

CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

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INTRODUCTION

Study of human society is the study of various aspects of man which includes religion, politics, economics, education, law, morality and any other activities of man performed within the frame work of one's own society. All these activities are very intimately interconnected with the members of the society with their respective importance and significance. Religion is one of the most indispensable aspects of social life as man has been enjoying solace and peace of mind through religion. Phases of development of society have witnessed the rise and fall of various kinds of faiths and beliefs commensurate with the socio-political scenario across the globe. Assam has also seen many rise and fall of various political, religious and social movements throughout all ages.

In India Hinduism is such a religious faith that originated in time immemorial giving rise to various sects and cults in course of time. In the 15th -16th centuries a new faith developed based on Vaishnavism which engulfed almost all the communities in India. It was under the leadership of the great reformer Saint Srimanta Sankaradeva that brought about great awakening in the Assamese society which can be termed as the renaissance. Before Srimanta Sankaradeva the social system of Assam was dominated by the Hindu cults, Saivism, Saktism, Tantrism and various tribal animistic religious beliefs. The priests, Ojas (quacks) or occult power practitioners, Brahmins etc. dominated the common people and exploited them in many ways with royal patronages. People were misguided or due to lack of proper knowledge they were compelled to superstitious beliefs and practices and sacrificed animals, bird's even human beings to satisfy unknown forces. Even sati-jowa pratha was a norm prevalent in the society. Seeing all these things some reformers in the society tried to change the evil practices and establish a new religious trend based on Vaishnavism. In Assam, under the leadership of Srimanta Sankaradeva the Neo-vaishnavism movement started. Based on the principles of *nama-dharma*, i.e. the glorification of *Vishnu* or *Lord Krishna* as it is enunciated in *Bhagavata-purana* and *Bhagavata-Gita* as also the *Padma-purana*, it drew the attention of the

common people by its very simple mode of performance. It is interesting to note that inspite of the practice of teaching the *Bhagavata-purana* and the *Bhagavata-Gita* at the traditional education centres known as *tols*, practice of the two sects of Saivism and Saktism could prevail not as a religion of the masses, but as the religion of the royal families or the section of the society with grip and positions in the society as preached by the Brahmin pandits. It could hardly be the religion of the masses for the elaborated arrangements for the worship which needed material sufficiency. Common people generally prefer simplicity in the mode of performances as they can hardly spare money for it. It was one very strong reason for the neo-vaishnavite movement to enjoy popularity among the masses. But the most prominent one was the devotion with which *nama-kirtana* was performed with all sanctity that appealed to their heart and soul. The great personality of Sankaradeva was instrumental at that time in popularizing the faith in Vaishnavism. The principles of Vaishnavism were glorified by the simplicity of the behaviour of the great saint who ultimately started getting considered as another incarnation of Lord Vishnu. The result was much resentment among the Brahmin pandits who could find no other way of standing as a stumbling block to the spread of neo-vaishnavism as they had no such weapon like reason, argumentation or deeper knowledge about Hinduism so as to face the strong and deep rooted argumentations of the great saint. The Brahmin pandits started spreading stories of polluting the atmosphere and environment of the society and mass resentment by him in complete disregard to the religious faiths practiced by the royal authorities. Sankaradeva, a talent per excellence could realise the situation and thought it was to remain prepared for any situation he might have to face. It was because of his intense knowledge of the society and its behaviour at the time of crisis.

Crisis in the social atmosphere and environment always causes a state of doldrums which the wise people gather courage and their mental power to overcome. That is what sankaradeva was found to do by various means of organisational activities both from religious point of view and from the social point of view. He did it through the establishment of the *Namghars* or the *Kirtanghars* for performance of the religious rituals as also by the initiation of the people from various ethnic groups irrespective of any caste and creed. This was a force by itself which can be called *Sui Generise*, i.e. a kind of it's

own with no parallel instance. It was intensive and extensive at the same time. The Namghars happened to function as the community halls of the modern concept in so far as it functioned as the place of religious performance, the gathering people for any mass discussion as also for dramatic performances in course of time. Gradually it started functioning as the very symbol of social unity and sanctity by doing away with differences among the people. As in modern conception, the society has its cultural complex at the present moment; the Namghar enjoyed the same status of cultural centre for which it got considered as a sacred place. Namghars were established in almost all the villages of Assam and functioned as a great cementing force for social unity. It was in course of time the fruit of the fertile thoughts and contemplation of the great saint for the establishment of Sattras at the most convenient places of certain areas.

