CHAPTER - I

INTRODUCTION
CHAPTER - I

1.00 INTRODUCTION

1.1 VAISNAVISM, ITS ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT: One of the most important of the Puranic religious systems to emerge in the early stage of their evolutionary formative period was Vaisnavism. The name is evidently derived from Vishnu. Primarily the solar God of the Vedas, but it would not mean that God was really at the root of the Puranic cult which came to be known by this designation at a late stage of its development. It is in one of the latest sections of the Mahabharata that the term Vaisnava occurs.¹

Vaisnavism, the religio-philosophical idealism calling upon its members to surrender themselves completely to the One Supreme power named Vishnu, was an important sect of Hinduism. It made its appearance in most of the provinces of India in around the 15th century after Christ and left its permanent foot-prints as it was on the fertile

¹ Banerjee, J.N.; 1966: Puranic and Tantric Religion, p.18
soil of religo-cultural heritage of India. Some well-reputed scholars are of opinion that the roots of the element of Bhakti are also traceable in the religion of the original settlers of India, and to the beliefs and practices of the lower orders of the Indian people.²

According to the great orientalist Bhandarkar³ the origin of the Bhakti doctrine is also traceable in the Upanishadic idea of Upāsanā or fervent meditation, which magnifies what is medicated upon and represents it in a glorious form in order to excite admiration and love. Further, he draws our attention to the Brihadāranyaka Upanisada (1.4.8) which conceives the internal Ātman i.e., soul as dearer than the son, wife, other relatives, wealth and every thing else.

1.1.1 The origin of the cult of Bhakti in Hinduism is shrouded in mystery. But it is a popular belief that the

² Banerjee, J.N.; op.cit., p.9
³ Bhandarkar, D.R.; 1930: 'Vaisnavism, Saivism and Minor Religious System', p.28
Bhakti is an indigenous growth. The germs of this cult are found in the Vedic hymns and the Upanisadas. The Vedic hymns to Baruna, Sāvitrī and Usās are replete with pious sentiments and devotion. The doctrine of Bhakti or single minded devotion to God is clearly evident in the later Upanisadas.

'The self cannot be realized by the study of the Vedas, nor by intelligence, nor by deep learning; It can be realized by him only whom, it chooses or favours, to him the self reveals it own nature ,(Kathaupanisada 11, 23 and Mundaka Upanisada 111, 2.3). This is the doctrine of grace. The word Bhakti occurs, for the first time in the Upanisada'.

Vaisnavite movement first started in South India. Later it was spreaded to northern India and thence to eastern part of it. In fact, the Bhakti movements were considered as a combined effect of the political, religious and different social conditions prevailing in the then India.

1.1.2  The Ālwarś, devotees of South India made Vaisnavism extremely popular among the masses during the period from the seventh to the tenth century and Vaisnavite regeneration took its root from this time. In the whole community there were twelve Ālwarś and they all adhered to a similar method of arriving at logical conclusions. Taken from the empirical point of view they accepted the basic tenets of the Vedas and the Upanisadas. They composed thousands of songs in the Tamil language expressing their inner sentiments. They laid stress on earnest and sincere respects for love and devotion. They were devotees of different incarnations of Lord Vishnu who was also symbolised as Krisna, specially the child Krisna.

The last of the Ālwar Āchāryas to give philosophical analyses of the Bhakti cult with superb intelligence to re-establish its supremacy was Nathmuni (824–920 A.D.). It was he who collected and edited the songs composed by the

7 Neog, D. ;528 Sankarabda : 'Juganayak Sankaradeva', p.75
Alwars. The Vaisnava Gurus of the later period, such as Jamunacharya, Ramanujan, and a few others have maintained the same spiritual traditions of the Alwars.

1.1.3 Ramanujacharya in the 12th century started the Bhakti movement with his Shri Vaisnava sect after establishing Bhakti on a strong philosophical foundations. His philosophical views are known as 'Visistādwaitavāda' i.e., abstract dualism.

He refuted the Adwaita doctrine of Ignorance i.e., 'avidyā' originates from the Śkt. root विद् 'to be'. The word thus literally means 'that which exists not'. According to some others, it is विद् 'to know' and the expression would, thus mean 'absence of knowledge or wrong knowledge'. Arguing that it ( = ignorance ) is incompatible with an Omniscient Being. For the Absolute which is limited by Ignorance is no Absolute in the strict

8 De Chaudhury, H.K.; 1969: 'God In Indian Religion', p. 77
sense of the term. The difficulty cannot be removed by attributing the Ignorance to the finite soul. To hold that Ignorance is neither existent nor non-existent is obviously unreasonable, and still, more unreasonable is the view that Ignorance of an indescribable nature is something positive. If it is positive, there is no hope for man's liberation from it.

