CHAPTER II

THE BEGINNING AND CHARACTERISTICS

OF FOUR SAMHATIS IN ASSAM

1. Historical setting and growth of Samhatis

Origin of the word: Samhati (Saṅghati).

The term Samhati was employed in the sense of
groups of Assam Vaisnavism or the schisms of the
Order. We find the use of the word only in the post-
Śaṅkarite Vaisnava literature. It was probably derived
from the word saṅghattana, which means unification or
cohesion. In the same way reference may be made of
Buddhist 'Saṅgha', but its relation to the Samhati
does not appear to be very close. The word was used
particularly by the later group of biographers with
various forms like Saṅghati, Ghati or even Saṅghatti.
The term may have originated or at least obtained
currency from the time of Mādhavadeva's passing away.
The sub-group of Dāmodara Vipra came into existence
in times of Mādhavadeva. Dāmodara's ambition to the
headship of the Order after the death of Śaṅkaradeva
was the driving force that led him to organise and
propagate a definite schism known as Damodarī or Damodarīyā. In early biographies, this division was never termed as Samhati and we find the word Sampradāya or simply Sampradāṇa instead of Samhati.

When the Master passed away, Mādhava-deva arranged his first annual śrāddha ceremony and Damodara refused to attend the same, disowning Mādhava-deva's leadership. Damodara seceded from the main Order and thus they differed and dissociated for good. This unhappy dissociation led to the beginning of a schism. When again, Mādhava-deva died, there was claim from many corners as to the successorship of the Order. Thus within the main body of the Order, three more sub-groups have originated after the death of Mādhava-deva. Some orthodox Vaisnavas maintain that earlier there was only a three-fold division instead of four. According to them, the Nikā or Nitya Samhati has originated quite recently. Sattras of this group were formerly included in the Puruṣa Samhati.

Dvārika1 has tried to explain the evolution of Samhatis

1 Dvārika, vv. 1734-1786.
in a fantastic or mythological way. He has mentioned only three Samhātis, viz., Brahma, Kāla and Purusā<sup>2</sup>. The evolution of the Nika Samhāti, however, has been narrated by him separately<sup>3</sup>. At some places, mention has been made of five Samhātis without giving their names<sup>4</sup>. But the four-fold division of the Vaiṣṇava Order has now become a recognised fact. The Samhāti division received its firm ground when the line of grand-daughters and great-grand-daughters of Śaṅkaradeva established their sattras in the Ahom kingdom<sup>5</sup>.

Dāmodara's act of seceding away from the main body has been described by almost all the biographers of Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva. Another Brāhma disciple, Harideva is also said to have started a new schism afterwards. The followers of Dāmodara Vipra

---

2 Dvārikā, vv. 1745-1749.
3 vv. 1876-1912.
4 APVC., f. 6(b), line 7.
5 M. Neog, Śrī Śrī Śaṅkaradeva, ed. 3, Guwahati, 1953, pp. 201-203.
and Harideva claimed success and later on these two groups are counted as falling under the Brahma Samhati. But it should be noted here that some Dāmodārī sattras like Sravanī and others with their non-Smārtham heads are, however, not included in the Brahma Samhati. After the death of Mādhavadeva, a question arose as to the leadership of the Order. The followers of Gopāla Ātā of Bhawanīpur asserted that Mādhavadeva nominated Gopāla Ātā as his successor because the latter was an important pontiff appointed by Mādhavadeva. Mathurādāsa Budhā Ātā of Barpeta, too, came to the same position by that time. So both of them claimed to be the real successor of Mādhavadeva and tried their best to win over the other group. Thus the difference gradually widened which ultimately resulted in the formation of two different sub-groups known as Kāla Samhāti and Nikā Samhāti respectively. Again a difference of opinion arose between Mathurādāsa and Caturbhujā Thākur on the issue whether Sankaradeva or Mādhavadeva was to be called
the guru. The matter was temporarily compromised by Rāmacarana Thākur but the feeling of bitterness of both the groups did not extinct. It was quite natural for the followers of Purusottama and Caturbhujā (the two grandsons of Sāṅkaradeva) to claim that being the direct descendants of the Master, they should be acknowledged as the legal successors of the Order.

