lord Kṛṣṇa and he worshipped Caitanya with the leaves of Tulsī.

(3) Murāri Gupta - From Sṛihatta, Murāri Gupta came to Navadvīpa to settle there permanently. He was older than Caitanya. He was the repository of love. The heart of Caitanyakadeva was melted by his huminity. He was a physician and under his treatment, illness of both body and mind disappears. He narrated domestic sports of Caitanya in his notes known as 'Murāri Gupta's Karcā. He is famous for his Karcā. He also wrote some padas in Brajabuli. He witnessed Caitanya's 'Barāha-mūrti' and was indebted to him for such beautiful performance.

(4) Sārvabhauma - Sārvabhauma's father was a great scholar named Maheśvar Bisārad. Caitanyadeva in his earlier days had read in the school of Sārvabhauma who became a favourite pandit of Pratāpā Rudra, the king of Orissa and also the

45 S.K.De, op. cit., PP. 24-25
46 Asit Kumar Bandyapadhyay, op.,cit., P. 646.
principal of Sanskrit college at Puri. After going to Puri, Caitanyadeva got two strong devotees, one was Sārvabhauma. He was ultimately converted by Caitanya and became his humble follower. This conversion had a miraculous effect of Jagannātha's holy prasāda which Caitanya took to Sārvabhauma and compelled him to swallow.

(5) Jīva Gosvāmi - Jīva Gosvāmi was the greatest theologian among the saints in Vindavana. He produced twenty works, the chief of which (a) Sat-Samdarbha on philosophy and (b) Loghūtōsini, a commentary on Rūpās work.

(6) Rūpa-Saṅātana - Rūpa and Saṅātana were two brothers who lived at Ramkeli of Gaṇḍa. They were very faithful ministers of Hosen Sāha. They got the title 'Sākar Mallik' and 'Davīrkhaś' respectively. Both of them deeply engrossed themselves in the study of Sanskrit literature and śāstras. The vast learning of these two saints gradually came to be widely recognised. They were the important followers of Caitanya who sent them to Vindavana and entrusted them with the task of teaching of his doctrine of Kṛṣṇa-prema in Northern India. Following Jaydeva, Rūpa composed some padāvālī songs in Sanskrit. He also wrote 'Bhaktirasamṛtāsindhu' and 'Ujjāla Nīlemāni'.

(7) Śrīvāsa - He was a wealthy house-holder and a very humble follower of Caitanya. In Kavikarpūra's 'Caitanya
Caritāmṛta, Advaita, and Śrīvāsa have been termed as Balarama, Śiva, and the incarnation of Nārada respectively. Śrīvāsa was always engaged in kīrtanas.

(8) Svarūpa - Dāmodara - He is regarded as one of the greatest authorities on post-Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism. Before taking Saṅnyāsa, he was known as Puruṣottama Ācārya and after that he got the name Svarūpa - Dāmodara. He was elder than Caitanya and Caitanya was always guarded by him at Puri. He was a great musician and always used to sing the songs of Jaydeva, Vidyāpati, and Caṇḍīdāsa. He wrote a 'Kārčā' on the life and teachings of Caitanya named 'Svarūpa - Dāmodarera Kangā'.

(9) Haridāsa - Haridasathough a Mahammedan, was a living embodiment of all the Vaiṣṇava characteristics. He was both loved and respected by Caitanyadeva. As he was a Muslim, he never used to go the Jagannātha temple. But Caitanya sent him prasād daily. When Sanātana and Rūpa came to Nilacal, they lived at Haridāsa's house. He was so full of prema-bhakti that whenever he heard the name of Lord Kṛṣṇa or Caitanya, tears began to roll down his eyes. He uttered the name of Lord almost all the time during day and night.

The main features and the principal elements of the new faith of Caitanya (Gaurīya Vaiṣṇavism) -
Caitanyadeva was the chief exponent of Bengal Vaisnnavism. In modern Vaisnnavism prevalent in Bengal, the name of Radha is invariably associated with that of Krsna and the formula Radha Krsna in the form of a Dvanda compound is used in the recitation of daily prayer. Radha-Krsna are the idols of love and the Vaisnavas seek to approach them with the offerings of love only.47

Now, we shall see, how this Radha-Krsna cult came to occupy a position of such exalted prominence in the estimation of the Vaisnavas.