Ramanuja admitted the reality not only of the individual selves but also to the external world. For him, the world was not unreal as it is a place for God's sport i.e., 'lilā'. As God is real, so is His 'lilā' and also the world which is the material setting of His 'lilā'. In other words, the world being a plane for the Divine sport cannot be a mere illusion. The Deity is Supreme and He is inexhaustible substratum of auspicious attributes. He is an object of our adoration. He is neither empirical, nor a mere void, but is such as can be apprehended not only on the eternal plane but on the emperical plane also. It is He who has created all that is, and enlivens all that He has created, just as an individual soul enlivens
its body. The whole universe is His body, hence He is all. This gives an altogether new orientation to a thinkar who conceives the Reality as qualified. While constituting the body of the Deity, the finite selves and physical things do not cease to maintain their individuality and reality. Although they are subservient to the Almighty, yet they have their own independent being, Ramanuja further holds that the finite selves do not lose their individuality even in emancipation. If they lost it, they would not enjoy the fellowship of the Deity. Every individual is striving for bliss, and the strife has its culmination in the beatific vision of, and communion with, the Deity who is infinite Bliss, conscious of His own existence.

1.1.4 Ramanuja held that the way leading to that vision and fellowship is devotion which is open to all, irrespective of the differences of caste, sex, position in society. All beings are His, hence He is accessible to
all. As soon as we surrender our all to Him, He embraces us and admits us to His eternal play i.e., 'Lilā', but we do not thereby lose our individuality but only get a glimpse or a direct experience of His blissful presence.9

All over India, most of the Hindu forms of devotion and worship have been influenced by Ramanuja's philosophy. His chief aim, the reconciliation of the doctrines of the Upanisadas, the Bhāgavat gītā, the epics and the Purāṇas, with his own religion and philosophy, was theological rather than philosophical.10

Ramanuja played a vital role in spreading Vaisnavism towards other parts of the country. After his departure Vaisnava Bhakti cult of southern India began to move towards Northern India. From the South India it was spreaded to the Hindi belt through Maharashtra and Gujarat. The singularly important factor in the Bhakti movement of northern India was the advent of Swami Ramananda. From the theoretical point of view he was a

---

9 Bharadwaj, K.D.; 1958 : 'The Philosophy of Ramanuja', p.10
10 Macdonell, A.A.; 1927 : 'India's past', p. 149
follower of Ramanujam. But his system of prayers and object of prayers were different. He took shelter not at the feet of Vishnu living in Vaikuntha but his incarnation, Shrirama or Ramachandra. To him Ram was God, and the name of Rama was the only praying word to him.

In addition to this difference in perception he accepted all human beings to be eligible for Bhakti and removed the evils of differences of caste, creed and nationalities from the sphere of his Bhakti cult.  

1.1.5 Nimbarkacharya, a contemporary of Ramanujacharya founded the philosophy of 'Bhedabheda', i.e., the differential and integral rules of God and His creations and preached his Bhakti cult from this foundation. Worship of the dual idolic images of Radha and Krishna on the same pedestal is the main feature of this sect. In the 13th century Madhavacharya or Ananandagiri founded the

12 Gupta, S.N.Das; 1961: 'A History of Indian Philosophy', Vol.III, p. 399
philosophy of Dualism and carried on his propagation on it in Karnataka and Gujarata. While Jnanadeva and Namadeva laid foundation and preached Vaishnavism in Maharashtra during the 12th and 13th centuries. This way the Bhakti cult took its root and began to be preached and spreaded over in the southern and western India during the period covering 12th to 14th centuries.

1.1.6 In the Ramanujam sect only the twice born i.e., 'dvijāti' could have been initiated which Ramananda kept his doors open for all be initiated in Rama Bhakti. With this liberal attitude Ramananda gave lessons on Rama to all from the top most rank the Brāhmans to the lowest rank Chandālas; thereby making an attempt at raising Hinduism to a higher status with compact co-ordination between life and Bhakti. As a result this liberal Bhakti cult and culture could capture the imagination of all and spread all over northern India. After Ramananda another

13: Opswichi, F.N.; op.cit., p.47
Vaisnava saint Kabir Das and Goswami TulasaDas, the most exalted Vaisnava Guru kept the holy Ganges water of devotion of Rama flowing thereby giving solace and peace to the disturbed minds of many a Hindus, their writings had given a glorious place to Hindi language and literature.

1.1.7 As the devoted poets influenced by Swami Haramananda created a large treasure of Hindi literature based on devotion to Rama, so was created a rich treasure of Bhakti literature in Braja language at the inspiration of Shri Ballabhacharya who through his mode of prayers to the Lord of Gopies i.e., Shrikrishna added new strength to Vaisnavism which began to exert great influences on the masses of northern India. In the first part of the 16th century Shri Ballabhacharya drew on his Suddha Dwita Philosophy i.e., Abstract Monism which he preached first in Mathura and Brindaban region and thence to Gujarata.

During this time in the eastern India Srimanta Sankaradeva in Assam and Shri Chaitanyadeva in Bengal got
hold of the main oars of Bhakti movements lying its foundation there. Chaitanyadeva brought about a correlative existence between Dualism and Monism. According to Chaitanyadeva Bhakti meant in its ultimate form pure and simple love. He used to forget himself being completely submerging himself in the deep nectars of love to Shrikrishna. His cult is known as the cult of treating one self as Radha, the most loyal and obedient devote of Shrikrishna.