'The Bardowā group of sattras and other institutions affiliated to it claim that Mādhava nominated Purusottama Thākur as his rightful successor'. This view was supported by a considerable number of associates and disciples of the above two Thākura and that led to the growth of a different group known as Purusā Samhāti. There were other views of lesser magnitude and consequently these resulted in the formation of four Samhātis within the body of the Mahāpurusāya cult.

In religious tenets and observances, there are no radical differences among these Samhātis.

*The earliest mention of this four-fold division

of the Vaisnava Order seems to occur in Aniruddha Dāsa's 'Guru Varnana', where Dāmodara, Caturbhujas successor, is made to explain to King Jayadhvajasimha that all these four Saṁhatis follow Saṅkara's faith by worshipping Kṛṣṇa, abstaining from the cults of other deities, and celebrating nāma-kīrtana. 

A. BRAHMA SAMHATI

I. Characteristics of Brahma Saṁhati.

The Brahma Saṁhati consists of the sub-sects of Dāmodara and Harideva, who later on joined the former. The followers of Yadumani of the Māharā-sattra and some other sattras with Brāhma pontiffs constitute this group. Brahmanical rites and rituals are observed in this Saṁhati side by side with devotional practices. 

The influence of Dāmodarīya group seems to be deeper than that of the Haridevi group, which is practically

---

7 Reproduced from the SHT, p.153.
8 Dewan, f.42(b).
confined to the Kāmarūpa district of Assam. It is said that the "Vaisnavism of the Bāmuni satra is less Brahmanized than that of the Dāmodarī satra like Dakhināpūt." Some of the prominent sattras of this Samhāti are said to have administered even tantric diṅsā. Some followers of this group have tried to establish a link between this Samhāti and the Vaisnavism of Bengal saying that Dāmodara Vipra was initiated by Caitanya himself. But "religious teachings and practices by Dāmodaradeva widely differ from those of Caitanya. Rather, Dāmodaradeva's teachings and practices almost agree in fundamental points with those of Sāṅkaradeva". Moreover, "the early biographers of Dāmodaradeva, viz., Rāmarāya and Nilakanṭha have indirectly acknowledged the indebtedness of


10 NMSIA, p. 74.
Dāmodaradeva to Saṅkaradeva. It has been justly remarked that "if he was free from any spiritual tie with Saṅkaradeva, then why did he perform the death anniversary of Saṅkaradeva? Afterwards, however, Dāmodara disowned the leadership of Mādhavadeva and came out of the Order to start a new sub-sect. Dāmodara Vipra thus made a compromise between the path of devotion and the Brahmanical practices.

It is remarkable that most of the sattras affiliated to this Sāmhati are headed by Brāhmans. Some of the sattras are monastic in character and some are headed by non-Brāhmans also. According to this Sāmhati, Vedic rites and rituals and devotional practices can be performed side by side. The Brāhma Sāmhati lays special emphasis on Deva (God) than the other three fundamental reals (vastu), viz., Guru, Nāma and Bhakta. So they encourage the necessity of

11 loc.cit.

12 loc.cit.
worshipping the idol of Visnu and Śalagrama-sīla,
the symbol of Visnu Nārāyaṇa, in their sattras. In
the later period, this sub-sect proceeded one step
further when the worship of other gods and goddesses
are also tolerated.

II. Principal sattras of Brahma Samhati

Dāmodara Vipra nominated Vaikunthanātha alias
Bhaṭṭadeva as his successor. Dāmodara established a
sattra at Pāṭ-bāūsi near Barpeta but he breathed
his last at Koo Behār leaving Baladeva and Paramā-
nanda as joint heads of the sattra. He deputed some
of his principal followers, like Bhagavānadeva, Gopāla
Mīrā, Arjunadeva and Manohara Kāyastha etc., in
different directions to propagate the faith. Bhaga-
vānadeva established a sattra at Govindapur, Gopāla
Mīrā remained at Khudiyā, Arjunadeva at Loca and

