1. Introduction:

The period of the 15th and 16th century A.D. is a milestone in the history of Assam for remarkable waves of reformation. The founder of the resultant of this reformation through Bhakti Movement was Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva. To spread his own faith he moved around the whole of Assam from one corner to the other. It gave birth to new ideas and institutions through which religious, literary, cultural and social aspects became well developed.

Śaṅkaradeva was educated in medieval Sanskrit lore and after that he settled down as a householder. After the death of his wife, at the age 35 he went out in a long pilgrimage of 12 years and visited all most all the sacred places of India. Among the important places that he paid his visit were Gaya, Puri, Brindavana, Mathura, Dvaraka, Kasi, Prayaga, Sitakunda, Sitavandha, Rameswara, Kuruksetra, Barahakunda, Ayodhya,
Badarikasram etc. In all these holy places, he came close contact with Vaiṣṇavite teachers of various schools, and took part with the various religious preceptors in deep religious discussions in theology and philosophy. During his long pilgrimage of 12 years, Śaṅkaradeva acquiring first hand of knowledge of Vaiṣṇavite theology, texts, mode of worship, and management of institutions. Having returned from pilgrimage he propagated a new faith of Vaiṣṇavism. A kind of Vaiṣṇavite faith has already been flourishing in all over India. A new form was introduced by Śaṅkaradeva which had a special character to propagate in the north-east region of India. Śaṅkaradeva was the founder of this new faith and it was known as Neo-Vaiṣṇava.

In the same period several saints of great endowments appeared in various provinces to carry the gospels of the new faith to the masses by rendering the Sanskrit Purāṇas into regional languages. The great saints were: Rāmānuja (1027 A.D. - 1137 A.D.) of Tamilnadu, Rāmānanda (1299-1410 A.D.) of Allahabad, Kabir (1398-1518 A.D.) of Ājamgarh, Vallabhāchārya (1497-1531 A.D.) of Telegu, Nāmdeva (1400-1430 A.D.) of Maharasthra, Mirābāi (1500 A.D.) of Udaypur, Gurunānak (1469-

1. Kakati, B.: *The Mother Goddess Kāmākhya*, p.72
2. Neog, M.: *Socio-Political events in Assam leading to the military of the Māyāmariyā Vaiṣṇavas*, p.5.
1539 A.D.) of Punjab and Caitanyadeva (1485-1533 A.D.) of Bengal etc. In Assam Śaṅkaradeva (1449-1568 A.D.) appeared to introduce new philosophy of life who was a Kāyastha by cast. He changed the whole atmosphere of the religious, social, cultural and literary life of the people.

Śaṅkaradeva taught a simple creed which is called as Ekṣaraṇa Daharma, the religion of supreme surrender to One, and that One is Kṛṣṇa-Viśṇu, who is the form of Nārāyaṇa, assume incarnations from age to age to redeem the world to grace his devotees. The central texts of Vaiṣṇavism of Assam are the Bhāgavata Gītā and Bhāgavata Purāṇa which have been rendered into Assamese verse and prose by Śaṅkaradeva himself and also by his followers.

The characteristic of the new faith was that the literature, verses for recitation in prayers individually or in congregation were all in the local Assamese language. Therefore it could make a wide appeal both to the men and womenfolk. Holding of general religious discourses was the mode of spreading the faith among the people. To spread the Neo-Vaiṣṇavite faith or the Mahāpuruṣīyā Dharma among the masses, Śaṅkaradeva introduced a new type of institution called Satra.
It is really a great concern how deep and wide the influence of Śaṅkaradeva’s Vaiṣṇava faith and the cultural renaissance burnt forth in medieval Assam were. Unfortunately there was no room for untouchability, or higher caste or lower caste people. So, there can not be any doubt that Vaiṣṇavism remains always a living religion in Assam for the masses.

2. Political condition of Assam on the eve of the Neo-Vaiṣṇava movement:

At the advent of the Ahoms, Assam was split up into several independent principalities, governed by different local chiefs. These were known as the Chutiyas, the Kacharies, the Bhuyans etc. In course of time the Ahoms became the sole sovereign of the Brahmaputra valley having a long record of rule for nearly 600 years.

The Kachary kingdom was situated on the south bank of the Brahmaputra which probably extended at least halfway across the old district of Nowgaon. However they survived as a separate ethnic group till the early part of the 19th century A.D. There was a number of petty chiefs called Bhuyans towards the west of the Kacharies on the south bank of the Brahmaputra

and the Chutiyas on the north. The chiefs were independent within their own territories. The western part of Assam was consisted with the old districts of Kamrup, Goalpara and a part of Koch-Behar known as Kamata Rajya. Under the leadership of Viśwasingha (1515-1540 A.D.) the Koch became the dominant power in the western Assam.

Under such a situation, in the religious field, the diverse beliefs and practices became a common fold factor with simple mode of worship, accessible to all. In that period a new religion known as Neo-Vaiṣṇava was introduced and deeply established its existence.