Such a movement of resurrection had as surging effect on the otherwise weaker organization of the religious sects enjoying royal patronage at the preaching's of the Brahmin pandits. The vaishnavite centres of religious performances stood as a great challenge to the continuation of the worship of the *Saiva* and *Sakta* sects at the temples built of the purpose. As reason, argumentation and scholarly discourses failed to prevail upon *Vaishnavism* or the devotees, the only way left for the Brahmin pandits was to whisper stories about Sankaradeva and inspire the kings and powerheads for a ruling against the great saint. It is a story which none can avoid or neglect, because it was the very beginning of paving the foundation of the Assamese society in the real sense of the term after so many turmoils under the patronage and protection of the Koch kings. The story of the neo-vaishnavite movement is inevitably also the story of the formation of the Assamese society.

The crux of neo-vaishnavism in Assam can be found in the four scriptures, popularly known as sari sastra that is the *Kirtana Dasama* and *Gunamala* by Sankaradeva, and *Ratnawali* and *Namghosa* by Madhavadeva. The four scriptures are enunciated in the Bhagavata-Gita and Bhagavata-purana with the acception that '*Gunamala*' is the sum and substance of *Ekasarana-nam-dharma*, rendered into Assamese by Sankaradeva at the request of king Naranarayana when he requested his court poets to 'put an elephant in a bamboo pipe', which the other poets and scholars called it impossible, but the great

Sankaradeva made this impossible possible by rendering the Bhagavata-purana into the thin booklet of 'Gunamala' into Assamese. This is a spectacular instance of the ingenuity of Sankaradeva. While any one of the four scriptures is placed at the *Guru-Asana* (seat of the Guru) in the *Manikuta* (Sanctum Sanctorum) in the east of the Namghar, it is sometimes found two scriptures placed together. In recent times the practice of placing only 'Gunamala' has been followed by the devotees of Srimanta Sankar Sangha, a universal religious organization established to perpetuate the ideals of Sankaradeva. Another universal practice followed by the devotees of neo-vaishnavism is to place a statue of Garuda almost in each and every namghar.

The neo-vaishnavite movement enjoyed a great boosting with the establishment of the sattras for propagation and spread of neo-vaishnavism. It was initiated by Mahapurusha Sankaradeva himself with the establishment of the first sattra at Vatadrava or Bardowa in the present district of Nagaon. Gradually the sattras went on working as the fountainheads of the propagation and sattras went on getting set up in different parts of Assam. Sri Sri Madhavadeva, the principal disciple of Srimanta Sankaradeva set up the Barpeta Sattra, one of the chief Sattras of Assam near which also was set up the Sundaridia Sattra turning the entire area into a sattra area to the great inspiration of the masses, but to the great discomfiture of the Brahmin priests. It is the sattra at Patbausi near Barpeta which happened to be the centre of the weaving of the unique Vrindavani bastra (length 180 ft. and breadth 90 ft.) to amazement of every one including king Naranarayana. Thus the sattra started functioning as the centres for the upliftment of the various aspects of culture along with the encouragement for the common people to work together as devotees of the absolute one, i.e. Vishnu or Lord Krishna.

The neo-vaishnavite movement passed through some remarkable variations in the observance of the rituals and the religious practices pertaining to the observance of some customs and systems. In course of time there developed four samhatis- the Nika samhati, the Purusa samhati, the Kala samhati and the Brahma samhati. These samhatis developed only after the demise of the great saint and his principal disciple Madhavadeva. Kala samhati was formed by Gopaldeva; Purusa samhati was formed by Purusottam Thakur

Ata, the grandson of Sankaradeva and the Nika samhati was formed by Padma Ata, Mathuradas Ata and Keshava Ata together. Brahma samhati was formed by the followers of saint Damodardeva and saint Harideva.

Sundaridia Sattrra of Barpeta district followed the practice of Nika samhati in course of time only after the death of its founder, Sri Madhavadeva.