13 The present Adhikārship of this sattra accrues to the
Adhikār of the Narowa-sattra, Nowgong, by a charter
of the king Laksmanśimha, dated Māgha, 1694 Saka. The
copper-plate is now preserved at the Bāli-sattra, Nowgong (Assam).
Vaikunthanātha at Vyāsa-kuci and the like. After the death of Baladeva and Paramānanda, Dāmodara's sattra in Koo Behār was conduced by one Vanamālīdeva, a disciple of Baladeva. Later on Vanamālī was given the charge of a new sattra named Vaikunthapurā. But after some time, Vanamālī had to leave that sattra to settle in eastern Assam. Vamsīgopāla was also deputed jointly by Dāmodara Vipra and Mādhavadeva to spread the message of bhakti in eastern Assam. He established the Kuruwābāhī-sattra and died a celibate. Prior to that Vamsīgopāla established a sattra at Deberāpār. After his death, Misrādeva became the head of the Kuruwābāhī-sattra. Misrādeva died a premature death and Jayaharideva was placed by the Āhom king as the head of the Kuruwābāhī-sattra. Jayahari's nephew Lakṣmi-nārāyana was given the charge of a newly built sattra, Gaḍamūr. At Kuruwābāhī, another devotee, Niraṅjaṇa was serving as a pāthak (reader). Later on this Niraṅjaṇa founded the Aumiāti-sattra at the order of the Āhom king. Vanamālīdeva also established several sattras
Likewise, Harideva nominated his daughter Bhuvanesvarī for the headship of his Māneri-sattra. There are four principal sattras of this Samhāti, commonly known as 'Bāmunīyā cāri sattra' (four sattras headed by Brāhmaṇas) or 'Rajāgharīyā cāri sattra' (sattras those received royal patronage from the Āhom monarchs). They are—Āuniati, Dakhinpāt, Gadamūr and Kuruwā-bāhī. From Yadumāndevā, a colleague of Vamsīgopāla, we have sattras like Adhār, Māharā, Paṭiyarī and Dokhorāmukh. Harideva's disciples also established some sattras. Mention may be made of Bainākuoi, Jāgarā, Subhā, Pāneri etc. Each of the principal sattras have several branches at different parts of the state.¹⁴

§. KĀLA SAMHATI

I. Characteristics of Kāla Samhāti

The followers of the Kāla Samhāti claim that the founder of this branch was nominated by Mādhava-deva as his successor. Gopāla Ātā established a sattra

¹⁴ list prepared with the help of Pavitra Asama and NMSIA.
at Kālījār, where he breaded his last. The name of the Samhati might have come from the name of this original sattrā. Sometimes the word 'Thākurīyā' is also applied to mean the followers of Gopāla Āṭā. 15

The Mōśmarīyā branch of sattras, which owes its origin to Aniruddha and the Dihīngīyā branch, founded by Yadumani, are also affiliated to the Kāla Samhati. The main feature of this sub-sect is that it keeps absolute faith in the guru. It is stated that Gopāladeva brought to the forefront the doctrine of 'guruvāda'. That the followers of this sub-sect did not bow their heads to any one but their guru, has been dealt with at different places with illustration. 16 For its liberal view in religious matters, some sort of esoteric observances probably entered into the sect in the later times.

As regards caste distinction, the Kāla Samhati exhibited a liberal view. According to B.C. Allen, 15 For an explanation of the word, see Ch. VI, fn. 9. 16 quoted in NMSIA, p. 89, from Gopāla Āṭā Carita, p. 255, (ed. not referred to) and Aniruddhadevar Carita, p. 48, (sources not referred to).
people belonging to different castes of the Moamariya branch of the Kalasamhati generally inter-marry.17

Whatever might be the basis of this statement, it is observed that this Samhati is liberal in its attitude towards some social problems and it betrayed an 'indifferent attitude towards all Brahmancial rites'. Even the Brahman disciples of this group were not required to perform their Vedic rites.18 In the later group of castes, a sense of ill-feeling and disregard to the followers of Kalasamhati by that of the other three has always become a noticeable feature.19

This is observed in the orthodox section of the Purusa Samhati also. These Mahantas do not keep any social contact like inter-marriage, inter-dining etc., with the Mahantas of the Kalasamhati and consider the latter to be the extremist group.

17 Census Report of Assam, 1911, p.34.
19 Dvārīkā, vv.1757-1763; 1775-1776; 2355-2358; 2368-2374; Harinārāyaṇa, vv.363-371; Jayahari, vv.108; 112-113, and also Vidyāhanda, vv.58-64.
This Sanhati, with its liberal attitude, propagated the Vaisnava faith far and wide, particularly among the tribals and socially backward communities of the state. Its 'easy to follow' \(^{20}\) devotional practice attracted many people to this group and, therefore, the number of disciples of this Samhati increased by leaps and bounds. The rosary is not used by the followers of this schism and kindling of the light in the prayer-house (nām-ghar) during day time is not in practice in some of the sattras of the Kāla Samhati sect.