3. Political condition of South Kamrup on the eve of the Neo-Vaiṣṇava movement:

During the 15th and 16th century A.D. politically we found the whole of South Kamrup was split up into several independent feudal Rājyas (States) Governed by the local Rājās (Kings). The central power of ancient Kāmarūpa was becoming weak from almost 11th-12th century A.D. Having taken advantages of weakness of ancient Kāmarūpa so many new principalities were being born. Simultaneously, some feudal states came into existence at the foot-hills of South Kamrup. Amongst these feudal states (Rājyas) Boko, Lukī, Rāṇi, Bagāi, Bangaon, Auguri,
Pantan and Dimariya are specially remarkable. It is known that there were 18 Rājyas in Dakhin kul under the control of Parikshit Narayana, the Koch king. These were situated from Goalpara in the west to river Kapili of Nowgaon in the east on the south bank of the river Brahmaputra. Of course, the ups and downs, the conversions and enlargement of geographical boundaries of these feudal states occurred from time to time.

According to traditional belief vast Brakho (Boko) Rājya was ruled by Garo king Ārimatta after having founded a capital on the hilly region of Lāndughāgrī of South Kamrup. It is also said that Ārimatta set up his first state at Dakṣiṇ Kūl (South Kamrup). It has been mentioned that Ārimatta became a sole emperor of then entire Kāmarūpa-Kamatā region. Almost more than hundred years after the death of Ārimatta in 1385 A.D. there was no powerful king in the entire Kāmarūpa-Kamatā region. During this period having got the opportunity of inter-revolt, inter-quarral and instability of political uncontrolled situation, some Khasi and Garo feudal lords gave birth to some

7. Sangrangthi, p. 35.
new petty states. Among these feudal rulers Umnā Singh, a Khasi feudatory set up Bagāi Rājya. In the eastern side of the Bagāi Rājya Khasi feudatory named Siren do’ Māfiyā set up Pāntān Rājya. This Siren do’ Māfiyā has been mentioned as Sāru Phukan in the history of Assam, history of Koch-Behar and in Darrang Rājbrāmśāvāli. At the same time a Khasi feudatory named Māchi Bind set up a small Rājya called Auguri. The emergence of Lukī Rājya occurred where there was Kulung Rājya in ancient period. The boundaries of the Brakho (Boko) Rājya has been shrunk during the 14th century A.D. when the aforesaid Rājyas came into existence within the boundary of Brakho. At that time a Garo feudatory named Nāriyā Singh became the ruler of Boko. Simultaneously the both Rāṇī Rājya and Dimariyā Rājya could uphold their power and strength. The aforesaid feudal states came into existence during the time from the decline of Kāmarūpa-Kamatā to the evolution of Koch kingdom. According to the history of Koch-behar, the Rājyas like Bagāi, Pāntān, Augurī, Boko, Luki, Rāṇī, Dimariyā etc. of South Kamrup obtained the prestige (Status) of feudatory states from the time of Viśva Singha, the Koch king to Parikshit Nārāyaṇa, the Koch-Hajo king. The Rājās (Kings) of the Daksin

8. Sangrangthi, p. 36.
kūl were regarded as *Dhekerī Rājā* by the Koch kings. It is known that by the order of Naranārāyaṇa, a man named Gobinda Laskar began to rule in a part of Bagai Rājya which was called *Bangaon Rājya*. It has been assumed that this incident took place during 1562-1568 A.D.

Koch-Hajo was occupied by the Mughals in 1613 A.D. When Koch-Hajo was occupied by the Mughals, Baladev Nārāyaṇa, the brother of Koch king Parikshit Nārāyaṇa, escaped to a place named Raṁjādal of Dakṣiṇ Kūl with his army unit. Antique Raṁjādal has been known as village Khaṭkhaṭi which is under Bangaon Mouzā at present. Baladev Nārāyaṇa herefrom sought help of the Ahom Swargadew Pratap Singha. On being complied with the request Pratap Singha made friendlyness relationship with Baladev Nārāyaṇa and 18th kings of Dakṣiṇ Kūl. Amongst all these 18 kings Lukī Rājā was the mightiest one. Whatever, under the leadership of Baladev Nārāyaṇa and with the help of Ahom soldiers the 18 kings of Dakṣiṇ Kūl

* A part of Kamrup district during the rule of Muslims. One part is *Sarkār Kamrup* and the other is *Dhekerī Kāmrūp*.
10. ibid., p. 13.
faught against Mirzā Nāthan, the Commander-in-Chief of Mughals in 1619 A.D. The battle took place on the bank of the Etsudongā Cibimā (River Kharkhari). In the battle, the local united front was defeated. In 1622 A.D. Mirzā Nāthan brought the said 18 kings of Dakṣīṇ Kūl to Nabab of Dhaka and thereupon started Mughal rule in Dakṣīṇ Kūl.14

From 1620 A.D. to 1682 A.D., in the act of pulling one another between the Ahoms and the Mughals for South Kamrup the inhabitants felt too much uneasiness and disturbances. Having defeated the Mughals on the bank of the river Barnadi in 1682 A.D. the Ahom Swargadew Gadadhar Singha occupied up to river Mānāh.15 After that till the Burmese invasions of Assam South Kamrup was under the control of the Ahoms. The Rājās of South Kamrup were regarded as Rājā Powālī by the Ahoms.16

Thus it is seen that under different times and different circumstances that feudatory Rājās of South Kamrup ruled over their feudal states as tributary sometimes under Koches or sometimes under Mughals and sometimes under Ahoms.

