

**THE SOCIAL ORGANIZATION OF THE BHAKTI
MOVEMENT IN MEDIEVAL ASSAM:
A STUDY OF THE CARITA-PŪTHIS**

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled "THE SOCIAL ORGANIZATION OF THE BHAKTI MOVEMENT IN MEDIEVAL ASSAM: A STUDY OF THE CARITA-PŪTHIS", submitted by Ms. Radha Das in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy, has not been previously submitted for any other degree of this or any other University. This is her own work.

We recommend that this dissertation may be placed before the examiners for evaluation.


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PREFACE

This dissertation aims at an understanding of the *bhakti* movement in Assam in relation to medieval Assamese society. It is based on the study of five major *carita-puthis* or hagiographical works as source material. However, this is only a cursory endeavour as part of a larger Ph.D. programme in which I would like to develop on some of the themes I have raised here.

I would like to express my deep sense of gratitude to my supervisor, Kunal Chakrabarti for the meticulous care and patience with which he has gone through my work. His suggestions have been invaluable and his involvement with the subject made me work for it. These words seem indeed inadequate, for the trouble he has taken with it.

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GLOSSARY OF TERMS

- Bāhir hāti - Huts or residences for married devotees of the nāma-dharma in a sattra.
- Bhakta - Follower of a deity and devoted to religious life
- Bhūyan - A dominant agrarian community having a caste stratified society. The bhūyans consisted of many landed chiefs who were mostly Kāyasthas, other castes included brāhmaṇas, daivajñas, kōlitās.
- Carita-pūthis - Biographical works on Saints. These related the life-stories of Sankardeva, Madhavdeva and various other Vaiṣṇava preachers.
- Choto Rājā - A local ruler of an area. These were generally feudatories of the Kāmarūpa rulers.
- Daivajñas - Astrologers.
- Dakṣiṇā - Money or presents given to brāhmaṇas on special occasions.
- Ekāśaraṇa nāma-dharma - Devotional religion showing allegiance to a single god.
- Ghāt - Tolls collected at various points on the river banks.
- Gosāin - A religious preceptor. The heads of Vaiṣṇavite Sattras are known as gosāin.
- Guru - A religious teacher. One who instructs in the Śāstras.
- Hāti - Rows of huts where devotees are lodged in a Sattra.
- Hāt - A place where trade transactions are carried out - a market-place. Also, tax collected in the market-place from traders.
- Kakoti - Revenue official at the village level.
- Kewaliyā - A celibate devotee.

- Khel - Organization of the paiks into units (Khels) for military service under the Ahoms.
- Kīrtana - Reciting the names and attributes of a deity accompanied by music and singing.
- Kolitā - A dominant peasant caste comprising of agriculturists and sub-castes of artisans and craftsmen.
- Likchou - A category of paiks given to nobles and officers for rendering them compulsory unpaid personal service.
- Mahantā - Non-brāhmaṇa heads of Sattras.
- Medhī - Functionary appointed by the Sattra to look after the affairs in a village.
- Nām-ghar - Prayer hall.
- Nāma-prasaṅgas - Devotional services consisting of prayers, recitations and religious discussions.
- Paik - Persons required to render specific services to the State, in rotation. Four paiks form a gōt.
- Sāmhatis - Neo-Vaiṣṇava sects.
- Śaraṇa - The initiation ceremony in which a neophyte is incorporated into the bhakti faith.
- Sattras - Neo-Vaiṣṇava monastic institutions.
- Sattriyā - Head of a Sattra.
- Śiromani bhūyan (or Barbhūyan - Chief over a number of bhūyan villages.
- Ujir - Village revenue official.
- Vāmācāra - Left handed rites marked by sexual and dietary excesses for propitiating a deity according to the tāntric form.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This dissertation proposes to study the neo-Vaiṣṇava movement in Assam between the 15th and the 17th centuries, its socio-cultural background, the nature of popular participation, and its institutional support base which helped it to sustain over a long period of time, on the basis of the biographies of the Vaiṣṇava saints who initiated and led the movement. The period between the 13th and the 17th centuries A.D. witnessed the articulation of various devotional cults, in many parts of India. Saints/poets associated with these movements, stressed the importance of vernacular language, because it was the only medium of direct communication with the rural folk of the peasant societies. The majority of these saints voiced popular opposition to the *varṇa*-based social structure and the ritualistic aspects of the brahminical religion. They espoused an intense theism marked ^{by} a fervid devotion to a personal God. This was facilitated by the use of local language in which these biographies are composed. The neo-Vaiṣṇava movement in Assam dominated the process of Assam's cultural formation. Here, the *nāma dharma* still continues to be a common mode of expressing one's relationship to the divine.

Researches on the *bhakti* movements of medieval India have been primarily concerned with the doctrinal aspects of *bhakti*, with a few exceptions which tend to characterize the movements as social protest. Recently Krishna Sharma¹ has challenged the very notion of the term *bhakti* as it was traditionally understood. She has drawn our attention to the problem of defining *bhakti* as devotion to a personal god, or rejection of knowledge and the monistic view of reality. On the basis of its etymological moorings in ancient classical literature she has emphasized the lack of uniformity in its various manifestations in medieval times. However, it may be pointed out that while the idea of *bhakti* makes an early appearance in classical literature, the abovementioned view fails to account for its changing nature and development over time. The various strains of influences which might have contributed^{to} its particular formulations in medieval times, has not been considered by her.

Some of the best examples of concern with the theological content of *bhakti* are provided by the studies on the

1. K. Sharma, Bhakti and the Bhakti Movement: A New Perspective, New Delhi, 1987, p.109.

bhakti movement of Bengal. Sushil Kumar De's² Early History of the Vaiṣṇava Faith and Movement in Bengal clearly states that the author is concerned more with the faith than the movement, the 'ideas and ideals' rather than the 'incidents and practices'. De looks at the Bengal Vaiṣṇava movement, their development under Caitanya, and later at the hands of the six *Vṛndāvana* Goswamis, through a detailed exposition of the doctrines contained in the Bengali and Sanskrit literary sources. He further dwells on the *rasa-śāstra* and forms of devotional sentiments as one of the most dominant features of the Bengal movement. Ramakanta Chakrabarti's later exhaustive study³ also follows a similar pattern.

Prabhat Mukherjee looks at the development of medieval Vaiṣṇavism in Orissa in a historical perspective. He identifies two phases of Vaiṣṇavism in Orissa - "the medieval Orissan Vaiṣṇavism" which had an indigenous origin and the subsequent influence of Caitanya, and attempts to highlight

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2. S.K. De, Early History of Vaiṣṇava Faith and Movement in Bengal, Calcutta, 1942.
 3. R. Chakrabarti, Vaiṣṇavism in Bengal 1486-1900, Calcutta, 1985.

the specific doctrines and philosophy of the former as a distinct strain within the Caitanya movement.⁴ He refers to rapid spread of the Caitanya movement when for a time, "the kings, the subjects, the high and the low" - all came under his influence.⁵ Mukherjee, however, does not analyse the social processes which generated this wide support base, limits himself only to the political sphere of royal patronage. He also views the success of the movement in Orissa as a result of the personal efforts of Caitanya and his disciples, in isolation of the society in which they operated. Thus, the politico-religious aspects gain precedence in his study to the exclusion of all other factors. Similar religio-philosophical concerns dominate recent works such as D. Gold's study on *bhakti* saint poets of north India, and Vaudeville's discussion on Kabir.⁶ Some attempts have been made to analyse the *bhakti* movement in other regions in terms of its socio-economic basis. While some linked the evolution of the *bhakti* ideology to the notion of dissent and social

4. P. Mukherjee, The History of Medieval Vaisnavism in Orissa, Calcutta, 1940, p.iv.

5. Ibid., p.123.

6. Cited in K. Chakrabarti, "*Kīrtan* and Social organisation in Medieval Bengal", The Indian Economic and History Review, Vol.28, No.4, 1991, p.455.

reform in terms of the study of the agrarian economy and feudal nature of social organization, others saw it as essentially reinforcing the feudal social order. D.D. Kosambi was the first to draw a correlation between *bhakti* and feudalism. The "doctrine of *bhakti*", with its 'unflinching loyalty to god' was 'similar to the loyalty which linked together the serf and retainer to the feudal lord' - in fact *bhakti* suited the feudal ideology perfectly."⁷ Arguing along similar lines, R.S. Sharma described the medieval *bhakti* movements as a manifestation of the medieval feudal order which "reflected the complete dependence of the tenants and semi-serfs on the land owners."⁸

Irfan Habib, on the other hand, has detected in the *bhakti* movements in northern India led by Kabir, Nanak, Dadu etc., a space for social mobility. He has argued that technological and economic changes, interlinked with urbanization and a changed political situation, led to changes in the economic positions of certain groups such as the

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7. D.D. Kosambi, Introduction to the Study of Indian History, 1956.
 8. R.S. Sharma, "Problem of Transition from Ancient to Medieval in Indian History", Indian Historical Review, Vol.I, No.1, 1974.

artisans and craftsmen in urban areas and among rural groups such as the Jats in Rajasthan and Western U.P., who, however, continued to be socially discriminated. "Jats were a pastoral people to begin with who had later taken to agriculture - a fact that demeaned them in relation to the peasant communities."⁹ Thus Habib says, "it was inevitable that they should protest against a social discrimination which had no material basis any longer and the contemporary monotheistic movement provided the best and strongest form of such protest." Harbans Mukhia¹⁰ has suggested another line of argument. He contends the notions of ideology as social current and the "ruling class's conspiratorial ideology" which emanates from R.S. Sharma and Irfan Habib's writings. But he also has not linked the popular articulation of religion with the everyday structure of peasant life. For South India, Veluthat Keshavan¹¹ and M.G.S.

