Sankardeva and Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam

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In the 12th and 15th century A.D. the social fabric in India was torn by all-out degradation and cultural distortion, and corruption permeated all sections of the society, right from the ruling to the priestly class. Various malpractices were committed in the name of religion, which vitiated the social structure. Such a situation inspired Hindu thinkers and reformers of the time to evolve a simpler and liberal faith acceptable to all. In this backdrop, the Vaisnava Bhakti movement, based on the liberal doctrine of bhakti or devotion, took shape, and encompassed the whole of India.

Assam too, was experiencing political turmoil with the different principalities fighting to hold sway over the entire region. This chaos and instability was reflected in the religious sphere also. Assam in the 15th century presented a kaleidoscopic picture of diverse shades and grades of culture. There were people who loosely adhered to Vaisnavism or Saivism and there were others who practised Saktism bordering on extreme Tantricism. The followers of these cults indulged in evil practices like animal and human sacrifice, magical rites, spells and the like. The poor and the downtrodden became victims of these ghastly practices.

It was at this juncture, that the great spiritual leader, social reformer, playwright and composer, Srimanta Sankardeva appeared on the social scene of Assam. He was a multifaceted genius who gave a direction to the chaotic Assamese society by initiating a fresh approach to the existing Vaisnava religion that gave rise to a set of new values and aided in social synthesis.

The writer of this article discusses at length about the uniqueness of the Neo-Vaisnavite movement initiated by Srimanta Sankardeva and the far-reaching changes that it brought about in the Assamese society. The writer dwells on the chequered journey of the Vaisnavite movement in Assam through both troubled and peaceful times, adding new elements to it through the ages, without losing its original essence, up to the present times. The Vaisnavite movement initiated by Sankardeva ushered in an era of socio-cultural renaissance in Assam as it developed a new genre of philosophy, art and music in the form of Borgeets, Ankiya Nats or Bhaoanas, Satriya dance and the Sankari school of painting. The writer also discusses about the role of the satras and the namghars which over the years have proved to be the custodians of the Neo-Vaisnavite movement and have become an integral part of the Assamese society.

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A social reform movement swept across India between the 12th and 15th century A.D. It was the Bhakti (devotional) movement based on the liberal doctrine of bhakti or devotion. It initiated new ideas even as it gave birth to new faiths, which at some places of the country took the shape of a revolution. The context of the new trend is rooted in the societal degradation and cultural distortion that plagued many parts of India at that time. Under the
corrupting influences of power and wealth and the incipient ritualism that had taken hold of the priestly and ruling classes of the Hindu society, various malpractices were committed in the name of religion, which vitiated the social structure. These factors impelled the Hindu thinkers and reformers of the day to evolve a simpler and liberal faith that would be acceptable to all alike. This set in motion what subsequently came to be known as the *Vaishnava Bhakti* movement, originally started by *Alwars* of South India and which thereafter spread to northern India and then to the eastern regions of India. The *Vaishnava Bhakti* movement thus encompassed the whole of India and thereby brought about a renaissance in the socio-religious life of the Indian people. By propounding in general that divine grace could be achieved through devotion, which was open to all classes and castes, the movement dispensed with the principle of birth, which hitherto determined access to salvation through knowledge and ritual. To that extent the movement initiated structural changes in the socio-religious sphere of the Hindu society and consequential changes in its value system and equality of relationships.

**The Neo-Vaisnavite Movement in Assam:**

As in the rest of India, the social, religious and political life in Assam was in a shambles resulting in a society full of chaos and disorder. Since the beginning of the 13th century, the ancient kingdom of Kamrupa was slowly undergoing a process of disintegration. The whole of Assam, from the eastern-most Dikkaravasini region to the river Karatoya in the west, disintegrated into several kingdoms, some of which did not survive more than a few decades. In the easternmost tract of Assam, ruled a line of Chutiya Kings. To the west of the Chutiya kingdom lay the Ahom principality. Further west, there was the Kachari kingdom to the south of the river Brahmaputra and it probably extended at least halfway across the modern Nagaon district. On both sides of the Brahmaputra to the west of the Kachari kingdom of the south and Chutiya Kingdom of the North-east, were a number of landed chiefs known as Bhuyans. The western part of Assam comprising the modern districts of Kamrup, Goalpara and parts of Cooch-Behar was ruled by a few dynasties during the course of the fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries and the kingdom was known as Kamataraja. By the end of the fifteenth century A.D., however, a new power, viz., the Kochs, under the leadership of Bishwa Sinha, emerged as the dominant political power in Western Assam. Constant friction and conflict for supremacy amongst the above powers was the order of the day, which severely affected the political condition of the region. The political instability brought about a chaotic condition in the religious sphere also.