15. Devi, Dr. L. : Asom Desar Buranjī, p. 278.
However the various groups of people like Khasi, Garo, Rabha, Boro, Koch, Kalita, Brahmin etc. lived together with friendly atmosphere, who practised their own religious rites in different manners. During the second half of the sixteenth century A.D., Mahāpuruṣa Mādhavadeva, the great Vaiṣṇavite apostle appeared in this particular area with his own religious views and spread out Vaiṣṇavism and set up many Satras which played an important role in the society of South Kamrup and it is still continues today.

4. Socio-religious condition :

Assam is consisted with both hilly and plain areas wherein culture of different communities established their existence. Such as the Karbis (Mikirs), Akas, Daflas, Adis, Singphos, Miris, Misimis, Nagas, Manipuris (Meitheis), Mizos (Lushai) Garos, Khasis are living with their own distinct languages and dialects, manners and customs, religious beliefs and culture. The people living in the plains are the Chutiyas in the extreme east, the Marans, Lalungs, Hojais, Dimasa Kacharis, Sonowal Kacharis, Mech, Rabhas, Bodos, Tripuris, and Garos with allied Hajongs in northern Mymensingh.17 On the other hand, the Khamtis, Phakials, Tai Buddhist groups, Turungs, Khamjangs, Aitanis

(Aitans) are living in the eastern Assam belong to the Shan stock,¹⁸ who migrated to this land after the Ahoms had made their home here. The Naras formed a part of the Ahoms. The Koches ruled over the western Assam. After the Muslim invasion in this land, the descendants of the captured soldiers of Hussain Shah's army contributed to Mohammadan population.¹⁹ Again, a Muslim named Giasuddin Aulia built a mosque at Hajo. This is known as Poā-Mecca (½ of a K.G.), even today. The Muslims eagerly accepted the social customs of the local people of Assam and had nothing to do with the social habits of the Musalmans except taking the names and the religion.²⁰ As a result of the admixture of the social customs of the Hindus and Muslims it developed a new Assamese culture in society.

The Assamese society is comprising with Brahmin, Kayatha, Kalita, Keot, Koch, Daivajña and many other castes including various tribals. The Brahmin are the priestly class, while the Daivajnas are astrologers who are known as Gaṇakas. The Bhuyans were of two types, one was Brahmin Bhuyans and the other non-Brahmin Bhuyans, including Kayastha and Kalitas.²¹

¹⁹. *ibid*, p. 145.
There are different sub-sect of the Kalitas such as Bar-Kalita, Saru-Kalita, Kumar-Kalita, Mali-Kalita, Nat-Kalita, Napit-Kalita etc. The second largest population of the Assamese Hindus are Koches, who are no longer a particular tribe but a Hindu caste. The Koches are the people formed from the different tribes such as Kachari (Boro), Garo, Lalung, Mikir, Rabha etc. who finally converted to Hinduism. The Koches are sub-divided into Bar-Koch, Saru-Koch, Heremiya-Koch, Šaranīyā-Koch and Mādomi-Koch etc. Another large population contributed to the Assamese stock are the Keots. They are Halowā-Keots (agriculturists) and Jālowa-Keots (fishermen).

During the 15th century A.D. the unstable socio-religious condition of Assam kept the people in the midst of puzzle and confused state of mind. People were believed in various religious faiths, prominent among them were Šaivism, Šaktism, Vaiṣṇavism. The characteristic features of the different sects are-

A. Šaivism:

From the very early times of Naraka and Bhagadatta, Šaivism was the popular and prime religion in Prāgjyotīṣa and Kāmarūpa. The following dynasty like Varmans were the staunch believer of Šaiva cult. All the ancient inscriptions of the ancient dynestical

rulers of Prāgjyotiṣa-Kāmarūpa refer to the prime deity of Śiva. *Kalikāpurāṇa* also mentions about the instalation of Śiva cult in ancient Assam. It appears from Rāmānanda’s description regarding the religious atmosphere of Assam before the advent of the Neo-Vaiṣṇavism, that the people did not worship Kṛṣṇa, but inclined to worship Bhairava (Śiva) and considered it to be the greatest deity of Hindu religion. They made offerings of blood of tortoises and goats to their deity Vairava and drank it as a sacred prasāda.23

The Purānic texts make it clear that Śaivism had a strong hold in Assam. In the *Sabhāparva* of the *Mahābhārata* the Kāmarūpa king Bhagadatta had been called Śiva’s friend. In this context, mention may be made of king Bāṇa, the great devotee of Śiva.24 The copper plate inscriptions also provide evidences of supremacy of Śiva-cult during the reigns of the Hindu kings of Assam or Kāmarūpa.25 In the Nidhanpur Copper Plate Inscription Bhāskara-varman offers obeisance to Śiva and sings in his praise.26 In the historical accounts, too, we find references to Śaivism. When the Chinese traveller Hie-en-Tsang