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9. I. Habib, "The Historical Background of the Popular Monotheistic Movements of the 15th-17th Centuries", Mimeograph, Aligarh, 1965.
 10. H. Mukhia, "Peasant Production and Medieval Indian Society", Journal of Peasant Studies, Vol.12, 1985.
 11. V. Keshavan, "The Temple Base of the Bhakti Movement", Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, 1979.

Narayanan¹² have tried to see the links between *bhakti* and the temple based brahminical movement and the feudal concept of loyalty and dependence. H.R. Sanyal's Bāṅglā Kīrtaner Itihāsa which remains an exception apart from being an exposition of religio-scriptural aspects of *bhakti*, also concerns itself with its role in the social organization of Bengal through *Kīrtana* and emergence of Bengal's cultural identity.¹³ However, while the notion of material base emerged as the ground for understanding the *bhakti* ideology, what was entirely ignored was the cultural patterns of the absorption of this particular concept by the rural people.

Not much work has been done on the neo-Vaiṣṇava movement in Assam. Maheswar Neog's¹⁴ authoritative study does contain brief sketches of the political, social, and economic background of the movement, but he fails to draw

12. M.G.S. Narayanan and V. Keshavan, "Bhakti Movement in South India" in S.C. Malik (ed.), Indian Movements: Some Aspects of Dissent, Protest and Reform, Shimla, 1978.

13. Cited in K. Chakrabarti, op. cit., pp.456-461.

14. M. Neog, Śaṅkaradeva and his times: Early History of the Vaiṣṇava Faith and Movement in Assam, Gauhati, 1965.

the interlinkages between these aspects for an understanding of the emergence and development of the movement. Moreover, though the work includes a concluding chapter on the social implications, it is a restatement of Śaṅkardeva's socio-religious prescriptions rather than to shape the social profile of Assam. The work essentially revolves around the personalities of Śaṅkardeva, the founder of the movement, and the other prominent Vaiṣṇava saints who followed him, and contains a detailed discussion of the doctrinal aspects of *bhakti*. Moreover, he views culture as an aesthetic achievement and therefore treats cultural products as aesthetic objects. Though he refers to it as a movement of the common people, and realises the integrative role of *kīrtanas* (public collective singing of devotional songs) and *satras* (neo-Vaiṣṇava monastic institutions) as platforms for interaction, he does not discuss the implications of these. However, the book is important as a pioneering and informative work on the subject.

S.N. Sarma's¹⁵ study broadly follows a similar course, with an emphasis on the religio-philosophical content and

15. S.N. Sarma, The Neo-Vaiṣṇavite Movement and the Satra Institutions of Assam, Gauhati, 1966.

life-sketches of the principal Vaiṣṇava saints. Although he discusses at length the institution that helped to organize the movement i.e. the *saṅghas*, his primary concern remains limited to the description of its specific architectural structure and its internal administration, without any attempt to locate them in their broader socio-cultural setting, or to assess their role in creating a strong social base for the movement.

My attempt will be to look for a total perspective of the *bhakti* movement in Assam between the 15th and 17th centuries, through a study of the underlying structures, that takes into account the wider social, economic, political and cultural realities. It will shift the focus from the individual saintly personalities and religio-philosophical aspects to a broader socio-cultural analysis, keeping in mind the particularities of the region. In the articulation of such an approach, the problematic of regional specificities assumes a particularly important place as this region remained largely outside the dominant socio-political or economic trends perceived in medieval north India.

The area under consideration comprises the three states of Kāmarūpa, Asamā and Kamatārājya broadly corresponding to the modern state of Assam and parts of north Bengal, and the

neighbouring state of Arunachal Pradesh. Together they form a distinct geographical unit, having markedly uneven levels of topographical and socio-cultural formations. It includes fertile river valleys inhabited by settled agricultural communities having a caste divided society, and tribal settlements outside the realm of Hinduism in close proximity with one another. The continuous interactions between these groups has played a crucial role in shaping the historical developments in this region. Hence, the imperative to locate the *bhakti* movement within this wider cultural setting. We would, therefore, like to trace the socio-economic structure of contemporary Assam, which showed a much greater flexibility in comparison to north India and situate it in the backdrop of a loosely knit political system which witnessed the gradual emergence of a rudimentary state under the Ahoms and their subsequent attempts at centralization. It is in terms of these factors that we shall trace the emergence and spread of the movement, its institutional and cultural mechanism, the processes of penetration of *bhakti* ideals and their subsequent routinization in the lives of different social groups.

The hagiographies of the Vaiṣṇava saints of Assam are the primary source of our information. Therefore a few

words on the methodology of how to study these texts are in order. The concerns of numerous recent studies centering on saints and their cults, especially in Europe, and elsewhere, arising out of an increasing ^{interest} in the study of popular cultural forms and the perceptions and world view of the lower strata of society appear particularly germane. Most works have emphasized the need to locate these 'saints' and their 'cults' in their broad socio-cultural setting. In a recent compilation of essays on the subject, Pierre Deloos in his sociological study of canonized sainthood in the Catholic church, has explored notions of sanctity among the people for an understanding of the 'social construction of sainthood'.¹⁶ Robert Hertz's research on the cult of St. Besse in a remote Alpine region in Italy, emphasizes the significance of the physical environment and the folklore and legendary tales existing among the mountainous inhabitants of the region, which, according to him, provides the vital clues for an understanding of the pattern of diffusion of the cult and the consciousness of these remote people.¹⁷

16. P. Deloos, "Towards a Sociological Study of Canonized Sainthood" in S. Wilson (ed.), Saints and their Cults, Cambridge, 1983, pp.189-212.

17. R. Hertz, "St. Besse: The Study of an Alpine Cult" in S. Wilson (ed.), op. cit., pp.55-89.

Such historical concerns take us to certain closely related issues which in the light of their relevance to the present study demands attention. First is the problematic of 'popular culture' and how it should be viewed. The second relates to the question of the treatment of the sources which are replete with myths, legends and eulogistic exaggerations, as relevant historical documents.

Recent scholarly discussions have often focussed on the problem of defining what constitutes 'popular culture'. These studies have denied the possibility of its existence as an unchanging and exclusive category of culture, emphasizing that 'it can only be accurately described at particular historical moments'. Although the term has been generally used to refer to 'the culture of the common people' or the 'lower' sections of society, it remains both a vague and partial representation. Scholars have often referred to the confusion involved in such a definition and wondered whether the term popular should be based on the socio-economic criterion (the oppressed sections of society), or on levels of formal education (illiterate). Thus while Aron J. Gurevich in his work on medieval popular culture outlines his task as involving an analysis of "the consciousness and emotional life of the common people 'from within', in ac-

cordance with its own logic", he also points to the dangers of depicting it 'as a single entity'.¹⁸ Historians are finding it increasingly difficult to justify the existence of 'low' or 'popular' culture as an exclusive category, opposed to the 'high' or the 'elite', and instead stress their mutual interaction, as these categories are not always clearly demarcated. Denying its existing in a 'pure form', Gurevich emphasizes that "these can be seen only in an interlacing in a complex and contradictory synthesis" which he terms a 'dialogue-conflict' of the 'two forms of consciousness'.¹⁹ The problem of homogeneity in the conceptualization of popular culture has also been pointed out by some scholars. They have drawn our attention to the problems deriving from the notion of 'culture as a unifying concept', as well as from the inadequate attention to the factor of internal differentiation of groups within the 'popular'. In an essay reviewing two works of E.P. Thompson and Natalie Davis on crowds and community behaviour, Suzanne Desan points out that Thompson's concept of 'communal consensus' may suggest 'a more cohesive and united community

18. A.J. Gurevich, Medieval Popular Culture: Problems of Belief and Perception, Cambridge, 1990, p.15.

19. Ibid., p.xviii.

than in fact existed', due to his inadequate consideration of the internal group dynamics within the English food rioters. Davis' stress on culture as a cohesive force in her analysis of religious violence in France leads her to be insensitive "to other motivating factors like political or socio-economic conflicts and interests".²⁰

This point regarding the internal group dynamics is particularly important, because one often notices that, unless due emphasis is paid to it, it often results in the invisibility of certain groups such as women in the studies of movements involving collective action. In the works on the *bhakti* movement one generally notices the absence of discussions regarding the role of women and their participation in various aspects of the movement, nor is due emphasis given to the women saints. This gender bias remains concealed under the umbrella term 'popular'. It remains an abstract notion and the category of woman thus becomes indistinct within the homogeneity of culture.

In the context of Assam too, this has been the general

20. S. Desan, "Crowds, Community and Ritual in the Work of E.P. Thompson and Natalie Z. Davis" in L. Hunt (ed.), The New Cultural History, California, 1989, pp.47-71.

trend of most studies, and women are mentioned only in passing. Also ignored in the existing historiography of the region are the groups in the margin, such as the tribals, as a dynamic element within the society. These will thus be taken into consideration here for an explanation of the complex, ambiguous, and even contradictory strands within the Assamese society between 15th-17th centuries and the neo-Vaiṣṇava movement. All these, however, are largely dependent on the availability of information in the sources.