1.1.8 The rise of Shri Chaitanya (1485-1533 A.D.) ushers in an important chapter in the history of mediaeval Vaisnava movement. He grew up in Navadvip in Bengal, a centre of great Sanskrit learning at that time and acquired early in life great reputation as an erudite scholar, but he renounced the world as ascetic (sannyasin) at the age of twenty four and lived as a preacher of the Krisna cult of the Vaisnava school with emphasis on the doctrine of divine love (Bhagavat prema) for the rest of his life.
He was a God intoxicated saint and exhibited in his action and utterances the symptoms of ecstasy and rapture characteristics of a great mystic drunk in the fountain of divine delight. He, however, used to decry such traits as unworthy of a samyasin. He is regarded as having manifested in himself the yearning of the human soul for union with the Divine, technically called 'Rādhābhāva' as typified by the feeling and conduct of ŚrīRadha towards ŚrīKṛṣṇa the Supreme Beloved. His preaching and occasional debates with certain learned protagonists of the Advaita Vedanta of his age successfully created a profound stir throughout the country and led to the development of a few Vaisnava school of Vedantic thought known as 'Achintabhedabhedha', i.e., the doctrine of inconceivable difference cum non-difference between Brahman regarded as 'saguna Iswara' (= god with attributes) and 'jiva' (= the individual self).

14 Dasgupta, S.N.; 1961; 'A History of Indian Philosophy', Vol.IV, p.389
15 Goswami, B.D.; 'Chaitanya Caritamrita, 11,10 "Chaitanya's discussion with Bharati"
Chaitanya instructed the masses in the Sankhya Philosophy of 'acintya-bhedabhedā tattva', which maintains that the Supreme Lord is simultaneously one with and different from his creation. Chaitanya taught this philosophy through the chanting of the different holy names of the Lord. He taught that the holy name of the Lord is the sound incarnation of the Lord and that since the Lord is the absolute whole, there is no difference between His holy name and His transcendental form. Thus, by chanting the holy name of the Lord one can directly associate with the Supreme Lord by sound Vibration. As one practices this sound Vibration, he passes through three stages of development: the offensive stage, the clearing stage and the transcendental stage. In the offensive stage one may desire all kinds of material happiness, but in the second i.e., clearing stage one becomes clear of all material contamination. When one is situated on the transcendental stage, he attains the most coveted position the stage of loving god. The great saint Chaitanya taught that this is the highest stage of perfection for human beings.16

16 Swami, A.C. Bhaktivedanta; 1980: 'Teachings of Lord Caitanya', Preface, p.x
Bhakti developed itself at the fact of Vaishnavism and it was raised at the charming place of Vaishnavism. In the eastern most part of India in Assam Mahapurush Sankardeva started to uproot the prevailing superstition and lowly practices by bringing them all under the huge common umbrella of Bhakti. This movement is known as ncc Vaisnavite movement of Assam. He established a close relation with all Vaisnavite sects of India. He had also generated in the then Assam including Koch Kingdom a new consciousness about God by discarding various types of worships of different deities in the name of ennumerable Gods and goddesses. Basically Sankaradeva subscribed to Adwaitabād (= Monism). 17

The official name of the Bhakti creed of Sankaradeva, is 'ekaśaraṇa nāma-dharma' and this explains its cardinal principles, which enjoin the worship of one god, that is Vishnu, especially in the incarnation of Krishna, and interdicts the votaries from the worship of

17 Goswami, U.N.; 1975: op-cit., p. 96
any other deity, and indicates its main form, which consists of the utterance of the holy names of the god in the singing of songs in his glorification.  

On the metaphysical plane, Sankara-deva holds a non-dualistic standpoint unlike many of his Vaisnava counterparts in the rest of India. This explains the absence of dual images in his religion such as Radhakrisna of Chaitanya, Gopi-Krisna of Vallabhacharyya, Rukmini-Krisna of Namadeva and Sita-Rama of Ramananda. He gives an unambiguous expression of this faith: Madhava is the guide of both Prakriti ( = matter ) and Purusha ( = mind) while Hari is the most faithful friend of all. Sankara-deva wants to preach it to his followers.

---

18 Ghabiha, B.P.(ed.); 1981 : 'Souvenir, the Golden Jubilee Srimanta Sankardev Sangha', article 'Basic Aspects of the Neo-Vaisnavism of Sankaradeva' by M.Neog., p.1