We find references of Krsna in the Harivamsa, Bhagavata Purana and Vishnu Purana, but the name of Radha is not found in these books. Even Ramanuja who brought about the revival of Vaisnavism in the South, does not mention Radha. According to him, the only deity is Visnu or Narayana.48

But Nimbarka in the 12th century A.D. gave exclusive prominence to Krsna and his consort Radha. He was followed by Ballava in the South and by Caitanya in Bengal in the 16th century. Both of them preached the worship of Krsna and his parakilya consort Radha. Thus Radha-cult became a prominent feature of modern Vaisnavism. This modern Vaisnavism, as preached by Caitanya, is known as Gauriya Vaisnavism. The intense love between Radha and Krsna was

47 Ajay Chakravartti "Literature in Kaml Baj Darbar", P.38
48 Prasanta Kr. Dasgupta "Mahaprabhu O Samakalito Bangla", P.103
practically demonstrated by Caitanya. The ultimate spiritual goal of the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism is not liberation - but love, a living love for the Deity who is spilt into Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa.

Caitanya is regarded by his followers as Kṛṣṇa reborn in Navadvip. They maintain that in Kaliyuga, both Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā were united (those were separated in the Dvāpara-yuga) in the person of Caitanya. This was a new turn which Vaiṣṇavism took in Bengal.

The most important contribution of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism of Caitanya is a new interpretation of Bhakti. This Bhakti is superior to "dharma", "mokṣa". This is "prema" which also means 'worship'. So, this Vaiṣṇava dharma is called prema-dharma. The main basis of this prema-dharma is Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa. The Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava School of philosophy is attributed to Caitanya and it is called Acintavedāveda system i.e. incomprehensible dualistic monism.

Acintavedāveda system -
(i) Idea of God - The Gītā, the Upaniṣad and the Brahma Sūtra speak of the Supreme Reality. The Supreme Reality is also called the Brahman, the Paramātman and the Bhāgavata. Their distinction rests upon their nature of Divine Energy (śakti). The Divine Energy is again grouped into three classes - Svarūpa - Śakti, Tatastha-Śakti and Bhārauga-Śakti.
(ii) Relation between God and Jīva - Jīvas are the parts of the Sakti of Brahman. Brahma is free from māyā (illusion), but the Jīvas cannot be a part of Brahma because they are always limited by māyā. Jīva is an aspect of Divine Jīva Sakti.

(iii) Jīva - According to Caitanyadeva, God is like a glowing fire and the Jīvas are its sparks. Jīvas are infinite in number. It always retains its identity though it has organic body, yet it is distinct from the body and sense. Caitanyadeva also explained to Sanātana that Kṛṣṇa Himself is 'advaya-jña-tattva'. He emanates in two forms - Svamśa and Vibhinnāmśa.

The Universe - Brahma is the cause of the Universe. With the help of his māyā-śakti, He creates this Universe, but Brahma always remains unaffected.

Incarnation - Incarnation means avatāra. Both Kṛṣṇa and Caitanya are the two incarnations. Kṛṣṇa becomes incarnate in Satya, Tretā and Dwāpar yugas. The Vṛndāvana Gosvāmīs and the Gaṇḍīya Vaiṣṇavas state that Kṛṣṇa is the Supreme Deity. Caitanya is regarded as a dual incarnation of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa. He has incarnated with His devotees to taste the aforesaid delight along with nāma-Śaṅkīrtana.