Given the literary nature of our sources one becomes necessarily drawn into the realm of textual interpretation. More specifically, it is important to look into the nature of hagiographical literature and its worth as a source of socio-cultural history. The present research is based on hagiographical works called the '*guru-caritas*' or - the biographical accounts of the lives of saints attributed with divinity. These constitute an important branch of the contemporary vernacular literature fashioned by the *bhakti* movement in Assam.

Generally speaking, hagiographies have always remained in the periphery of historical research. Historians have tended to question their validity because these contain a liberal smattering of fantastic, mythical, and legendary

episodes related to the saints' lives.²¹ The problem stems from the general tendency among the historians to regard it as a static entity which make them miss out on the reality which produced these particular fantasies. Moreover, ~~it is~~ erroneous to assume that since these works are meant for the lower orders of the society, their 'popular' content is self-evident. In the context of the *bhakti* movement in India these texts yet to be subjected to rigorous critical analysis by THE historians.

However, scholars in Europe, underlining the value of such works, have emphasized the need to locate them within the historical and cultural context in which they developed, and take note of their socio-cultural function, all of which gave them a particular form, in order to obtain an objective picture of existing social realities.

Such an emphasis is central to Aron J. Gurevich's study who used certain genres of 'popularizing literatures' which were 'intended for a wide audience'. "These were designed to be comprehensible even to the idiotae" and were marked by simplicity and absence of sophisticated theology, which

21. W.H. McLeod, Early Sikh Tradition: A Study of the Janam Sākhīs, Oxford, 1980, pp.248-249.

"were the most important channels of communication between clergy and masses". He points out that they reflected aspects of folk religiosity and the popular world-view, as they were adapted to their audiences, whereby contents and stylistic features of folklore were incorporated into them, although they may have been written by 'the learned elite'. Another feature is the importance of oral tradition in a largely illiterate society and its influence on the written texts which often grew out of it, and the co-existence of the oral and written, even after its codification. This, added to the fact that the 'learned' preachers who composed them often belonged to the same social milieu as the audience accounts for the popular attitudes which find a place in them.²²

The induction of the notion of 'folkloric culture' - and discussions on the relations between medieval 'learned' and 'folkloric culture', has further expanded the horizon of historical inquiry to include other aspects apart from popular religiosity as constituents of the popular. Though religion formed an important element in the lives of the people of the medieval period, it also contained much more

22. A.J. Gurevich, op. cit., pp.1-20.

than beliefs and rituals. As such the hagiographic texts should be seen within the context of this 'folkloric culture'.²³

By emphasizing the study of hagiographical works against the background of the underlying socio-cultural structures, historians have demonstrated that these works reflect not merely the socio-religious processes or modes of religious perception, but being rooted in the very society where they occurred they also throw light on other aspects, such as social relations, political structure and the world-view of the common people.²⁴

Moreover, the legends, eulogies, and fantastic tales contained in these works are extremely significant as they allow us access into the underlying structures of consciousness of a particular society. These should be critically appraised rather than taken as literal expressions and rejected outright. For, these offer historical explanation

23. J. LeGoff, cited in A.J. Gurevich, op. cit., pp.xvi-xvii.

24. This may be noticed in the works of A. Gurevich and W.H. McLeod, op. cit., E. Patlagean, "Ancient Byzantine Hagiography and Social History" in S. Wilson (eds.), op. cit.

of the emergence of the 'socio-cultural' movements, and the ways in which their traditions were preserved over a sustained period of time. The legends take the form of stories related by the members of a society about and for themselves. More significantly, legends often serve to legitimise or protest against asymmetrical relations of power that prevail in the larger societies of which the communities that tell the legends form a greater or lesser part. This is often noticed in the legends relating to Śaṅkardeva and other prominent Vaisnava saints of Assam.

W.H. McLeod, emphasizing the importance of the *janam-sākhī* (biographies of the Sikh *gurus*) literature for an understanding of the society of Punjab, has underscored its relevance as a category of source material for the period of their composition i.e. the 17th-18th centuries, than the earlier times which they claim to represent. He points out that by necessarily requiring the *guru* to be placed within a particular setting, the narrators inevitably drew from their own contemporary experience, which was a period later than Nanak.²⁵

However, one must also keep in mind the fact that the

25. W.H. McLeod, *op. cit.*, p.257.

hagiographies developed from an existing body of oral traditions carried over from an earlier period, and these themes are repeated the later works along with the incorporation of new elements, in the course of their evolution till they acquired their final form.²⁶ We shall attempt to address this problem in the following section.

Five *carita-pūthis* or hagiographies constitute the source material for this study. Composed in Assamese, these were compiled between the 17th and the 18th centuries. They are enumerated below:-

1. Daityāri Ṭhākur - Śri Śaṅkaradeva-Mādhavadeva Carita.
2. Bhūṣaṇa Dvija - Śri Śri Śaṅkaradeva.
3. Rāmānanda Dvija - Guru Carita.
4. Rāmacaraṇa Ṭhākur - Guru Carita.
5. Anonymous - Guru Carita Kathā.

The *carita-pūthis* were rendered in to written form, in the period following Śaṅkaradeva (1449-1561) from the existing oral tradition, within the precincts of the *satras* or *Vaiṣṇava* monastic institutions,²⁷ created by the movement.

26. A.J. Gurevich, *op. cit.*, p.2.

27. M. Neog, *Śaṅkaradeva and His Times*, *op. cit.*, pp.2-3.

These had become the principal institutional base for the dissemination of Vaiṣṇava *bhakti* ideals of the *ekā śaraṇa nāma dharma*. Reciting the saints' lives had in fact come to be regarded as an essential part of the daily congregational prayer or *nāmakīrtanas*, conducted in the *saṭtras*.

Regarding the dating of these texts, Maheswar Neog's classification is usually considered acceptable by the scholars. He has divided them into the (a) early group composed around the early 17th century and (b) the later group written some time in the late 17th and the early 18th centuries. The works by Daityāri Ṭhākur, Bhūṣaṇa Dvija and Rāmananda Dvija belong to the earlier group. The *carita* by Rāmacaraṇa Ṭhākur and the anonymous prose text *Guru Carita Kathā* belong to the latter group. Though the earlier biographies also apotheosize the saints as an article of faith, they are generally more sober and matter of fact in their accounts, when seen in relation to the later texts, which came to be embellished with more and more legendary and miraculous episodes.²⁸ Any study of these texts as source necessitates locating them in their proper context, i.e.,

28. M. Neog (ed.), *Guru Carita Kathā*, Gauhati, 1987, 'Introduction', pp.137-140.



the place of composition, the social background of the authors, and the audience for whom these were meant.

Daityāri Ṭhākur, the earliest of the biographers, was the son of Rāmacaraṇa Ṭhākur and belonged to the kāyastha caste of the bhūyan community. His father was a nephew of Mādhavdeva and spent most of his life with the latter, who initiated him into the Vaiṣṇava fold. Daityāri mentions that his work was compiled through discussions with several learned persons including his father.²⁹ This may help in understanding the reason why Daityāri dealt at length with the life of Mādhavdeva and restricted his work to a brief account of Śaṅkardeva. His father's allegiance to Mādhavdeva enables one to get a clearer picture of the ways in which the latter differed from his *guru* Śaṅkardeva, and of the changes he introduced. Bhūṣaṇa Dviija's grandfather was Cakrapāṇi, a brāhmaṇa who had been initiated into the fold by Śaṅkardeva. It is significant that Bhūṣaṇa Dviija does not mention any differences of opinion between Mādhavdeva and Dāmodardeva, and instead describes the latter as the undisputed and principal *mahantā*.³⁰ Rāmānanda Dviija was the

29. M. Neog, Śaṅkardeva and His Times, *op. cit.*, pp.5-7.

30. D. Borkotoki (ed.), Śri Śri Śaṅkardeva, Jorhat, 1986, 'Preface', p.5.

son of Śrīrāmadeva who was a disciple of Bhavānipuriya Gopāla Ata of the *Kāla samḥati*. His account includes a very detailed genealogy of Śaṅkaradeva's predecessors, tracing their origin from Gujrat through Kanauj, Bengal, and finally Kāmarūpa (Assam). This was possibly done to forge a connection between the *bhakti* cult in Assam and those in different parts of north India. Evidently by the time these texts were compiled certain religious influences from outside the region had found their way to Assam.

Situating the texts in their proper context - the social background and religious inclinations of their authors, helps us to explain and resolve certain discrepancies that sometimes occur regarding the same event in these texts. By the time the later *caritas* were compiled, the Vaiṣṇava order had undergone various divisions, resulting in the emergence of *samprādayas* or sub-sects, which accounts for the changing practices and beliefs and new forms of adjustment, within the order.

This also led to increased contact with areas outside Assam. All the later *caritas* consider Śaṅkaradeva, Caitanya of Bengal, Harivyasa (probably of the Nimbārka sect) and Rāmānanda of north India as quadruple incarnations of Viṣṇu.

