

# Role of *Sattr* and *Namghar* in the *Vaishnava* Tradition of *Srimanta Sankaradeva*

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## ABSTRACT

*Srimanta Sankaradeva* (1449 AD-1569 AD) was an important personality in the archives of Indian History. He was not only a religious preceptor, but also a social reformer, who had Sanskritized the diverse ethnic groups of north east India and assimilated them with the national mainstream. He is considered as the father of modern Assamese society and is also considered by his followers as an incarnation of God because of his multi-faceted contribution to the mankind. *Sankaradeva* preached a doctrine of universal brotherhood and humanism for improving the condition of Assamese society and created a harmonious socio-cultural-religious environment for the diverse ethnic communities in the Brahmaputra valley. *Srimanta Sankaradeva* made his magical impact on the religion, social, literary and cultural life of the Assamese people. It was because of Sankaradeva's philosophy of equality and universal brotherhood revealed through his Neo-Vaishnavism many indigenous people took religious shelter under the new faith, the hallmark of which is the evolution of two distinctively unique institutions, namely the *sattr* and *namghar* in Assam, both of which began to serve not only as the instrument of spreading faith but also intimately associating with the social as well as the cultural fabric of the Assamese society. In this paper, a humble attempt has been made to discuss at length about the uniqueness of the Neo-Vaishnava movement initiated by *Srimanta Sankaradeva* and the long lasting changes that it brought about in the Assamese society. The paper further attempts to highlight how *sattr* and *namghar* have contributed immensely in the process of assimilation and socialization of the assamese culture and identity.

**Keywords:** *Srimanta Sankaradeva*, Neo-Vaishnavism, *sattr* and *namghar*, socialization

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The green foothills of medieval Assam witnessed a reformist movement of socio-religious nature that galvanized the entire fabric of ethnic mosaic of this land widely spreading over the dimensions of time and space. Once a land of *tantra*, magic and incantations, as mentioned in the epic *Mahabharata* and *Kalika Purana*, the latter being written during the 11<sup>th</sup> -12<sup>th</sup> century A. D., *Pragjyotisha Pura*, etymologically the city of eastern astrology, is described as a city comparable to the city of Indra, the king of the Gods (Bera, 2016: 5-6). Over a long historic time bearing a tradition of its own, Assam developed the *Asomiya* identity marked *inter alia* by language, territory, dress, and festivals such as *Bihu*, folklore, and the pervasive impact of Neo-Vaishnavism

as it developed in the Brahmaputra Valley under the influence of *Mahapurush Srimanta Sankaradeva*. In reality the term Assamese can be designated to a socio-cultural complex formed by the happy union of caste principles and *Ekasarana* Vaishnavism (*ibid.*). The *Asomiya* caste society has been meagrely influenced by the Ahom principality to which they were subjected for about two centuries in the past. On the contrary, the Sanskritized Ahom gentry who adopted Assamese language eventually became a zealous defender of the Brahminical order (Saikia, 1997: 222-224). However, Assamese socio-cultural life owes to the history of the Ahom principality to a great extent. Cantlie (1984) has observed that the Assamese caste society differs from

most other caste societies in India in its principles and compositions since commensality and other forms of physical discrimination are less rigid here. While referring to the medieval Vaishnavite movement in Assam, Ramirez (2014) descriptively notes that:

“The originality of Assamese caste society stems largely from the role played by the Vaishnavite reform over the last four centuries. Assamese Vaishnavism (*Ekarana*, or *Mahapurusiya*) has evolved since the sixteenth century around principles developed by Sankaradeva, including the grouping of devotees into communities, the rejection of Brahminical ritual exclusivism, and the prohibition of the cult of idols (*murti*) – the latter having proved only relatively successful in practical terms. Soon after Sankaradeva’s death, the movement split into different sects (*samhati*) associated with different monasteries (*sattra*) and whose prescriptions differed (idol cult, participation in non-*Vaishnava* rituals, puberty rules...). The sacred and secular centre for local community is the praying hall, *namghar*, although *pujas* to idols take place in spatially and conceptually separate shrines, *than ghar*. *Namghar* is a place for daily chanting (*kirtan*) and for worshipping sacred texts (*Bhagavan*, *Kirtan ghosa*), for certain life-cycle rites, and for annual festivals. It is also here that meetings are convened to decide about common affairs and to settle disputes. Every lineage is affiliated to the *namghar* or to one of the *namghars* of the village. The *namghar* itself is affiliated to one specific *sattra* (monastery), where male devotees are initiated and which is maintained thanks to regular financial contributions by devotees. Affiliations to *namghars* and various degrees of initiation combine with caste affiliations to define a complex range of individual statuses and commensality relationships. The more initiated a person, the less he will accept cooked rice from a caste lower than his own. And depending on the *namghar*, the rules differ, both with regard to the relationships within the same community and to the relationships with other communities” (quoted in Bera, 2016: 13).