49 Kṛṣṇadāsa Kaviraj 'Caitanya-caritāmṛta', Adilīlā, P. 5
50 Ibid., Madhyālīlā, P. 380
51 Ibid., Adilīlā, P. 14
Gauya - Kṛṣṇa Tattva - Radha and Kṛṣṇa, though they are shown as two bodies, are actually one. Caitanya is the embodiment of Rādhā. In order to taste the glorious love of Rādhā, Lord Kṛṣṇa appeared as Caitanya. Caitanya incarnated two in one body. This was a new turn which Vaiṣṇavism took in Bengal. Caitanya's longing for Kṛṣṇa and his golden colour of the body led his followers of Navadvipa to believe that Caitanyadeva outwardly is identified with Rādhā. On the basis of this Caitanya - philosophy, Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa philosophy of the Vṛndavana Gosvāmīs stands. So practically there is little difference between the two schools of thought - Navadvipa and Vṛndavana. It was Nityānanda who distributed the name of Gaurāṅga Hari from door to door in Bengal and after Nityānanda, and Advaita, the leadership of the Vaiṣṇavism of Bengal was partly transferred to Srikhanda.

Liberation - Hindus pines for liberation or mukti. According to Caitanyadeva, the world is a true evolution of Ekamevāditya Brahman and not an illusion. This universe evolves under Divine will. Bhakti is the principal means to come to God and it is the stepping stone to mukti - the highest stage of bliss. We have four desires dharma, artha, mokṣa and kāma - but

"Tār madhye mokṣa banchā kaitab pradhān
Yāhā haite Kṛṣṇa-bhakti hay antardhān" 53

(Among them mokṣa is the worst type of deceit that causes the disappearance of devotion to Kṛṣṇa) -

52 Ibid., p. 13
53 Ibid., p. 3
So when our true knowledge warns us, the illusion vanishes, and when the illusion is cast off, realisation of unity comes. That is true the salvation or mukti.

Revelation: The Supreme Being can directly reveal himself in the soul. The second way is the scripture and the third way is the guru who knows the mysteries of Kṛṣṇa. The guru must be served and worshipped with utmost regard.

Conception of sin: To Caitanyadeva, it is a sin when Bhakti is alloyed with desire. If a devotee does not perform his nitya and naimittika works – he also commits sin. But these sins are removed when a devotee utters the name of Hari. The resulting merit depends on the stage of the spiritual progress of the devotee which differs from man to man.

Attitude towards the castes: Caitanyaism removed all the barrier of caste in matters of worship. It tried to create a new grouping of men united by a common religious impulse. It certainly gave a larger place to women and out-castes by recognising their inherent religious capacity. Caitanya also ignored the caste distinction in connection with the selection of gurus. He had six famous Gosvāmīs of Vṛndavana but all of them were not Brahmīns.
Attitude towards women: Caitanya also condemned women and wealth. But in the Bengal Vaisnavism, there are ample references to the glorification of the sex-impulse. Radhā-Kṛṣṇa's love is a great example to the exponent of the Parakīyā theory. Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāj also upheld the doctrine of "Parakīyā-Vāda". The intense love between Radhā and Kṛṣṇa was practically demonstrated by Caitanyadeva. But one thing must be noted that Radhā's crowning love is a religious symbol, a typefication of the free worship offered by the human soul to God. Caitanya's devotional personality along with his passionate and sincere adoration stands always above the religion of human flesh and blood of the said belief in wealth and women which can bring only earthly happiness. But in Caitanya's teaching earthly enjoyment and happiness had no place.  

Post-Caitanya Sahajiyā—cult: "Sahaja" is a Sanskrit word, which means what one is born (Saha-yata) and thus it refers to the natural tendency which one possesses from birth. In the conception of Divine nature, the quality to which the sahajiyās have given stress, is the attribute of love. It is a natural characteristic of the Supreme Being which is possessed by man by virtue of his origin from the Eternal spirit.  

This sahajiyā cult has been derived from the Buddhist Mahāyāna cult. In the Buddha monasteries — the Bhikṣus and the

54. A. M. Mukherjee, op. cit., P: 139
Bhikṣunīs started the creed of "sahaja dharma" based on romantic love. They did not believe in the human soul, the sacredness of marriage tie and in anything beyond pleasures of the present moment. These sahajiyās outwardly profess that they are Vaisnāvas by cult, but their mode of devotion is quite different from the Gaurīya Vaisnavism.

