CHAPTER-II

Milieus in Medieval Assam and Odisha

No movement with its socio-economic and religious implications can be studied without going through the time and the milieus prevailing at the time. Some historical facts and currents of time do help determine the present and the future course of any religious and socio-cultural movement and its implications. In Assam, time during the 15th and 16th centuries was a time of flux and despair, full of social degeneration and religious bigotry, cultural stagnation, economic uncertainty and political turmoil. It was the time when social life of Assam was afflicted with fanciful religious rites dictated by the priestly class, caste division, feudalism, exploitation, superstition, economic deprivation etc. The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and the time before it in Assam were engulfed by spiritual ignorance, complex and cumbersome rites and rituals, political vendetta and were marked by social hierarchy.

During the period, in Odisha too, social, religious and cultural life was cracked due to caste division, hegemony of Sanskrit language and general atmosphere of fear at the possible disintegration of the Gajapati Empire. There was lack of genuine religious feelings and religious life was polluted under the influence of tantric practices and sahajiy¡ tradition. The present chapter studies social, economic, literary, cultural, political and religious conditions of Assam and Odisha on the eve of the spread of VaiÀ¸avisim, i.e. in the later part of the fifteenth and the first part of the sixteenth centuries.

2.1 Social Milieus

2.1(a) Social Environment

In the whole gamut of áa´karadeva’s writing we find no mention of the word Assam (Asam) except only once because the concept of Assam that we have now did not exist then. The demographic structure of the land in those days can be inferred from a verse in the Bhigabata, written by áa´karadeva’.
In Asam jako (there live) the Kir¡tas, Kach¡ris, the Kh¡sis, the G¡ros, the Miris, the Yavanas, the Kankas, the Gow¡ls, the Asamas, the Maluks, the Rajakasa, the Taruks, the Kavacas, the Mlecas, the Candalas (II.V.474) (qtd in áa´karadeva, M.Neog, p. 74). About the land and its population in the 15th and 16th centuries Assam áivanath Barman writes:

“The entire land was divided into numerous territories ruled independently by heterogeneous tribes, mostly of the Indo-Mongoloid stock, with diverse shades of religion, language and culture. So huge was the population of the tribes that it far exceeded that of the caste Hindus who had from time to time trickled into this land” (12).

In áa´karadeva’s time society was afflicted with many ills. Many irrational and absurd social practices had taken roots due to the religious beliefs of the people. Belief in many lesser gods and divinities, various rites and rituals associated with these gave rise to practices of different types of magical rites and sorcery among the mass, especially among the low castes and different tribes. The kings in Assam had to perform some sorcery on the day previous to the day of a battle. People even practiced sorcery and magic to influence the course of judicial proceedings. Belief in ghosts and spirits was common. The bej or the oja (the soccer) treated diseases or persons believed to be possessed by evil spirits by chanting spells and incantations. Fortune-tellers and astrologers also prescribed remedial steps to be taken to ward off evil spirits. To quote Jyoti Prasad Rajkhowa:

There are different types of magic rites among the different tribes of Assam. The magicians attributed every evil, disease or untimely death, to numerous spirits; and it was up to their medicine men to ward off the spirits and cure the patients. There is a huge mantra literature in Assamese, considered efficacious in keeping off the supernatural agencies (called bhut, daini, daktini, dattya, donova, camon, galat, jakh, jagthi, kandh, khetar, mor, prªt, pisaab etc.). The medicine men are called “bej” (vaidya) or “oja” (upadhyaya) and are also known as “deo-manuh” (god men). Spells and incantations meant to cure people of snake-bite, known as “sape-khowa” mantra were in practice. (29).

This gave rise to a section of males who indulged in incontinence, inhuman acts, oppression and suppression of the women, and other weaker sections of the society. Many people calling themselves as Buddhists
displayed extreme forms of sexual acts and drunkenness and were flesh-eaters. This degraded form of Buddhism created a group who were termed as "Ritikhowa" (eaters at night) or Pur, adhurti sect having free sex orgies (Rajkhowa 39). Quoting muslim writers K.L. Baruah says, "About this time there was a class of persons in Kamarupa called Bhogis (enjoyers) who voluntarily offered themselves as victims for sacrifice before the goddess Durgi to return for the privilege to indulge in all manner of licenses for a whole year previous to their immolation" (p. 203-204).

During this period the womenfolk of Assam were leading comparatively a free life, of course conforming to patriarchy system. The women were not veiled. To quote Edward Gait, "the wives of Rajahs and peasants alike never veil their faces before anybody, and they move about in the market places with bare head" (149). However, there was restriction on widows. A kigasba or any other "high class Hindu, Ramananda says, was not to partake of food cooked by a widow" (Gck, V.269). There are veiled references in the Chartias that the custom of suttee was there. Maheswar Neog writes, "It is believed that áa´kara’s mother died by suttee after her husband’s death" (áa´kara 94). He cites áa´kara’s own works where references of custom of suttee are made. However, patriarchy was strong during the period. Women were not allowed to partake in public works. Child marriage was common. áa´kara married a girl of twelve and married off his daughter when she was only nine. However, there was no bride burning.

In áa´kara’s time Assam was socially divided into different groups, communities, races and tribes. Each had its own customs, traditions, faiths and beliefs. Each group was separate and distinct from each other. Every one was contending with the other. There was social dissension, religious intolerance and social inequality.

Social life was beset with caste divisions during the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries of Assam. There was exploitation and toeguality in the name of caste system. The Brahmins and priestly class had hegemony in the society. They were at the top of the caste ladder. Yet then they had their own differences. "Brahmins of lower Assam considered themselves purer and did not intermarry with their counterparts in upper Assam" (S.L.Barahah, p. 420). The daivajnas, the kigasthas, the kaltis, the hilat keots were following the dvijas in hierarchical order while jalat keots known as katvarias, ferrymen, and some culturally impure persons were in the lower rung of the caste ladder. Many people made their living by the
traditional or inherited professions like fishing by dragnet, selling fish or meat, making pottery without wheel, taking up cobbler's profession and profession of brewing country liquor and selling it. These professions were not welcomed by the high caste people, rather looked down upon. There was no inter-caste marriage or inter-dining between the Brahmins and the áudras or between upper caste áudras like the Kjasthas and the lower caste áudras like the Katvarśas and Harās etc. The social distinctions between the aristocracy and the common people and, in later times, between the higher and the lower castes were regularly observed. Even the kings, "the non-Aryan kings, particularly the Koc and the Ahom kings, extended patronage for the establishment of the caste system on a strong basis..." (Rajguru 109). The commoners were not allowed to use palanquin, ride horse or an elephant, use silk dress, wear gold ornaments, live in masonry houses or offer lavish feast even on occasions. To quote Edward Gait:

None but the highest nobles had a right to wear shoes, or to travel on a palanquin. Persons of humble birth who wished to wear the chaddar, or shawl, were obliged to fold it over the left shoulder, and not over the right, as the upper class did. Mussalmans, Morias, Doms and Harās were forbidden to wear their hair long, and members of the two latter communities were further distinguished by having a fish and a broom, respectively, tattooed on their foreheads (149).

In pre-áa´karıte period cumbersome religious rites on various occasions were in vogue. Priestly class enjoined the people to perform śmAtrenerated rites connected with birth, marriage and death. They also asked people to perform rites while trying to appease smaller gods with a desire to gain some worldly pleasures, power or riches or to get recovered from ailments. Thus they were taking advantage of illiteracy, gullibility and superstition of the people. They were exploiting people in the name of religion and god-worship.

The Brahmaputra valley of Assam had a number of tribes who did not follow any religion and they maintained their distinct identity and way of life. The process of Aryanisation or assimilation of the plains or hill tribes in pre-áa´karıte period was slow. These tribes in their food habits were "unclean" in the eyes of the caste Hindus because they took pork, chicken and homemade liquor. So as to say those who were not in the Hindu fold were called impure people. Apart from a large number of Hindus and tribes, a small community of Muslims and Buddhists, both assimilated and unassimilated, had spread over the entire valley.
Thus Assam at the time of áa´karadeva was socially divided into different isolated groups and races having no inter-relation and co-operation among them. In fact the society was in diffused condition and the “inhabitants included many tribes and races of diverse faith, creeds and various distinctions in their way of life” (Choudhury, p. 41).

The western part of the land was invaded many times by muslims since 13th century and those invasions must have each time added a little to the Islamic element of the local population.

Slavery system was there in Ahom kingdom. The nobles and rich men could keep slaves including slave girls. They also kept retainers to work in their private estates. Slaves were bought and sold openly. In Koc kingdom criminals were bartered for horses in Bhooty market. That the slave trade was common during the period is known from a writing of Jadab Chandra Das who has mentioned in his Asomar Patibhumi, Bhasi-Baraagara r Aitihya that Naranarayan sold away Thakur ata and Gokul Gand ata after giving them punishment when he could not extract any information from them about Mahapurush áa´karadeva (25).

Popularity of medieval VaiÀ`, ava movement and its influence on Odisha life cannot be gauged without going into its medieval social environment.

Literature, chronicles like the Midalapali, records left by contemporary historians and travel reports are the main sources from which we can get idea about social history of the land of that period. Much of the information about the social condition of the medieval Odisha is got from the Mahabhirata of Sarula Das. Society in the 15th and the 16th centuries Odisha was mainly religious in character. Most of the functions in the society were guided by religious motifs. State administration was hierarchical. The villages were centers round which there evolved the social life of its people. Village was the self-sustaining unit.

As in other parts of India, Odisha society consisted of numerous castes and sub-castes. áa´karadeva in his Õresi Varnan mentions thirty-four castes in Odisha including oilman, florists, goldsmith, potters, kayastha etc. “Pritibhivit Jateka vrittiagan acche/ Chautris Jatio jay nripatir pacche.” (Whatever castes are there in the world, all the thirty-four followed the king - K¢rtana GhoÀ¡ - Õresi Varnan.K¢rtan-ii:17). However, the Brahmins enjoyed the highest postion. They were privileged lot. The king invited them from the north and the south India and settled them in his kingdom by donating them land
without levying any revenue. Many inscriptions belonging to the Ganga and the Suryavamsh Gajapati period mention that Sisamas (agrihara villages) were made available to the Brahmans. They were granted tax-free land to use it for worship of gods and goddesses in different temples and also for their livelihood. They were indispensable for important ceremonies. By their pious works, they commanded respect in the society. They were well versed in scriptures. They thrived under the patronage of kings and by opening educational institutions imparted education and scriptural teachings. Due to their knowledge in epics, scriptures and puranas they were revered by the people. However, some of them were arrogant and treated other castes contemptuously. Whenever their interests were at stake they reacted sharply.

In the next hierarchical position there were the Kshatriyas who were warrior class and shouldered the responsibility to protect the country from internal rebellion and external aggression. They were also great builders and built temples, dug tanks, opened and maintained educational institutions besides doing numerous charitable works.

Another caste was the Vaiśyas. They belonged to the trading class who resorted to cultivation, trade and commerce. They explored trade routes and carried on overseas trade. Sometimes the Vaiśyas took part in military activities and contributed to the maintaining of political stability of the land.

The Sudras who in the traditional caste structure occupy the lowest rung were drawn from the community that consisted of artisans, craftsmen, small farm holders, servants etc. Education and learning was not easily available to them. They were not conversant in Sanskrit language. However, some Sudras like Sarala Das composed the Oita Mahabharat and Balaram Das, one of the pauraskaris composed Andha Abhigyan. S.K. Panda says:

The Sudras were numerous and belonged to the lowest stratum of the society. They were not a homogenous caste, but comprised agricultural and petty peasants, artisans, craftsmen, manual workers, servants and attendants. Their improved condition was a remarkable feature of the society. . . . The Sudras, as mental labourers were attached to the temples, for services to the deity (p. 280).