*Srimanta* Sankaradeva (1449 A.D. – 1569 A. D.) was an important personality in the archives of Indian history. He was not only a religious preceptor, but also a social reformer, who had Sanskritized the poly-ethnic mosaic of north east India assimilating them by way of creating

a harmonious socio-religious environment merging them with the national mainstream. He is considered as the father of the modern Assamese society and is also considered by his followers as an incarnation of God because of his multi-faceted contribution to the mankind. Sankaradeva preached a doctrine of universal brotherhood and humanism for improving the condition of Assamese society. He made his magical impact on the religion, social, literary and cultural life of the Assamese people who is considered even today as the greatest social, cultural, religious and economic reformer of the medieval Assam.

### As a *Vaishnava* Saint

In 1481, at the age of thirty-two, Sankaradeva set out for pilgrimage with his seventeen member team. After visiting almost all the temples and *tirthas* (pilgrimages) particularly associated with the Hindu God Vishnu in and around northern India, he stayed at Jagannatha Dham, Puri for a long time and came in contact with a host of saints, sages and pilgrims from different parts of the country. This was a phase of revelation for him when he encountered the religion of love of the Supreme Being. It is said that at this juncture he designated Lord Jagannatha as his *guru* (preceptor) and carried home with him the nascent form of Neo-*Vaishnava* movement inside him (Bera, 2016).

### The Philosophy of Neo-Vaishnavism

Sankaradeva visualized an egalitarian society, where members from all sections of life irrespective of caste, tribe and community will be able to sit together for the prayer of God and dine together. This great and reformist idea of the saint truly reflected itself when proselytized members from tribal communities of the valley united to form the embryo of an equal society. He announced that there is no sense of caste difference in *bhakti*. Members of such tribes as the Koch, Ahom, Kachari, Chutiya and the Nagas soon took shelter under the new creed of Vaishnavism (Sharma, 2014). The Neo-*Vaishnava* faith announced that *bhakti* is open to all people irrespective of caste, creed and ritualism and it posed challenge to the age-old Brahminic religion. Vaishnavism flourished among the lower strata of the society since it was a

non-Brahmanic endeavour of that time. Sankaradeva made all to believe that everyone irrespective of their caste affiliation has the right to love Hari (Vishnu). This ideology of Vaishnavism developed as a result of fission in Hinduism; however, remaining a part of Hinduism as a sect. At the same time it acted as a defence mechanism to protect Hinduism from being inflicted by Abrahamic religions like Christianity and Islam, even in later days. Sankaradeva's Neo-Vaishnavism philosophy started the socio-cultural renaissance in the Assam Valley during the 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards which contributed to the development of vernacular literature, art, architecture and other cultural activities which oriented the tradition of the indigenous people (Kalita, 2016). Sankaradeva's Neo-Vaishnavism philosophy led to the upliftment of the Assamese society and the hallmark of this reformist movement in Assam acted as a catalytic agent in the evolution of two unique institutions, namely the *sattra* and *namghar* both of which were not only instrumental for spreading this newly formed faith but also developed a closely associate bond in the diverse socio-cultural life of the Assamese society.

### The institutions of *Sattra* and *Namghar*

It was because of Sankaradeva's philosophy of *Ekasarana* the concept of equality and universal brotherhood developed in the then Assam revealing Neo-Vaishnavism to the indigenous people who joined this new faith. Under the canopy of Neo-Vaishnavism *sattra* and *namghar* became instrumental for spreading the new faith intimately associating with the social as well as the cultural fabric of the Assamese society. *Sattra*, considered as a monastery, developed as a larger unit accommodating a number of villages whereas *namghar* being a smaller unit functioned as a centre of evening prayer. Over a long passage of time *sattra* became the organizational agency for consolidating and bolstering the movement. *Sattras* became the repositories and radiators of ideals, modes, and mores that the new movement had come to stand for.

The doctrine of Sankaradeva never advocated for idol worship like the normal practice in traditional form of Brahminical Hinduism. His ideology centred on *nama gaan* (prayer) in the grounds of the *sattra* consisting

of prayer services being divided into a day-long programme of three to four parts, each called a *prasanga* or *nama prasanga*. These performances centred in the congregation hall called *kirtana griha* or *namghar*. At the time of initiation in the *sattra* the secret teaching of *bhakti* consisting of four names of the Lord Rama, Krishna, Hari, and Narayana are confided by the senior (veteran) to the novice (Bera, 2016).

The institution of *sattra* played an important role as a social force in the socio-politico-cultural life of the people in then Assam. This was further strengthened through the acceptance of the *Vaishnava* faith by the Ahom Kings and other nobles. The Hindu Assamese, therefore, had two social affiliations; firstly, the temporal affiliation to the State run by the King, and secondly through spiritual submission to the *guru*, who functioned as the head of a *sattra*, by subscribing to the religious belief in Neo-Vaishnavism.

The institution of *sattra* created its decentralised replica called *namghar*, in a comparatively smaller scale that further strengthened the social organisational network of Neo-Vaishnava order. The *namghar* were institutionalised at the village level which formed the basis of all village activities functioning with the exercise of spiritual control over communities. The *namghar* ran on democratic principles doubly acting as the village court controlling over crimes and offences of minimal nature. It also took into cognizance of disputes over land and property. Only difficult cases which could not be solved at this level were forwarded to the *sattra* to decide accordingly. Thus, through these twin institutions of *sattra* and *namghar* the entire Assamese society organised maintaining the cohesiveness and corporateness in the lives of the people of Assam. The network of *namghar* and *sattra* provided a well-organised and yet decentralised religious structure that can be considered to be unique domains of Vaishnavism of Assam.