19 Barua, B.K.; 1960: 'Sankaradeva— Vaisnava saint of Assam', p.88
1.2 THE ASSAMESE VAISNAVISM AND SANKARADEVA: There was already a very thin but prominent stream of Vaisnavism in Assam before the advent of Srimanta Sankaradeva. In the copper scripts of King Dharmapal in the 12th century A.D. and those of Kings Satyanarayan, Laxminarayan of Swadhanyapur (North Lakhimpur) in the first part of the 15th century. We get better hints of existence of Vaisnavism at that time. In the writings of Pre-Sankara poets like Rema Saraswati and Madhava Kandali we come across the influence of Vaisnavism of their times. Translation of certain cantoes of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata had also given some glimpses of the influences of Vaisnavism to the people. Over and above, one can learn from the 'Kālikā Purāṇ' and 'Yogini Tantra' about the prevalence of worship of Vasudeva or of Pancharatra Vaisnava Marga. But it seems that these religious sects were confined either within the four walls of a temple, or to some particular group of persons. Hence, during those days i.e., the Pre-Sankar Vaisnavism in Assam could not attract the common people at large.
The third important sect of Hinduism that prevailed on the eve of the neo-Vaisnavite movement was Pancharatra Vaisnavism. But this form of Vaisnavism is quite different from the one introduced by Sankaradeva and other Gurus. The worship of Vishnu in the form of Vasudeva seems to have been prevalent from early times. The Baraganga Rock inscription of Mahabhuti Varma (554 A.D.) which refers to the King as 'parama bhagavata' is the earliest recorded evidence of the existence of Vaisnavism. Sankaradeva made a beginning of the Vaisnavite Bhakti movement during the later part of the 15th century. There prevailed during his time a highly anomalous social system produced by heterogeneous chains of different sects, different religious practices and different social and personal customs and behaviours. In absence of any moral ideal, spiritual pursuits and systematic search for truth, the whole social body was filled with hypocracies and degradation. The common people had to easily practiceable religious ideal or moral system before them, and hence, they were guided by easy sentiments and

naturally uncontrollable emotions leading people to embark on whatever way of life attracted them most. To fill the cup of moral and spiritual degradation the easy way the Tantras with its inherent ingredients of propitiation of lust for women, wine and wealth took its roots in different parts of the country. The Tamreswari temple at Sodia, the Kamakhya Temple in Guwahati and the Jayantidevi temple at Jayantapur became the centres of such tantrik practices. Variety of faiths, worships of a number of different deities and the accompanying practices made inroads in the society leading to diversion of people from religion in its true sense. Facing such a despicable situation Sankaradeva realised it very much that different linguistic groups and multiferious faith could be brought about only through a common system of spiritual permits or a common religious ideal. He firmly believed that only Vaisnavism could fill-up the vacuum created by heterogenous pulls in the society. With such view he undertook a comprehensive tour of India for about twelve long years at a stretch to visit various places of pilgrimages,\textsuperscript{21} different temples and mathas.

\textsuperscript{21} Prosad, K.N.; 1976; 'Sankardev Sahityakar Aur Richarak', i.9
throughout India to make an indepth study of the systems prevailing there, and to observe the activities of various Vaisnava sects. So that he could adopt a modified Vaisnava Bhakti path suited to his time, his place and his people. Like Ramanuja, Sankaradeva had also propagated qualified Monism. He preached as the four pillars of his Vaisnavite religion the holy name of God (Naam), the deity to be worshipped (Deva), the preceptor (Guru) and the disciple (Bhakat) as the inseparable ingredients of 'Eka-śarana-nāma-dharma' i.e., the religion for surrender to the name of only one God and inspired the people after it in his own unique way.

1.2.1 The cardinal features of the 'Eka-śarana-nāma-dharma' are enumerated below:

1) Sravana-Kirtana-dharma i.e., the principle of audition was accepted as a stimulating device for religious devotion.

22 Das, H.M.; 'Sankaradeva— A Study', p.56
23 Prosad, K.N.; 1976 : op-cit., p. 184
(ii) The dāṣya view of life was profounded by Kabir and Tulasidas; according to this view the relation of man to God was like that of a servant to his sovereign. It was not like that of a woman to her beloved as postulated by Mirabai or Surdas. That is why, the character of Radha and the 'Feery power of unreflecting love' are absent as themes from general purview of Assamese Vaishnavism. It is marked by a certain measure of austere attitudes.

(iii) It is democratic in thought and all-embracing in concept and application in the sense that it never accept any division of caste and creed.

(iv) Literature, its accredited channel of expression, was meant to stimulate interest among the general masses of the people particularly the women folk and illiterates.  

24 Barua, Hem; 1965: 'Assamese literature', p.40
Like all other medieval Vaisnava schools of India, the neo-Vaisnavite movement in Assam is essentially and primarily based upon Bhakti. In Sandilyasutra, Bhakti is defined as the highest attachment (parama mukti) and in the famous work Naradiya Bhaktisutra it is considered as mental state of the highest love and bliss (parama premarūpa, amritarūpa). But Assamese Vaisnava scriptures have not quoted anywhere the above works, rather they have frequently quoted from the Bhāgavata, the gītā and other Vaisnava Purānas to define the nature of Bhakti. The absolute self surrender to god and a feeling of joy and happiness in serving or worshiping him are the two main characteristics of Bhakti. It is based on faith and not on dialectics. Vaisnavas in Assam consider Bhakti as both the means and end of human existence. The superiority and efficacy of Bhakti over all other modes of worship have been repeated in various devotional and religious works of the sect.