Assam in the fifteenth century presented a motley picture of diverse shades and grades of culture. The majority of the people belonged to non-Aryan tribes having distinct manners, customs and religious beliefs. Those who professed Hinduism loosely adhered to *Vaishnavism* or *Saivism*; *Saktism* bordering on extreme *Tantricism*, was also widely prevalent. The followers of these cults were all found indulging in evil practices like animal and sometimes even human sacrifices, magical rites, spells and the like. It was based on the philosophy of palate and sensual pleasures. The economically backward classes and the socially downtrodden became the victims of such ghastly practices. At the other end of the religious spectrum were the bulk of the indigenous tribal population who followed their indigenous tribal faiths. Bringing all these diverse communities and warring factions under a systematized religious code and conduct of life and to provide the masses with a mode of worship, which would be simple and at the same time accessible to all was what constituted the pressing need of the time. Against this backdrop, Srimanta Sankardeva appeared on the scene. A multi-faceted genius, Srimanta Sankardeva was at once a spiritual leader, a social reformer, a prolific writer and a master playwright and composer. He is credited with providing the bedrock of Assamese culture, and creating a religion that gave shape to a set of new values and social synthesis. He was born in the *Ahin* (September-October) month in 1371 *Sakabda* (1449 AD) at Tembuani (Bordowa), in the present-day Nagaon district of Assam.
Srimanta Sankardeva undertook the difficult and arduous task of a reformer at a juncture of acute crisis in Assamese society and polity. The Neo-Vaishnavite movement initiated by Srimanta Sankardeva in Assam in the latter period of the 15th century ushered in an era of socio-cultural renaissance in Assam, humanist in content and popular in form, in literature as well as in the vocal and visual arts. The movement was at once unique in nature and revolutionary in terms of its impact. The uniqueness of the movement lay in the fact that unlike other contemporary cults in the rest of India, Srimanta Sankardeva’s Neo-Vaisnavism rested not on a discursive reasoning and abstract thinking but its emphasis was more on ethnic integration, societal reforms and spiritual uplift through an innovative mode of religious conduct based on indigenous elements of the region, at a time when the society in Assam was in a turmoil fragmented and faction-ridden as it was. It was revolutionary in the sense that Neo-Vaisnavism in Assam meant not only a religious faith but a way of life. It encompassed their social, cultural and religious spheres even as it brought about a change in very outlook on life and the world. Neo-Vaisnavism stands out among the different Bhakti cults of India in terms of its unique and innovative character, which found expression in the move to create an egalitarian civil society based on the shared values of fraternity, equity, humanism and democracy.

This new creed of faith started by Srimanta Sankardeva is officially known as Eka-Sarana-Naam-Dharma. Sankardeva preached devotion to a single God, Lord Krishna or Vishnu, (Eka Sarana) who can be worshiped solely by uttering His various names (Naam). Srimanta Sankardeva considered the sranana and kirtana modes of bhakti or devotion as prescribed by the Bhagavata-Purana to be sufficient. They are accessible to the highest and lowest, men and women alike, irrespective of birth, caste or status and no rigid theocratic laws are to be followed by the votary. Idol worship does not feature in Srimanta Sankardeva’s system. The Radha-Krishna cult is not acknowledged in this system of Vaisnavism, nor is any shakti (energy represented in a female form) of Lord Vishnu to be recognised. The four fundamental elements of Neo-Vaisnavism are (i) God, (ii) Guru (the religious preceptor) (iii) the fraternity of Bhakats (devotees) and (iv) Naam. Of the different attitudes of bhakti, Srimanta Shankardeva advocated dasya or servitude to God. Eka-Sarana-Naam-Dharma is also known as Mahapurushia Dharma, after Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardeva, who founded it.
The Neo-Vaisnavite movement commenced in Assam in the first decade of the 16th century and reached its climax towards the middle of the 17th century. It started on a missionary note by working towards the uplift of the backward classes and minimization of the rigours of caste distinctions. The peripheral groups including the so-called untouchables and backward classes and tribes were taken into the new fraternity. The earliest attempts to bring the backward tribes, castes and classes into the fold of Vaisnavism was made by Srimanta Sankardeva himself who accepted Govinda belonging to the Garo tribe; Paramananda, belonging to the Miri (Mishing) tribe; Narahari, an Ahom man; Narottama belonging to the Naga community; Jayarama, a Bhutiyi person; Candsai, a Muslim person; and Bhattadeva, a Brahmin scholar as his disciples. They all took part in the bhaona performances (religious plays) and when required acted as guides to analyze the essence of Eka Sarana Naam Dharma. In his popular work, Kirtana-ghosa, Srimanta Sankardeva announces:

\[ Nahi bhakatita jati-ajati vicara \]

(There is no sense of caste difference in Bhakti)

Thus, people from all castes and walks of life were received by Srimanta Sankardeva as disciples; and they could even act as teachers in his Vaisnava Order. A democratic outlook permeates the entire teachings and practices of the Neo-Vaisnavite faith in Assam. On the one hand, God has been brought down from the metaphysical heights to the reach of the ordinary people, on the other hand the status of human being, indeed all creatures, has been elevated by insisting on the relation of God and soul. Srimanta Sankardeva’s concerns were not limited to human rights alone but they extended even to include animal and plant rights, as is evident from some of his literary contributions. It is based on the simple principle that every living being is God’s creation. The fundamental principle of the Neo-Vaishnavite philosophy was enlightenment of the human conscience through universal love. As a pointer to the fact, one may quote a verse from the ‘Kirtana-ghosha’ written by Srimanta Sankardeva. It gives Lord Krishna’s last words to his devotee, Uddhava. The opening sentence of the verse is as follows:

“uddhanaka sambudhi matanta Krishna pache”
In this verse, Lord Krishna explains to Uddhava what the mystic doctrine of love is and asks him to practice it with an unperturbed mind. Lord Krishna then goes on to declare that he lives in all creatures and that all creatures have to be taken as Vishnu and respected. He alone is learned who makes no discrimination between a Brahman and a chandala, sees the image of Vishnu in all creatures, possesses the same regard for the benevolent and the thief, has the same understanding for the vile and the good. Such a man is liberated from jealousy, envy, hatred and egotism. Lord Krishna further says that the ‘bhakta’ (devotee) is His soul and that He is the bhakta’s soul in turn.

The missionary work started amongst the backward classes by the early reformers, was extensively carried out by their successors and followers during the succeeding periods. Members of such tribes as the Koches, the Ahom, the Kachari, the Chutiyas and the Nagas soon took to the new creed of Vaisnavism. People of the so-called untouchables or lower castes came to live in fellowship with those of the highest castes in Assamese villages and they could take part in all functions of the villages. Accordingly, Neo-Vaisnavism soon became a veritable movement with a mass appeal.

The movement as mentioned above commenced in the first decade of the 16th century and reached its climax towards the middle of the 17th century. The religious reformers of the first two centuries including Srimanta Sankardeva and his direct disciple Mahapurush Madhavdeva initially faced a lot of difficulties, hardships and opposition from the state and vested interests, the latter determined on preserving the status quo. Various allegations were levied against Srimanta Sankardeva. Though it is difficult to seek a clear and consistent stand either on the part of the Ahom monarchs or the Koch Kings of Western Assam with regard to the neo-Vaisnavite movement, on the whole, the movement did not have a smooth ride during the early part of its history. But later on, in spite of royal indifference or hostility, the state had to acknowledge it by the beginning of the 18th century. By this time Neo-Vaisnavism got firmly entrenched and established in the Brahmaputra valley, with an unprecedented mass following.