Some Sudras were untouchables. They were outside the caste structure and also the society and were engaged in mental, unclean work. Among them were the fisherman, basket-maker, washer man,
shoe-makers etc. They were not allowed to enter temples. Another section of the people called Hi-i, Dumba, Gindila employed as cleaners and scavengers were outcasts in the society and lived outside the villages.

The aboriginals and the tribes were not in the mainstream. They had their distinct culture and separate identity. They were living in the forest areas and generally looked down upon by the Aryan stock. Hunting was their main occupation and they used to travel far and wide in search of animals. They were fond of alcoholic drinks.

The caste structure was not very rigid yet there were occasional skirmishes between the higher and the lower castes. Sarala Mahabharata describes a conflict between the Brahmans and the Candillas. Jagannatha Das’s Ota Bhagabata was dubbed as Tel! Bhagabata (low caste’s Bhagabata) and Sarala Das as audramati. Priestly class was powerful. Balaram Das was beaten up and thrown out of Jagannath’s chariot by the machinations of the priests on the chariot. He was also stoned at very often on the highway in presence of the public at the instigation of this class for he protested against their evilness and hegemony.

Despite this, there were possibilities of both vertical and horizontal mobility. The Brahmans besides discharging their duties as priests also got lucrative posts in royal courts. They were made ministers and sometimes served as military officers using titles like Bahinipati, Camapati and Senapati. They were also appointed to the posts of record keeper, writers etc. Further, the Brahmans were also appointed to the posts of Sandhivigrahi (Ka), Sanadhikarin etc. (Harihar Panda 140). There were some Brahmans who were engaged in lower professions like agriculture, trade etc. Many audras were also promoted to the status of Kshatriya and others claimed the status of a Vaiśya. The Arasavalli plates of Vajrahasta refers to a military officer who was a sudra.

Though caste structure was not rigid yet intercommunity mobility or interaction was not smooth. Some incidents prove that intercommunity acceptance was not welcome in the 15th or the 16th century Odisha society. Guru Nanak when visited Puri in 1508 experienced a humiliating experience as one of his disciples for his sporting a beard was not allowed entry to Jagannatha temple because he was mistaken for a Mussalman. He was severely beaten and left uncared for. Kalipahar, originally a Brahmni was denied entry into the Hindu fold because he was converted to a Mussalman after getting married to a beautiful Mussalman damsel. Despite all these people were hospitable towards the people other than their religion.
Women in the 15th and 16th centuries Odisha were enjoying high position in the society. They were encouraged to receive education. Jagamohini, the daughter of King Prataprudradeva was an accomplished woman. Her *Tuki Paµchakam* was famous for its eruditeness. Ladies belonging to well-to-do families were instrumental for building many temples and creating provisions for the worship of God or Goddess. They also devoted themselves to charitable works. The practice of *sati* and *purdh* were not prevalent. However, in royal families *purdh* was observed as is evident from the *Chaitanya-Charitamrita* which speaks of the wives of Prataprudradeva being carried on the back of elephants in covered litters. About the position of women in medieval Odisha P. K. Pattanaik says, "Women were not confined to the four walls of the house. They were free and could ride horse, learn sacred lore, deliver speeches and even participate in wars along with their husbands" (96). However, this is true of ladies belonging to higher class. But the condition of lower class woman was different. They were denied education and had to toil hard for their livelihood. Monogamy was the norm in the society. Yet polygamy was not unknown to royal and higher families. The concubine system was among the high caste and rich families. PuruÀottamdeva, son of Gajapati Kapilendradeva was from a concubine. However, they were given full recognition in the society as we see PuruÀottamdeva inherited the throne. To quote K.C.Panigrahi on medieval social condition of Odisha will be rewarding here:

The kings were polygamous, but excepting the aristocratic class, the other citizens were generally monogamous. The queens observed purdah as is evident from the *Chaitanya-Charitamrita* which speaks of the wives of Prataprudradeva being carried on the back of the elephants in covered litters. The girls married very early, sometimes at the age of seven. Parents selected bridegrooms for their daughters (202-203).

It is difficult to know about the prevalence of widow marriage system during the time. However, S. K. Panda says, "Higher castes like the Bravmans and KÀatriyas generally did not allow widow remarriage. It might have been prevalent in lower caste" (471).

Slavery appears to have been prevalent in very mild form in the society. They were more or less servants hired for a sufficient long period for doing menial work. Bruton, for instance, found that girls could be bought for this purpose (50). (Bruton’s *Account of Puri and Cuttack*, Orissa History Research Journal Vol. X. No. 3, 48-49).
Social life of the people in the 15th and the 16th centuries Odisha was by and large stable. In spite of all these there are traces of social tension and conflict in society. Frequent Muslim invasions from the north created fear among the general mass for losing their religion and culture. The rise of the kiyasitas or karanas as a group of professional elite caste undermined the monopoly of the Brahmanas as writers and scribes. Their appointment as ministers or officials in the court of kings invited resentments from the Brahmanas who were enjoying these positions all alone and brought mild social tension among the two castes. The Paucaskhils too raised their voice against the domination of Brahmanas. Balarima Das in his Vedantasira Gupta Gati (XXX) and Asyutamanda in his Acyuta Sañhitā (IX) recounted how they were ill-treated by the Brahmanas for acquiring spiritual knowledge. S.K.Panda says: “The rise of Chaitanya movement also led to social tension in the 16th century. It increased the antagonism between the Brahmanas and the Chaitanyites. The Brahmanas as a class were always hostile to the rising tide of the cult of Chaitanya and some of their ceremonies” (p.471).

2.1 (b) Cultural Life

Sources like literary works, buranjis etc. threw light on the cultural life of Assam during medieval period. Kings were encouraging to help promising poets to compose poems and translate great classical epics of India. One such king Manimanikya was a patron of Madhava Kandali who composed Ramajy, a in vernacular language. Ahom kings appointed writers to write buranjis to record different aspects of life in the state.

Rice, fish, meat, fruits and vegetables constituted the chief articles of food. Meat and fish comprised common articles of food. In Assam, unlike the other provinces of India, the Brahmanas and the Vaiṣṇavas both eat meat and fish without any social bar. Alcoholic drinks were common among the low caste and tribes. Rice beer was very common among the tribes and they even offered it to their gods, a practice looked down upon by the high caste Hindus.

Animal sacrifice was common to derive merit in life. Among the animals enjoined for sacrifice are ducks, pigeons, tortoises, wild boars and buffaloes. Ordinarily people did not eat females of all animals.

Hunting was favorite pastime among the people. Catching of wild elephants was a sport encouraged by rulers. Among the Ahom kings hawk-fight, elephant-fight, buffalo-fight, tiger-bear
contests were favorite pastimes. The Ahom kings maintained regular aviaries for the training of hawks. They organized a guild connected with this royal pastime with the usual gradation of officers. Thus there was animal cruelty. Dancing and music were popular amusements. Temple precincts were used for dance shows while festivals like Bihu accompanied dance and music.

Education in medieval Assam was not in the sense of today’s book learning. No doubt, Brahmans were the learned class yet others like scribes, copiers and those who kept accounts and drew up deeds were also educated. Education was centered round the guru-grhas, schools maintained by private individuals, or at village schools provided by the Brahmans of an Agrahara village. 'Kara' Karadeva received his education at a school maintained by the Brahma guru Mahendra Kandali. He was conferred with the "deva" title for his eruditeness and was preferred by his guru to other Brahman disciples. This shows that even non-Brahmins were admitted into these schools and favored along with the Brahmin students.

The temples played a remarkable part in the cultural life of the people (B.K. Baruah, Cultural History p.154). Its porch sometimes held the village school. It was a centre of popular education through the constant recitation and exposition of the Rāmāyaņa, the Mahābhārata and the purāṇas. Occasionally leaders of religious sects used to expound philosophy and tenets of their own sects in the temple precincts. Its precincts were used for festival purposes where music, singing, dancing, recitation, pantomimes were performed.

During the medieval period cultural life of Odisha had rich tradition. Long before the advent of the pascasakhis a rich cultural atmosphere was created and even in interior villages discussions and discourse were made on epics and scriptures where Brahmin pandits were clarifying the meanings of the Bhagavata, Rāmāyaņa, Mahābhārata and other epics and scriptures written in Sanskrit language. The kings and land-lords were patronizing such gatherings to drive home the sense of morality among the common people. They had also engaged Brahmans in temples to read scriptures and comment on it.

The people spent their leisure time in various sports. Hunting seems to have occupied a prominent position in this respect. Generous hospitality towards guests and strangers had been the distinctive qualities of the people. They did not hesitate to keep people as guests other than their religion. The people observed fasting as the common mind believed it would bring merit. The people did not have much learning,
they did all things by memory. They could not endure a perjuror, a common swearee or a drunkard.

Rice was the staple food of the people. The people were by and large non-vegetarians. Milk undoubtedly comprised one of the principal items. Cloth of coarse and medium variety was the common dress of the people. They also used silk and tassar. Some used woollen clothes. The people were fond of gold and silver ornaments. These included ornaments for the hand, wrist, feet, head etc. (K.N. Mohapatra Descriptive Catalogue Vol.II-CXXV-CCIII). People also used other fineries like ungents, paints, powders etc. to fashion their body in many ways. Tumeric was mainly used for powder. Some kept long hair on their head. Brahmins followed the practice of shaving their heads and women left their hair as long as to grow.

From the beginning of first part of the second millennium A.D. Odisha witnessed a spurt in the temple construction activities. Kings and their relations, royal officials and landed gentry built small and big temples in different parts of the kingdom. But from the fifteenth century along with temple construction activities art and painting flourished in Odisha. The Kapal Vijay painting to commemorate Purusottamadeva’s victory over the king of Kapal made on the Mukhasala of the Jagannath temple at Puri is a fine example of mural painting. In the 15th and the 16th centuries many monasteries and temple walls were painted with Hindu mythological subjects. Common motifs of these paintings are scenes from the Gita, Hanuman carrying a mountain and of wrestlers. Pata paintings dated back to the 12th century flourished in the 15th and the 16th centuries. Their tradition is deeply rooted in the cult of Jagannath. The usual subject matter of the patachitra is the gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon and familiar episodes in the Râdhâ-Kûpâ legend.

2.1 (c) Literary Scenario

In pre-âsiradeva time literary production was there both in Sanskrit and Assamese. Though Vaishnavism movement in medieval period produced a rich corpus of Assamese literature, cultivation of Sanskrit literature during the period could not be totally ignored. As M.M. Sharma puts it, “The curriculum of study continued to consist of mainly of Sanskrit works in original throughout the period...” (qtd. in Barpujari Vol.III, 261). Because of royal patronage and Brahminical influence Sanskrit continued to flourish. āukladdhvaja was the author of Saravati, a Sanskrit commentary on Jayadeva’s Gitagobinda.

Assamese literature in pre-âsiradeva period consisted mostly of renderings from the two
Indian epics- the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*. Around the first part of the 15th century, Madhava Kandali wrote the *Rāmāyaṇa* in Assamese. As Ananta Kandali, leader of the Vaiṣṇava movement says:

> I can compose verses in Sanskrit very well, yet, I have preferred to compose verses in Assamese, so all persons including women and those who belong to the lower strata of the society also may be in a position to understand the highest truth and have the pleasure of listening my composition. (qtd in Barpujari, III, p.261)

In that period kings like Mahāma, Durlavani, Indranīrja, and others patronized the scholars and encouraged them to write in Assamese. These writers rendered epic and purāṇic tales to Assamese and while doing so they followed their own way in narrativising the tales, without following the original writer. In the early 15th century, three poets of great merit- Harthara, Nema Sarasvati and Kavirabha-wrote poems in Assamese like *Lava-Kushar Yuddha*, *Vabhrivahanar-yuddha*, *Tmaradhvajar Yuddha*- and tales taken from Simint Bharata.