25 Nath, R.M.(ed.); 'Narada Bhaktisutra' 2/3
26 Sarma, S.N.; 1966: op-cit., p. 48
1.2.2 The main characteristics of the Neo-Vaisnavite Bhakti cult of Assam are enumerated below:

(i) This religion centres round Srikrisna whose ideals are basically laid down in 'Shrimad Bhāgawat Gītā' and the Bhāgawat Purāṇa.

(ii) Paying obeisance to God through listening to him and his worldly activities as revealed in the holy books and singing songs in His praise.

(iii) Vishnu is the only God; He is omnipotent and omnipresent.

(iv) Concentration of mind in chanting the names of God for the spiritual benefit.

(v) The highly beneficial impacts of the preceptor and honest companions.

(vi) Laying emphasis on the noble qualities like non-Violence, love, kindness and honesty.

(vii) Equal rights in matters of Bhakti for all irrespective of caste and creed.
1.2.3 In order to make the above principles easily understandable majority of the people and with a view to making attentive listening, memorizing and singing praise of God easier for the common masses the holy personalities and the great incarnations, Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva compose musical prayers and wrote some poetry books and dramas.²⁷

1.2.4 Srimanta Sankaradeva was the greatest exponent of Neo-Vaisnava cult in Assam. Beginning from Sankaracharjya in the 9th century all great intellects like Ramanujam, Ramananda, Kabir, Nanak, Chaitanya, Madhvacharya, Nimbarca, Tulasidas, Ballava, Namdeva, Tukaram, Jnanadeva, and others founded the Vaisnava cult and for the matter of Rama and Krishna based on the tenets of the Vedas, Brahmans, the Upanishadas, the Mahabharata, the Ramayana, the Bhagawata and the Gita. Majority of them were philosopher. Many of them have written a good number of books. Some of them

had also composed devotional songs and a few others had preached the Bhakti mottos in different parts of the country. None of the aforesaid Vaishnava saints, however, adopted such a wide range of means to preach Bhakti cult of Vaisnavism as done by Sankaradeva in the eastern part of the country. That is why, the stream of this Bhakti cult of Vaisnavism flowed in a higher tide in the North East India after the death of Sankaradeva than in his life time.

1.3 SATRA INSTITUTION IN ASSAM: The Satra institution of Assam is a product of the neo-Vaishnavite movement initiated by Sankaradeva towards the closing decades of the 15th century of the Christian era. The institution has since its inception, been serving as the radiating force of all religious activities of the Vaishnavite communities.28

28 Chaliha, B.P.(ed.); 'Sankardev'; 1978 : the article 'The Satra Institution of Assam' by S.N.Sarma, p.74
Garamur Satra gives a nice picture of a monastic Satra in Assam:

"The buildings of the Satra are approached by a good road which is constructed at some expense. The namghar is a huge structure, the roof of which supported on huge wooden pillars and the great floor space is entirely bare save for one or two lecturns on which the sacred writings are reposing. The actual shrine is a separate building closely adjoining the eastern end of the namghar. The shrine is very different from the structure of the Satra temple. There is not race of blood or grease; there is nothing disquesting or grotesque and the whole place is dominated by the note of decency and propriety which is so marked a characteristic of Vaisnavism of Majuly. In a square around the gardens stands lines of huts in which the resident monks line. They consist of well built rows of rooms which are much more specious than those ordinarily occupied by village folk and are kept scrupulously clean. There is something singularly gracious and pleasing in the whole atmosphere. Everything is fresh, neat and well to do. The well-groomed smiling monks are evidently at peace with themselves and with the world at large. The children are recruited from villages and trained to be devotees, but if at any time they find the restraint of celibacy irksome they are at liberty to return to outer world". 29

29 Ibid., p.76
The Satra Institution in Assam are excellently examples of the rich religio-cultural activities of the Vaisnava era. The rich heritage of enlightened socio-cultural activities art, culture and literature and the strong foundation of the religious beliefs of the Bhakti cult of the neo-Vaisnavism of Sankaradeva are treasured and nursed in these Satras. In a word, the Satra institutions are still the nerve centres of the Vaisnava society in Assam since the hollowed past. The shining rays from these institutions in vast area from Sadiya, the eastern-most corner of Assam to Cooch Behar in West Bengal are throwing lights of enlightenments on the Assamese society.

1.3.1 The first stage of the growth of the Satra institution began with Sankaradeva. Sankaradeva no doubt laid the foundation of the institution, but the superstructure was raised during the succeeding generations. With the organisation of Satras came their

30 Chaliha, B.P.(ed.); 1978; Ibid.
decentralised replica, the institution of village namghar, something like the parish church. From the beginning the namghar formed the hub of all village activities. It was the village club and theatre. It exercised a close spiritual control over all members of community and held them back from many evil acts. In fact, this institution might be called the village parliament and a parliament run too, on broad democratic principles. It was the village court where the trial of disregard the judgement was pronounced by the elders of the village. An excommunication could be decreed by the village Panchayat. These were also decided in the namghar. Only difficult cases were referred to the superiors of the Satra, or to the Government judiciary. Thus through the twin institutions of Satra and namghar Assamese society was neatly organised, and the moral tone of the people with such vigilance all around was found to be very fine.\(^{31}\) These are the most memorable everlasting

---

31 Chaliha, B.P.(ed.); 1981 : 'Golden Jubilee Souvenir' article 'Basic Aspects of the Neo-Vaisnavism of Sankaradeva', by M. Neog, p.4
legacies of Vaisnava preceptors headed by Sankaradeva, Madhavadeva and Damodaradeva faithfully followed by their devoted disciples.