The tendency to trace the origin of *bhakti* from *Adi Śaṅkarā-cārya* is a feature of this group of *caritas*. Further, these, including the *Guru Carita Kathā*, mention a number of disciples of Śaṅkar, deva from outside Assam.³¹ There is also an attempt to include various holy places all over the country in the itinerary of Śaṅkar, deva's pilgrimage. The *Guru Carita Kathā*, which was probably compiled in the 18th century, clearly reflects the wide expansion of the Vaiṣṇava order over the three states of *Asamā*, *Kamatāpura* and *Koch-Behār*. Consequently the *guru*-lore also escalated, coloured by the schisms of the order and interests of the multiplying *sattras*. It gives an account of twenty five Vaiṣṇava saints of Assam.³² From these, particularly the *Guru Carita Kathā*, which in certain ways is the most inclusive of the different strains and came to be the dominant text of the movement one can discern the changing social conditions in the region.

Though written texts are generally considered to be the products of the elite culture, the hagiographies of the

31. M. Neog (ed.), *Guru Carita Kathā*, *op. cit.*, 'Introduction', p.138.

32. *Ibid.*, p.2.

bhakti saints are somewhat exceptional in that these are written with the audience of the common people in mind. Thus they embody popular beliefs and perceptions to a much greater degree than the contemporary texts of other categories.

Popular culture refers to the beliefs, perceptions and practices that were widely shared among a population including folk beliefs and practices rooted in local traditions and mass beliefs and practices generated in political and commercial centres. It implies the meeting between the elite and popular traditions and can be seen only in their interlacing in a complex and contradictory synthesis. In the context of the Vaiṣṇava movement in Assam, the *carita-pūthis* contain many details which indicate this interaction and reflect the existing contradictions and ambiguities. The *bhakti* ideals developed by Śaṅkaradeva were often critical of the brahmanical practices and were meant for the common people. Thus, he drew heavily on various elements of the existing local traditions. The movement, however, also had to adjust with brahmanism and this process of interaction transformed one another. The *caritas* show that there emerged within the same movement various conflicting strains such as the *Brāhma*, *Puruṣa* and *Nikā saṁhatis*, practising various brahmanical rituals and practices while the *Kāla*

Samhati strictly and totally forbade them.

Hagiographies fulfilled a variety of functions. Statements were made to stimulate devotion and provide examples of piety, to boost particular cults and further the interests of different groups and institutions. This was done through the use of symbols familiar to the society at which they were aimed. For example, the *Guru Carita Kathā* tells us how the celebration of the guru's life story (*gurujanar caritra-kīrtana*) came into being as a part of the prayer services in the *satras*, following the stylistic form of the lores of Lord God (*Śrirāmar Kṛṣṇabalabhadrar carita*), when Mādhav deva became the head of the faith.³³ The saints' articulation of religion, society, and everyday aspects of life, developed a language which was lived among the people of the region.

The saints' accounts came to be couched in mythological terms, and the life of Śaṅkar deva was modelled on the early life of Kṛṣṇa. Themes from the epics had already been in circulation among the people and these were rendered into the vernacular by Mādhav Kandali and others, in the pre-

33. *Ibid.*, p.1.

Śaṅkaradeva period. Now these were presented with an emphasis on the element of *bhakti*, and the saints' lives were incorporated with in them through the creation of myths and legends in the same mould.³⁴ It was through these mythical and legendary tales of saints, which were included in the prayer services in *sattras* and *nāmghars* in the villages, that they found their way into the minds of the people, who understood that language. These *caritas* thus spoke directly to them and greatly facilitated the penetration of *bhakti* ideals among the comon people.

As discussed earlier, not much research has been done along the lines outlined in this chapter with regard to the *bhakti* movements in India, and more particularly in the case of Assam it is almost non-existent. Within the limitations, this dissertation will attempt to fill in this lacunae.

34. S.N. Sarma, "Assamese Literature" in J. Gonda (ed.), History of Indian Literature (Early Period), Vol.IX, Wiesbaden, 1976, pp.46-47.

CHAPTER II

THE SETTING: SOCIETY, ECONOMY AND POLITY IN MEDIEVAL ASSAM

This chapter aims at an understanding of the complex socio-cultural processes operating in a region covered by the three medieval kingdoms of Koch Behār (or Kamatā as it was known, before the rise of the Koch power in the early 16th century), Kāmarūpa and Asamā. Although they exceed the territorial limits of the present day Assam, these kingdoms broadly correspond to it. It is necessary to delineate the geographical extent of our study more concretely: its western limit was the river Kārātoyā, thus including a part of modern North Bengal, while its easternmost reaches touched the hills of the Pātkai range. It was bound in the north by the sub-Himalayan ranges, occupied by the Bhoṭiyas in the west, and numerous other tribes in the east. In the south-east were the Nāga hills, Manipur and the Tippera hills, and further south the Gāro-Khasi-Jaintiya hills and a part of Mymensingh, now in Bangladesh.¹

1. B.K. Barua, A Cultural History of Assam, Gauhati, 1950, pp.1-2. References to places and tribes in these areas are also scattered throughout the *carita-puthis*.

Geography played an important role in shaping the socio-cultural developments in this region. The distinct topographical features comprising the contiguous hill-plain areas, with the intricate river system of the Brahmaputra, forming its backbone, immensely affected all aspects of life in the region. Therefore, it is imperative to study the existing regional peculiarities, -- the political, socio-economic and religious conditions, within the framework of its topographical - ecological setting. The prevalent assumptions about history and ecology, have led towards a reappraisal of hitherto understated aspects of ecology. This is the context in these developments, in the light of their relationship to the emergence and development of the particular form of Vaiṣṇava *bhakti* that became dominant in Assam between the late 15th and the end of the 17th centuries.

In the first section I will attempt a reconstruction of the multi-faceted developments in the region from around the 13th century A.D. This would provide the background of the movement, i.e., the working of the various forces that precipitated it. In the next section the socio-cultural milieu within which the movement became entrenched in the succeeding centuries (16th-17th centuries), will be analysed, in terms of the continuities and the later developments, which had a role in strengthening its hold.

Studies on the neo-Vaiṣṇava movement in Assam have tended to treat the contemporary society as a static entity, against which the tenets of the faith are discussed. Thus Maheswar Neog discusses the existing politico-religious and socio-economic background without linking it to the later developments, or the processes of the evolution of the *nāma-dharma*. S.N. Sarma,² while delineating the politico-religious situation totally ignores the socio-economic formations of contemporary Assam. The inherent contradictions and interlinkages within the existing society, which must have had a role in the rise of *bhakti*, have not been adequately treated.

SECTION I - THE BACKGROUND OF THE MOVEMENT

Politically,³ as well as in the socio-economic sphere, Assam, from the 13th century onwards, presents a picture of fragmentation and incessant conflicts between different groups. The struggle for power was operating at various

2. S.N. Sarma, The Neo-Vaiṣṇavite Movement and the Satra Institutions of Assam, Gauhati, 1966, pp.22-24; M. Neog, Śaṅkaradeva and His Times: Early History of the Vaiṣṇava Faith And Movement in Assam, Gauhati, 1965, pp.58-63.

3. S.N. Sarma, op. cit., pp.2-3.

levels. The process had its roots in an earlier period, but it is clearly reflected in the medieval *carita-pūthis* as well. From around the 6th century A.D., if not earlier, the rulers of Kāmarūpa had encouraged settlement of the *brāhmanas* in this area through grants of land with fiscal and administrative privileges. This is also known from a number of epigraphic sources. Since then there has been a steady flow of *brāhmaṇa* settlers, from the west to the plains of Assam.⁴

The distinct ecological division of the region into the hill-plain continuum created a complex social situation, as this was marked by the existence of highly-differentiated levels of cultures in close proximity with each other. The fertile river valley along the Brahmaputra was inhabited by Hinduized communities having a predominantly agrarian economy. The surrounding hilly terrain was inhabited by various tribal groups which followed a hunting-gathering economy and were thus at a lower level of material culture. Those in the somewhat more accessible areas also practiced marginal agriculture. Largely outside the pale of Hinduism, these groups followed their own tribal customs, beliefs and

4. B.K. Barua, *op. cit.*, pp.116-17.

practices.⁵ The interaction between these groups and the Hindu agricultural communities produced certain contradictory trends in the society. While on the one hand, clash of interests led to frequent conflicts, on the other the exchange of socio-cultural ideas resulted in the gradual penetration of brahminical beliefs and practices among the tribes through a process of mutual adjustments.⁶

By the 13th century a distinct identity of Assam, having its peculiar political, socio-economic and religious features had emerged as a result of this process. The *caritas* provide insights into the nature of these relations, and the existing society.

A look at the prevailing political situation, would help put things in their proper perspective. The 13th to the 16th centuries witnessed the simultaneous existence of several incipient tribal states, under the loosely knit system of the *bhūyan-rāj*.⁷ The Ahom or Shan invaders, who had conquered eastern Assam in the 13th century, were

5. S.M. Dubey (ed.), North-East India: A Sociological Study, Delhi, 1978, p.5.

6. Ibid., pp.6-8.

7. A. Guha, "Tribalism to Feudalism in Assam 1600-1750" in Indian Historical Review, Vol.1, 1974, p.65.

pursuing a policy of aggrandisement. Their territorial designs often clashed with the interests of the indigenous tribal kingdoms, who occupied a dominant position at that time. Among these were the Chutiyās (a branch of the Bodo-Kachāri tribe), who had set up their capital at Śādiya in the present Lakhimpur district. Other tribes like the Morāns and the Borāhis occupied smaller tracts of land. Further west, south of the river Brahmaputra, lay the Kachāri kingdom which around the 15th century stretched half-way across the modern Naogaon district. West of the Chutiyā kingdom on the north bank and the Kachāri kingdom in the south, a group of *bhūyans* were ruling around this time. However, during the 14th and 16th centuries, the Ahoms had carved out a principality west of the Chutiyā territory which included the modern districts of Sibsagar and Lakhimpur; after subjugating the Morāns and Borāhis, and displacing the *bhūyans* from this area. In Western Assam, comprising the present day districts of Kāmrup, Goālpārā and parts of Koch Behār, a succession of dynasties were wrangling for power during the 14th-15th centuries.⁸ This picture of political instability also provides a clue to a better understanding of the tribal clashes with the agrarian communities.