In the 15th century Odisha, Sanskrit and Ośia literature were richer. Prior to pāucasakhis’ literary works using Sanskrit language as medium were rich. We find great Sanskrit scholars like Jayadeva, Vaitrāja Ga, gīdhara, Bīdgadhar, Narayana Das, Chandl Das, Chandruśekhar Dash, Bīswanāth Kaviraj who composed all time great works like *Gitagovinda*, *Hasyarnava*, *Ekavali*, *Sarvāṅga Sundari* etc.

During the time of Pāucasakhis we find great Sanskrit pundits and poets like dvadevaḍya, Dibakara Mishra, Markendeya Mishra, Ramananda Pattanak, Godabhar Mishra, Narasimha Bajpayee, Chintamani Mishra, Kṛṣṇadāsa Barjena Mohapatra and many others. They have original works including epics, plays etc.

However, from the end of 15th century there appears to have been a gradual decline of writing in Sanskrit language. Sarala Dasa’s *Mahābhārata* written in Ośia language in later part of 15th century explored vast potentiality of this regional language as a medium and writers of the period could realize that vernacular medium could be used to express exquisitely natural beauty or complex human emotions. Moreover, by 14th and 15th century, Telugu, the language of Telangana, southern part of the kingdom had become the medium of abundant Telugu literature and the leisured class saw that like Telugu, Ośia language was capable of being well developed. Sarala Dasa’s other two works *Bilanka Rāmāyaṇa*, and *Chandi purāṇa*, a
also inspired later writers to experiment with vernacular medium.

2.1 (d) Economic Condition

“Religion is the opium of the people”. When Karl Marx made this observation he had in his mind about the toiling masses, the deprived lot who are economically deprived and exploited. This category of mass immersing them in an emotive issue like religion ignore real issues that confront their daily life, like the problem of gathering their bread and butter for the day. It is an expression of distress, sigh of the oppressed creatures. So, economic condition of the land plays a significant role in the spread of a particular faith. The following section aims at discussing economic condition of Assam in the 15th and the 16th centuries that contributed to the growth and spread of Vaishnavism.

In medieval Assam economic activity was at low ebb. Industry was limited to home-made domestic products and trade was based mostly on the barter system. Agriculture was the general occupation of the people, but the instruments of production were limited to hoe, used by both men and women. The Ahoms introduced the technique of tilling the land with ploughs and growing transplanted rice on permanent wet land after which people in plain areas took to plough cultivation while in hilly region they still followed the more primitive shifting cultivation. With the rise in the use of cattle-driven plough production began to increase quickly, yielding surplus food stuff. “Sufficient enough to maintain intelligent leisured class to enjoy themselves and wield political authority over the masses” (Barman 13). By the 15th century the society moved from tribalism to feudalism that in turn created some practices not at all favourable for economic growth of the land.

Feudalism created the paik system, a system that made lower rung of the society to give free service to the royalty and high officials under the king. During the period of their absence the other paiks had to work in the field of absentee paiks. The condition of the paiks was miserable since they had to work free for three months at the farm land and households of the nobles. They were half-fed, half-clad. Their economic condition was not better than a slave and the majority in the kingdom belonged to this paik lot. These unfortunate people were always trying to escape the drudgery of their life by taking shelter somewhere else.

Economic condition of the lower rung of peasantry known as lagus, ilkhevs, bandhas and
bahiyaus, bindis and beits etc. was as miserable as that of the piliks. They were bonded labourers having no social or economic freedom. In Guru Garté Kathí we find mention of how Badula ata, Sriram ata, and Damodar ata had no means of permanent income and Sriram ata was living on begging (329). Both Sriram ata and Damodaradeva were daily wage earners while Badula ata was a pilik engaged in the palace of the king.

Famines were frequent during the period as is known from old hagiographies of Vaiñö leaders of Assam. Midhavadeva, the chief disciple of áa`karadeva was struck by one such famine in his younger days when he was forced to beg alms after remaining hungry for three days (66X 49). Economic condition of the time can best be summarized when we quote some lines from the Bhágabatapuri, (Bk.XI) written by áa`karadeva where the saint has painted a very dismal picture of the Kaliyug, the vision of which is in all probability a reflection of his own age. Many will perish in drought and famines. But the tyrannical kings will not refrain from levying taxes. The vile people will consider only money as sacred and by bringing will get themselves acquitted of all crimes (ár¢mad BhágabataVV10344, 10356)

Trade and commerce flourished in Odisha during the medieval time. Oias traders touched the shores of Java, Bali, Samatra, Ceylon and even China and brought wealth in large quantity to their land. Literary texts of the period mention about the enterprising Oias voyaging in the month of October to far of countries to carry on trade and commerce. The chief articles of export were rice, cotton, woolen fabric, chilies, butter etc. Being ferried from ports like Puri, Pipili, Kantika, Chilika, Gopalpur etc. (Bruton's Account of Puri and Cuttack, Orissa History Research Journal. Vol. X. No. 3, 48-49).

Industry was fairly developed during the period. People were skilled in textile industry, art of making brass utensils and weapons made of iron. Large number of standing army offered scope to blacksmiths to make spears, swords, shields etc. for use in war. Besides, images of gods and goddesses in brass and copper that have been excavated " presuposes the existence of a highly advanced industry of casting and moulding metals" (Patitanath, p. 100) Considering profuse reference in literary works about use of gold and silver ornaments by gods, goddesses, kings and queens there is no doubt that goldsmiths prospered during the period.

During this period, the temples-in its construction and maintenance-played an important role in
the economy of the state. Temple construction work served as a link between the king and the people. The kings were generous enough to spend as much as possible for construction of the temple. They engaged Brahmins, donated gold and land for its maintenance. They and members of their family donated land and gold to the temple to keep its lamp lit. The Suryavaśi Gajapattis used to donate costly presents to Lord Jagannātha and even granted the income of the southern viceroyalty, as a sacred offering to him.

Not only the kings but also the officials, rich merchants, people of high caste donated land, money, gold and lamps to temples to attain religious merit. Large stretches of land donated to temples remained under the trusteeship of Brahmanas who used to enjoy its proceeds generation wise in exchange of his service to the presiding deity of the temple. As Shishir Kumar Panda observes:

The accumulation of donated land by the temples, led to the formation of a class of landed magnates. As land owners they employed a large number of agricultural labourers. The yield from the land gave the temple the major share of its income. In this way the temples of medieval Orissa probably took an active interest in the agricultural development of the area. A large number of people were also employed for their maintenance and daily functions, like accountants, treasurers, musicians, drummers, singers, lamp lighters, cooks, sweepers, gardeners etc. Temples which attracted a large number of pilgrims were a good market for product of the local merchants. Besides, they were also major consumers of local products which were used in daily rituals. The deposits of money, in the temples for the lightening of the lamps were utilized for rural credit...that might have contributed to the growth of rural industries (267-268).

During the period Odisha was often visited by natural calamities like famines, droughts and floods, while foreign enemies were attacking Odisha. The Midala Pānji mentions that in the early part of the fourteenth century and also during the reign of Kapilendradeva famines frequently visited Odisha, leading to the death of a large number of people. The repeated occurrence of natural calamities and famines had a great effect on the state and its economy.

When one looks at the social conditions of Assam and Odisha of the 15th and early 16th centuries one will notice that in Assam people belonging to various tribes were greater in number than in Odisha. These
tribes did not belong to any major religion. They were living in a well carved out geographical area, sometimes imminent to the outsiders. The process of Aryanization had not touched them and it began with the advent of gurus like á´karadeva and M¡dhavadeva. However, the tribes living in plains in Assam were not as resistant as the tribes in hills or the tribes in Odisha to their assimilation with the main stream.

About caste rigidity Odisha experienced more severe form than Assam. The Brahmins in Odisha opposed the rise of lower caste in social ladder. They lived in such places which were earmarked only for them, i.e. s¡san into which other castes were not allowed. Each of these villages had separate tanks, separate places of worship etc. They did not allow other caste people to take part in religious discourse or interpretation of scriptures. They even discouraged caste Hindus to translate scriptures or epics into Odia language. But in Assam such caste rigidity is not found. No doubt, á´karadeva and other VañÀ¸ava gurus were opposed by the priestly class and they misled the rulers very often against them. But it was because they feared that their bread and butter would be severely affected because the VañÀ¸ava gurus asked their followers not to practice rituals performing which this priestly class was earning their living. In Assam Brahmins were not as orthodox or rigid as were in Odisha. They lived in villages where other castes were also living. Like in Odisha they did not prefer physical labour, they chiefly depended on doles of ruling class and offerings made by the nobles. The Brahmins in Assam conspired only when they feared that their economic interests were threatened, otherwise they did not confront with lower castes. But in Odisha the Brahmins always tried to block even the intellectual development of the other people. Number of castes in Odisha was greater than that of Assam and all were dependent on the generosity of the king.

Condition of women in Odisha during the period under discussion was better than Assam. Women in royal houses and noble families were cultured and literate, however they maintained low profile in state matters. Because of predominance of tribes in the society of Assam movement of women was free and no restriction was there. They could work in fields, move about in market place and participate in family matters and community service. But such freedom for women was not there in Odisha. Sometimes women in Odisha were subject to pawns in the state chess board as we find how Jagamohini, the only daughter of the King Prataparudra and an accomplished lady was married to Krisnadevaraya, a polygamous and aged king to buy peace.
During the period there was no slavery system in Odisha though high caste families were maintaining retainers, indentured labours but slave trade is not heard as is found in Assam.

Tantra practice and sorcery were there in Odisha and Assam but these were prevalent to extreme form in Assam as the society had a number of tribes, and education did not reach common people. Moreover, hold of sakti cult and tantric Buddhism was strong enough on the psyche of the society that prompted the common people to rely on superstition and tantricism.

Since material culture of a community depends largely on the geography, climate and topography of the area comparison on this count may not seem appropriate. Yet then people of both the regions were living a simple life adjusting to the order in class and caste structure of respective societies. However, in sculpture, architecture and painting medieval Odisha was far ahead of medieval Assam. Temple building culture, culture of exquisite painting that we find in medieval Odisha could not be found in medieval Assam though later kings like Áivasimha, Narandrîyâ, a built imposing temples in and around their respective kingdoms.

When one compares the pre-Vaiṣṇava literature in Assam and Odisha one finds that in both the states Sanskrit works were in abundant. But in comparison to Assam, in Odisha vernacular literature was rich. Before the panchasakhīs great epics of India and many of the purânic literature were rendered into Oïa language that aroused nationalism among the people. People could realize the vast potentiality of their mother tongue in expressing complex human emotions through literature. However, no such resurgence in the production of vernacular literature is found in Assam though it cannot be ignored about some quality literary productions in translated form during the period. As in Odisha, in Assam too the curriculum of study consisted mainly of Sanskrit works in original. However, it should not be forgotten that litterateurs in Odisha were greatly encouraged and inspired by neighbouring Telugu and Tamil vernacular writers while Assamese counterparts did not get such scope. Moreover, many of the litterateurs writing in Oïa language could devote their time and energy without seeking any patronage from the ruling class but in Assam this was not possible as economic condition of the people of Odisha was better than the people of Assam during the period and Assamese writers were heavily dependent on rich and affluent people to continue their literary activities.
A comparative study of the economic condition of Assam and Odisha shows that both the states were economically sound during the 15th and 16th century. Assam was rich in its natural resources and they exploited it to their advantage. Though farming system was not so advanced as in Odisha yet its forest products were abundant in comparison to Odisha. Assam being a land-locked trans-state maritime trade was absent here, though its water channels and waterways played vital role in internal trade. However, Odisha exploited its proximity to the sea. Its navigators and sailors sailed to far off places like Java, Sumatra, Swetadeep etc. to trade and brought ample riches to their land. Drought and famines were common both in Assam and Odisha during the period but when riches brought from foreign land and royal help could tide over its severity in Odisha, in Assam in absence of this people suffered.

In contrast to Assam, economy in Odisha during 15th and 16th centuries was better and people were living less hard life. Agriculture was the main occupation of the people and main produces were paddy, cereals, fruits etc.