As mentioned earlier, the Neo–Vaisnavite movement initiated by Srimanta Shankardeva ushered in an era of socio-cultural renaissance in Assam even as it developed a new genre of philosophy, art and music in the form of Borgeets (devotional hymns heralding a new classical school of music), Ankiya Nats or Bhaonas (a theatre form introduced for the first time by Srimanta Sankardeva and which became increasingly popular with the masses, centering around themes from the Bhagavata-purana. and the Ramayana) as well as the Satriya dance as modes of conveying the principles of Ek-Sarana-Naam-Dharma, centering around single minded devotion to Lord Krishna or Vishnu based on a spirit of equality and humanism which found concrete manifestation in the institution of the Namghar. A new school of painting was also developed by Srimanta Shankardeva, just like his dance and music. It is known as the Sankari school of painting. He initiated this new form of painting with his epoch-making drama Chinha-yatra, which was enacted in 1468 AD at Tembuwan (Bordowa) in Assam. Incidentally, this happened to be the first play in any modern Indian language. Chinha-yatra brought about a new era in the cultural history of India. It was the first play in the world where elevated stage and drop-scenes were used. It launched the regional drama movement in medieval India. Srimanta Sankardeva depicted seven Vaikunthas (the celestial abode of Lord Vishnu) in scrolls, which were used as backdrops there.

For most of his works, Srimanta Sankardeva used the Assamese language of the period so the lay person could read and understand them. But for dramatic effect in his songs and dramas he used Brajvali, an artificial mixture of Braj language and Assamese. His magnum opus is his Kirtana-ghosha containing narrative verses in praise of Lord Krishna and meant for
community singing. A copy of the *Kirtana-ghosha* is found in nearly every household in Assam. Srimanta Sankardeva and his disciples used many instruments for a dramatic effect in his songs and dramas. All these were innovated indigenously. Two of the most important of these instruments are the *Khol* (a form of drum with a unique acoustic property) and the *Bortal* (big cymbals).

**Neo-Vaisnavite Institutions - The Satra and the Namghar:**

The hallmark of the Neo-Vaisnavite movement initiated by Srimanta Sankardeva is reflected in two distinctively unique institutions, viz., the *Satra* and the *Namghar*, both of which are intimately associated with the social, cultural as well as religious life of the Assamese society. The *Namghar* actually evolved as an offshoot, an extended wing or a miniature replica of the *Satra* institution. Accordingly, while tracing the origins of the *Namghar*, a brief account of its parent body, the *Satra* becomes necessary.

To create an atmosphere where single-minded devotion to God based on a fellowship of devotees or *Bhakats* under the guidance of a *Guru* or teacher could be achieved, the *Satra* institution was brought into existence and it became a well organized and a popular institution within a century of its inception. In fact, the most distinguishing feature of Assamese Neo-Vaisnavism is the network of decentralized monasteries – the *Satra*, literally meaning “holy areas” each headed by a *Guru* (teacher) designated as the *Satradhikar*. At Tembuwani (Bordowa), the birth place of Srimanta Sankardeva, the saint set up his first *Kirtanghar* (prayer hall), with houses for the devotees within the compound and on the four sides of the *Kirtanghar*. The *Kirtanghar* was the nerve centre of the entire place. It was a long and open hall, where the devotees sat together to sing the glory of God. There was no idol in the altar, but only a book, generally the *Bhagavata*, symbolising God. In addition to prayers and cultural functions, religious discourses were also held in the *Kirtanghar*. One of the functions of these satras was to initiate aspirants to Neo Vaishnavism. This activity of initiation by the *Satras* prepared the ground for cultural integration of different sections of the Assamese society with increasing numbers of both tribal and non-tribal sections of the Brahmaputra valley population accepting the new creed, which had a strong democratic content based on a common code of conduct. It is important to recall that after Sankardeva's death, the movement was no longer monolithic. Variations and multiple leaderships emerged with Sankardeva’s direct disciple Madhavdeva and his protégé Gopaldeva (aka Gopal Atta) carrying forward the *Sankarite* tradition in its original vibrant form, thereby commanding larger following than the other disciples of Srimanta Sankardeva, namely, Damordeva. The Neo-Vaisnavite movement initiated by Srimanta Sankardeva, by and large, remained confined to the western part of the Brahmaputra valley during his lifetime. After his demise, his chief apostle *Mahapurush* Madhavdeva succeeded him to be the head of the order. Madhavdeva, a man of vision and action, sent twelve disciples to different parts of Assam to spread the message of *Eka-Sarana-Nama-Dharma* propagated by Sankardeva.