8. S.N. Sarma, op. cit., pp.2-3.

The case of the *bhūyans* is of particular significance. It was within this group that neo-Vaiṣṇavism first struck its roots, and developed its initial form. The *bhūyans* comprised a dominant politico-economic group, occupying the core agricultural area on both banks of the Brahmaputra in the Kāmarūpa region. They were a caste stratified Hinduized society, composed of *brāhmaṇas* and *daivajñas* (astrologers) who were the two high status groups on the social scale. The *kāyasthas* were another important group and formed the landed elements or chiefs. They exercised more or less autonomous control over the area. Apart from these, the bulk of the *bhūyan* society was constituted of the *kolitās*, a dominant peasant caste.⁹ Many of the indigenous elements incorporated into Hindu society belonged to the *kolitā* caste. The Guru Carita Kathā mentions the *bar kolitā* (who were agriculturists),¹⁰ and *kumār* (potter), *kaṁār* (blacksmith), *tānti* (weaver) etc., all of whom generally belonged to the *Kolita* caste.¹¹

9. A. Guha, op. cit., p.65-66.

10. M. Neog (ed.), Guru Carita Kathā, Gauhati, 1987, p.71.

11. Ibid., pp.83-85. These are also found scattered throughout the text.

The *bhūyan* political organization was characterized by a number of independent chiefships, which aligned together in a loose confederacy at times of threat from a common enemy. Occasionally, they acknowledged nominal allegiance to the petty kings, who from time to time tried to assert their superiority in this area.

However, even in such circumstances they continued to wield considerable power and influence at the local level as official functionaries.¹² It is evident from the *carita-puthis*, that the *bhūyan* chiefs, such as the *Barbhūyan* or the *Śiromoni bhūyan*, often posed a threat to these rulers and refused to occupy a subordinate status. Candibara, one of Śaṅkardeva's ancestors, settled in Kāmarūpa by king Dūrlabh-nārāyaṇa of Kamatā, as the *Śiromani* over a group of *bhūyans* is said to have functioned more or less independently. He disregarded the king's orders, refused to pay him annual personal attendance or the prescribed dues. The king thereupon imprisoned him suspecting that he was preparing to become the king himself.¹³ Moreover, the military prowess

12. A Guha, *op. cit.* p.66.

13. M. Neog (ed.), *Guru Carita* by Rāmananda Dvija, Gauhati, 1959, p.12.

of the *bhūyan* chiefs may be inferred from the reference to the 80 shields¹⁴ in their possession and their three-day long battle with the Bhoṭiyas at Rauta, where the latter was defeated and they fled with the loot.¹⁵ Apart from their political role, the *bhūyan* chiefs appeared to have been actively involved in the agricultural process, and activities related to it. These included clearing of land for cultivation,¹⁶ building of *bunds* (dams) etc. These were communal operations in which the entire village participated. On his return to Lengemāguri after being released by *Dūrlabhnārāyaṇa*, *Caṇḍibara* found the *ryots* engaged in constructing a *bund*, to prevent the flood waters of the Brahmaputra from destroying the crops; on the orders of Gandharvārāi, the *Choto rājā*, a *karatalia* (tributary) of *Dūrlabhnārāyaṇa*. The difficult task was finally accomplished, only after *Caṇḍibara* took over the organization of the operation. This gained him the blessings of the *Choto rājā* and

14. D. Borkotoki (ed.), *Śri Śri Śaṅkardeva* by Bhūṣaṇa Dvija, Jorhat, 1986, p.83; M. Neog (ed.), *Guru Carita Kathā*, *op. cit.*, p.11.

15. M. Neog (ed.), *op. cit.* p.11.

16. The fourteen families of the *bhūyans* under *Caṇḍibara*, who often moved from place to place in search of suitable areas for cultivation, had to clear the land before undertaking agriculture. This is mentioned in the *caritas*. *Ibid.*, p.11 etc.

admiration of the people.¹⁷ These shared experiences with the cultivating peasants, provided the bhūyan chiefs with some support in their particular localities, where they wielded considerable influence. The political ambitions of the bhūyan chiefs and their local influence, perhaps brought them into conflict with the *Choto rājā* whose efforts at imposition of authority by demanding payment of certain dues were often thwarted. The undercurrent of tension may also be detected in Candibara's decision to leave Lengemāguri along with the rest of the *bhūyans*. This was because the *rājā* agreed to surrender the former to the Bhoṭiyas to prevent an attack, despite the services rendered by him in times of difficulty.¹⁸ Moreover, Candibara's parting words also indicate this - 'with our 80 shields we could have repulsed (them) if the king and people relied on us. We shall not stay in this ungrateful (*adharmi*) place.'¹⁹

The *caritas* also throw light on the socio-economic conditions of the times. An understanding of this is

17. M. Neog (ed.), Guru Carita Kathā, p.10.

18. The building of the dam which saved their crops and repulsing an earlier attack by the *Bhoṭiyas*, Ibid., p.11.

19. Ibid., p.11.

crucial from the point of view of the emergence of *bhakti* in Assam. It is evident from the texts that the predominantly agrarian economy of the region was under considerable pressure from various directions -- political, socio-religious, and ecological. Moreover, although settlement and cultivation were encouraged by the Kāmarūpa rulers,²⁰ large tracts of land remained thickly forested and agriculture was carried on a somewhat limited scale, which was largely confined to the plain areas on both banks of the Brahmaputra.²¹ Hoe agriculture seems to have been the main form of cultivation, as mention of the plough is extremely rare in the early *caritas*. Also there is practically no mention of trade and traders or the use of money. Exchange was possibly carried on through barter, and generally cowries were used

20. Dūrlabhnārāyaṇa, settled 14 *bhūyan* families (*kāyasthas* and *brāhmaṇas*) with grants of 'grain, spade, *dāo*, and slaves' in Kāmarūpa, where they lived practicing agriculture, *Ibid.*, p.8. Rāmananda Dvija also mentions the grant of 'wealth and grains' to the *bhūyans*, *Ibid.*, p.12.

21. This is known from frequent references, to dense forests in the vicinity of the villages, and the fear from wild animals, which are found scattered throughout the texts.

as the medium of exchange.²² Thus picture presented in these texts is that of a largely subsistence-level rural agrarian milieu.²³

The impact of the predatory tribal incursions on the fragile agrarian economy was disastrous. These grain and cattle raids created havoc within the agricultural communities and was one of the primary causes of their frequent migrations. At Lengemāguri on the north bank, the *bhūyans* had frequent skirmishes with the Bhoṭiyas of the neighbouring hills. The latter ransacked the *bhūyan* village 'carrying away cattle and other commodities, killing men and women and taking away others as slaves'.²⁴ Later, these *bhūyans* shifted from Kājolimukh to Kuthārdubi and then to Rauta in search of 'fish, water, firewood' and to escape from the Bhoṭiyas. In each of these places they undertook agriculture for brief periods.²⁵ Ultimately, both *Bhoṭiya*

22. Except for Bhavānanda, who was said to be a trader, references to trade or traders are practically non-existent in the earlier *caritas*. Cowries are often mentioned, and the story references to the *rupiya* probably pertain to a later period when trade with Bengal and Mughal India had developed. Bhūṣaṇa Dvija, p.160.

23. A. Guha, op. cit., p.65.

24. M. Neog (ed.), Guru Carita Kathā, p.10.

25. Ibid., p.,11.

raids and the tensions with the Koches, who were an emerging power in Western Assam during the late 15th-early 16th centuries, compelled them to shift to the south bank. Here, there was 'an abundance of land, water, pond, fish, fire-wood,'²⁶ but they were faced with the onslaughts of the Kachāris who 'looted and plundered their land'²⁷ at village Alipukhuri. This was probably due to the pressure from the expanding Ahom kingdom in the east. The *Guru Carita Kathā* relates that the *bhūyans* and Kachāris practiced agriculture and cattle-rearing in adjoining areas. Friction occurred due to the pilferage of grains and cattle by the latter.²⁸

The topographical-ecological factors played a crucial role in shaping the nature of the economy and society. The peculiar topography of the region, limiting the arable land to the fertile river valley, with the surrounding hilly terrain unsuitable for cultivation, was one of the reasons for the frequent conflicts between the tribal and agrarian populations. The territorial ambitions of the incipient tribal states also centred around these areas, as each

26. *Ibid.*, p.11.

27. *Ibid.*, p.11.