Unlike in Assam, trade and commerce flourished during the time. Odia traders touching the shores of Java, Bali, Sumatra, Ceylon and even China and brought wealth in large quantity to their land. Literary texts of the period mention about the enterprising Odias voyaging in the month of October to far off countries to carry on trade and commerce. The chief articles of export were rice, cotton, woolen fabric, chillies, butter etc.

### 2.2 Political Condition

Political condition of a state has direct bearing on the religious practices of the land. This is more evident in medieval times when King’s attitude or his patronage to a particular religion or royal favours to the followers of that religion created congenial atmosphere for the acceptance and spread of that religion in the land. Sometimes royal powers either by encouraging their subjects to follow the faith that they profess or by resorting to coercive measures so that the subjects would toe the royal line swell the number of the members of the faith to which they show their allegiance. Or reversely, their neutrality or disfavour to other religions causes decrease in the number of followers of those religions. This is particularly true of the 16th century Assam and Odisha where royal favours determined the popularity of Vaishnavism. Here we shall dwell upon the political condition prevailing in Assam and Odisha in the 15th and the 16th centuries that
became conducive for propagation and spread of the Vaishnavite faith in respective lands.

Kingdoms and principalities - Assam, Kamrup, Koc Bihar - that extended northward to some parts of Bhutan and westward to Jaldapar in present day West Bengal and eastward to Patkai hills constituted the territories in 15th and 16th centuries that came to be the land for Anakaradeva and Madhavadeva to propagate their Vaishnavite faith. It was a time full of ethnic rivalries, political turmoil and scramble for territorial expansion, internal dissension and external aggression. The concept of a unified Assam was absent then as it was divided into small territories ruled by various ethnic groups like the Kacharis, the Koc, the Ahoms, the Bhuyans etc., each trying to dispossess the other and consolidate its position by demanding allegiance from others. These groups often engaged in bloody feuds that took toll of many lives, besides causing displacement to large number of people. The period is also marked by internal strife where palace intrigues were common. Workings of centrifugal forces were strong enough to cause very often weakening of the central power and disintegration of kingdoms and territories. Compounding to all these there were frequent Muslim invasions from neighboring Bengal that bred dissension, suspicion, ill-will, hatred and restructuring of alliances among the sit-in powers.

During the period under discussion, Ahoms and Koc had their suzerainties over the eastern and the south-western parts of the land respectively, while chieftains belonging to Bara Bhuyan families had principalities, sometimes having *thopiya-sanchita* relation with the dominant imperial power and sometimes declaring them independent. There were also tribal chiefs who had territories under them, among whom Kachirs and Chutiyos were important. To say in the words of S.N. Sarma, "In 14th and early part of 15th century Kamarupa had undergone a process of disintegration and several kingdoms appeared on the scene, some of which did not survive more than a few decades (2)."

There were constant skirmishes between the Bhuyans and the Kachirs. Kachirs were Tibeto-Burman tribe having their own tribal custom and religion whereas Bhuyans were Aryans. Bhuyans did not belong to any single caste, there were Brahmin and non-Brahmin Bhuyans. They were basically large land holders. They were petty chiefs who were ruling over rich alluvial lands on both sides of the Brahmaputra to the west of the Kachir kingdom of the south and the Chutiy kingdom of the north-west and followed akta tenets. Under the pressure of the Ahoms, the Kachirs were compelled to withdraw further and further to the west.
The Bhuyans had to remain in constant fear of the Kachirs. During the triumphant Bhuyanship of āa´karadeva’s father Kasumavara, in about 1515 A.D., the Kachirs became powerful and invaded Bara Bhuyan territories. In the year 1517 fearing assault on them from the Kachirs, āa´karadeva and his clan migrated to Raful which again they left under the threat of Kachiri attack and went to and settled at Ga´g¡mukh on the estuary of the river Budhiganga in the Ahom kingdom. Here too the Bara Bhuyans faced some difficulties from the Daflas and then they moved to Bhuvahat. Here they enjoyed the protection of and feudal service from the Ahoms till Hari Bhuyan, the son-in-law of āa´karadeva, who the Ahoms alleged that he was responsible for the conduct of the Bhuyans for he failed in elephant catching and was put to death by the Ahoms.

In eastern part of Assam there ruled a line of Chutiy¡ kings claiming themselves a branch of Bodo race. These people were s¡ktas and they were worshipping various forms of goddess Kali having their own priests. However, by the end of early part of 16th century these kings were subjugated by the Ahoms and Ahoms took suzerainty over their territory.

To the west of Chutiy¡ kingdom Ahoms belonging to Shan tribe were ruling. They were tribes, till later part of the 17th century they had not come to the fold of Hinduism. They had their own social customs, own godheads akin to Hindu godheads, own religious practices. They were a rising power during 15th and 16th century Assam.

The extreme western part of present day Assam and some parts of north Bengal was ruled by Khen dynasty in the 15th century A.D. It was known as Kamat¡rajya. This territory faced Muslim invasion many times from the south. This dynasty became weakened by last part of 15th century due to frequent Muslim attacks and finally the dynasty was overthrown in 1498 A.D.

Koc kingdom was founded by Viswa Simha in 1515 AD, the territory of which was bounded by the Karatoya on the west and Baranadi on the east. In the south and south-east he had subdued the Bhuyans in Kamrup. However, he could not extend his territory towards the east for the powerful Ahoms.

The Koc kings were tribes and they followed their tribal religion and akktism till they embraced Hinduism. Though a worshipper of áiva and Durg¡, Vi´wa Simha was tolerant towards the VaiÀ¸ avas and gave gifts to them and to the priests and astrologers. He invited and settled many Brahmins from several
centres of learning for the cultivation of puršic and tintric studies (Barpajati, vol II, p. 73). He extended his suzerainty over Kamatirajya which later came to be known as Koc Behar under Koc kingdom. From 1540 when Viswa Simha’s son Malla Deva assuming the name Naramirīja, a ascended the throne he registered not only the greatest expansion of their imperialism but also “the completion of their social and cultural hegemony or “Sanskritization” (73). He engaged in several conflicts with the Ahoms.

By the time āśkaradeva preached Vaṁśavā is faith the Ahoms had not embraced hinduism officially, though Brahminical influence was there since 1397 AD. During the period of Sahumman Dihingiya Raja (1497-1539) Brahminical influences grew rapidly in the capital. The king styled himself as Svarganirīja, adeva and was not hostile to āśkaradeva and his faith and even during a summary trial at the allegation of priests against āśkaradeva he was convinced with the reply of āśkaradeva who presented his arguments on some Brahminical rites.

The above account shows how the ruling powers were antagonistic to each other. Assam in āśkaradeva’s time was socially and politically divided into different groups, races and fountain heads of power having no inter-relation and co-operation between them, “it was divided among the Bhuyāns, Ahoms, Koces, Kacharis, Jayantias, Chutias and Nagas” (Achāryya, p.262). There was unstable political situation leading to chaotic condition in the field of religion. Political instability, warfare among kings, chieftains, tribal heads were the order of the day. It led to suspicion, ill-will and bred revengeful attitude towards one another.

The kings were autocrats, moody and whimsical; they were susceptible to sycophancy of fortune seekers, were supersitious, afraid of democratic spirit of their subjects. They engaged persons to collect information from their kingdom about popular sentiment towards their rule and used it to put down any possible revolt. About the killing of Hari Bhuyan, āśkaradeva’s son-in-law by Ahom king on the charge of his failure to catch elephants. Maheswar Neog quoting some chronicles says that Hari Bhuyan was killed being suspected of some “fifth columnist activity” when the Koces accompanied by some Bhuyas invaded the Assam kingdom in 1546 AD and tried to obtain passage for āśkaradeva and his party to the Koc kingdom of Behar (āśkaradeva, p.70). However, about the cause of Ahom king’s treatment towards Vaṁśavās, Dambarudhar Nath says, “neo-Vaṁśavāism’s democratic outlook and the emphasis on
community feeling and brotherhood soon appeared to be a threat to the Ahom monarchy, whose principles of governance were based on despotism and crushing of individual liberty of the subject population” (p.173-4). áa´karadeva when fearing danger to his life in Ahom kingdom migrated to Koc kingdom and convinced Naraniriga , a, the Koc king, about the high ideals of VaiÀ¸ava religion, the king established the former by appointing him the Administrator of Barpeta region and donated him lands to establish a sattra at Koc Behar near his capital. The king too issued a Declaration permitting the free propagation of his faith and teachings amongst his subject population. But so benevolent a king as Naraniriga , a was he was also moody. When priestly class complained about áa´karadeva he dispatched soldiers to arrest áa´karadeva by saying “I will cut him to pieces, throw his flesh to the dogs, make a drum with his skin and beat it even with his bones (qtd from Daitari in Neog, GCK-119). However, it is worth mentioning here about the observation of Maheswar Neog regarding catholicity of the Koc king Naraniriga , a, áa´karadeva and his Bara Bhayan, Neog writes.

migrated into the territory of Naraniriga , a, who was catholic enough to encourage the tribal customs and creeds of the Bodos as well as patronize the tantric and visnuite forms of Hinduism. Both the king and his brother, Cilaraya, were enlightened patrons of learning. The latter composed the ‘Saravati’ commentary on the Gita-govinda, and the former is said to have made some verses in Sanskrit. The VaiÀ¸ava movement of áa´karadeva secured unstinted help from these two brothers, and their patronage inspired poets like áa´karadeva, Mdhavadeva, Rama Sarasvati and Ptambara Kavi to their literary activities (áa´karadeva, p.62).

This catholicity and patronage of the Koc king Naraniriga , a encouraged áa´karadeva to propagate and spread his faith without any fear or obstruction.

In comparison to Assam, Odisha had a centralized political authority that extended from Hoogly in the north to Godabari in the South. It had comparatively a stable and powerful monarchy in the 15th century though the situation turned worse in the beginning of the 16th century with the ascension of Prataparudra to the throne in 1497A.D. In 1435A.D Kapileendra, founder of the Suryavamsa ascended the throne after circulating a story by him and by his supporters that he had been chosen as successor of Bhanadeva by Lord
Jagannath, the presiding deity of Odisha. Thus it is seen, in the 15th century Odisha, God’s dispensation was required to legalise the kingship of a king.

Kapilendra’s thirty-two year reign was full of military activity, when he succeeded most of the time and built an empire so large hitherto unknown. Moreover, after centuries when a native of Odisha ruled his own people giving them a sense of pride and self-respect, hopes and aspirations, O-tas volunteered themselves to battlefields. He enlisted the support of all classes of people by making Odisha a strong military state in which the protection and the extension of the kingdom came to be the joint responsibility of the ruler and the ruled. Militarism penetrated into all ranks of people irrespective of their caste and class, and O-ta nationalism grew.

Kapilendra brought Odisha to all India focus and broke her isolation. He became the standard bearer of Hindu culture and made Lord Jagannath more popular outside the state. He enlisted the sympathy of the non-O-ta Hindus by siding with them against the aggression of the Muslims.

Kapilendra’s son Purusottama ascended the throne in 1467 A.D. and ruled the empire for about thirty years. He was coroneted after Lord Jagannath’s nomination of him to the throne, which is said to have been communicated to Kapilendra in a dream, and which was circulated among the people. This became the best weapon for the king to strengthen his position over his more able half-brother Hamvtra. During his early reign Odisha disintegrated though later he regained many of his lost territories. He neglected the affairs of his northern frontier. As a result Muslim rulers in the north became powerful and posed threat to the Gajapati empire. Moreover, Purusottam’s war with the Hindu empire of Vijayanagara made the kings of Vijayanagar the hereditary enemies of Odisha. The charge of failure to build up a Hindu solidarity against the Muslims is also leveled against Kapilendra by some scholars. In this context, however, K.C.Panigrahi says, “(it) be noted that pan-Hindu conception was alien to the age in which both the Orissan kings lived and ruled” (p.167).