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25. Devi, Dr. L.: *Asom Deśar Buranj*, p. 94.
visited Kāmarūpa during the reign of king Bhāskaravarman in 7th century A.D. he saw hundreds of temples in this land and most of these were Śiva temples. The ruins of the temples also indicate the variety of religious faiths in Assam. The Śiva temple of Viśvanāth-ghāṭ of Tezpur, the ruined Śiva temple of Negheriting of Golaghat, the Deo-Parvat of Numaligarh of Golaghat, Śiva temple of Umānanda at Guwahati have been taken to belong to the pre-Ahom period. In the book *Mother Goddess Kāmākhyā* by B. Kakati, it is stated that Śiva was being taken as the guardian deity of the province of Assam. The Śaiva temples called Kedāreśwar and Kamaleśwar at Hajo, Viśvanāth, Gopeśwar of Śingari, Parihareśwar of Dubi are worth mentioning. The Koch royal family of Koch-Behar in Kāmarūpa has been called the descendants of Śiva. The Koch kings have designated themselves as Śiva-carana-madhukara in their royal seal. Śaivist was a living religion when Śaṅkara was born. Kusumbara, father of Śaṅkaradeva is said to have worshipped Śiva in order to get issue and it is added that god Śiva was pleased in his devotion. As a result a son was born to Kusumbara

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and the name of the child was kept as Śaṅkara or Śaṅkara-vara.\textsuperscript{30} Hence, the prevalence of Śaivism in Assam can be easily guessed.

B. Śāktism :

Śāktism was dominant faith in ancient and medieval Assam till the advent of the Neo-Vaiṣṇavite faith. According to the scholars, \textit{Tantra} and \textit{Śākta} faith had their origin in Assam and Bengal.\textsuperscript{31} According to \textit{Kalika Purāṇa} it was Narakāsura who first introduced the Śakti cult in Kāmarūpa. In ancient Kāmarūpa, the \textit{Devi} had been established as the presiding deity. There are references to the five different forms of the Devī, viz. Kāmākhyā, Kāmeśvarī, Kāmarūpā, Tripurā-Sundarī and Yonimaṇḍalā. The three radiating centres of Śakti-cult are Kāmākhyā, Tamrēśvarī or Kechāikhāti and Jayanteswarī. Traditionally, the Śakti-cult is considered to have its home land in Kāmarūpa with its chief temple at Kāmākhyā.\textsuperscript{32} Mother Kāmākhyā is also conceived as Ādyāśakti, Jagajjananī and Śrṣṭikārini. Scholars believe that because of the predominance of matriarchal civilisation among some tribal people of ancient Assam, many gods and goddesses

\textsuperscript{30} \textit{Guru Carit Kathā}, p. 13.
\textsuperscript{31} Neog, M. : \textit{Purani Asam lyS Samaj am Sanskriti}, p. 15.
\textsuperscript{32} Barua, B. K. : \textit{A Cultural History of Assam}, p. 166.
belonging to the Šakti-cult had their origin in ancient Kamrūpa. In those days the Khasi and Garo communities, followers of matriarchal society also worshipped the material power.

After the adoption of Šākta Hinduism, the Ahom Kings cherished the ambition of becoming devout of Šākta worship, spent more time in religious observances, patronised Brahmanas, made endowments, erected temples, became direct and indirect propagandists of Šaktism. In the western Assam the Koch kings patronised Šākta-Hinduism. During the time of king Naranārāyaṇa, the practice of worshipping the clay images of Devī Durgā in Kamrūpa was said to have been introduced. In 1565 A.D. Naranārāyaṇa rebuilt the Kāmākhyā temple. On the other hand, great honour was paid to Śaṅkaradeva by king Naranārāyaṇa and his brother Cilārāya, the general of the army of the Koch-kingdom during the reign of king Naranārāyaṇa.

It is a historical fact that the ancestors of both Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva the fountain head of Neo-Vaiśṇavism of Assam were Šāktas. Mādhavadeva himself also was a Šākta and he offered arguments in favour of Šaktism when he first met Śaṅkaradeva at Dhuwāhātā (in Majuli) in Jorhat district of Assam.

Besides, making offerings for sacrifice of baffalo, goat, duck, fish, pigeon, deer, tortoise, pig, rhinoceros, crocodile etc. there was also the system of making human sacrifices and offering one’s own blood to the Devi. On the practices of sacrificial rites, it is gathered that Mādhavadeva pledged to sacrifice a pair of he-goats on the occasion of the autumnal worship of the Devi for the welfare of his mother.\textsuperscript{37} In the temple of Rāmreśwari human sacrifices were offered. Same cases were held with the Tripuris, Kachāris, Koches, Jayantiyās and some other tribes of Assam.\textsuperscript{38} It is known that in 1615 A.D. the son of a general of a Muslim invader, Karamchand by name, was picked up from a boat and later sacrificed to the goddess Kāmākhyā.\textsuperscript{39}

Manasā, the snake goddess, is to be another manifestation of Śakti. It appears in the Guru Carīt Kathā that there was prevalent of Śītalā Pūjā (worship of goddess of small pox) in Bāusi Paraganā. The Manasā Pūjā and Śītalā Pūjā are remaining another important part of Śaktism in Assam till today. Hence, it is no doubt that Śāktism was the dominant and popular faith in Assam from the very beginning till today.