1.1 The Problem under Study

An effort is being made in the present study to elaborately describe the Sundaridia Sattrra of Barpeta, one of the oldest religious and culturally developed sattrra of Assam founded by Sri Sri Madhavadeva. The Sattrra of Sundaridia is unique in the sense that Sri Sri Madhavadeva stayed here for a long period and made it a centre of cultural performance.

The study of the Vaishnava monasteries namely the sattras has a great attraction for a great numbers of scholars in Assam. The ancient history of the sattrra, its origin, growth and nature has been studied by some eminent scholars who are able to draw the attention of different scholars at the national level. The sattrra institution of Assam representing as a living organization for propagating neo-vaishnavite deals in the state as well as outside. It was brought into life by the vaisnava leaders of medieval times, mainly by Srimanta Sankaradeva, Sri Sri Madhavadeva followed by Sri Sri Damodardeva and Sri Sri Harideva and their disciples, initially to serve as a centre of religious spreading, literary creation and cultivation of quality performing arts. Right from the beginning till today it has played a vital role in bringing about social changes in the society. It has influenced the social, political, religious life of the people and in the literary field greatly and significantly. The sattras have contributed a lot in propagating the religious beliefs of Neo-vaishnavism and improving the socio-cultural life of the people and creating the unity among the Assamese society which is a mixed collection of different ethnic groups of people.

Sundaridia Sattrra is one of the most influential and culturally developed sattras in Assam. It was established in 1570 (1492 Saka- an Assamese era) by Sri Sri Madhavadeva. The sattrra has been influencing profoundly over the minds of the people since then. For

the last two centuries, this sattrā has been able to grow larger in both physical and moral aspects. Thus it has created for itself an image of respect and honour and it has been a tremendous impact on all aspects of life of the people of the state. By conversion, people of various castes and communities to vaishnavism, the sattrā has succeeded in bringing about social unity and integration. The contribution of Sundaridā Sattrā in the field of music, dance, drama and literature is remarkable.

All the Sattradhikars (principal custodians) known as Adhikar or Medhi have given importance for all residential devotees (bhakatas) in cultivating the habit of singing, dancing, playing of musical instruments and performing the arts of wood, bamboo and cane works etc. So that, they can carry out their cultural life as well as material life. This type of art and craft techniques spread far and wide in the society.

1.2 Review of Literature

There is abundance of literature on the issues of the Sattras of Assam written in Assamese, Hindi or English by local scholars and other enthusiastic writers from India and abroad. As the Sattrā institution is deeply connected to the Assamese social traditions, these are studied by various persons and scholars and reports are published in books, journals, news papers and Ph. D. Thesis (unpublished) or in published form. The researcher has used such literature for secondary sources.

Kakati (1952) made an in depth study of the myth and legends against the background of the broad spectrum of vaishnavism in India. It studies the origin and its representation in different literary works in Sanskrit literature simultaneously their manifestation in the Vaishnava faith in Assam. It is an important contribution towards the understanding of the teachings of Sankaradeva and the spread of his religious faith.

Mahanta (1964) extensively elaborated in the exposition and spread of the ideas and philosophy of Sankaradeva vis-à-vis the vaishnavite movement through his manifold writings in both Assamese and Hindi. He tried to explain about the spread of Sankaradeva's faith and Assamese vaishnavism in Assam and outside the state together. The stupendous works he did for digging out the historical background and the elaborate

analysis of the socio-economic and socio-cultural-historical background of the contemporary Assamese society have thrown much light on the study of the movement from a historical point of view.

Barua (1965) treats in details the cultural contribution of Srimanta Sankaradeva ranging from the plays (ankia nat or bhaonas), their various forms, and timings to the poems, songs and verses composed by the saint (Bargeet, Kirtan-ghosa and others). A detailed survey of Saint Sankaradeva with a full description of his background and a resume was written by Neog (1965). In one volume he has mention about the Hindu culture of Assam as it showed itself through Vaishnavism and the Ekasaraniya belief which may be described as Assam's expression of the medieval pan-Indian Bhakti movement.

Neog (1967) also discussed about the Bhakti movement in the book Sankaradeva and Sankaradeva's Neo-Vaishnavite order and practices of the faith.