Sankaradeva spread the message of the 'religion of love' releasing the soul of the common man from the superstitious beliefs. One can visualize Sankaradeva through his contribution not only in the domain of religious resurgence but also through his academic

credibility that lie in his compositions of music, art, painting, dance, drama and so on.

## DISCUSSION

Through this paper, a humble attempt has been made to discuss at length about the growth, development and uniqueness of the Neo-Vaishnava movement initiated by *Srimanta* Sankaradeva and the long lasting changes that it brought about in the Assamese society. The paper further discussed how the *sattras* and *namghars* have contributed immensely in the process of assimilation and socialization of the Assamese culture and identity.

In the light of the above discussion it can be said that the role of Sankaradeva's Neo-Vaishnavism and more importantly the hallmarks of its institutionalized forms of *sattras* and *namghars* have contributed immensely in the process social evolution of the Assamese culture and identity. The doctrine Neo-Vaishnavism, with its dynamic philosophy of inclusiveness, developed a new cultural nationalism by the way of preservation and development of the indigenous culture of the region.

But while making a reappraisal of the entire thing a pertinent question that comes to the force that why Vaishnavism flourished in medieval Assam and what was the necessity of having the institution of *sattras* and *namghars* in this land?

Vaishnavism was not a new phenomenon in medieval India. We find references of this sectarian development in many parts of the country at that period of time. Bera (2016: 142) attests elsewhere that:

“During the medieval times almost the whole of India had been passing through a religious revolution in the form of *Bhakti* movement under great religious personalities like Chaitanyadeva of Bengal (1485-1533), Vallabhacharya of Andhra and Vrajmandala (1479-1531), Kabir of Varanasi (1398-1518 or 1425-1492/1519), Nanak of Punjab (1489-1539) and Tulsidasa of the United Provinces (1523-1623). These saints neither were attached to any particular creed, nor had blind faith in any sacred scriptures. They experienced illumination by individual efforts through freedom of thought and self-culture. Most of them denounced idolatry, and believed in *bhakti*

(love or devotion) as the means of salvation. They preached in vernacular, rather than in Sanskrit, which took them nearer to the soil. The same noble object broke the barriers of caste taking them further nearer to the so called depressed classes. In a way this *Vaishnava* movement, through a revivalist approach, tried to protect Brahminical religion from the inroads being made by other religions. Hence, the emergent religion of Vaishnavism came out with the prospect of a simpler non-ritualistic religion which was acceptable to all breaking the hierarchical order of the Hindu caste system”.

While looking into the historiography we find that Sankaradeva came to be known as the most famous *Vaishnava* reformer of Kamrupa (i.e. Assam) and Kamta-Kuchvihara (i. e. Cooch Behar of present day Bengal), during the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. The territories of Kamrupa then were extended from the Lohit Division of the erstwhile North Eastern Frontier Agency (present day Arunachal Pradesh) on the east to the river Karatoya which now cuts across northern part of West Bengal and the western part of Bangladesh. The valley of the mighty Brahmaputra, forming a sort of central corridor and the different hills forming side rooms to which one could enter from that corridor, constituted the old kingdom in some stages of history (*ibid.*).

Further while making the reappraisal with the idea of review and introspection one can look into a trichotomic parameters of views corroborating the orthodoxy, liberalism and concern of social sciences. The orthodox view is that ‘let us save this great religion since despite its existence over centuries there is remarkable notice of its degeneration’. The liberal view suggests that ‘perhaps the most important reason which contributed to the continued existence of the *Vaishnava* religion and the Vaishnavites as a community to the present day is the excellent organization of the community manifested through the twin institutions of *sattras* and *namghars* at the grassroot level’. Finally, today some scholars of social sciences view that ‘the greatest threat to the continued existence of Vaishnavism came not from some external source but from a spiritual decay within the *Vaishnava* society itself’. At the same time it became apparent that the teachings of the *gurus* hold sway at the liturgical



level but were weakened at the level of application. Deviations and aberrations came to be visible in different ways although individual *sattras* somehow managed to retain their exalted status among their adherents (Bera, 2016).

What is interesting in north eastern part of the country is the ethnic mosaic. The fabric had been chequered with people of tribal origin who subscribed to their own indigenous faiths. As a process of long cultural contact many of them got absorbed to Hindu fold. About seven decades ago this view has been attested by the famous Gandhian anthropologist Nirmal Kumar Bose as 'Hindu method of tribal absorption' (Bose, 1941). Though apparently divisive in nature from the core canopy of Hinduism by creating a barrier to Abrahamic religion that was making inroads slowly through the process of religious proselytization, Vishnavism consolidated its position in this poly-ethnic mosaic through two powerful agents of defence mechanism, the *sattras* and the *namghar*.

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