1.3.2 The arrangement of Satras as described above often awoke comparison with the Buddhist monasteries or viharas with the provision of monks' dwellings. But the influence of the other types of religious institutions, more than Buddhist Viharas, seemed to have gone deep into the origin of these Vaisnavaite Satras. These are great Vaisnava shrines, the Jagannath Temple at Puri being the chief amongst them and the residential institutions of various monastic communities of India, chiefly those of the schools of Sankaracharya and Ramananda. It is, however, to be noted that the Vaisnava establishments of Assam are generally called Satras and not Mathas.

---

32 Goswami, S.C.; 1946: 'Introducing Assam Vaishnavism', p. 1
33 Fergusson; 1876: 'History of Indian Architecture', p. 54
34 Neog, M.; 1965: 'Sankaradeva and his times', p. 309
the earliest years of the history of Assamese Vaishnavism, the saints and their followers had mostly to depend upon themselves for the construction of their huts and the namghar, i.e., temple hall. They did not possibly think of having stone or brick built temples even when they could have utilized royal favour to that end. Carpentry is an easy craft for acquisition, and the monks themselves could raise a prayer hall and a set of residential quarters. These structures had to be rebuilt from time to time and they were also subject to ravages of fire and storm.\footnote{35}

The use of the term Satra in the sense of a Vaishnavite institution or establishment appears altogether to be a new one in the religious history of India. The word 'sattra' in Sanskrit has been used in two senses of a sacrifice lasting from a few days to a year or more.\footnote{36} The latter sense is responsible for the nomenclature to the Vaishnavite institution of Assam.\footnote{37}

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
  \item Neog, M.; 1965 : op-cit., p.313
  \item Sarma, S.N.; 1966 : op-cit., p.5
\end{itemize}
1.3.3 In its derivative sense the word 'satra' meant sacrificial place. But during the period of Neo-Vaisnavism it lost its original connotation and was used to mean a place for congregation of devotees to carry on religious discourses or for daily sessions for reading of Bhagawata or for merely holding religious discussion. During the initial phases of the Neo-Vaisnavite movement the word 'Satra' was used in a loose form, and hence, the Satra institution were also a little indisciplined. But with the passage of time this institutions became clearer as time passed by. With the gradual evolution Neo-Vaisnavism and with the expansion in its area of preaching, there grew many Satras in Assam with various title for their heads and with various modes of performances and worships in them.

The word Satra is also found in religious books like Bhagawata and Mahabharata. In the initial stage of the Neo-Vaisnavite movement the word Satra was used in the sense of religious sitting or association and not
systematized institution. Ananta Kandali, contemporary of Sankaradeva while tracing the genealogy of his family speaks of his father Ratna Pathak as having founded a Satra at Hazo, where he constantly recited the Bhagawata Purana. With the term Satra, Ananta Kandali referred to a religious sitting or association where his father used to explain the Bhagawata. The Satra in the shape of monastic or semi-monastic institution developed much later than Ratna Pathak. Bhusana Dvija, one of the earliest biographers of Sankaradeva has used the word Satragriha in the sense of a house where Sankaradeva after his return from the first pilgrimage used to hold religious discussion.

Bhattadeva, one of the foremost religious teacher of the 16th century defines a Satra in his 'Saraṇa Mālikā' as an assembly of holy persons where Bhakti in all its aspects is practised. He defines : "That supreme place

38 Ananta Kandali's Bhagawata Purāṇa : Book -IV; Quoted from Satra-Śanskritir Svamarekhā by Narayan Deva Goswami.
39 Dvija, Bhusan; 'Śri Sankaradeva', Verse 137
dored by gods and where ninefold Bhakti daily prevails, is called Satra. Vaisnavas residing there are naturally prone to Harināma. ⁴₀

1.3.⁴ According to Benudhar Sama ⁴¹ Satra is the noble place where the devotees discussed and chanted the various scriptures. Similarly the Satradhikar N.Goswami ⁴² has also described Satra as a place where the Vaisnava devotees are assembled and lived together for various holy discussions and expressions of the noble God through the derives of Bhakti.

1.4 THE BASIC COMPONENTS OF A SATRA: The Satra institutions in Assam is a body with four principal components, namely:

---

⁴₀ Sama, S.N.; 1966: Ibid.
⁴¹ Sama, Benudhar; 'Dakkhinpath Satra', p.7
⁴² Goswami, N.; 1984: 'Satriya Sanskritir Swarnarekhā', p.5
(a) Satrādhikār who is the principal person of the institution so far as religious and spiritual matters are concerned.