The Bāuls, (means 'Yogī' and 'Avadhūtas')Āuls, Kartābhajā (this sect was popular in the West Bengal in 18th century) etc. sects lie in the fold of sahajiyā-cult. Besides these, the rest are known as sahajiyā Vaisnāvas of Bengal. But they do not believe in image of Kṛṣṇa. In "Kartābhajā" sect, there were some influences of Christian religion. The sahajiyās, bāuls, āuls, sāis, believed in and practised certain erotic rites. It was difficult for them to understand the true spirit of the bhakti-cult. They derived their inspiration from the erotic and emotional preachings of the adherents of the Srikhanda group also.

The philosophy of love: The sahajiyās set up a doctrine of love which is to be exercised from the individual to the infinite through the atmosphere of spirituality. Love is the motive of a sahajiyā. To them, love is religion and its range is infinite patience, infinite joy out of infinite sorrow.

In Bengal, we get the full form of Radhā-Kṛṣṇa episode in Jaydeva's "Gītagovinda". Jaydeva also mentioned the names of the

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Sukumar Sen, op. cit., Aparārdha, P.353
poets Umāpatidhāra, Svārāṇ, Govardhana-cārya etc. Next, we can cite the name of Bādū-candīdāsa. His "Śrīkṛṣṇakīrtana" is a lyrical song. Vidyāpati's Raḍhā-Kṛṣṇa songs are also of the same nature, which were followed in the post-Caitanya Vaiṣṇava literature.

Caitanya heightened the importance of love in the scale of devotion. The current of his love flowed in two directions—one towards Kṛṣṇa—the infinite—and the other towards beings—both animate and inanimate. His message was that of prema and bhakti. Prema is the ultimate goal and bhakti is the means to attain that goal.

The Gaurya Vaiṣṇavis advocated for the 'Prema-Kaisora' love (childhood) at Raḍhā and Kṛṣṇa and slowly they advocated the various aspects of love—Pūrvarāga (first down of love), Abhisāra (secret journey for union), Ākṣepānurāga (waiting promoted by love), Milan (union), Viraha (separation).

Caitanya and his followers adopted the idea of perfect love and in doing so, they have brought down Lord Kṛṣṇa to this world and treated him as their love (friend, lord etc). Caitanya came to redeem the world by living love.

INFLUENCE OF CAITANYA UPON BENGALI LITERATURE:

After the appearance of Caitanya, a great change has been noted in the field of Bengali literature and culture. Finally in
the sixteenth century, a wave of Vaiṣṇava enthusiasm inspired by Caitanya's preaching the doctrine of Kṛṣṇa-Bhakti, swept over the peninsula. Before his advent, the subject matter of Bengali literature was Mangalakāvyas, translation of Purāṇas and Bhāgavata and the praises of gods and goddesses. Even the Radhā-Kṛṣṇa episode was not so much refined. But Caitanya gave the final touch of Radhā-Kṛṣṇa episode and songs of Radhā-Kṛṣṇa became the celestial songs.

Caitanya's strong personality uplifted the human love, separation and union to a celestial attitude. The Bāwls placed their beloved in the position of God, and it was done at the influence of Caitanyadeva. Through him, the flow of Kṛṣṇa-bhakti took a new turn. In Bengal, Vaiṣṇavism flourished through a new path. Caitanya drove out the social division. In Bengal, he abolished the differences between the rich and the poor. Really he was a social reformer like Ram Mohan Ray. By his influence, the unity of the Bengaleese came into existence. Behind the religious reforms of the 19th century, Caitanya's contributions were also enormous.

The "love" which was promulgated by Caitanya influenced the modern poets of Bengal. From Michel Madhusudan Dutta to Devendra Nath Sen, all the poets are influenced by the Vaiṣṇavapadāvalī. The Vaiṣṇava influence upon Rabindranath was so great that he could not forget the "Brajamandal parībēs". He was the last descendant of "Vaiṣṇava pada Kṛtanas". The
Vaisnava theory of love was also depicted in Sarat Chatterjee's "Charitarhin", "Pall-samaj", "Bardidi" etc. Tarasankar Benerjee was also influenced by Vaisnava literature. His "Rākamal" is the noblest example. Modern Vaisnava padavallis and Bengali literature grew up under the influence of Caitanya.