\textsuperscript{38} Gait, E. A. : \textit{A History of Assam}, p. 42.
\textsuperscript{39} Bhuyan, Dr. S. K. : \textit{Kāmrūpar Buranjī} (ed.), Art.109.
C. Vaiśṇavism:

The worship of Viṣṇu is as old as the Rg-Veda. The ancient kings of Kāmarūpa claimed themselves to be descendants of Viṣṇu. There are various legends in the Kālikā Purāṇa, Viṣṇu Purāṇa and Bhāgavata Purāṇa about the origin of Naraka and his association with Viṣṇu, Janaka, Kṛṣṇa and goddess Kāmākhyā. The epics and the Purāṇas show the association of Kṛṣṇa with Vāna, Bhismaka and Bhagadatta who were the rulers in different parts of Assam in different times. The definite reference to the worship of Viṣṇu is found in the Baḍganaga Rock Inscription of 554 A.D. made by Bhuti-Varman. Dharmapala was the staunch believer of Viṣṇu during the period between 1095-1120 A.D. He was the ruler of Pāla dynasty of Kāmarūpa.

The Bhāgavatism of the Gupta kings which was the admixture of Viṣṇu of the Vedas, Nārāyaṇa of the Pañcaratnas, Vāsudeva Kṛṣṇa of the Sātvatas and Gopāla of the Āhiras had a tremendous influence over Kāmarūpa. Huen-Tsang (7th century A.D.) the Chinese traveller states that Bhāskarvarman the king of Kāmarūpa was a descendent from Nārāyaṇa (i.e. Viṣṇu). Bāna in his famous

Harsha-Carita describes that the king Bhāskarvarman belonged to the Vaiṣṇava family (Vaiṣṇava-varṇa).\textsuperscript{41}

The idea of incarnation of God is noticeable from by-gone days of \textit{Rg-Veda}. The archeological remains and iconographic representation also show the beginning of worshipping Viṣṇu and his incarnation at least with the fifth and sixth centuries A.D. Probably the Viṣṇu legends form an essential part of Vaiṣṇavism in Kāmarūpa from the 7\textsuperscript{th} century A.D.\textsuperscript{42} But the worship of Kṛṣṇa form of Vaiṣṇavism introduced by Śaṅkaradeva acted as the cementing power in the society which differs from Pañcaratna Vaiṣṇavism.\textsuperscript{43}

The \textit{Kālikā Purāṇa} which is supported to be written in Assam during the tenth century A.D. names two important manifestations of Viṣṇu e.g. Hayagrīva-Mādhava (Viṣṇu with horse head) of Manikuta and Vāsudeva-Viṣṇu of Dikkaravāsinī region. They are still now worshipped. The later group of \textit{Caritas} assert that Śaṅkaradeva discovered a four armed Vāsudeva image of black stone at Baradowā while he was at work in order to construct a Kirtanghar.\textsuperscript{44}

\textsuperscript{41} Mukherjee, A. M. : \textit{Vaiṣṇavism in Assam and Bengal}.
\textsuperscript{42} Goswami J. N. : \textit{Asamīya Śāhityar Samu Buranji}, p. 78.
\textsuperscript{43} Sarma, S. N. : \textit{The Neo-Vaiṣṇavite Movement and the Satra Institution of Assam}, p. 5.
\textsuperscript{44} Lekharu, U. C., (ed.) : \textit{Kathā Guru Carit}, p. 43.
During the period of the 13th century the different religious forms like Śaivism, Śaktism, Tāntricism, Buddhism etc. were prevalent in Assam. In the field of religion during this period the people were in the midst of chaos and confusion regarding different religious faiths. At that time a very feeble stream of Vaiṣṇavism was flowing through Assam. This flow, however, encouraged Mādhava Kandali, the court poet of the Kachārī king Mahāmāṅnikya to translate the Rāmāyaṇa and Harihara Vipra, Kabiratna Sarsvatī and Rudra Kandali to translate several episodes of the Mahābhārata into Assamese language.45

Immediately, at that hour of need Śaṅkaradeva, the Vaiṣṇavite apostle of Assam appeared with his Bhakti movement in order to give a definite shape to the religious movement and to bring Assamese society into one unit by introducing Neo-Vaiṣṇavism.

5. Śaṅkaradeva : the initiator of the Neo-Vaiṣṇavism in Assam:

The period from 15th to 16th century A.D. was the period of world wide reformation. In Europe Martin Luther led the reformatory movement and founded the Protestantism. In India some famous religious reformers were born (already have been discussed in the Introduction). In Assam appeared Śaṅkaradeva who founded the Neo-Vaiṣṇavism in this land. The people of

45. Mukherjee, A. M., : Vaiṣṇavism in Assam and Bengal.
Assam look him as an incarnation of God Viṣṇu. He is also entitled as Mahāpuruṣa and Śrīmanta. His message to the people was:

\[ \text{eka deva eka seva} \]
\[ \text{eka bine nāhi keva} \]

There is only one God whom is to be worshipped and except Him means Lord Kṛṣṇa-Viṣṇu, nothing else. Again he said -

\[ \text{kṛṣṇara kiṅkare kahe śaṅkare} / \]
\[ \text{hari hari bolā samsta nare} //^{46} \]

Śaṅkara, the servant of Lord Kṛṣṇa says that every people should utter the name of Hari (God).