(b) Dekā Adhikār who is a trainee under the Adhikār, acts as an assistant to him in all matters connected with daily performances of Pujās (offerings) observation of tithis, etc.

(c) Bhakats i.e., a selected few disciples who after discarding worldly life like to reside within the precincts of a Satra and the general disciples living outside a Satra and a carrying all their respective professions to look after families.

At present there are three types of Satras in North East India. These are as follows:

(i) The Satras all those live within their precincts irrespective of the Adhikār, Dekā Adhikār or the disciples carry an unmarried insipide secluded life without any care for the worldly things.
(ii) Other lead a married life with all earthly cares for themselves and the society.

(iii) Only the Adhikār lead an unmarried life keeping himself aloof from the family life.

1.4.1 Some differences, are however, found in the Satras of Goalpara in Assam and Gooch Behar district of North Bengal so far as their above mentioned components and systematic adherences. Here, in Goalpara and North Bengal there is provision for only one Satradhikār in a Satra. The number of unmarried disciples are very few and most of the Satras are managed by the house holding disciples living around the Satra.

1.4.2 Each of the Satras owe allegiance to a particular sect. During the life time of Srimanta Sankardeva there was no sectarian differences within the Neo-Vaisnavite society of Assam. But after his death there tended to grow some differences among his followers and ultimately
took shapes four different sects within the Vaisnavite society. These are known as Brahma Samhati, Nikā Samhati, Purusa Samhati and Kāla Samhati which may respectively formed as integration with Brahma, the Ultimate truth, the particular way of worship. Worship of persons believed to be incarnations of god and adherence to the flow of time. This division in the undivided Vaisnavite society seems to be the result of differences in the understanding of the principles of Vaisnavism as preached by Sankaradeva by his beloved disciples. It might have also been influenced by the social situation prevailing in the then society at different places. According to Dr. Hiren Gohain these differences were not as accidental happenings but as the outcome of social situations. Damodardeva and Harideva are included in Brahma Samhati, Madhavadeva's followers are called of Nikā-Samhati, those subscribing to Sankaradeva's line of thinking founded by Purushottam Thakur are included in Purush Samhati while the followers of Gopal Ātā of Bhawanipur are known as Kāla Samhati. These divisions are artificial and seem to have resulted at least

Partially from personal factors and social and traditional differences. Moreover, these differences are confined to the boundaries of the Old Ahom Kingdom.

1.4.3 As per analysis of Maniram Dewan keeping equal faiths simultaneously on the Vedic rites and on the way of saying and chanting the names of God are the fundamentals of the four Satras of Upper Assam. The views propounded by Purushottam Thakur were formulated on the principles of performing a little rites while mainly devoting to the prayers of God. Discarding all worldly activities only devotion to the holy feet of the preceptor is the ingredients of Kala Samhati as profounded by Gopal Ata and his sect. Non-performance of any rites and strict adherence to the earnestness with accompanying plethora of temporal decora are the principles propounded by Badula Padma Ata, Mathura Das Burha Ata and others.\footnote{Neog, M.; 1951; 'Sri Sri Sankaradeva', p.153}
Though Vaisnava society is hereby divided into four distinct sub-sects, the basic tenets and modes of carrying on spiritual advancements are almost in distinguishable all subscribing strictly and accepting unconditionally the supremacy of the religions and ethical principles laid down by Sankaradeva. Hence there prevails General Unity and commonness among the adherents of different sects. In course of time the influence of the Satras in Upper Assam made inroads in the Satras of lower Assam and Cooch Behar in North Bengal could not get themselves completely rid of sectarian divisions.

Important Satra in Cooch Behar are Baikunthapur by Damodardeva, Madhapur by Sankaradeva, Haripur by Harideva, Madhapur by Harihar Ātā, while in Dhubri district Jinkātā by Harihar Ātā, Hāmrākutī by Hari Ātai, Dalgoma by Harmohan Thakur are prominent Satras. Besides there are quite a good numbers of Satras in the North Bengal and undivided Goalpara, but most of them are now in deplo- rable condition.
1.5 THE SATRA INSTITUTION OF GOALPURA: The district of Goalpara has been subdivided a few years ago into three districts, which are known as Goalpara, Kokrajhar, and Dhubri. The prominent Satras in these three districts are Satrasāl or Pāmrājkuti, Jinkāta, Dālgona, Dharma pur and Bishnupur. It is true that there are some other Satras in these districts, but most of them are now in a very dilapidated condition. Moreover, quite a good number of such Satras have been already lost their existence; such Satras were Ghilāzāri, Khākāpāra, Jāmlāi, Tiplāi, Phulaguri, Chautārā, Sri Rampur, Bijāpur, Shyāmrāyhāti, Shyamsundārbhāti, Balijāna, Bāguān, Balkunthapur, Narayanpur, Nalanā, Bebbāri, Dobāpāra, Sankargholā, Tribenighāt, Bhotgāon, Jogighopā, etc. All these Satras were situated in these districts. ¹⁵

1.5.1 At present, the Satras of Goalpara shows some differences with the other Vaisnavite Satras in respect

of its construction of namghar and the campus. There are mainly three houses in each Satra of Goalpara. The Manikut and main Prayer Hall are situated together while the other small house, locally called Matha is constructed on the left side of the Prayer Hall. The Padasilā (= foot stone i.e., stone with footprint) is generally kept in the Matha. The Manikut is generally constructed in the easternmost part of the compound and the Prayer Hall is constructed on the western side of the Manikut. Locally the prayer hall is called Kirtangghar and its main entrance is located on the western side. These Satras resemble with the model of Barpeta Satra. The idol mainly Chaturbhuj Vishnu image is placed at the āsana in the Manikut.