By the end of the seventeenth century, ideological differences resulted in the emergence of orders or *samhatis* of *Satras*- (i) *Purusha* (ii) *Nika* (iii) *Kala* and (iv) *Brahma*. The *Purusha samhati* derives its origin from Purusottama Thakura, the eldest grandson of Srimanta Sankardeva. The *Satras* of this *samhati* were founded by the preachers belonging to Srimanta Sankardeva's direct line or *Purusha*. This *samhati* lays emphasis on *Naam* or prayer. The *Nika samhati* was founded by Mathuradas Burha-Ata and Badaluwa Padma-Ata. They organized their *Satras* in strict conformity with the rules and regulations prescribed by Madhavdeva and their adherents and paid great attention to outward cleanliness (*nika*). In this *samhati*, the position of Madhavdeva is more important than that of Srimanta Sankardeva, the latter being revered as the *Guru* (teacher) of their *Guru*. The *Satras* established by Gopaldeva and his successors formed the *Kala-samhati*. The *Kala-samhati* gave the guru a supreme position. It was more egalitarian in outlook and more liberal in matters of caste than other *samhatis*. Besides, the *Satradhikars* of these *Satras* preached...
mainly among the tribal and so-called backward or depressed people of the region. Though these Satras had caste Hindus in their fold, their disciples mainly consisted of people from the Kachari, Ahom, Kaivarta, Brittiyal, Chutiya and Moran communities. The most prominent Satras of this samhadi were the Moamaria and Dihing Satras. The Moamaria Satra was distinguished by strong democratic traditions with a large congregation of people of Tibeto-Burmese origin. The Brahma samhadi consisted of the sub-sects of Damodardeva and Harideva, two Brahmin disciples of Srimanta Sankardeva. Most of the Satras affiliated to this samhadi are headed by Brahmin preceptors; hence the name Brahma samhadi. This samhadi permits Vedic rites and devotional practices alongside Nama Kirtana and lays highest importance on Deva (God) in comparison to the other three fundamental aspects, viz., Guru, Nama and Bhakat. The genre of art and culture stemming from the Satras are part of a living cultural tradition. The Satras have been serving as the very custodian of the Assamese cultural identity.

The first stage of evolution of the Satra naturally began with Srimanta Sankardeva. But in his times, the religious association organized by him did not take the shape of a regular institution of a permanent nature. Sankardeva, as has already been mentioned earlier began preaching at his native place Bordowa and built a Satra there.

It was during the time of Madhavdeva and Damordeva that the Satra institution attained the second phase of its growth. The architectural structure of the Satra also received the final shape during this period. It thus came to possess the prayer hall (Namghar) and the Manikut with the wooden throne (Singhasana) attached to the former and containing a sacred scripture.

The Satra institution, by the middle of the 17th century, firmly established itself and the royal authority had to accord recognition to Srimanta Sankardeva’s faith. Subsequently, the Ahom kings and nobles accepted Neo-Vaisnavism. The Satras played a great role in the social life of the people. The Hindu Assamese had now two affiliations: that of temporal allegiance to the state and the king, and that of spiritual submission to Neo-Vaisnavism and a Guru, the head of a Satra. The leaders of Neo-Vaishnavism by this time found a more peaceful and accommodating atmosphere to preach their faith and consequently numerous branches of Satras were established by family members and disciples of the principal Neo-Vaisnavite (religious) leaders of the 16th and 17th centuries. The period between 1650-1800 may properly be called the era of the growth of the branch-Satra (sakha-Satra). One component of the Satra institution, the Kirtanghar, became an integral part of every Assamese village in Assam over time. It became popular by another name too, the Namghar. Over time it came to be an integral part of every Hindu village of Assam. As a result every Assamese village came under the religious influence of one Satra or the other and its influence even penetrated gradually into the neighbouring tribal areas. The Satras gave Assam a rich religious literature, besides reviving and popularizing the art of classical music and dance.