28. *Ibid.*, p.36.

struggled to gain control over the fertile valley. Moreover, the river Brahmaputra, which ran through the entire length of this region, and its network of tributaries often caused floods. Floods were a common occurrence and damage to crops are often mentioned.²⁹ As mentioned earlier, flood control measures such as building of dams were undertaken through communal participation.³⁰ Again, at Tembua, where the waters of the Luit (Brahmaputra) caused destruction to the crops, the prominent *bhūyans* gathered together the people of several villages to construct a dam.³¹ Moreover, the dense forests were inhabited by wild animals, which also caused difficulties for the people. There is mention of damage to crops caused by wild beasts and the general fear from attacks by these. For instance, 'Mahendra Kandali's field of ripe paddy crop was invaded by seven elephants who came to graze there and the slaves failed to chase them off.'³²

All these factors, as well as the effects of frequent

29. *Ibid.*, pp.10, 32 etc.

30. *Ibid.*, p.10.

31. *Ibid.*, pp.32-34.

32. *Ibid.*, p.23; References to expression of fear from wild beasts have been referred to earlier on.

conflicts³³ thus served to put considerable pressure on the primarily agricultural communities such as the *bhūyans*.

The interaction between the upper castes and the indigenous tribal groups were not confined to conflicting relations alone. These produced significant socio-cultural repercussions. The predominance of the tribal population lent a peculiar colour to the socio-religious developments in this region, which was markedly different from contemporary north-India.

In the religious sphere, brahminism had to adjust itself in order to gain a foothold in this region. It was, however, a two-way process. While there was a gradual penetration of Hindu beliefs and practices among the indigenous groups, elements of tribal culture also found their way into the former.

One of the most manifest features of this interaction was the introduction of caste stratification within the society. The process of incorporation of tribal groups resulted in their being assigned a place within the

33. The *ryots* are often said to have fled to the neighbouring forests to escape from the scene of the battles. Ibid., p.39 etc.

brahminical social order.³⁴ The bulk of the tribals were given a low social status, and were lumped together as *śūdras*. Prominent among such tribes were the Koches, who had become partially Hinduized, and tended to crystallize into a distinct caste of low status within the brahminical social order. These Koches, many of whom had taken to agriculture, appeared to have intermarried with the other Hindu peasant castes such as the *kolitās*.³⁵ The traditional four-fold *varṇa* system was not prevalent in Assam, and the society was broadly divided between the *brāhmaṇa* and the non-*brāhmaṇa* categories. The *kolitā* caste, a dominant peasant group, was also ranked as the *śūdras*, which subsumed most of the tribal population. Thus there was a general proliferation of the *śūdras*,³⁶ arranged into several sub-castes. Most of these groups later became the followers of the *nāma-dharma*, preached by Śaṅkaradeva and other Vaiṣṇava saints.

The process of the inclusion of tribal groups within

34. S.M. Dubey (ed.), op. cit., pp.6-8.

35. S.K. Bhuyan (ed.), An Account of Assam by F. Hamilton, Gauhati, 1987, p.56.

36. S. Jaiswal, "Varna Ideology and Social Change", Social Scientist, Vol.19, No.204, 1991, p.46.

the brahminical fold was perpetuated through the identification of various tribal deities with gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon.³⁷ B.K. Kakati has discussed the existence of different forms of the mother-goddess among the local tribes. However, he shows that in course of time they came to be identified with Hindu goddesses such as Durgā and Kāli.³⁸ Both Śiva and the Devī assimilated easily with the tribal forms, as brahminism made adjustments and was being internalised by the tribal groups. This process saw the emergence of Śākta-Tāntric rites which before the emergence of the *bhakti* faith, became the predominant religious form in Assam.³⁹

The utterances of the Vaiṣṇava saints and preachers frequently refer to the disruption of the social fabric caused by the religious excesses of the *Kaliyūga*.⁴⁰ Their emphasis on simplicity of worship through devotion was rooted in these excesses which had an adverse effect on the day to day existence of the common people. Daityāri Ṭhākur,

37. S.N. Sarma, op. cit., p.2.

38. B.K. Kakati, The Mother Goddess Kāmākhyā, Gauhati, 1989, pp.35-66.

39. Ibid., pp.16-22, 33-66; S.N. Sarma, op. cit., pp.2-8.

40. All the *caritas* abound in such descriptions.

the author of *Śri Śri Śaṅkardeva-Mādhavdeva Carita*, sums up the existing religious situation and the relevance of *bhakti* thus:

In earlier times there was no *bhakti* in this land. People worshipped various deities and performed blood sacrifices of ducks, goats and pigeons etc. They performed various rituals and were steeped in sin. The Vaiṣṇava saints thus took birth as *avatāras* of Kṛṣṇa to redeem the world from the improprieties of the *Kaliyūga*.⁴¹

That the brahminical religion of the Śākta variety requiring elaborate ritual and animal sacrifices, was widely practised by the Hinduized agrarian communities like the *bhūyans*, is well attested by the *caritas*. Śaṅkardeva's ancestors mentioned as worshippers Śiva and Caṇḍi.⁴² His grandfather Caṇḍibara was conferred with the title *Devidāsa*, by King Dūrlabhnārāyaṇa of Kamatā, after defeating a *brāhmaṇa* pundit in debate.⁴³ The kings of this area also patronized Śaktism and on one occasion a conflict between the

41. R. Nath (ed.), *Mahapurusa Śri Śri Śaṅkardeva-Mādhavdeva Carita* by Daityari Ṭhākura, Sylhet, 1869 Saka, p.2.

42. B.K. Bhattacharya (ed.), *Guru Carita* by Rāmcaṇa Ṭhākura, Tihu, 1985, pp.5-11.

43. D. Borkotoki (ed.), *op. cit.*, p.84; M. Neog (ed.), *Guru Carita Kathā*, *op. cit.*, p.15; All the *caritas* contain description of this episode.

kings of Kamatā and Gauda, who were worshippers of the *Devī* Durgā, was said to have been settled through the mediation of Caṇḍi, a manifestation of the goddess.⁴⁴

The geneological sections of the *caritas*, pertaining to Śaṅkardeva's ancestors, are replete with descriptions of elaborate rituals - *vrata*, *hōma*, *pūjā* etc. for the propitiation of a number of gods and goddesses such Brāhma, Candra, Surya etc., apart from Śiva, Viṣṇu and the *Devī*.⁴⁵ All brahminical rites of passage *nāmakaraṇa*, *upanayana*, *annaprāsana*, *śrāddha* etc., were performed.⁴⁶ On all such occasions, rich gifts in the form of *dāṇa* and *dakṣiṇā* were bestowed on the *brāhmaṇas*. These included gold, copper, cows, clothes, food and various other items.⁴⁷ That the *brāhmaṇas* enjoyed a high social status through the perpetuation of such practices is evident from these texts.

Śaivism had been a prominent religion in this region from an early time. Both epigraphical and sculptural

44. M. Neog (ed.), *Guru Carita Kathā*, *op. cit.*, p.8.

45. *Ibid.*, pp.4-14.

46. *Ibid.*, pp.20, 43; These rituals are mentioned later in the texts.

47. *Ibid.*, pp.12-13; M. Neog (ed.), *Guru Carita*, *op. cit.*, p.29; All other authors also describe the respect shown to *brāhmaṇas* through *dāṇa* and *dakṣiṇā*.

evidence attest to this fact.⁴⁸ Though the worship of Viṣṇu was prevalent he occupied a secondary position compared to Śiva and Devī.⁴⁹ It gained pre-dominance in the form of Kṛṣṇa bhakti, only with the spread of neo-Vaiṣṇavism.

As mentioned earlier, *Hinduism* influenced the various tribal groups, through the induction of local gods within its pantheon. Most of these, however, continued to retain their autonomous identity, leading to a complex admixture of tribal and brahminical modes of worship. Tribes such as the Chutiyaś and the Kachāris worshipped various forms of Śiva and the Devī through Śākta-Tāntric rites.⁵⁰ At the great cult centres of Śaktism such as Kāmākhyā near Gauhati and Dikkarāvāsini near Śādiya in eastern Assam, worship was conducted through both right and left-handed methods.⁵¹ The worship of Śiva through such rites was also common.⁵² Moreover, the number of deities had proliferated, and they were propitiated in similar ways.⁵³ Magic and sorcery were

48. B.K. Kakati, *op. cit.*, pp.10-12.

49. *Ibid.*, pp.67-71; S.N. Sarma, *op. cit.*, pp.3-8.

50. S.N. Sarma, *op. cit.*, p.3.

51. *Ibid.*, pp.4-5; B.K. Kakati, *op. cit.*, p.45-66.

52. S.N. Sarma, *op. cit.*, pp.3-4.

53. *Ibid.*, pp.5-8.

common features of the tribal religion.⁵⁴ On the whole, the cult of animal sacrifice gained popularity both among the tribal and the Hinduized sections of the society, and it appears that human sacrifice was also practised in a few places.⁵⁵ In fact, even a late work such as the Guru-Carita-Kathā contains an episode concerning human sacrifice.

People complained to King Dūrlabhnārāyaṇa about Hāthiya Kachāri who, after becoming the *Doloi* of the area, performed human sacrifice before the clay image of Durgā.⁵⁶ This episode clearly demonstrates the intermingling of tribal and Śākta practices.