Purusottamadeva had created congenital atmosphere for the literary and cultural growth in Odisha. The king was himself a poet and scholar and he had literary bent of mind. During his time many works in Sanskrit language were composed and ground was made fertile for the growth of vernacular literature, the opportunity of which pujasakhis seized later.
After Purushottama, his son Prataparudra ascended the throne in 1497 A.D. Initially the political condition was favourable for him. The permanent enemies of the Odishan Empire like the Bahamani kingdom was disintegrated and the Vijayanagar empire became very weak. But in a few years the situation changed. By 1510 A.D. with the ascension of Krishnadevaraya to the throne of Vijayanagar Empire the power equation changed and the political condition turned unfavourable for the Gajapati king. Again in the south the ruler of Golkunda Quli Qutab Saha became very powerful. Besides these powerful enemies in the south there was a strong rival in the north named Nassaruddin Saha, the Sultan of Bengal.

From 1503 A.D. to 1509 A.D. there was turmoil and dissension in the Vijayanagara kingdom that provided an opportunity to Prataparudra to invade the kingdom in 1509 A.D. While he was away from his kingdom and busy in war the Sultan of Bengal invaded Odisha and came up to Puri town and plundered it. As a result life in Odisha was in shambles (Mahatab, p.22). On getting the news of it Prataparudra returned to Odisha and drove out the Muhammadan army. Its commander Ismail Ghazi took shelter in the fort of Mandaran in the district of Hooghly, Bengal. Thereafter, Odia army besieged the fort and was on the threshold of giving a final blow to the enemy. But at this juncture Prataparudra’s general Govinda Vidyadhar betrayed him. So the king had to withdraw the attack and come back to the capital, dejected at the treachery of his trusted and able general, deciding never to wage future operations against the ruler of Bengal.

In 1510 A.D. Krishnadevaraya of Vijayanagar ascended the throne and waged a series of battles against the Odishan Empire. During 1513 and 1519 A.D. he led three expeditions against Odisha and won decisive victory over Prataparudra. The king concluded a treaty with Krishnadevaraya and according to the terms of the treaty gave his most loving daughter Jagamohini in marriage to him. Raya neglected, rather ignored her. She lived a secluded life. Raya too caused the death to Prataprudra’s son Virabhadra. The incident of Virabhadra’s death, ill-treatment of Krishnadevaraya towards Jagamohini and her life of seclusion, the loss of entire southern part of his kingdom, the treachery of his trusted general Bhoi Govinda Vidyadhar all taken together, brought deep disappointment to Prataparudra. To quote Mukherjee, “Assassination, rebellion and struggle for power brought about internal anarchy” (p.177) and precipitated the disintegration of the Gajapati power.
Thus the period from 1509 to 1519 A.D was a period when the kingdom of Odisha waged several battles to thwart advance of enemies from both its Southern and Northern fronts, received series of defeats, saw fall of well fortified forts, witnessed capture and confinement of able generals and its warrior prince and entered into humiliating treaties, even bartering away its princess, the suicide of its confined prince for humiliation that was heaped on him and above all disintegration of the Gajapati empire. The King finding no other way of peace and happiness took shelter under the umbrella of Vaisnavaism as preached by Caitanya. Despite the propagation of Vaisnavaism or bhaktividya in Odisha by Utkalaya Vaisnava, avas like paucasakhis which professes prembhakti because it had become a cult of love, it was full of mysticism, could keep the king in trance for sometime so that he could forget naked realities in life. He directed all his time and energy for spreading Vaisnavaism in Odisha. Moreover, the King’s such tilt towards spirituality and his thirst for religious life created a favourable ground for the creation of religious literature and flourish of an atmosphere where Vaisnava preachers like Caitanyadeva and the Paucasakhis could thrive. Following the king the people of Odisha forgot their glory and disappointment and embraced the bhakti cult of Caitanya and the Paucasakhis. It took away much of their martial quality.

During this period not only the king but also some of his principal officials and powerful and experienced officers like Ramanandaraya, the governor of Rajmahendri and Gopinatha Badosena, the administrator of Medinipur converted themselves to Vaisnavaism of Caitanya cult and followed the religion of equality and love, the result of which was disastrous on the political and military strength of the state. Ramanandaraya by retiring from his position at Vidyanagara, the weakest frontier of the country caused the king to hand over the southern viceroyalty to young and inexperienced people. One may ascribe the fall of Kondavidu, Kondpalle and Rajmahendri to their being left in charge of young and inexperienced officers like the prince Virabhadra after the retirement of Ramananda.

The most important development during the medieval period in Odisha was the deification of monarchy. It was because of the looming dangers from the feudal lords and the foreign enemies. King Anangabhimadeva III dedicated his empire to Lord Jagannath and styled himself as his viceroy (rauta) in order to quell the rising unrest in his kingdom. Since his time successive rulers declared themselves regents
of the Lord. King Kapilendradeva and Purûottam legitimized their position declaring that they were chosen by the Lord Īśvara to rule the country. According to P.K.Mishra, "It is seen that Suryavamsi kings as devoted Viṣṇu followers had accepted Jagannātha as Lord of the Kingdom and related him closely with the national policy...Emperor Kapilendradeva’s decrees were declared from the temple portals. He was keeping Lord Jagannātha as witness while formulating polities of the kingdom and was seeking His co-operation to run the administration” (p. 89). Thus the kingship became a part of the Jagannātha cult and vice versa, becoming the main source of their legitimacy. It was done to save the impending disintegration of the empire under cover of a religious sanction and theocratic idealism. This might have achieved short term gain but in the long run proved fatal as the rulers gradually became more dependent on the spiritual power of Lord Jagannātha and superstitions than of their own power which proved fatal at the time of external invasion.

When political conditions of Assam and Odisha in the 15th and the 16th centuries are compared it is seen that Odisha was a unified state and the Gajapati empire had spread from distant south to the heart of present day Bengal in the north. Throughout the 15th century the stronghold of the emperor was writ large on his territory. The empire was stable and people lived in peace and prosperity. But the situation reversed in early part of the sixteenth century, the kingdom faced attacks from two sides-north and south, muslims from the north and powerful Krishnadevarai from the south. Sometimes due to betrayals either by the ambitious generals or governors of the respective areas, and sometimes due to indecisiveness and lack of farsightedness of the king Ota army conceded defeat. However, village life was by and large peaceful and people least bothered about the fierce battles fought in border areas. The king was also attentive to his royal duties despite prolonged warfare and was considerate towards his subjects. However, series of defeats, humiliations, personal tragedies and the resultant general disillusion about pelf and power, pomp and royalty tilted the mind of the king much towards liberal religious faiths. As a result, a congenial atmosphere grew for propagation of Viṣṇu avta by the pūcasakhās and Caitanya.

In Assam political condition during the period was largely determined by two powerful royal families—one in the east and the other in the west. The Ahoms in the east were always at loggerheads with the Koc king in the west. Moreover, taking advantage of indifferent attitude to the Ahom kings in the
far-east to the far off places some feudatory rulers became powerful and unleashed terror on people forcing
some to migrate from the land. Again, áa´karadeva took full advantage of the enmity between the Ahom
king and the Koc king, and by taking shelter under the powerful Koc king he could propagate his VaiÀ¸a
faith among the mass.

2.3 Religious Condition

In Medieval times political condition of a land happened to be responsible for influencing its
religious life. It was so because royal patronage was necessary for spread of a religion. Growth or decline of
sentiment for a particular religion or sect was determined by the royal favour or disfavor.

The political instability in the 15th and early 16th century Assam was largely responsible for the
chaotic condition prevailing in the religious life of the people during the time. Society was mainly
dominated by religious ideas. Brijhmins had unique dominance over the religious and social life of the people.
áaivas, áktas and worshippers of ViÀ¸u took direct help from the priestly class while worshipping their
respective personal gods. Vedic sacrifice and other pur¡¸ic rituals required direct participation or
supervision of a Brijhmin priest. Brijhminism in medieval Assam, by and large, was not directly and solely
based on the Vedic Brijhmana literature, instead it depended for the guidance and authority on the per¡, as,
tantras and smriti digests. In initiations, marriages and auspicious occasions sacrifices were also made.
The left handed excesses of brahminical tantricism gave rise to customs like bhogi and devadasi.

In this period Brijhmins held important positon in Hindu society. They were patronized by Bara
Bhuy¡ns and other rulers. No sacramental rite that is performed in different stages of a human being was
complete without the participation of a Brijhman priest. They were lavishly offered gifts, sacrificial fees,
feast etc. Kings and rulers donated land to them to help them impart education and worship gods in villages.
Brahmanical hold was so strong on the society that even the neo-VaiÀ¸a doctrine that lays greater
emphasis on áaktu¥c as a mode of worship could not altogether do away with the practice of complex
rites and rituals. It only relegated Brahmanical rites and rituals to a secondary position. It is recorded in the
Guru KatiÁ Cartia that Rama Guru, a Brijhmi, associate of áa´karadeva acted as the officiating priest in
the cremation of the latter.

áaivism


A dvism was a living religion when Áa°karadeva was born. Ramananda, in describing the religious atmosphere of the land before the advent of neo-Vaïavism, writes, "People did not worship Kôa, a or perform the deeds sacred to Hari. They, on the other hand, would fain worship Bhairava and consider He to be the greatest of religions. They made offerings of blood of tortoises and goats to that deity, and drank of it as a sacred drink" (prasad) (qtd. In Neog's Áa°karadeva-81). Áa°karadeva's father was a Áaivite. It is said that Áa°karadeva was born to him after he worshipped Ativa. Viswa Simha, the founder of the Koc dynasty is believed to have been born after his mother had a union with Ativa. Epigraphic evidences show that all royal families of Kmrupa during the time were devotees of Ativa. Land grants issued to the dnones between the 11th and the 14th centuries were having invocation to Ativa. Many literary works like Haragaurisambad and Jayadrathabodha composed during the period had Ativa and Parvati as chief characters. In Mdhava Kandali's Assamese version of the Rimlya, a goat is seen chanting the name of Ativa. Ramananda Dvija in his ArGuru Charita mentions how people before the advent of neo-Vaïavism used to worship Bhairava alone as the best religion. Even auspicious occasions like marriages were being held after worshipping Ativa and sacrificing goats, ducks, pigeons etc.

Plates, coins and other records show that the great Koc king Naranirgla, a who was a patron of Áa°karadeva was an ardent devotee of Ativa. The coins minted during his reign bear the epithet ÁrG ÁrG atvacarana-Kamalamadhu Karasga prefixed to his name. The Bodo Kachirs practiced a form of primitive Aadvism where the worship was carried out by sacrifice of buffaloes, he-goats, pigeons, ducks and cocks and by the offering of rice and liquor. The Bodo-Kachirs believe that they are the descendants of Bathau-atvarat, a deity identical with Ativa. Naranirgla, a, the Koc king is stated to have legalized this form of tribal worship of Ativa by the issue of an edict which set apart the north band of the Brahmaputra for the practice of aboriginal forms of worship (B.K.Baruah-pp.21-24). Ativa and his consort Parvati were the principal deities of the Tiwas and the Rabhas who live in the middle and the western part of Assam respectively. Even among the Karibs and the Sonowal Kachirs Ativa and Ptvati were popular deities. Religious history of the Kachirs shows that even the result of a fight between the Kachirs and Ahoms was determined on the basis of a sacrifice made to Ativa.

Worship of Ativa and his consort Parvati was most popular in pre-Áa°karadeva period. Áa°karadeva
was aware of the strong influence of áaiva cult during his time. So he asked his followers to recognize Kari (Viśva) and Hara (áiva) as identical (Barpajati Vol. III: 218).