1.5.2 The constructional pattern of the Satras in Dhubri area appears to be different from the others. The guṇgraṇgha is constructed at a little distance from the main prayer hall facing towards east. There is no provision
of Padasilā Griha in the Satras of Dhubri district. The Chōghar as in other Satras are also not available in these Satras. Satra campus like Jinkātā, Simalābāri, Mingdingā etc. are newly constructed, while Ghārāikholā, Hākāmā etc. were shifted to the present sites from their original sites. It is very interesting to note that the traditions, customs, system of prayers, offerings and observations of the festivals etc. show some differences. It is the result of influences of other sects of Bengal. The local Zamindars had once extended their patronages to these Satras in Goalpara. They have donated revenue free landed properties to the Satras and also liberally provided funds for the construction of the various houses of the Satras. After the abolition of the Zamindari system some plots of land were mutated in the name of the deities in many of the Satras throughout the undivided Goalpara district. In certain cases, however, some plots of land were mutated in the names of the Satrādhikār. Now many of the Satras have lost their traditional Vaisnavite characters, but have modified and incorporated many things in the context of the present society.
1.6 THE SATRA INSTITUTIONS IN NORTH BENGAL: Madhupur

Satra is the most important Satra in North Bengal. Cooch Behar preserves the memories of the noble Vaisnava saint Sri Sankaradeva and other Gurus. Under the patronage of Koch King Naranarayana and his successors Sankaradeva, Madhavadeva, Damodardeva, Harideva had built up a few Satras. Later on Hari Atai, Harihar Atā, and a few other prominent Vaisnava followers have built-up some Satras with the traditions of other Vaisnava Satras in Cooch Behar. About twenty-four Satras were established in this area under the direct supervision of Madhupur Satra most of these Satras are to-day almost in a dying condition. At present only Madhupur, Baikunthapur, Mādhapur, Nākārkhanā, Haripur and Bhelā are existed keeping some traditional characteristics.

1.6.1 After the annexation of this area with Bengal the entire socio-political situation was changed to a

---

46 Sama, Hargobinda; 516 Sankarābda: 'Dujana Guru Sankar-Mādhava', p.48
great extent. The Satras have also lost their traditional characteristics. Many of these Satras have changed their mode of worship, style of praying etc. Moreover, the West Bengal Government did not extend their patronisation to the Satras. This way the small Satras are, in the long run, lost their Satra like characteristics and most of them now either in the process of decay or in a dying condition. 47

Such extinct Satras are Phulabāri, Gagan, Charā, Chaukhuti, Marichbāri, Srirāmpur, Betnā, Godādharpār, Māthābhāṅgā, Bāraitāri, Bāneswar, Maināguri, Jalpāiguri, Ghugumāri, Kāljāni, Bāhārbandha, Bhitarbandha, Sālbāri etc. 48

1.6.2 In the Satras of Cooch Behar the Guru Griha or Mandir i.e., the temple for the great initiator in constructed at a little distance from the main prayer hall.

48 Sarma, H.; 516 Sankarabda: 'Dujana Guru Sankar-madhava, p. 50
Madhupur Satra still maintains this traditions. Such separate Gurugriha is not found in other Satras in Assam. Ramraykuti and Jinkatā Satras in Dhubri district were modelled after the Satras of Cooch Behar. The additional temples near the main prayer hall as in the Satras like Barpeta, Sundaridiya, Patbaushi, Bhawanipur etc. in Assam are absent in the Satras in Cooch Behar.

1.6.3 Many Satras were established in Cooch Behar during the rules of Koch Kings. They have extended their patronisation to the Satras. The more generous among them were Naranarayan, Chilarai, Laxminarayan, Himnarayan, and Prananarayan. They liberally donated lands and other materials required for construction of those Satras.

At present most of the Satras in North Bengal have lost their identity because of the new socio-political situations. Moreover, there is no Government patronisation

---

and at the same time these Satras of North Bengal are not well-organised as in Assam to give pressure on the West Bengal Government for their development and preservation.
SKETCH MAP OF GOALPARA

KOKRAJHAR

1. Ramrapuruti.
2. Jinka.
3. Chautara.
4. Anguri.
5. Dalgan.
6. Bali Jena
1. Medhupur.
2. Haripur.
3. Dhela.
4. Sailunthapur.
5. Medhupur.