The *vāmācāra* or left-handed practices, which were marked by considerably relaxed sexual and dietary rules, appear to have been widely prevalent particularly among the lower rungs of the society. This was because they transcended caste restrictions and allowed access to the lowest *varṇas*, who were barred from participating in orthodox brahminical rites.⁵⁷ People accepted only the ritualistic

54. Ibid., pp.6-8.

55. Ibid., pp.2-8; B.K. Kakati, op. cit., p.62.

56. M. Neog (ed.), Guru Carita Kathā, p.40.

57. B.K. Kakati, op. cit., pp.41-55.

aspects of Tāntricism, without concerning themselves with its theoretical or philosophical foundation.⁵⁸

All these, however, also resulted in certain contradictory trends within the existing society. Despite the general attitude of respect toward the *brāhmaṇas*, a parallel attitude of antagonism was also developing towards them. Certain episodes in the *caritas* contain reflections of this tendency. The shameless greed of the *brāhmaṇas* is often explicitly stated. The Guru-Carita-Kathā relates that, after the death of Govindagīrī, his sons found themselves in a difficult situation. Despite borrowing, they could not collect the amount of money required to perform the last rites, due to the high demand made by the *brāhmaṇas*. Thus, they complained 'there is no respite from the *brāhmaṇas* here.'⁵⁹ Again, Govinda Garamali explained that *devipūjā* was responsible for his poverty-stricken condition as he had lost everything, 'cows, buffaloes, copper, bronze and slaves etc., to the *brāhmaṇa* priests'.⁶⁰ The numerous debates between the *brāhmaṇas* and the *sūdras* (i.e. the non-

58. S.N. Sarma, op. cit., p.6; B.K. Kakati, op. cit., pp.41-55.

59. M. Neog (ed.), Guru Carita Kathā, op. cit., p.53.

60. Ibid., p.79.

brāhmaṇas) that appear in the *caritas* also confirm this general misgiving about the *brāhmaṇas*.

The feeling was probably particularly strong among the *kāyasthas* who, despite their important socio-political position and proficiency in brahminical learning, was often looked down upon as *śūdras* (all non-*brāhmaṇas* tended to be addressed thus by the *brāhmaṇas*), and were debarred from reciting the *Vedas* or performing the religious rites themselves. In addition, the *brāhmaṇas* also enjoyed various privileges including exemption from payment of taxes, and manual service in later times,⁶¹ due to their high ritual status.

The effects of the brahminical religion and the rise of neo-Vaiṣṇavism may be better understood when related to the general conditions of the time. Given the extremely unstable nature of the existing society, marked by a subsistence-level agrarian economy unsupplemented by either a regular system of trade or well-developed crafts, the practice of animal sacrifice and elaborate ritualism adversely affected the bulk of the population, comprising the peasantry. Moreover, the system of gifts to the *brāhmaṇas* further

61. A. Guha, *op. cit.*, p.72.

increased the burden on their limited resources. The large scale killing of animals like goats, bullocks, ducks etc., which were important to the agrarian economy, did create a dislocation in the economic life, especially amongst those who could not afford it. The *guru-caritas* cite numerous examples of people reduced to poverty due to the excesses of the *brāhmaṇas* as well as, the general economic conditions.⁶² Reference to periodic food shortages caused by famines is also extremely common in these texts. Śāṅkardeva's emphasis on the prohibition of blood sacrifices and simplicity of worship would indicate his deep understanding of the existing societal contradictions. Thus he could garner the support of the majority of the people in this region.

In the subsequent centuries (i.e., around the 16th-17th centuries) many of the socio-economic and religious forces operating in the earlier period continued, as is evident from the later *caritas*, but some notable changes also took place which further contributed to the rise of neo-Vaiṣṇavism in Assam. I shall focus on the increasingly centralizing tendencies of the Ahom state and its role in the entrenchment of the *bhakti* movement in the region.

62. M. Neog (ed.), *Guru Carita Kathā*, *op. cit.*, pp.53-54, 79 etc.

SECTION II

LATER SOCIO-CULTURAL DEVELOPMENTS AND BHAKTI

In its initial stages, during the time of Śaṅkardeva and Mādhavdeva covering the greater part of the 16th century, the *nāma-dharma* remained largely concentrated in the Kamatā-Kāmarūpa region, where the Koches had emerged as the dominant power and established the kingdom of Koch Behār.⁶³ This may also be related to the nature of power equations in eastern Assam. Here, the Ahom rulers, who were foreigners (being of Tāi extraction), had become powerful and were engaged in consolidating their position.⁶⁴

They extended their patronage to the dominant social group, the *brāhmaṇas* with the view to utilizing their influence among the indigenous population to strengthen their own position in the area. The *brāhmaṇas* had therefore become more influential.⁶⁵ On the other hand, the *bhūyans*, who were a prominent socio-political group with political ambitions, were both conciliated and sought to be subordinated. They were given grants of land and were settled in small

63. S.N. Sarma, *op. cit.*, pp.11-20.

64. M. Neog, *Śaṅkardeva and His Times*, *op. cit.*, pp.58-63.

65. *Ibid.*, p.58.

groups in different parts of the kingdom, probably in order to create division among them. Moreover, attempts were made to exert authority on the dominant elements in the group, though in later times many were incorporated as local functionaries.⁶⁶ The group to which Śaṅkar deva belonged, was settled at a place called Dhuvāhāt. They were engaged by the Ahom king in an elephant catching or *Khēda* operation. The *bhūyans* who were primarily agriculturists and therefore untrained in this, were unsuccessful in their pursuit. The Ahom king thereupon unleashed a reign of terror on them and officials were despatched to inflict severe punishments. Their leader Hari Bhūyan (Śaṅkardeva's son-in-law) was beheaded, Mādhavdeva, who was also captured, was, however, spared as a holy person, as he was heard reciting *kīrtana*.⁶⁷

Thus, at this stage, the Ahom opposition to the *bhūyans* was largely political and it was instigated by the orthodox *brāhmaṇas* who complained to the Ahom king against them. The *bhakti* ideals, based on devotion to a single god through *nāma*, was inimical to brahminical interests, as it interdicted ritualism and sacrifice. It threatened their

66. H.K. Barpujari (ed.), The Comprehensive History of Assam, Vol.II, Gauhati, 1992, pp.65-66.

67. D. Borkotoki (ed.), op. cit., pp.93-94.

livelihood as well as their exalted social position.

During the 16th century the expanding Ahom and Koch kingdoms were frequently locked in conflict.⁶⁸ The latter also faced the pressure of incursions by the Bengal Sultans.⁶⁹ The *Guru Carita Kathā* relates that the Koch King Naranārāyaṇa sent an expedition under Chilarāi to get back the Baro-bhūyans who had left Alipukhuri and settled in Asamā. The Ahom king blamed the *bhūyans* as the cause of the battle, and asked them to devise a solution to avert the crisis. Śaṅkardeva advised them to mount *śūdras* dressed as *brāhmaṇas* on cows and asked them to move towards the enemy. This done, the *Koches* retreated and the Ahoms marched upto Kaliyābar. Thus there was an interesting reversal of roles between the *brāhmaṇas* and the *śūdras*. As a result of this battle the peasants are said to have fled to the jungles for safety.⁷⁰ This is a significant passage because apart from the Ahom-Koch conflict, it also contains insinuation of the *brāhmaṇa-śūdra* antagonism and the detrimental effects of war on the peasantry and agriculture.

68. H.K. Barpujari (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp.71-83.

69. *Ibid.*, pp.86-87.

70. M. Neog (ed.), *Guru Carita Kathā*, *op. cit.*, p.39.

There are references to the depredations caused by the tribes of eastern Assam such as the Akās, the Bhoṭs⁷¹, and the Daflās⁷², which often moved from one place to another. Frequent floods and war with the Bāṅgals (foreigners, usually used for the Mughals) also caused disruption and scarcity of food for the people.⁷³

In the 17th century, the *bhakti* movement had become well entrenched in the region, and had developed a strong organizational base in the institution of *sattras*, despite the persistent resistance from sections of the orthodox *brāhmaṇas* as well as intermittent royal persecution.

This development has to be seen in the perspective of the socio-economic images and in relation to the working of the Ahom state which, by the 17th century, controlled most of Assam.

In the socio-economic sphere, this period is marked by a general agricultural expansion following the extension of plough agriculture and wet rice cultivation.⁷⁴ Crops such

71. *Ibid.*, p.209.

72. *Ibid.*, pp.38.

73. *Ibid.*, pp.38, 219.

74. A. Guha, *op. cit.*, p.67.

as mustard, gram, pulses, variety of vegetables and fruits are mentioned in the *caritas*, and numerous references are made to the plough and ploughmen.⁷⁵ Despite this, trade and money economy remained extremely limited till the mid-17th century,⁷⁶ though the *Guru Carita Kathā* (a work of the late 17th and early 18th centuries) contains various references to markets, and traders selling betel leaf,⁷⁷ mustard,⁷⁸ oil,⁷⁹ etc. and even the sale of fish is mentioned.⁸⁰ Cowries continued to be the medium of exchange along with some amount of Mughal currency, but in the later *caritas* especially the *Guru Carita Kathā*, money is mentioned more frequently.

In the Koch kingdom, a certain amount of mercantile activity seemed to have existed from a slightly earlier period, as this area had come into contact with Bengal, and

75. Such references to crops and *hālovas* (ploughman) and *hāl* (plough) are found scattered throughout the *Guru Carita Kathā*, op. cit., pp.63, 93 etc.

76. A. Guha, op. cit., p.68.

77. M. Neog (ed.), *Guru Carita Kathā*, op. cit., pp.70, 71 etc.

78. Ibid., p.74 etc.

79. Ibid., ,p.203 etc.

80. Ibid., p.249.

was more accessible from outside.⁸¹ River transport on the Brahmaputra was the principal means of communication from an early period.⁸² However, trade too, like agriculture, must have faced obstacles due to the frequent political conflicts in the region.