Media of propagation: The chief media of propagation of the new Vaisnavism of Bengal were the followings:

1. The chunting of the holy names was a strong medium of this movement. Religious songs, poems, and literature of the Vaisnava poets and reformers, Jaydeva, Vidyāpati and other poets and different religious books are instances in this connection. Śrīmadbhāgavatagītā and Bhāgavata also helped in the propagation of the Vaisnavism.

2. The Bhajans, Namsamkirtanas conducted by the bhaktas played an important role in the propagation of dharma.

3. Mathas and ākhṛs were established in different places where Lord Kṛṣṇa and Śrī Caitanya were regularly worshipped, and the reformers preached Vaisnavism amongst the common people, who were generally influenced by their preachings.

4. The biographies of Caitanya and his followers were however the most important medium of propagation. We are discussing this in details herein below.

5. The hariṣabhās are to some extent comparable to the namghars of Assam through their influence was not as wide as the namghars of Assam.
Biography - as one of the medium of propagation:

The biography was a thing altogether new to our literature, so far the literature had been monopolised by gods and goddesses. But now for the first time it looks real and living human beings for its subject from the 16th century. And for this, Vaiṣṇava biographers deserve credit as pioneers.

Since biographies record contemporary impressions felt, witnessed or believed with intense faith, they represent to a greater extent a proper step towards biographical writing. The picture is no doubt exaggerated and obscured by credulous legends. But the general outline is clear and vivid. The life which they deal with is rich in inward religious passion rather than in external acts and incidents.

The "Gaurangalas" created interest in reality and history. Besides, citing the social condition of the then period, these inspired to create diaries, biographies etc. These biographies also describe its passionate expression in devotional ecstasies, visions and frenzies.

A fairly large number of biographies in Sanskrit and Bengali on the life and personality of Caitanya came into existence not many years after his death. They supply valuable materials and the growth of movement he initiated. Though most of them acknowledge the divinity of Caitanya and write from the

57 Sukumar Sen op. cit., P. 317
58 Sri Srikumar Bandyopadhyay, op. cit., P. 93
devotional point of view, beneath all these, we have a picture of great human interest and appeal and the purely devotional aspect of Caitanya's career is depicted with sincere and loving care with all the attending details and circumstances.

These biographies gave an impetus to the "Bhakti-Movement" which was ultimately responsible for the spread and propagation of Vaiśnavism throughout the length and breadth of Bengal and Orissa. Caitanya was the centering figure of the Vaiśnava renaissance in Bengal and Orissa.

The important biographies on the life and teachings of Caitanya are the followings:

1. Murārī Gupta's karccā (1520 - 25 A.D)
2. Caitanya-mangala - Locanadāsa (16th century)
6. Gaurāṅga-śtavakalpa ṇṛkṣa - Raghunāthūasa (Early part of 16th century)
7. Karccā by Svarūpādamodara - (This karccā has not been found anywhere)
8. Kṛṣṇa-Caitanya-čaritāmṛta - Murārī Gupta (In Sanskrit - 1520 A.D)
9. Gaurā-ghanoddeesa dīpikā - Kavi Karṇapūra (1576 A.D)
10. Caitanya-čaritāmṛta kāvyā - Kavikarṇapūra (1520 A.D)
11. Bilaḳsman-čaturdaśaka - Sadasiva Kaviraj (16th century)
Over and above, in Caitanya-ifengala, Manasā-maṅgala kāvya (a sectarian kāvya) we get stray references of Caitanya'a life-story. And these have been stated in Kṛṣṇabhāratī's 'Santnirṇaya', Dharma-maṅgala of Rāmādāsa Ādak. They also supply some documents of Caitanya's life.

Besides all these, we get some references of Caitanya from ancient Assamese, Bengali and Oriya literature.