Devotion to áiva is invariably associated with the idea of devotion to his consort, goddess Durgá or goddess Párvati. Durgá is variously called as áakti, Devi, Kili, Kiihl, Gandi, Kinihkyi and so on. áaktism, as Eliot defines, is the worship of “a goddess of many names and forms who is adored with sexual rites and the sacrifice of animals, or when the law permits of men” (qtd. in Neog’s á’karadeva 82-83). Since áikt and áaiva cults were popular during the pre-á’kari period in Assam, rites and rituals accompanying it were common in the land. To propitiate áiva and áakti, adherents to these faiths follow vigorously exotic rites as prescribed in the Kiihkyi Purá, a and the Jogini samára. These works prescribe mantras, evocation, worship, preparatory rites, visualization of the deity in forms and charm and enjoin blood sacrifices and esoteric rites.

The atmosphere was vitiated by the prevalent vile form of Buddhism known as Vajrajana that admitted madhya (wine), matsya (fish), nima (meat), madri ( parched grain) and maithuna (sexual act). Thus blood sacrifice and pancamakara became prominent form of ritual to propitiate áakti in medieval Assam. People vigorously pursued these left handed excesses with the hope of getting power, riches and other material gains. In Midhava Kandali’s Assamese version of the Ramya, there are references to worship of Durgá and Gandi by offering animal blood. Mahendra Kandali, the teacher of áa’karadeva volunteered to teach him the procedure of the worship of Durgá. áa’karadeva’s great grandfather Gandiva got the title of Devadasa from the king for his deep devotion to the goddess Gandi. Midhavadeva was a devout áakt before his initiation into the Vaiñavism. The Kacharis ruling some parts of the Brahmaputra valley before the 16th century were followers of the áakt cult. The goddess Kechakhati at Sadhiya who was propitiated with human sacrifice was the tutelary deity of the Kachari royal family. There were two other shrines, one, dedicated to Kinihkyi and the other to Jayanto varí where human sacrifice was made. There were many other shrines dedicated to áakti in different parts of Assam. The Koc kings who were much powerful in the 16th century Kmrupa were the followers of áakt cult. The Matri Rajavamsabali records show that the kings like Viśva Stíha and his successor Nanmiriya, were great
devotees of the Mother Durgā.

In áa´karadeva’s time Vajrayana Buddhists who professed a queer mixture of monistic philosophy, magic and eroticism with a small admixture of Buddhist ideas had spread their tentacles on the land. They admitted five makaras and held that the seekers of salvation should enjoy perfect truth that resides in every woman. Some priests belonging to various sects were earning their livelihood by performing magical rites and feats with funny idols made of copper, bell-metal, wood and earth.

In áa´karadeva’s time áaktism was prevalent in various forms. One such form of the goddess is Manas¡, the goddess of snakes. Manas¡ worship was very popular among the people of western Assam. It was accompanied by oja-palt, a choral performance, a deadhant, a shamanistic dance and a formal puja performed by a Brahmin priest. Some people also worshipped Dharma (Yama) along with the snake goddess Manas¡ accompanied by certain songs. Again, worship of a peculiar supernatural power popularly known as Ai, the goddess of pox was current among the Assamese people. The power was worshipped in the name of attali with songs known as ainaam sung by female devotees. Tantrik vaisnavism was prevalent during the time even in the Hayagriva-Madhava temple at Hajo. Even the Brahmins were practicing left-handed rites. They were performing magical rites and feats with idols made of copper, bell-metal, wood and earth.

Blood sacrifice on the altar of the Devi in its horrendous proportion was in vogue in medieval Assam. The Kālikā purāṇa and the Yogini tantra give a list of sacrificial animals that include birds, buffaloes, men etc. More grotesque was the human sacrifice. Since the beginning of the thirteenth century the ancient kingdom of Kamarupa was slowly undergoing a process of disintegration and amongst religious rites, B.K.Kakati writes, "The land was infested with itinerant teachers of the vājra Tantric schools with their insistence on the philosophy of sex and palate. Among religious rites the most spectacular were blood sacrifices to gods and goddesses amidst deafening noises of drums and cymbal, night vigil and virgin worship, and lewd dances of temple women (80)." The Chutiya kings used to sacrifice human beings at Timreswari temple. Even young men were being sacrificed at the altar of earthen idol of goddesses in order to attain worldly gains like wealth, physical gratification and even salvation. About the practice of blood sacrifice during the time Hazarika says:

There prevailed the practice of human sacrifice in the Tamreswari temple of Sadiya. Even during
the establishment of the sanctum sanctorum of Hayagriva temple at Hajo, many people were allegedly sacrificed. It is shocking to learn that young men, earmarked for sacrifice moved freely in the society... In the two ancient religious scripts of Assam, Kiiiki purana and Yognot tantra there are mention of prevalence of human sacrifice. (p.445)

The practice of human sacrifice gave rise to a class of people called Bhogis. The practice of goat (private parts of female) worship and worship of kamatis (maidens) associated with that of the worship of goddess had created a grotesque form of worship practice in the Brahmaputra valley. This led to the flourish of the tantric practices.

Nitha Cult

Some minor cults also flourished in some places in 15th and 16th centuries Assam. The Nithas, a branch of the Áaiva sect practiced various forms of yoga and made repeated utterances of the name of Áiva. Worshipping of different gods among the people was the order of the day. The Ahoms who were the ruling class worshipped the god of heaven, the god of rain, the god of land, the god of air, the god of learning and many other lesser gods. To propitiate these gods they made animal sacrifice including male buffalo and bulls. About people’s belief in many gods and goddesses during the time Malik says:

The people believed in many gods and goddesses, including “jal-kunwari” or water fairies and for propitiating them in the event of sickness, or to any serious problem they mostly offered pigeons as sacrifice, or in their place even pumpkins (komora) were chopped into pieces, at the altar of the deity. They also believed in the existence of spirits like “ban kunwari” (fairy of the jungle), “jal devata” (water god), “ban devata” (the jungle god)...Many more spirits and gods were believed to lurk around abandoned places, jungles etc. which also possessed humans at the slight opportunity (pp.20-32).

However, many royal families during the period were worshippers of both Viñu, Áiva and Áakti. Kaviratna Saraswati in his Jayadrathavadha describes his patron Indranarayana as a worshipper of Hari but blessed by Hara. Rudra Kandali, author of Shtyakiprabeda describes his patron Timradhvaja as a devotee of Viñu and, at the same time, a worshipper of goddess Mahimti. In Haranga Rajavamsaval (V 2178) it is mentioned that the king Viñwa Siäha used to worship Bosantka (goddess Durgï)
after remembering Viṣṇu. He was a worshipper of Īśvara and His consort Durgā, though he used to chant Brahma-mantra and listen to purāṇa everyday.

The tribes in the region during the period worshipped many gods and goddesses and propitiated them with their favorite animals, fowls, pigs etc. They were also in the belief of innumerable lesser divinities. The Morās worshipped Sadan Madan, the god of elephant. The Boras worshipped Bhandast, the goddess of fish. They also believed in natural powers which are very often called “spirits”, “supernatural agents”, “bhuts” etc. These elements are believed to have exercised power to move nature, guide and control human action. When there was rain, they began to attribute it to the god of rain, when there was thunder they attributed it to the god of thunder, when there was fire, they ascribed it to the god of fire and so on. Among certain tribes there were traditional practices like worshipping the clouds, rivers, animals and making obeisance to cowsheds and barns and haylofts. The tribal people also worshipped trees and stones taking those as symbols of god or goddess. Boro-Kacharis worship cactus plant as the symbol of their god Bathou. For Rādhā a stone stands as the symbol of Īśvara. Giving account of the scenario of the religious condition of Assam on the eve of the revival of Viṣṇuism Ramarai Dvija in his Gurudhāra says:

In Kāmarupa, people of all castes used to conduct themselves according to their sweet will. There was no difference of religious conduct and observances amongst the Brāhmans, Kāstrīgas, Vaśygas and Śudras. Unlike inhabitants of other countries (dīsa), people of all castes here observed only the ceremony of cutting the umbilical chord and nothing else. They used to worship various village gods (grīma-devatā), but none worshipped Hari (qtd. in S.N.Sarma, p.7).

The land of Ōkha that is Odisha is famous throughout ages for the meeting ground of different faiths and religions. Apostles and prophets from different places and regions have come here for propagation of their respective religious views. Puri, the abode of Lord Jagannath, has been a meeting place and followers of different faiths see the image of their respective personal gods to Śri Jagannath. For centuries Jagannath is being worshipped by the tribes, Buddhists, Jains and even by Sikhs and Muslims. Important religious leaders of all creeds-Śaiva, Ākta, Gānapatiya, Saur and Viṣṇu, ay-āke Adi úa ‘kariyāya, Guru Nanak, Samaníkṣerya have all been drawn to Lord Jagannath. And the Lord by his catholicity absorbed strains of different faiths into him. Thus confluence of many religious and sectarian streams, Lord
Jagannath is a unique God who stands for secularism. To quote Banshidhar Moharthy, "From the astro-astatic aboriginal culture of mystic faiths to medieval Brahmanism—Jaina, Bouddha, Saura, Nitba, Ganapatya, and above all nirguna, a-love based Vaishnavas built their home in Orissa" (p.329).

**Jatnism**

Some centuries before the birth of Christ, Jatnism was there in Odisha. Many royal dynasties had adopted Jatnism as their state religion and made efforts for its propagation and spread. Some draw a parallel of Jagannath, Subhadra and Balabhadra to the Jaina trinity of samyak jñāna, samyak charitra and samyak drishti, and twenty-two steps leading to the sanctum sanctorum to twenty-two tirthankaras. Lord Jagannath is similar to the "Abhishek" ceremony of the Jains and the red granite image at Ellora that is named "Jagannath" is also proved to be Jaina monument. Because Odisha has a long legacy about Jaina religion, we find the influence of it on the sixteenth century Pauca-sakhis religion.

**Buddhism**

Odisha too was a fertile ground for the propagation of Buddhism. Here emperor Ashoka was turned from Chandashoka to Dharmashoka. From 1st century A.D. to 7th century A.D. propagation of the Mahayana sect of Buddhism reached its climax here. Nagarjuna, Dharmagupta and others devoted themselves for the spread of Buddhism in the land. During that period many monasteries came into existence here for propagation of this religion. Again, in later times, Buddhistic tantrism was also found to abundance in Odisha. It was the place where tantricism of both Hinduism and Buddhism flourished. Some scholars assert that the tree images of Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra are of Buddhist origin and represent Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. Dharma in Buddhism is supposed to be female and so is symbolized in Subhadra and Balabhadra stands for Sangha, the monastic order where the relationship between the monks and the nuns are that of brother and sister. In many respects the cult of Jagannath bears the impress of the Buddhist faith.

**Nitba cult**

Years after the decline of Buddhism in Orissa Nitba dharma found a way into the land. From 12th to the 15th century A.D. this religion flourished here. In Sarala Das's Mahabharata we find praises for the Nitba apostles. This cult has left its impression on the Pauca-sakhis, five associates who preached Vaishnavism in Odisha in the 16th century. Much discussion on the Shtula Vedas an important work of the Nitba cult has been
made in the works of the Pâpacaksâkhis. Again, the work "Gobindaácharitra" of Yashobhânaádas is based on Nîthkâharmâ. There is close similarity between the Kîpalsâhmana and Vîgasîdhamana of Nîthagyogti and mode of sîdhâni of the Pâpacaksâkhis. There is ample evidence to prove that religious views and mode of meditation of Pâpacaksâkhis are largely influenced by some of the religious views and opinions of Nîtha dharma. To quote Achiñeya Deb, "The Yoga practices of Nîtha cult have influenced VaiÀ¸utism in Orissa. Saraladas in his Mahîbhirata has used a few epithets such as Yogi, Tapast and Kanta which are used till to-day for Nîthas" (p.31).

**ânîvism**

Interestingly not only other religions but also various sects of Hindu religion flourished at different times in Odisha. Much before the Pancasakha period ânvism was very popular in Odisha. Works on ânvism like "Kalasa Chautisha", "Somnath Brañkatha" etc. and glorification of àiva were there much before the spread of Bhakti movement in Odisha. Even there are many references to ânvism in Saraladasa’s Mahîbhirata.