As institutions having an unmatched symbolic value and commanding deepest of reverence from all sections of the people of Assam, the role of Satras becomes immensely significant in terms of reaching out to the people. In this context one might mention the role of the Satras during the National Freedom Struggle with special reference to the role played by the Satradhikar of Garmur Satra in Majuli situated in Jorhat District of Assam, Sri Pitambar Goswami. It was due to his efforts that the anti-opium and boycott programmes and eradication of untouchability became popular slogans and practices in the island even before the Congress adopted them seriously. Lately, the Asom Satra Mahasabha was formed at the initiative of a few visionary Satradhikars or heads of Satras of such places as Jorhat, Sivasagar, Majuli, Nagoan, Kaliabor and Tezpur in Assam with a view to bringing coordination in the religious and cultural activities of the Satras across the different samhatis or orders. Originally launched as Satra Sanmilan in 1915, it subsequently came to be known as Satra Sangha and finally in 1990, it was renamed as Asom Satra Mahasabha.
The organization has undertaken a number of steps in the direction of restoration of the atmosphere of peace and integration in Assam. As part of its efforts, it organized a massive peace rally in the State on October 31, 1999 from Sadiya to Dhubri in which people from different linguistic and ethnic groups from different parts of Assam took part in great numbers. The organization appealed for peace and harmony to the participants, numbering around nine thousand, who finally gathered at the Judges’ Field in Guwahati. Again on November 17, 2000 and on December 17, 2000, similar rallies were held in Dhubri and Rajmaj respectively. However, the most notable step taken by the Assam Satra Mahasabha has been the Bhaona festival called Setubandha (literally meaning “building bridges”) which it has been organizing periodically since 2003.

Aimed at achieving cultural integration in the society, the hallmark of this festival is the participation by the various ethnic tribes and communities of Assam such as the Mising, Sonwal Kachari, Nepali and tea tribe communities to name a few. They are imparted training by the organization itself. The first such festival was held in Guwahati in 2003 and the Mahasabha together with Srimanta Foundation has since been organizing the festival at regular intervals. It may be noted here that over the years, the Bhaonas performed in the Satra premises have helped to evolve the system of Sattriya dance which officially has been given the status of a classical dance form, belatedly though. The Sattriya dance is an integral part of the Assamese cultural identity. Accordingly, the Satras have an immense role to play as custodians of the Neo-Vaisnavite tradition and emerge as nerve-centres from where the entire Neo-Vaisnavite genre of song, dance, plays and literature can spread far and wide.

As has already been mentioned earlier, one component of the Satra institution, the Kirtanghar or Namghar, became an integral part of every Assamese village in Assam over time. The establishment of the village Namghar came about with the idea of popularizing the Neo-Vaisnavite faith to the masses. The Namghar came to serve as a forum of not only religious but also socio-cultural activities of the community. In fact, the existence of these prayer halls is noticed in almost every Assamese village. The village Namghar has for the last four hundred years has been serving as the village public hall: it is at once a village prayer hall, a cultural centre, a “village court” and a “village parliament”, thereby providing a common forum for the villagers to assemble in an atmosphere of goodwill and cooperation. The village Namghars operate and are managed on democratic principles. The Namghars since the time of Srimanta Sankardeva have been so designed and constructed that people of all races and tribes living in this part of the country could easily enter them and take part in congregational prayers and the like. Thus, significantly, the Namghar is built without walls or if at all, only with half walls with two rows of pillars with a thatched or tin roof. This has a great deal of symbolic value in terms of promotion of the ideal of equality. An open wall-less Namghar underscores the point that its doors are open to everyone and that it is an inclusivist institution embracing all people without making any discrimination among them along such artificial lines as caste, creed, religion, tribe or language. All activities of the Namghars are directed towards the Singhasana, a wooden throne, in which is kept a sacred book composed by either Mahapurush Srimanta Shankardeva or his direct disciple Mahapurush Madhavdeva. These include the Dasham, the Kirtan-ghosha, the Naamghosha, Bhakti-Ratnavali, etc. The wooden throne may be a three, five or seven storied one with a canopy called Chandratap over it. The shrine is adorned with beautifully woven Gamochas (a form of local fabric) contributed by the villagers. A brass or bell metal lamp stand is kept in front of the shrine. It is known as the Akhyoy Banti. The Namghar has a fixed drum or what is known as Doba in Assamese. It is sounded twice every day, once in the morning and once in the evening. The size of the Namghar varies depending on the population of the village. The corporate life of an Assamese village moves centering round the village Namghar. It is constructed by the joint labour of the villagers. Every household is considered as a unit and therefore, each household is required to place the service of at least one member of the family in constructing and maintaining the Namghar. Every household must contribute proportionately to the Namghar according to the number of its members in
cash or kind. Those who are not in a position to contribute are required to put additional labour on a co-operative basis. Tasks like the kindling of light, cleansing and sweeping of the floor and making arrangements for materials necessary for daily services are done by each household by rotation, depending upon its capacity. The Namghar is the centre of cultural activities of the villagers. The Namghar becomes the venue for congregational chanting of prayers or Naam-Prasangas, singing of Borgeets or classical devotional songs composed by Srimanta Sankardeva and his disciple Madhavdeva and enactment of Bhoonas on various occasions. No discrimination is made in terms of class or caste in distributing roles in the Bhaonas held at the Namghar. The villagers contribute according to their capacity and aptitude to make the performance a success. Accordingly, the staging of such performances in the village Namghar unites all castes and classes under a common cultural tradition. It may be mentioned here that an entire handicraft based cottage industry centering around the Bhaona performances has also sprung up over the years. The Namghar has thereby contributed immensely to the overall socio-cultural development of the Assamese people. The role of the Namghar as a panchayati institution can hardly be exaggerated. In fact, Srimanta Sankardeva in medieval Assam conceived the idea of community development and Panchayati Raj and through the institution of the village Namghar, he united the village communities to settle their common disputes in accordance with their local judicial procedures and methods. The villagers assemble here on various occasions to discuss matters concerning their village. The Namghar, in its capacity as a “village parliament” has traditionally been a vibrant centre of community development activities. On the premises of the Namghar are taken collective decision regarding various issues of community life ranging from construction of water tanks to educational institutions. Since at the Namghar the people of the village themselves, or more precisely, the raij, (the general body of the villagers composing of eldest male member from each household of the village) take decision on issues which directly matter to them, the Namghar provides an effective forum for decentralized planning and decision making.