Barua's (1969) monumental works are valuable contributions which helped to know in the spread and circulation of the messages of Assamese culture and the teachings of Sankaradeva outside the state. He also wrote about the background and descriptions of the temples of Assam including some of the legends prevalent in the society with their significance in matter of religious background.

Murthy (1973) has also drawn the background of the Vaishnava movement, the biography of Srimanta Sankaradeva and his preaching's and activities. He also showed the differences regarding philosophy and religion of Sankaradeva with Ramanuja.

Neog's works (1975) is stupendous by its own spirit as he made a comprehensive study of almost all the aspects of the movement both from historical and aesthetic stand points. His contributions include a number of works on Vaishnavite literature. His approach to the theme of Sattriya Dance and its Rhythm is of spectacular importance in contribution of its exhaustive study for the first time of its kind. His remarkable works on Bargeet and its Rhythm is based on the study of manuscripts available in the Sattras and the vary modes of performance as practiced there. This again is of remarkable importance

and considered as the mile stone in the field of researches. His works made the study on the Neo-vaishnavite movement rooted in both intensive and extensive studies based upon the objective analysis on a historical line.

Neog's (1977) works are considered as an important contribution of the Mahapurusha cult explained in it in a manner and style understandable to the masses, general readers as well as the initiated devotees. It is a comprehensive study of the various sources of the concept of Vaishnavism as interpreted by Sankaradeva. It focuses on the Hindu scriptures which are not easily accessible to the common readers, but are very essential for an intensive and extensive study of the movement.

Chaliha (1978) edited another publication where there are good number of articles contributed by eminent scholars of India on diverse aspects of teachings and contributions of Saint Sankaradeva, one of the noblest religious leaders of the Vaishnava Bhakti movement in the South Asia. Medhi (1978) did remarkable work to the discovery and exposition of the manifold problems of the Vaishnavite movement, particularly with respect to the authentic presentation of the vaishnavite texts. It is of great importance and significance for his untiring efforts in digging out both the linguistic aspects and the philosophical doctrine of Neo-vaishnavism. His works throws much light on many unexplored aspects of the movement for which his contribution remains unique to a great extent.

Mukherjee (1986) did a comparative study of Bengal Vaishnavism with that of Assam's Eka-Sarana Vaishnavism and is a land mark in the study of religious sects, culture and literature of Bengal and Assam.

In his book, Neog (1988) has given information on the essence and philosophy of Ekasarna-nama-Dharma or the main theme of Neo-Vaishnavism initiated by Srimanta Sankaradeva. The book belongs to the various works of Srimanta Sankaradeva and his closest disciple, Saint Madhavadeva. The entire contribution of Saint Sankaradeva and his Neo-Vaishnavite movement to the social, cultural and religious life of the Assamese people has been described successfully by him.

Rosen (1989) has described in a comprehensive manner on both apologia for the

precedence of Lord Krishna's worship over that of Christ and a compilation of archaeological and textual data that sums up the earliest recorded history of Vasudeva Krishna.

Saikia (1990) made an analytical study on the devotional literature of Sri Sri Madhavadeva, a great preacher and poet of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement in North-East India.

Rastogi (1994) mentions about the splendid Assamese culture which are in debt to the evolution of Vaishnava fraternity, envisaged by the Vaishnava Saints who created insight and vision in every part of life through their writings and commitment to spiritual value. The movement took the first step towards democratization of different tribes into one composite Assamese culture supporting the age long spiritual and moral values. The foundation stone of the Assamese language was placed by the Vaishnava Saints like Srimanta Sankaradeva, Sri Sri Madhavadeva and so on. It was the period of the development of Assamese nationality too. The *Mayamar* Vaishnavas were compared with the Marathas who played a historical role.

Talukdar (1996) studied on the origin, history and development of the Sundaridia Sattrā. He tried to describe about the Sattrā's history from the time to Madhavadeva till date.

Goswami (1997) described a form of dance regarding oja-pali of Assam. He mentions the dance movements and the musical manners related to it. It focused to the readers some ideas of the many sided genius and personality of Srimanta Sankaradeva and his everlasting contributions to the Assamese life and literature, art and culture.