A comparative study -

Vaiṣṇavism secured a strong foothold in Assam, Bengal, Orissa and Vṛndāvana with the help of Śaṅkaradeva and Caitanyadeva respectively. Both of them appeared at a critical juncture when people were in great need of its ideas. They advocated Vaiṣṇavism wherein Viṣṇu is adorned in the from of Kṛṣṇa above all other deities. After their death, their followers took the responsibility of carrying on the arduous task of their Masters. So, in the later part of the 16th century, we get many saints and scholars like Mādhava deva, Dāmodara deva, Harideva, Vaiṣṇogopāla deva, Gopāla Āta and many others of Assam and Rūpa, Sanātana, Jīva Nityānanda, Advaita etc. of Gaurīya Vaiṣṇavism – of Bengal.

The influence of this Gaurīya Vaiṣṇavism was far-flung and it covered a large part of Bengal, because Caitanyadeva himself

59 "Sāhitya Pariṣat Patrikā" - 27th issue, PP. 131-139
60 "Baṅgīya Sāhitya Pariṣat" - published by Basanta Kumar Chattopadhyay.
made a net-work in Bengal. In Assam also the influence of Caitanya sect is noticeable side by side Mahāpurusīya sect. We know that Rāmacandra and Rāmavada and other members of Nityānanda's family came to Assam and preached Gaurīya Vaisnavism. There are some satras in Nowgong and Goalpara districts professing Bengal Vaiṣṇavism. But it should be remembered that the influence of Bengal Vaiṣṇavism in Assam was limited. From some medieval biographies we come to know that Mathurādāsā Ṭāṭā, Gopālā Ṭāṭā, Hari Bhāratī etc and some others of Assam who took invitation or preparing to get themselves initiated in Bengal Vaiṣṇavism. But in spite of this influence, Bengal Vaiṣṇavism in Assam, could not make any headway in the face of the growing movement conducted by Śaṅkaradeva and the concerted and systematic propagation by his followers. 61

In Assam, the main stream of the movement coming down from Śaṅkaradeva divided into four main divisions. So, Vaiṣṇavism of Assam was alert to fight against them. But in Bengal Vaiṣṇavism, a section of the Vaiṣṇavite fell an easy prey to the baser forms of worship leading to erotic practices. This led to the formation of different sub-sects. But these sub-sects have not been able to influence the main stream. There are thirteen sub-sects (Āul, Bāul, Nṛṣa, Kartābhajā etc.) which always considered by a true Vaiṣṇava as the unholy association.

61 S.C. Goswami, "Introducing Assam Vaisnavism," P. 20
In the matter of theology also, a little difference is discernible between the two schools of thought. Both the schools have drawn their inspiration from the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa*. Śaṅkaraḍēva relied upon the commentary of Śrīdhara Svāmī but Caitanyadeva laid stress on the *Brahma Saṁhitā*. God is called by the names Brahma, Paramātmā etc. But in Assam there is no clear distinction among them.

To the Vaiṣṇavites of Assam, Kṛṣṇa is the most ideal divinity. His manifestations are Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa who live in Vaikunṭha, but to the Vaiṣṇavites of Bengal School, Kṛṣṇa lives in Goloka and Yṛṇḍavaṇa. This Universe is also an illusory existence to the Assam Vaiṣṇavites while the existence is real of the Bengal Vaiṣṇavite. Assam Vaiṣṇavites believed in the theory of incarnation and in the twenty-four incarnations of Nārāyaṇa-Viṣṇu. In Bengal, the doctrine of incarnation is two-fold where Kṛṣṇa incarnates in every age. In Bengal Vaiṣṇavism, Acintya-bhedābheda system exists between God and Jīva, but there is no such system that has evolved in Assam.

As regards the media of propagation, the brāhmaṇa-satras and many branch-brāhmaṇa-satras established (during A.D. 1650-1800) spread their influence among the Assamese people and the tribals. Bargītās and Nāma-kīrtans also served the purpose. But in Bengal, the ākhrās and maṭhas have very limited activities and influence, because
they keep their contact with a certain group of devotees.

In Assam, the Neo-Vaiṣṇavite movement has the greatest contribution towards Hinduisation. Many non-Aryan races have adopted the Aryan culture. In Bengal also, its influence deeply penetrated into the hearts of the people. So, both the movement of Assam and Bengal produced a rich religion and contributed much to the cultural development to the lands. People felt unity through love and devotion of Kṛṣṇa.