II. Principal sattras of Kāla Samhati

Gopāla Ātā appointed six Brāhmaṇ and six non-Brāhmaṇ apostles for propagation of the cult of bhakti at different parts of the state. From them, several sattras came into existence: Śrīrāma, Rāmacandra, Puruṣottama, Rāmacarana, Paramānanda and Dalai-po Sanātana were his Brāhmaṇ disciples. Bar Yadumani, Saru Yadumani, Aniruddha, Murāri, Nārāyana and Sanātana were non-Brāhmaṇs.

\(^{20}\) Dvārikā, v.1762.
Gopāla's original sattrā at Kālībār was managed by Śrīrāma Ātā after the death of the former. Of all the sattrās affiliated to this Samhāti, two, viz., Dihīṅg and Māyāmarā, deserve special consideration for their importance in the political history of Assam. Bar Yadumani established a sattrā at Bāh-bārī. His eldest son founded the Dihīṅg-sattrā which became a leading sattrā of the group within a short time. The sattrā acquired numerous followers and considerable power and wealth.\textsuperscript{21} The other important sattrā of this Samhāti is Māyāmarā-sattrā which owes its origin to Aniruddha Bhumā. The Māyāmarā Gosāis suffered much oppression and persecution from the Ahom monarchs at different times, and that led to an open rebellion conducted by the followers of this Samhāti, against the Ahom rule. 'The pages of Assam history' from 1770 to 1795 A.D., 'are dotted with acts of royal persecution of the Kāla Samhāti Mahantās, which persecution made the laity of the Māyāmarā-

\textsuperscript{21} NMSIA, p. 86. Shri Shri Saktaradeva, p. 198.
sattra of this community into a war-like race lacking only in the organization of the Sikhas.22

Saru Yadumani founded the Gajalā-sattra. About twenty-four sattras came into existence from the descendants and disciples of Saru Yadumani. The Ahatguri-sattra was established by Srīrāma Ātā. His son Ramānanda and grandson Ramagopāla were two notable persons for their literary contributions and proselytising works. Other sattras affiliated to the Kāla Samhati are those founded by the principal disciples of Gopāla Ātā. They are - Hāladhiāti or Dah-gharīyā-sattra established by Narayana, Kāthpār-sattra by Purusoottama, Ikarājan by Ramacandra, Khairāmocarā by Ramaocaraṇa, Na-gharīyā by Sanātana, Carāibāhī by Murāri, Habūng by Paramānanda and a sattra established by Dalai-po Sanātana. The name of his sattra, according to some account,23 appears as Eiğāpurīyā-sattra.

22 SHT., p.155.
Gopāla Ātā had five grandsons from his son Kamalalooana. They also established some sattras and numerous branches emerged out of them. Mention may be made of the following sattras established by the grandsons of Gopāla Ātā. (1) Daukaōāpāri of Yadavānanda (2) Āmaguri of Mādhavānanda (3) Kalākaṭa of Daivakīnandana (4) Dhopābar of Svarūpānanda and (5) Nāoanīpār and Hāmārbarī of Rāmānanda. Likewise, the Māyāmarā-sattra and the Dihing-sattra have numerous branches and offshoots at different parts of the state.

C. NIKĀ SAMHATI

I. Characteristics of Nikā Samhati

The Nikā Samhati has come into existence much later than the other three Samhatis. The name also appears as Nitya or Niṣṭhā Samhati. The followers of Mathurādāsa, Padma Ātā and others constitute this community. But some biographers like Dvārika consider Mathurādāsa, Padma Ātā etc., as belonging

---

24 Dewan, f.40(b) ; SHT.,p.154.
25 v.1782.
to the Purusa Samhati group. Some modern writers like to trace the origin of this Samhati to Padma Ātā only, leaving aside the name of the two other figures, Mathurādāsa and Kesava Ātā. To this, mention may be made of Rāmacarana Thākur, nephew of Madhava-deva. Rāmacarana became the head of the Sundarīdiyā-sattra and the Ganakakuci-sattra after Madhavadeva and his sons and grandsons established several sattras in western Assam. This group of sattras may also be considered to be affiliated to the Nikā Samhati. But as a general rule, celibacy is not observed in these sattras. This is a notable feature only of the Nikā Samhati sattras.