Sarma (1999) tried to present a comprehensive study of the growth, development and the subsequent grouping into four different samhatis of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement and the Sattrā institution. His work is one of the most praise worthy contributions on the study of Sattrā institution of Assam. Barman (1999) studied on the life and works of Saint Sankaradeva.

Nath (2001) in his work expresses on the geography, geology and antiquity of

Barpeta, its ecology and environment, society, economy and culture formed a designed by the Sattras with a relationship for the place and its inhabitants. He has nicely depicted the atmosphere and the achievements of its inhabitants what make Barpeta so special and significant. He has nicely portrayed the rich cultural heritage, ethnic diversity and natural beauty of the Sattras of Barpeta. Among all the Sattras, the Sundaridia Sattras is one of the remarkable ones.

Rajkhowa (2003) has tried to bring out the great personality of Srimanta Sankaradeva, admitted as the “Jagat-Guru” (the Universal Preceptor) and “Sarva-Gunakar” (the embodiment of all the virtues) by focusing on his life, the preaching’s and the religious practices as also his noted contribution to humanity through the spread of Universal Love, Peace, Justice, Liberty, Equality, Fraternity and Secularism- all these for the benefit of human kind.

Neog (2004) has attempted to describe the Assamese culture with particular reference to Vaishnava renaissance, the Bhakti cycle of Assam, Vaishnava music and the Indian Ballet. Bhattacharya (2004) has described about the Sattras of Assam belonging to different sects.

Kalita and Majumdar (2005) included information about Srimanta Sankaradeva and his great personality and contribution in the field of religion, culture, social reform and economic manifestation in their edited volumes. Bhusan (2005) has attempted to describe the various sides of the State of Assam, located in North-East India. He has made all attempts to embrace in totality all the lives, spurting and quiet aspects of Assam.

Barkakati’s (2006) work is a remarkable one which deals with various themes ranging from the life sketch of Saint Sankaradeva and his philosophy to ankiya nats (one-act devotional plays) and bhaonas (a dramatic and religious performance of Vaishnavite dramas) of the Saint. He points out the readers an insight into how Srimanta Sankaradeva brought the composite Assamese nation into being through his Neo-Vaishnavite beliefs. The treatise introduces new ground in bringing to light the sociological import of the cultural system that Vaishnava movement has begun in motion over the centuries. Das

(2006) has given a description in his book about the lives of nine great devotees of Srimanta Sankaradeva and Sri Sri Madhavadeva, who are known as Nava-Ratna (Nine Jewels).

Bhuyan (2007) has made an original contribution in explaining the role of Srimanta Sankaradeva in making the composite Assamese culture with the varieties from all ethnic groups from within the geographical boundary of the Brahmaputra Valley. He has elaborated how the new beliefs of Neo-Vaishnavism initiated by Srimanta Sankaradeva had all the principles of social movement, which was so powerful and methodical that it left no section of Assam untouched. The writer also mentions that the institution of Namghar can come out as a vital centre to convey the message of peace, harmony and integration.

Medhi (2008) has given an insight into the art and culture of North-East India. It consists of seven articles on different key heritage issues of the region with a very important article on Saint Sankaradeva and his religion. Das (2008) has pointed out on the Jagannatha culture and the varied historical perspectives related to it. Stress has been laid on the influence of the Vaishnavite, Saivite, Jain and Buddhist traditions in the making of Jagannatha culture. Moreover, issues relating to other shrines in Jagannatha temple compound, management of the temple in different periods and diverse rituals followed are also discussed. Gait (2008) attempts a comprehensive study of the history of the region and can be declared to be an authority on the same. The growth and evolution of Saint Sankaradeva's movement has also been covered by the book and it gives relevant information about the course of its development. Sarma (2008) throws the light on all the aspects of Saint Sankaradeva's philosophy. It provides a comprehensive philosophical frame work in which scholars have attempted to establish the conceptual truths of Sankaradeva's ideas and thoughts. There are all together forty seven papers illustrating the observations of the contributors.

In 2009, Baishya's book gives a detailed description on Assamese traditional, indigenous, science and technology. It is practiced by the people of Assam and North-East India millennia in their daily life. The history of science and technology is the part of

indigenous cultures of North-East region with particular reference to Assam by carefully observing literary sources, folklore materials and archaeological information has been described by him very well.