Śaṅkaradeva was born in a Bhuyan family at Ālipukhuri, a place about sixteen miles from the present town of Nowgaon, on the south bank of the Brahmaputra in the bright daśāmī of Āsvin in 1371 Śaka (1449 A.D.). At that time it was in the Ahom kingdom. Śaṅkaradeva’s family was called Śiromoni Bhuyan, being the chief among the Bhuyans. His father was Kusumbara Bhuyan and his mother’s name was Satyasandhyā. Śaṅkaradeva was the descendant of Śiromoni Bhuyan Candibara, a Kāyastha by cast. The lineage of the Śaṅkaradeva is as follows^{47} -

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47. Bezbarua, Lakhminath: Śrī Śrī Śaṅkaradeva and Śrī Śrī Maḍhavdeva, p. 7.
Canḍībara was settled in Kāmarūpa by the Kamatā king Durlabha Nārāyaṇa (1330-1350 A.D.). Due to various reasons Kusumbara, father of Śaṅkaradeva migrated to Bardowā within the boundary of the Ahom kingdom from Kāmarūpa.

Ālipukhuri was a nearby village of Bardowā where Śaṅkaradeva was born. Śaṅkara’s mother died three days after his birth, and he was brought up by his paternal grandmother, Kherṣūtī Āi. Sometime after this, Śaṅkara’s father also breathed his last.

When Śaṅkara was twelve years old he was admitted into a school of a Brahmin, named Mahendra Kandali, an erudite Sanskrit scholar. In study as well as sports Śaṅkaradeva out

48. Devi, Dr. L.: *Asom Deśar Buranji*, p. 73.
classed all the Brahmin and non-Brahmin boys of his age. His sharp memory and brilliant career made him a profound scholar within a very short time. He mastered himself over all the available branches of Sanskrit study. His imaginative power and extraordinary intellect were well displayed even in his school days. Just after learning alphabet, Śaṅkara composed an exquisite poem making up consonantal wordings without the addition of any vowel sounds except the first.

Śaṅkara completed his study at the age of twenty two (1470) and came out as a refined scholar. At the age of twenty three Śaṅkaradeva married Sūryabatī and settled down to domestic life. A daughter, Manu, was born to them. Sūryabatī died four years after her marriage. When Manu attained puberty he gave her in marriage to a person named Hari.

The unhappy incident of his wife’s death brought a turning point to his career. He became a monk and practised Yoga. Within a very short time he acquired all the mysteries of Yoga-Vidyā. By nature, he was religious and thoughtful. This inborn tendency led him to study religious scriptures such as Purāṇas, the Gītā, the Vedas, the Vedāntas and the like. The more he
studied the Śāstras and taught over them, the more he realised of true religion. After an earnest devotion and deep meditation he realised the true sense of Bhakti-cult.\textsuperscript{49}

Śaṅkaradeva now felt inclined to renounce the world and set out a long and extensive pilgrimage. He was accompanied by seventeen companions including his former Guru Mahendra Kandali. He visited most of the sacred places and temples of northern and southern India (already discussed in the Introduction about his pilgrimage). He returned home having convinced that one need not renounce the world. As a matter of fact, he himself remarried Kālindi Āi on his return and began to preach his tenet which was derived from the teachings of the Gītā and the Bhāgavata.

In such a new atmosphere Śaṅkaradeva removed his residence from Ālipukhurī to Bardowā. At Bardowā he set up the first Satra and started to propagate his Ekaśaraṇa Dharma. For an Ekaśaraṇiṇī, the worship of other gods and goddesses is strictly prohibited. It has been said by Śaṅkaradeva himself that a Vaiṣṇava should not worship any other god except Viṣṇu, he

\textsuperscript{49} Acharya, N. N.: \textit{The History of Medieval Assam}, p. 277.
should not enter any other god's temple, nor should he partake of the offerings made to any other god. In so doing Bhakti would be visiated.*

Because of occasional disturbances created by the neighbouring Kachārī kings and his subjects, Śaṅkaradeva had to leave his ancestral residence at Bardowā at the age of sixty seven. He therefore removed to Gāngmou and then to Dhuwāhātā a place in Mājulī island of Brahmaputra. He was staying 14 years at Dhuwāhātā and during this period two important incidents occurred. The first was the conversion of the famous Śākta scholar Mādhavadeva (1489-1596 A.D.), who later on became the greatest apostle and most formidable exponent of the tenents of Śaṅkaradeva. The second incident relates to Śaṅkaradeva’s encounter with the Ahom king Suhummung (1497-1539 A.D.). The Brahmanas accused Śaṅkara before the Ahom king of preaching a religion unorthodox and not envisaged by the Vedas. The Ahom king summoned Śaṅkara to argue with the Brahmanas of his court. Śaṅkara defeated them and retained his practice and devotion with full credit. In the mean time, because of the atrocities of the Ahom kings, Śaṅkaradeva