**âkta**

For centuries âkta worship has been there in Odisha. It is closely associated with the social and religious life of the people of the land. In tantrik scriptures Odisha has been mentioned as "Okrakshyam Prathamam Peetham". Out of four âkti peethas in India where exist sixty-four temples, each erected in honour of Yogini, there are two seats to Odisha having the same number of temples. àaktism has also its influence on the jagannîtha cult. The Lord is at present regarded as Bhairava and Vimala as Bhairavi. "The predominance of the âkti cult is attested by the worship of Vimala in the compound of jagannîth temple at Puri" (S.K.Panda, p.309).

ârâ Jagnânîth is also regarded as a tantra devâti. Even in the Kîlîk Puri, we find mention of lines like "ârâkâhêre to jagnânîtha sakshat Dakshina kaltka" (Oh, Jagnînîth, thou art like the Dakshina Kîlîk at SreeKsetra) or at another place we come across the line "Vimala Bhairavi Jatra Jagnânîthastu Bhairaabha (Jagnânîth is the Bhairava where there is Vimala-Varavi). Here "we can infer the assimilation of tantra, àiva and âkta cults" (Sahoo, p.33). Before the advent of bhakti movement in Odisha a number of works on àkta worship had appeared in Sanskrit language. In the Chandipuri, a, Mahîbhirata and Bîlankî
Rømøya, a of Saraladas there are many references to the glory of Devi. The áakta-tantrik cult was not only confined to cult images but also found expression in the form of decorative female figures in the temple architecture of Odisha. S.K.Panda says, “The nagitkas, apsaras, nayikas, and the gandharvis are depicted with sensuous beauty, seductiveness, charm and in various sexual postures which symbolize the power of áakti, the union of purusa and prakriti, áiva and áakti (308).” According to Baribamithra’s BªhatsaÄhit¡, ‘Ekînwesha’ positioned between KªÀ¸a and Balar¡ma is known as Subhadra which gives the indication of shakti worship (qtd. in Sahoo, p.34).

Saura:
The worship of Sun was also there in Odisha during the medieval period. Archaeological evidence proves that the worship of the Sun-god was there since the Gupta period. Worship of Sun-god reached its climax in Odisha in the 13th century with the construction of the Sun temple at Konarka by Narasimhadeva I. We also find the indication of Sun worship from the Birañchí Narayan temple at Paltura in Bhadrak district. This was constructed in the 7th century.

Gînapatya:
From about 6th-7th centuries to 14th century worship of Ganesh was popular in Odisha. According to Saraladas’s Mahñbhñra Mahñbhñra Mahññjñjaka (Ganesh) is the part of Íagannñth (qtd. in Sahoo, p.41). On the auspicious day of Snãna Purã, lord Íagannñth puts on the appearance of Gángapati. Again, we find an evidence of it from the name of a hill named Mahññjñjaka hill near Chandikhol in Cuttack district which is famous as Ganesha kàetra. Here though Ganesha is worshipped in a small temple still in that place only one image is worshipped as áiva, Viã, a, Durã, Saryã and Ganesa which establishes the fact that there was worship of Paµcadevatã in medieval Odisha. From the Ganesh temple situated at Khiching in Mayurbhanja district we find the evidence of the worship of Ganesh in north-west Odisha.

In the medieval period two works- Jayadeva’s Gitagobinda and Saraladas’s Mahñbhñra popularised Rødhí-KªÀ¸a cult. In the Íodögaparva of Mahñbhñra, the poet while narrating ten incarnations of Viã, a, had actually cited eleven names-Matsya, Kurma, Kolo, Nãsimha, Bãmana, Parãudhara, áàrãma, Kñhu, ñãkarsana bauda Kãlikã ye dasavata ra. He has considered KªÀ¸a an avatara of Viã, a. Prior to Saraladas Rødhí-KªÀ¸a, a cult was popular in Odisha. The poet under the influence of Jayadeva had
depicted the Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa līla with human touch. But the worship of Viṣṇu is inferred from the 4th century when the kings of Mithara patronized and identified themselves as "Nārāyan pīdā bhakta" (Epigraphia Indica, E. IV, 30).

Despite different sects living side by side in the land there was no sectarian conflict. āṭṭa-ākāṭṭu-Viṣṇu were taken as one. Balaram Das in his Jagannātha Rāmāyaṇa describes Rama as an ardent devotee of Viṣṇu. Similarly, we find here that āṭṭa is a great admirer of Rāma. To quote Achintya Deb, "It was not possible for Balarāma to ignore the popularity of āṭṭa and in order to give proper regard to common man’s belief he has made Rāma a devotee of Viṣṇu. He has also identified āṭṭa with Balabhadra of Puri...while invoking Subhadra he had identified her with Durgā" (p.32).

A comparative study shows that religious scenario in Odisha during the medieval period was less dismal than in Assam. Lord Jagannātha, the presiding deity of the land has had always a salubrious effect on the religious sentiment of the people. He is the synthesis of all cults and all races, everyone feels him as his presiding deity. Reigning kings of the time also looked upon him as the saviour and they as servitor. Therefore cult conflict or sectarian violence was almost unknown during the period, though cold war was there among the Brahmins and the tantric Buddhists. In Assam religious practices were more severe in form as sacrifices at the altar of goddesses were horrendous. To appease goddess people were enjoined to make bird, animal and even human sacrifices. Under tantric influence people indulged in sexual orgies and drug addiction, sometimes putting society in danger. In Odisha there were ākāṭṭu, āṭṭa and Nāth cult side by side with the Jagannātha cult but Jagannātha cult dominated all other cults. But in Assam various cults exercised strong influence over their respective followers and there were no let up in it. As in Odisha, in Assam too, among the Ēṛṣīs, different cults overlapped their religious practice.

In Odisha kings had allegiance to only one cult to which they adhered to it steadfastly. There was little public persecution in the name of religion. But in Assam during the period kings were liberal in the growth of different sects as Koc king Narainrya, a and Ahom kings bestowed favours on sects other than they professed. Ahoms except during the time of their marriage, birth and funeral ceremonies used to engage Brahmins in their daily religious chores. Narainrya, a was a sīkta yet he offered liberal grants to the āṭṭas and gave shelter to āṭṭa ūkaradeva, a Vaṭā, ava and facilitated to propagate his faith. In Odisha
temples played a significant role in social cohesion and economic growth, but in Assam we do not find such a phenomenon.

2.4 Advent of Medieval Vaishnav Preacher

At this critical juncture of Assam and Odisha, in this background of socio-economic, cultural, political and religious life of respective lands, áa karadeva (1449-1569) in Assam and Paçcasakhis (1500-1570)- Balaram Das, Jagannath Das, Achyutananda Das, Yashobanta Das and Ananta Das- in Odisha appeared as messiahs to cleanse the social and religious life of respective lands many of its evils by propagating Vaishnavism in reformed form. In Odisha the medieval Vaishnav preachers are called Paçcasakhis because they were close associates and they were also friends of Caitanya.

áa karadeva’s creed is officially called eka¿ara¸a n¡madharma, the basic tenet of which is that all men are equal and are capable of being blessed with god’s grace irrespective of their birth. He boldly stated that "there is one god and one devotion and there is none else. He advised people to devote whole heartedly to Lord Vi¿ u or K¤À¸a (Banikanta Sarma p. 3)." He preached that ways of God are not wealth or power, complex rites and rituals, show of pomp and royalty but complete and total surrender at His feet by chanting and hearing His name, by practicing simple and unalloyed life, life free from desire, greed and ego. To quote Suniti Chatterjee, "áa karadeva was enabled to preach the new faith he had ... on the new interpretation of the name of God (n¡ma) and singing his praise (K¢rttana) in congregational worship, and finally on an absolute and complete surrender of oneself to the will of the Lord" (3). In his "n¡madharma only ár¢K¤À¸a, ár¢K¤À¸a alone is the god desired, and here lies one of the distinguished features of his neo-Vaishnavism" (Laxminandan Bora 128).

áa karadeva’s new approach was based on the philosophical doctrines of the Gita and the Bhigavata-pur¿i, as its scriptures and it helped him on the new interpretation of the doctrine of bhakti. His knowledge in the Bhigava was based on Odisha scholar ár¢dharaswami’s commentaries on the Bhigava named Bhavirtha D¢pik¡. This annotation had found general acceptance almost throughout the whole of India by the beginning of the 15th century.

áa karadeva had visited Puri two times in his life. During his first pilgrimage in 1481 for twelve years he spent about one year at Puri where he must have come into contact with various scholars who
congregated there for religious discourse. There he was overwhelmed at the philosophical arguments, debate on religious matters and above all catholicity present in the precinct of Jagannath temple and humanistic spirit surrounding it. He was so overwhelmed by it that even after he began to preach ekāraṇa, a nirodharṇa rejecting image worship he installed one image of Jagannath made from aegle marmolos wood at Dhawahati to symbolize Brahma. To quote Laxminanda Bora in this context will be more illuminating. He says, “It may be surmised that after spending a lot of time in Puri his (āa’ karadeva’s) ekāraṇa, a nirodharāṇa blossomed at Puri, in the precincts of Jagannath temple, near the image of Lord Jagannath. He found the source of this religion in the Bhīgavatapurāṇa, the Gītā, narada Bhakti sutra, Sandilya Bhakti sutra etc. He came to know that even a monotheistic like Ballavacarya has associated gopis, Namadeva Rukmini and Ramananda Rama with Śta” (p.128). Jyotisna Rout too says, “Here at Puri ār成龙 āa’ kara realized surely the philosophy of ār成龙Jagannath cult along with his own conviction about religious philosophy” (p.111). At Puri he heard about the Bhīvṛtha Dīpikā, a commentary on the Bhīgavata, by ārdharaśvīmy, the copy of which along with the Bhīgavat he received through Jagadish Mishra after his return to Assam. “Biographers of āa’ karadeva uniformly claim that it was Jagadish Mishra, who received a mandate from the Lord of Jagannath Kētra to dream, hastened to Assam to hand over a copy of the Bhīgavatapurāṇa, a along with the commentary of ārdharaśvīto āa’ karadeva of Bardowa. ‘When āa’ karadeva had listened to Jagadish’s discourses on the Bhīgavatapurāṇa, a he was convinced that this work had no peer and that its purpose was to fix Kṣīṭa, a as the sole worshipful, and that the celebrating of his acts in the company of holy men and the taking of sole refuse in him was the greatest religion of men’...From the writing of Aniruddha Kījastha it is quite evident that the receipt of the Bhīgavatapurāṇa, a with ārdhara’s commentary moulded the new faith and the movement into a definite shape”. (Neelima Govani pp.4-5). Aniruddha referred that āa’ karadeva got his jñāna-bhakti first at ār成龙Kētra before Jagadish Mishra met him at Bardowa: ādesa parve bhaṁa niĉhaṁ bhakatibhiṁ hṁsi karā ṇ ṇ̄ ṇ̄̄ dhogatī// Pice datvagatī ista Kṣīṭa~ara Kṣīṭaṁ niĉhaṁ āa’ karadeva jñāntī sīkhyā। Alpa bayase jagannātha kētra gatlā/bahudin hartrace charara sevī// Tīrthe pīḷānta jñāna bhakati vīsesa/ Āna piḍi piche istaṁtā jñādesa। (There was no bhakti earlier in this country, people were doomed for indulging in violence. Later due to divine ordination and bliss of Kṣīṭa, a one in name āa’ kara was born. At a tender age
he visited Jagannath ksetra and spent many days there drinking the nectar of Hari. There he got special 
jnana bhakti and returned to his own land on order. (Aniruddha 5th skandha qtd. in Usha Goswami p.100) In 
his second pilgrimage in 1550 he stayed there for few days. In these two pilgrimages he also paid visits to 
Brindavan where the presiding deity is arKÇÀ¸a. From these two visits, one to Puri and the other to 
Brindavan he must have been influenced by the intellectual aspect and emotional aspect of bhakti to the 
personal god.