In 2010, Phukan describes the story of a person (Sri Sri Sankaradeva) who steps to greatness in his lifetime. But Sankaradeva's multi-talented personality is often obscured by religious suggestions.

Though there exists a lot of literature related to the sattras of Srimanta Sankaradeva and Sri Sri Madhavadeva, yet there is a need to study the sattra institution of Assam for a better understanding of the society. The Sundaridia Sattra established by Sri Sri Madhavadeva still needs to be studied as no complete study of the organization is available in the context of modernization of the human societies at large.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

The Sattras being the centres of Assamese culture with their traditional prayer form embrace classical dance, music, open theatrical form, colourful boat races, handicrafts and script writing bear a spectacular importance in the study of the cultural scenario of Assam. Sundaridia Sattra bears a long tradition of more than five centuries and a half since the time of Madhavadeva.

The present study aims to examine the following-

- i. History and development of Sundaridia Sattra
- ii. Physical structure of the Sattra
- iii. Organisation and management of the Sundaridia Sattra
- iv. Daily and occasional and annual rituals of the Sattra
- v. Socio-cultural activities of the Sattra.
- vi. Relation of the Sattra with the community.
- vii. Relation of the devotees with the Sundaridia Sattra and the changing aspects of the Sattra.

1.4 Methodology

This research proposal was finalized after studying the influence of Vaishnavite religion over the Assamese community as a whole and Barpeta area in particular. This is an exploratory research work. Several studies were conducted by foreign and local scholars on Sattras of Assam, like Barpeta main Sattrra and Sattras of Majuli, but Sundaridia Sattrra has not been surveyed by any scholar. It was established by the principal disciple of Srimanta Sankaradeva at the direction of Sankaradeva's wife and stayed there for a long time. This Sattrra has many unique features and therefore it was selected as a topic of research. A preliminary survey was made at the beginning and necessary data were collected by genealogical, case study, schedule survey and observation methods. Organization within the Sattrra and surrounding villages and their involvement with the Sattrra are studied in detail discourse with the people for a year. As this researcher belongs to this area, it is also helpful to know the geographical, environmental and social background of this area.

The President, Secretary, Treasurer and Auditor are the important persons within the Sattrra who were interviewed by the researcher. Moreover, general members, villagers, women and young groups of boys and girls were met by the investigator. As the investigator belongs to that community it was possible for her to stay within the Sattrra community and take part in various activities through out the year. It was necessary for the understanding of the insider's views.

The scholar has also visited different households of local people of the area to understand the lifestyle of the people and different religious and cultural festivals in the Sattrra together with information on the impact of modernization and westernization on the Sattrra. These interactions along with participation in the various festivals helped in broadening the knowledge base regarding the lifestyle and day-to-day religious practices of the people. In addition to Sundaridia Sattrra, some visits were also made to other Sattras like Barpeta Sattrra, Patbausi Sattrra etc. to have a better and deeper understanding of the Sattrra culture and their interconnections.

Besides this, available literature, books, magazines, journals, periodicals, historical documents, published/unpublished doctoral thesis and internet were also consulted from time to time. Elaborate library work was undertaken in the Library of the Department of Anthropology, Gauhati University, Krishna Kanta Handique Library, Gauhati University, Library of the Regional Centre of Indian Council of Historical Research, Guwahati and research institutions like Vivekananda Kendra Institute of Culture, Guwahati and Kamrup Anusandhan Samity, Guwahati.

1.5 Presentation

This thesis consists of seven chapters. In Chapter I there is an introduction including the problem under study, review of literature, aims and objectives of the study and methodology etc. The second Chapter (Chapter II) contains Neo-vaishnavism in Assam, including history and development of neo-vaishnavism in Assam, structure and division in neo-vaishnavism, sattras and namghars, contribution of neo-vaishnavism etc. In Chapter III, there is a presentation of Sundaridia Sattras including its origin and history, its environment and physical structure etc. In Chapter IV the organization and management of the sattras have been discussed. Chapter V gives a detailed description about the activities of Sundaridia Sattras and its daily rituals, annual rituals and occasional rituals etc. The Chapter VI deals with the sattras and community. In Chapter VII, summary and conclusion of the research work have been discussed.