* Śrimadbhāgavata-Dvitiya Skandha, verse-124, p. 45.
left the Ahom kingdom and came to Kāmrūpa, which was under Hindu king of Koch-Behar. He journeyed to Barpeta in 1546 A.D. At Pārt-bāusī, near Barpeta, Śaṅkaradeva established a Satra with Nāmghar and dwelling huts for his followers. Here he used to hold regular religious discourses, recitations of the sacred texts, congregational prayers and dramatic performances. It should also be noted that the major portion of his religious writings, namely the songs, dramas and kāvyas were composed here. Śaṅkaradeva here converted three Brahmana disciples namely Dāmodardeva (1488-1598 A.D.), Harideva (1493-1568 A.D.) and Ananta Kandali.

But the Brahmana pandit of Naranārāyaṇa’s court did not like the growing popularity of Śaṅkaradeva’s activities, which they considered *mleccha ācāra* or non-Vedic. King Naranārāyaṇa (1540-1584 A.D.) summoned Śaṅkaradeva to his court. The saint by his scholarship and erudition defeated the Brahmana pandits in a contest. For the majestic personality of Śaṅkaradeva, Naranārāyaṇa honoured him with valuable presents and assured royal patronage towards propagation of the Bhakti Movement in his kingdom. The king even expressed his desire to become his disciple. But Śaṅkaradeva declined to give him initiation, as he taught that it would not be possible for kings to observe the religious and ethical code of his religion.
Sāṅkaradeva came back to Pāṭ-bāusī - Barpeta. He came out again for the second pilgrimage in 1550 A.D. Now he was accompanied by 120 devotees. He returned home with a great popularity and a large number of his disciples. After returning from the pilgrimage both king Naranārāyaṇa and his brother Cilārāi invited him on several occasions to Koch-Behar. Sāṅkaradeva stayed at the Kākatkūṭā Satra in the last days of his life. Here the great saint who gave to Assam a new way of thinking about God and man, passed away in 1568 A.D.

A. Contribution of Mahāpuruṣa Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva to Assamese culture.

The contribution of Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva to Assamese culture is boundless. Mahāpuruṣa Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva was the Śiromāṇi, who made the foundation of modern Assamese nation and culture and tried to keep the said nation under the same roof, irrespective of caste, creed and colour. He was the maker of Assamese language and its culture. In fact, he was an exemplary poet, an artist, a singer, a musician, a danced skilled, a dramatist, a philosopher, an etomologist, a painter, a social

50. Bhakat, Dr. Dwijendra Nath: Satrar Samikṣātmak Itivṛtya, p. 84.
51 Neog, Dr. M.: Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva (Essay), Asamiyā Racnā Saṅkalān, p. 15.
reformer, a religious preacher, a sculptor, an unique creator and what not. Had this Mahāpuruṣa not been born in Assam, the existence of Assamese nation and culture would not have survived in Assam. During his 120 years long period he gave Assam a new society and a new culture.

He created well-organised Assamese society without any discrepancy and indifference through the sweet speeches of worshipping of one omnipotent, and that one is Viṣṇu. He awakened the sentiment of the social consciousness and responsibility, equality and friendship amongst the common people through his songs, dramas, art and culture.52

Śaṅkaradeva had introduced the Āṁkīyā Nāṭ (drama) and its acting in Assam for the first time. Though there are a little similarities between his Āṁkīyā Nāṭ and Sanskrit drama yet his creation is really unique and genuine wherein his composition is some total of local ingredients and newly born thought from nook and corner of Indian theatres. In his Āṁkīyā Nāṭ there are several elements viz śloka (verse), Gīta (song), Kathā (intention), Sutra (prelude), Caritra (character), and Samālāp (dialogue).53 Of course, out of these elements the Gīta is the most influenceial

52. *ibid*, p. 15.
53. Das, Dr. N. & Bhattacharya, Dr. P. K.: Mahāpuruṣa Śrī Śaṅkaradeva (Essay), *Asamīyā Raṅnā Sansayan*, p. 86.
element. That is why these Amklya Nat can be regarded as Giti Natya or lyrical drama. The language of these drama are Brajāvalī. These dramas are composed in prose order for the first time in Assamese literature.\(^{54}\) In addition to acting, dancing in melody is also an another remarkable contribution of Śaṅkaradeva. He composed his songs, dramas and other books not only understandable to common people but he used similes and metaphors in his composition as far as practicable. He created his drama from the costumes and usages prevailing in the society of the pre-Śaṅkarite age in Assam like Ozāpāli, Deudhani Nāce, Dhuliyā Nāce, in which the local people were familiar.\(^{55}\) He enriched Assamese culture in every directions. In the field of musical instruments also he did much. By using drum, cymbals, tambourine etc. in the songs, drama, folk-dance, folk-ode and other religious performances he made it largely popular in Assam.