The Namghar as a village court, witnesses the village elders (raij), assembling in its premises to try cases of moral or social delinquency on the part of any villager with the help of the relevant Raj-Medhi or Barmedhi, the local agents of the Satras concerned (of which the parties involved in the dispute are disciples). Punishments are then meted out according to the nature of the offence. However, criminal cases are kept outside the purview and only minor cases of moral and civil nature are tried. The ruling of the Namghar is generally taken as binding upon both the plaintiff and the accused, which the latter can afford to violate only at the risk of social ostracism.

In the light of the above discussion, it can be concluded that the neo-Vaisnavite tradition initiated by Srimanata Sankardeva, in terms of its humanistic philosophy, art, literature, music and institutions stands at the very core of the Assamese cultural identity even as it contributes immensely to the process of socialization in Assam. Adherence to the Neo-Vaisnavite philosophy in its true spirit is the key to building a vibrant civil society based on peace, goodwill, mutual respect, social justice and self-help.

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6 Sharma, S.N.: The Neo-Vaisnavite Movement and the Satra Institution of Assam, Gauhati University, Department of Publication, Gauhati University, 1966, p. 155.
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ABOUT ISHANI

The Sanskrit nomenclature for the North-east direction is Ishanya or Ishan-Kon. Hence anything concerning the North-east or Ishan-Kon is ISHANI. Keeping this in view, we have selected ISHANI as the name of our journal.

ISHANI will aim at presenting developments in the North-Eastern region, which may otherwise escape notice of the national media. It will also be our effort to evolve ISHANI as a window to view the fascinating, bewildering mosaic that is the North-east India. We will carry views and reflections of the people from the North-east on various issues concerning them. It will also be our attempt to highlight the good work of different voluntary action groups in the region. The life and work of prominent personalities of the North-east will also be presented.

As ISHANI is being published as the journal of Mahatma Gandhi Ishani Foundation, we will inevitably carry articles and other materials related to the life and thoughts of Mahatma Gandhi. This will be one of our highly cherished objectives. The publication of ISHANI has become possible through the generous donation of a donor group. It will continue to be published as a bimonthly journal for some time. ISHANI is a mission aimed at rendering service to the North-east and the rest of the country by being a communication bridge between the two regions. We seek goodwill, support, cooperation and blessings from our well-wishers.

Editor