Considering the time that was beset with social inequalities, hypocrisy of priestly class and chaos 
and anarchy in religious life áa´karadeva’s first concern was “emancipation of the prevalent religious and 
social abuses” (Murthy 35) and people of the land saw a ray of hope in the new version of VaÌÀ¸ava religion 
as preached by áa´karadeva. Since the religion was catholic in its spirit, as it was liberal in embracing 
people from all other faiths, even heathens and non-believers, it took into its fold people from all walks of 
life. áa´karadeva initiated people from all strata and sections of society. By his propagation of 
VaÌÀ¸ava he took people of Assam, Kamarupa and Bebar culturally, caused the downtrodden mass to 
know their worth, enriched their spiritual growth, showed them a ray of hope for their salvation, cleansed 
social and religious life of its many evils, translated and adapted scriptures and purÌÀ¸as in vernacular 
language, pulsated cultural life and, above all, helped to grow Assamese nationalism by bringing to his 
religious and cultural fold different tribes and shades of people. It served as a cathartic in clearing the 
mindset of people of the space effects of traditional obstructions.

The reformation movement started by áa´karadeva was accelerated by Mdhavadeva and was 
carried on by great apostles like Dmodaradeva, Gopiladeva and others. In later period Yadamantadeva and 
Anraddhadeva made very distinguishing contributions to the spread of the school.

Religions always tend to split into different schools and sects. Hebrews split into Israel and Judah, 
Christendom into Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, Islam into Shi and Sunni, Buddhism into Mahajàna 
and Hinajàna and Jainism into õvetámbara and Digambara. Splits are thus common to religious order.

After áa´karadeva cleavages appeared in Assamese VaÌÀ¸ava. Four sub-sects appeared, each 
called a SaÃ§habait (Sanghâtait), i) the Brahma-saÃ§habait (the Brahmanical group), ii) The Nika-saÃ§habait (the 
partist group), iii) the Purûla SaÃ§habait and iv) the kâla saÃ§habait. The Brahma-saÃ§habait was originally
constituted by the followers of Damodaradeva and was joined by the followers of Harideva and Yadamanideva. This sañhatti admitted Brahmantical rites as well as general devotional practices. Neog says that they took a rigid view of case distinctions and went so far as to administer tantric diküa (āākaradeva, p.154). The adherents of niki-sañhatti pay great attention to rules of outward cleanliness and other formalities. This community does not attach much importance to the Brahmantical rites. The Parūla sañhatti claims itself the main sañhatti vouchsafing that it retains the original features of āā karadeva’s faith. The Kala-sañhatti originated from Gopiladeva. It has a distinctiveness on account of its “catholicity, and democratic outlook, and freedom from the tyranny of creeds.” (Neog, āākaradeva, p.139). It exhibited an indifferent attitude towards all Brahmantical rites. It adhered strictly to the monotheistic doctrine of āā karadeva and placed absolute faith in the guru. It kept its door open for people belonging to low caste and class and thrived most in the north-eastern Assam with its predominating Tibeto-Burman population, and reclaimed large number of people from animistic practices.

However, all these sañhattis follow āākaradeva’s faith by worshipping Køár, abstaining from the cults of other deities, and celebrating nima-kørtana (Neog, āākaradeva, p. 153). None of these deviated from Guru’s basic teachings. If any, it is in externality. In Aniruddha Dasa’s Guru-Varnana (312) it is mentioned that Damodara, Caturbhujya’s successor, is made to explain to king Jayadhvajasimha that all these four sañhattis follow āā karadeva’s faith by worshipping Køár, abstaining from the cults of other deities, and celebrating nima-kørtana (qtd. in Neog, āākaradeva, p.153).

About refreshing effect of Vaiñavism at the advent of āākaradeva, Aniruddha K¡yastha, a Vaiñava preacher in seventeenth century gives a description in his adaptation of Book V of the Bhgavata purana in the following way:

“The Bhakti was previously absent (prior to āā karadeva) in this land of Kamarupa. By taking recourse to various acts of violence people degraded themselves spiritually. At long last, by the grace of Køár, a person by the name of āā karadeva was born. He visited the holy place of Jagannath at a comparatively tender age where he served the feet of the Lord for a long time. Here he came to know the doctrine of knowledge and devotion and at last returned to his native place after having received religious orders (ajna). He made known the path of devotion
(Bhaktipatha) to the people of his land so long steeped in misery. (HN Dutta Baruah, Bhagavata, book V, verse 4390-91 qtd. in SN Sarma, 8).

Thus Vaishnavism as preached by Ākara deva was a conscious reaction against the dominant cult of Ākāta-tantricism, particularly its perversions and excesses, highhandedness of priestly class, evils in society like hegemony of one caste over other, denials to lower sections of the society of enjoying spiritual benefits, caste inequality, exploitation in the name of caste and class.

As in Assam, in Odisha too, reaction to religious hypocrisy and social inequality paved the emergence of five saints, later termed as Paµcasakh¡s (1500-1570), in the later part of the 15th century A.D. who continued their apostolic work into the later part of the 16th century. During that period Srí Kétre at Puri was a seat of philosophical discourse where even from ancient times different Écaryas congregated from different parts of India and engaged in open discussion and argument about philosophical issues. It was a centre where various sects and schools of Hindu religion had freedom to drive home their point through discussion and argument, thus encouraging cultivation of intellectual exercise.

These Paµcasakh¡s were pained to see the prevalence of black magic, sorcery, occult practices and esoteric feats among the scholars. They detested people’s leaning towards jugglery and śāktic methods instead of following glory and purity of ancient Vedantic tradition (Chittaranjan Das p.95). They were determined to expose falsity in black magic and incantations, hypocrisy in the name of religion and shallowness in the complex rites and religious paraphernalia. They opposed religiosity, conflict in beliefs, dominance of Brahman religion, commercialization of religion, corruption indulged by the priestly class and outward show of one’s religious beliefs. They were prepared to check spread of Islamic faith as “due to Muslim invasions Muslim culture, faith crept into Odisha society (and) people got attracted to Islam faith in one God, rejection of religion paraphernalia, prayer etc.” (Kedarnath Mahapatra, Konarka, p.10). So, emergence of these panchasakhhas was “a significant landmark in the history of Oriya literature and culture” (Sitakanta Mahapatra-12). When Panchasakh has appeared on the scene Jagannath cult was dominant in Odisha and the king identified himself as a servitor of the Lord. All the Panchasakhhas also accepted Lord Jagannath as their personal god but in their sampradáya, mantra, tilak, samadhi and guru they were different. Balarima had Balarima/ViL, usum Sampradáya, Ananta had Shishu/Ramananda Sampradáya.
Yashobanta had Vrundavana/Rudra Sampradaya, Jagannath had Atibadi sampradaya and Achyutananda had Nimbarka/Acharya Sampradaya and all of them initiated their disciples. Though their naam-bhajan was "Hare Ram Kirti a" and their diksha was "Brahma Jaina" get their mantra and Samadhi were different. Balaram had Kirti a/Konatraka mantra and yoga Samadhi. Ananta had Surya Ekasuta/Gopala Mantra and Bhiksha Samadhi, Yashobanta had Shyam Mantra / Prema panchaksha mantra, Jagannath Das had 16 naam 32 syllable mantra or Radha mantra and jnayoga Samadhi and Acyutananda had mantras/Prema Sadash Mantra Turiya with Turiya Samadhi (Chhati (ed.) 16,17,18) These pascasakhis expounded their philosophy and religious practices in their individual literary works but their love for the Lord united them into one unit. The Jagannath consciousness like an unseen thread bound them into a single compact bond. Among the Pascasakhis Jagannath Das and Balaram Das were first poets and then became bhaktas and the other three were at first bhaktas and later became poets. Although in their ideals and principles they looked identical from the very beginning yet there is no close similarity between them. Ratnakara Chhati says, "Shree Chaitanya assembled them and the idea of friendship among them grew up" (Achyutananda Das, pp. 6-7). Before resorting to the company of arcanah, Jagannath Das had completed composing his Bhagabata and Balaram Das his Jagamohana Ramya. The intense devotional activities of the latter made him called a "lunatic". Jagannath Das was a level headed saint. Caitanya called him "Atibadi" or the great. Achyutananda learnt the teachings for "Sankirttana" from Jagannath Das. Spiritual teachings of Sanatan Gosain could not satisfy the former, so he took initiation from the latter. Though Pascasakhis set up their mathas at different parts of Odisha yet Jagannath consciousness bound them into a single compact bond.

One noteworthy fact is that medieval Vaisnav preachers of both Assam and Odisha, unlike Caitanya, their counterpart in Bengal, were accomplished translators and composers. And all of them were loose translators of Indian classical writings like Puris, Bhagabata, Ramya, a etc. Most of their ideas and views on their respective branch of religion and its philosophy are reflected in their writings. But in comparison to Assam Vaisnav preachers the Odisha Vaisnav preachers are prolific composers. Aa karadeva, besides composing thirty-five noble numbers (borgit), six one-act plays, some verses on devotional theory, some devotional songs also transcreated a major portion of the Bhagavatpuri, and
Uttarakhand Kīmīyā, a from the original Sanskrit. However, much of his views on religion and philosophy is
culled from his Kīrtan-ghosā, Bhaktiratnakara, Bhakti Pradeep, Nimi-Navastudha Samhita and transcreation
of a major part of the ārṇavadbhūgavatā. Mādhava-deva too was an accomplished writer. Apart from
composing a number of Nītījñānusiddhi, noble numbers, he transcreated the Ādikīloda of the Kīmīyā. a. However,
his ideas on religion and philosophy are gathered from his Bhakti-Ratnāvali and Nīmaghosā.

Pañcasakhīs in Odisha were also prolific writers and translators. Their works reflect their ideas on
religion and philosophy. Some of the major works of these preachers are as follows:

Balarama Das is credited with more than thirty-nine works. Some of his major works are ārṇavadbhūga,
Bhāgavad Gītā, Bedānta Sūtra, Gopāla Gītā, Gopāla Vitā, Dīpētsīra Gītā, Manu Gītā, Amarakosa Gītā,
Kīmīyā, a. Brahmā, da Bhāgava. Bhandachakra Bīṣama, Brahma Kandālṭeṣa. Jagannāth Das composed more than
sixty-three books including translation of the ārṇavadbhūga. His major works are Sanyā Bhigavata,
Brahma Ekśikha Gītā, Tālī ḍhūnī, Mahābhīrā, Indraśīka, Pañcaśakhī Gītā, Bīrābhaṅgha Gītā, Bīrābrahma Gītā, etc. Among the
Pañcasakhīs Achyutakanda Das was most prolific. He has composed more than one hundred ten works,
though all of them have not come to light. The noteworthy works of the poet are Harivamsa, Sanyā Saṁhitā,
Ankita Saṁhitā, Gopāla Gītā, Bhākti Saṁhitā, Odaya Kīhōti, Sanyāgītā, Katharta Gītā, Gurbhākṣēta Gītā,
dīvībētā, Brahmāgaṇī, Gopāla Gītā, Gopāla Pirā, Brahmāgaṇī, Rukmigītā, Nīmabhūma, Nābūdhi Bhākti, Nītiyā Rūba, Mahābhīrā Saṁhitā, Paramabrahma Saṁhitā, Nīryu, a Saṁhitā, Brahmavatīda, Gopālaśīla Purāṇa, etc. Yashobhāna Das has composed eleven works and some devotional songs.
Among his works Premabhākṣī Saṁbhāvī, atya Sarvadaya, Kshērīvatīdī, Bramha Ekśikha Gītā, Rīsa,
Paṇḍārītā are most prominent. The youngest of the Pañcasakhīs is Anantā Das and he has composed Pītha
Brahmāna Gītā, Neva Odaya Gītā, Bhajanārtā, Dīvībētā, Śiḥṭābhēta Tikā, Dhamakṣētra, Gopāla Tikā, Chandralalpa
Tikā, etc.

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