Padma Ātā was influenced by Gopāla Ātā and so there are some similarity in certain doctrinal aspects between the two Samhatis. Some famous sattras like Barpetā, Kamalābārī and Madhupur are affiliated to the Nikā Samhati. This Samhati 'possibly derived its name from the fact that its adherents pay great attention to rules of outward cleanliness and other

27 loc.cit.,
formalities. The followers of the Nikā Samhāti lay much emphasis on the conduct of every day life in order to purify them in body and mind. They are required to follow strict discipline in all religious matters as well as in respect of their dress, food and manners. The Nikā Samhāti has got certain peculiarities of its own, with regard to some matters religious. As regards guru, the position of Mādhavadeva is more important in this Samhāti than that of Sāṅkaradeva. Sāṅkaradeva is regarded as guru of their guru. Moreover, idol worship is of little importance in the Nikā Samhāti and instead of it, the worship of the scripture is a noteworthy feature of this Samhāti. The followers of the Nikā Samhāti 'does not attach much importance to the Brāhmaṇical rites'.

II. Principal Sattras of Nikā Samhāti

Padma Ātā, who was sent to eastern Assam by
Mādhavadeva on his behalf (that is why Padma Ātā is also called Badalā Ātā), established the Kamalābārī-sattra which became a prominent institution of eastern Assam within a very short time. Kesāva Ātā, another disciple of Mādhavadeva, founded the Barjahā-sattra. But the most important one of the Nīkā Samhati in western Assam is the Barpeṭā-sattra, established by Mādhavadeva himself. Mathurādāsa was nominated by Mādhavadeva to remain in charge of the Barpeṭā-sattra when the latter left Kāmarūpa for Koo Behār. Mathurādāsa introduced the democratic procedure of managing the affairs of the sattra and proved himself to be an able organiser. Thus Barpeṭā became the central institution of the Vaiṣṇavas in western Assam. There are some other important sattras of the Samhati. They are—(1) Sundarīdiyā-sattra established by Mādhavadeva’s nephew and disciple Rāmacarana Thākur (2) Khaṭarā-sattra founded by Govinda Ātai (3) Camarīya-sattra by Bar Viṣṇu Ātā and (4) Dhopaguri-sattra established by Laksmlkānta
Atai, the last three saints being disciples of Madhavadeva.

2. Relation between the Samhatis

The neo-Vaisnavite Movement and The Satra Institution of Assam states that 'the history has not mentioned any friction between the different sub-sects of Vaisnavism in Assam. Rather a spirit of cooperation and harmony marked the relation between the different sub-sects throughout the history of Vaisnavism in Assam'. This cannot be accepted as authoritative. There are numerous genuine works of deserving merit which have not yet come to the light of general readers. Although sectarian vilification against some Vaisnava leaders of opposite groups are noticeable in some of them, these works contain the basic truth of the actual state of affairs among different groups. Moreover, each group created some stories which became like established facts. The dissension has gone to such an extent that even during the time of Purusottama Thākur, the extremist Kāla Samhāti group of

30 NMSIA, p. 99.
people was not cordially received by the Thākur himself. The learned biographer Dvārika describes the excommunicating of Gopāla Ātā by Mādhavadeva and Purusottama. Even now some orthodox Gosāis of the Puruṣa Saṁhati do not agree to sit together and dine with the Gosāis of the Kāla Samhāti. They do not enter into the precinct of a Gosāi of the latter group and do not entertain them at any position. Their social relation with the Kāla Saṁhati is, therefore, discouraging. This is observed particularly in case of Narowa and the Kowāmarā groups of sattras of the Puruṣa Saṁhati. But with other groups, the relation was possibly retained uneffected.

31 Vidyānanda, vv. 58-64; Jayahari, vv. 108-113; Hari-nārāyaṇa, vv. 363-371; Dvārika, vv. 2352-2368; 2375 and 2380-2400.

32 Dvārika uses the common proverb: 'bhāṭi yowā mahantar phāṭi yowā kathā' (The biased statements of degenerated Mahantas).