The incessant flow of devotional pleasure is the intermixture of local and Indian tone of melody what was used in his Gitas and Bargitas. He established Indian rural melodious tone along with the development stage of these songs (Gitas).\(^{56}\) Just like

\(^{54}\) ibid, p. 86.

\(^{55}\) Taher, Dr. Mahammad - Samanvayar Kāndārī Mahāpuruṣa Śaṅkaradeva (Article), Satra Pradīpa, p. 25.

\(^{56}\) ibid. p. 25.
this he was not indifferent to our local painting and sculpture in Assam. He depicted picture on *Bata, Sarai, Thagi, Gacha, Thapan* etc. which were traditional from time immemorial. Besides this he depicted various devotional pictures on the wall of *Namghars* specially in the inner and outer walls of the *Manikut*. The special dresses that Śaṅkaradeva generally used in the Satra and other religious performances were also a noticeable one. It is an union of Indian and local culture of Assam wherein *Pāguri* (turban) and *Galabastra* (necktie) are institutionally worn in all the religious performances of the Satra. He not only strengthened the socio-cultural life of Assam but he involved it with Indian culture and fastened its quality to drama, song, melody and tone, decoration and art. It is a matter of extremely surprising one that a Mahāpuruṣa of Assam could be a leading figure of Indian society, culture and thinking of the 15th and 16th century.\(^{57}\) The religious superstitions, the narrowness of mind, the irreligious act, the exploitation and social maladjustment were in full swing in the medieval period. This environment was not only in Assam but in the whole world. Mahāpuruṣa Śaṅkaradeva wanted to exempt the people from such an environment who saw the soul of God

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\(^{57}\) Taher, Dr. Mahammad - Samanvayar Kāndārī Mahāpuruṣa Śaṅkaradeva (Article), *Satra Pradīpa*, p. 25.
in the heart of a dog, a fox and an ass. That great being tied the whole caste of Assam viz., Kirāt, Kachārī, Khāsī, Gāro, Mirī, Yavana, kangka, Gowāl, Dhovā, Turuk, Kubās, Mlech, Caṇḍāl in equal status and they are living under a roof which can be undoubtedly believed. Had he not done it, the basis of Assamese society would have different.

In this way, by strengthening Assamese community he tried to mould and purify them. Regarding this his contribution of Nāmghar and Satra institution are mentionable. Nāmghar and Satra can be regarded as Assamese national platform. The Satra institution and Nāmghar are very important organs of Assamese culture. There are two organisational outlook of the Satras and Nāghars. First of all, it is a gathering place of villagers in a body. The meeting and the prayer of God by the villagers are occurred herein. It is the recreational ground of Bhāonā and Yāṭrā. It is the place of Gaon Panchayat wherein its members are generally assembled. It is the place of religious discussion and of rural development. From that point of view the Satras and Nāmghars are the prime source of unity and development amongst the people. In addition to this satras and Namghars
became the ideal place of various caste and sub-caste. The doors of the Namghars open to all, irrespective of caste, creed and colour. Everybody can take part in all kinds of discussion and dramatical performances.

The noteworthy books of Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva are - Hariścandra Upākhyāna, Rukmini Hariṇa Kāvya, Kīrtana Ghoṣā, Assamese version of the Prathama Skandha, Dvitiya Skandha, Daśama Skandha, Ekādaśa Skandha and Dvādaśa Skandha of the Bhāgavata, Ajāmil Upākhyāna, Bali Chalana, Nimi-Nava Siddha Samvada, Anādi Pātana, Bhakti Pradīpa, Bhakti Ratnākara, Guṇamālā, Uttarā Kāṇḍa Rāmāyaṇa, Amṛta Manthana, Gajendra Upākhyāna, Kurukṣetra, Patnī Prasāda, Kāliya Damana, Rāsa Kṛḍā (Keli Gopāla), Rukmini Hariṇa, Pārijāta Hariṇa, Rāma Vijaya, etc. Besides these the Bargīta, Totaya, Capaya etc. are also his noteworthy writings.

The religion of Śaṅkaradeva was Eksarana-Dharma. By extracting the essence part of the great religious books like - Śrimadbhāgavata Purāṇa, and Bhāgavata-gitā, he propagated the Bhakti cult. Amongst the ninefolds of devotional objectives of the religion of Śaṅkaradeva, Śravana-kīrtana was declared the chief.58

Śaṅkaradeva was the predecessor of Mahatma Gandhi. Śaṅkaradeva inspired the people to comprehend the value of non-violence. He not only established the non-violence in the field of religion, but it was established in his own life also. He stood against all kinds of injustice and harmful act and tried to persuade the rulers to set all things right through religious consciousness. Mahāpuruṣa Śaṅkaradeva was the first person who taught us to give up hatred. Having done this he awakened the self-conviction in all classes of people in the society.59

This great being was the father of Assamese nation and culture,60 who was born in the manifold society of 15th and 16th century, yet his mind was truly Indian as well as cosmopolitan.61

59. Das, Dr. N. & Bhattacharya, Dr. P.K.: Mahāpuruṣa Śrī Śaṅkaradeva (Essay), Asamīyā Racaṇā Sansayān, p. 86.
60. Ibid, p. 84.