The Ahom administrative structure was marked by a centralization of the conscripted labour.⁸³ It was based on the *paik* system, according to which *paiks* drawn from the peasantry were required to render manual service, as labourers or ordinary soldiers, to the state.⁸⁴ Out of these, a certain number was allotted to the official class and the nobility to render them personal service, and to work on their farms.⁸⁵ This class of *paiks* was called *likchous*. The rest of the free peasantry produced *paiks* for periodic military service in times of war, or were engaged in various

81. H.K. Barpujari (ed.), op. cit., pp.148-149.

82. This is quite evident from the *caritas*. Most of the commercial travelling was done by boat, as the Brāhma-putra links the entire region.

83. A. Guha, op. cit., p.68.

84. Ibid., p.68.

85. Ibid., p.69. S.K. Bhuyan (ed.), op. cit., p.24. This account refers to a later period, but that the officers exacted work to the maximum is also evident from the *caritas*. Guru Carita Kathā, op. cit., p.48.

public works.⁸⁶ Slaves formed an important element in the agrarian system, which is indicated by frequent mention of *bandi-beti* or *gā-mānuh* in the *caritas*.

The agrarian expansion leading to an increase in surplus and concomitant growth in population, provided the Ahoms with a strong material base to consolidate their position.⁸⁷ This was marked by a tendency towards further centralization. The 17th century was also a period of Ahom-Mughal conflict, as the latter tried to extend their sway over Assam.⁸⁸ Both these developments necessitated raising greater resources for the state, as well as the creation of a more organised state structure. Thus effort was made to convert the state machinery into a military-administrative system. For an effective military organization, the manpower used for military purposes was divided into *khels*, which existed along with the village organization based on the *paik* system.⁸⁹ Moreover, in order to augment the resources of the state, apart from the imposition of the land revenue to be paid in cash, a number of additional taxes in

86. A. Guha, *op. cit.*, p.69.

87. *Ibid.*, pp.67, 69-70.

88. H.K. Barpujari (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp.148-256.

89. A. Guha, *op. cit.*, p.70

the form of tolls on traders, ferries, markets etc. were introduced.⁹⁰ That the number of taxes had increased enormously is known from the mention of *hāṭ*, *phāṭ*⁹¹, *ghāṭ* etc. in the *Guru Carita Kathā*. These were outposts on the border and inside the country under officers or *visāyas* such as the *hāṭ-khowa*, *phāṭ-khowa* and *ghāṭ-khowa*.⁹² *Visāyas* collected customs such as *dān*, *kar*, etc., from the traders, boat-men and others.⁹³ *Caxis*, *hāṭs* and *phāṭs* are mentioned in connection with Nārāyaṇa Dāsa Ṭhākur's trading activities, which were spread over Asamā, Gāro, Bhoṭ and Bāṅgal areas. Nārāyaṇa Dāsa and his fellow traders tried to escape these taxes by lying to the officials.⁹⁴ The *Guru Carita Kathā* relates how Nārāyaṇa Dāsa and his fellow traders became *bhokots*.⁹⁵ The anecdote compares the petty traders to a goat amidst wild beasts.⁹⁶ These varied taxes and tolls

90. S.K. Bhuyan (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp.24-25.

91. M. Neog (ed.), *Guru Carita Kathā*, *op. cit.*, pp.72, 73 etc.

92. M. Neog (ed.), *Guru Carita Kathā*, *op. cit.*, "Introduction", p.156.

93. *Ibid.*, p.355.

94. *Ibid.*, pp.72-73.

95. *Ibid.*, pp.73-79.

96. *Ibid.*, p.73.

naturally increased the burden on the large number of petty traders who operated in this region. The situation must have been further worsened by the corruption of the officials in charge of these collections. Madhāi Atoi of Jainti was an officer collecting *jal-kar* (tax levied on river outposts) but he gave up his duties as it involved malpractice.⁹⁷

The later *caritas* attest to the increase in the number of officials having fiscal and coercive powers. The oppression of the officials in charge of collecting revenue is described thus:

Harsimha Bora went on tours to collect taxes i.e. *rājādhan* or *jaigīrī* payable to the state. On discovering a shortfall of twenty rupees (*taka*), he subjected the people to severe punishments. Mādhavdeva, who witnesses this, asked him to spare the poverty-stricken peasants. But the latter was unrelenting. Finally, Mādhavdeva, through a miracle, squared the amount.⁹⁸ Again, a *Kakoti* and an *Ujir* got together in exploiting the *paiks*, extracting from them

97. Ibid., p.82.

98. Ibid., p.47.

labour service, *muga* cloth, cotton, pepper, and made profits out of these. In the *Ujir's* absence, the *paiks* complained to the *Barua* (a higher official at the village level):

"One *Ujir* along with a *Kakoti* from the west, have squeezed us of our wealth and have ruined us."⁹⁹

In later times officials also made undue demands from the *bhokots*. *Surānanda*, an official, terrorized the *bhokots*, and forcibly extracted one rupee (*taka*) each from a group of them.

In Western Assam villages came to be divided strictly on caste lines by this time. The *brāhmaṇas* lived in a separate part of the village, while such low castes as the *kumār* (potter) *hirā* (wheel-less potter), *ḍom* (fishermen), etc., lived in other parts earmarked for them.¹⁰⁰ These low castes became adherents of the *nāma-dharma*. Śaṅkardeva, along with his *bhokots*, moved from *Tāntikuchi* to *Kumārkuchi* etc., halting for brief periods and establishing *hari-gṛhas* or *nām-gḥars*.¹⁰¹

99. *Ibid.*, p.48.

100. *Ibid.*, pp.83-85.

101. *Ibid.*, pp.83-85

The general condition of the peasantry had worsened. Scarcity of food and poverty are common themes in the *cari-tas*. Mādhavdeva's family was reduced to poverty and sought shelter in various places. His parents are said to have gone without food, sometimes two to three meals at a stretch.¹⁰² The condition of the slaves, commonly owned by officials and prosperous people and utilized for agricultural purposes, was even worse. Balaram Atoi was formerly a slave in a household, and was treated badly. One day he fell asleep from exhaustion while ploughing the field. When Nārāyaṇa Dāsa Ṭhākur found him, rescued him from his plight by purchasing him off, whereupon the former took *śaraṇa* and became a *bhakta*.¹⁰³

The *bhakti* movement received its first group of followers from the *kāyastha-bhūyans*, and later from the bulk of the peasantry and the newly Hinduized tribal people, who were taking to agriculture and were assigned a low social position. The petty traders, who were harassed and oppressed, also found it suitable to their needs. By becoming *bhaktas* traders often escaped the tolls and taxes and also benefitted from the *sattras* which often provided the

102. *Ibid.*, pp.83-85.

103. *Ibid.*, pp.86-87.

followers their basic everyday needs. This will be seen in the next chapter. As seen from the above discussion, all these groups were subject to various pressures during this time, when the movement was trying to establish its hold in this region.

The cumulative effects of the diverse and often conflicting socio-cultural trends within the society, contributed to the diffusion of the movement. Due to its inherent syncretism, its liberal attitude towards caste restrictions, its ability to organize people under one umbrella and give them assurance against oppression and poverty the movement could draw and accommodate different groups within it. The processes through which this was effected, and the strong organizational structure that helped to crystallise the movement will be the focus of our discussion in the next chapter.

CHAPTER III

THE DYNAMICS: THE INSTITUTIONS AND MASS PARTICIPATION IN THE BHAKTI MOVEMENT

In the last chapter, we discussed the material and social context within which the *ekāśaraṇa nāma dharma* of Śāṅkardeva developed in medieval Assam. The *bhakti*, movement, which initially spread among the *bhūyan* community around the end of the 15th century, rapidly gained in numerical strength during the succeeding two centuries. It found support from a wide section of the population, and by the 17th century had become deeply embedded in Assamese society. Significantly, it still continues to be one of the dominant modes of religious expression in Assam. This was due to a number of factors such as a prolonged process of evolution of the movement, adjustments in the realm of ideas, and a carefully developed organizational structure through which it could sustain its appeal and influence over a wide variety of people. It is a distinct feature of Assam *Vaiṣṇavism* that it developed a strong organizational base, which found its culmination in the institution of the *sattrā* or monastic organizations.¹ The emphasis of the present chapter will

1. S.N. Sarma, op. cit., pp.23-24.

thus be on the socio-cultural processes which facilitated the permeation of the bhakti ideals and the nature and role of the Vaisnava institutions.

As seen earlier, Assamese society at the time of Śāṅkardeva comprised of fragmented religio-ethnic groups with a variety of complex beliefs and practices. Śāṅkardeva evolved a simplified religion based on *bhakti* or devotion to a single god, Kṛṣṇa, attainable through *nama*, i.e. recitation of the name of the lord.

The basic form of the social organization of bhakti in Assam was the *sāṅkīrtana* or *nāma-prasaṅga*. These were the congregational prayer sessions, characterized by the recitation and singing of the names and attributes of the lord Kṛṣṇa. The entire society could join in these sessions, as these required no special qualifications; the utterance of the name of the lord was sufficient to procure divine grace. This is emphasized time and again in the *carita* literature, which often contain descriptions of Śāṅkardeva surrounded by a group of *bhaktas* reciting *Harināma* or singing *kīrtana*. It is often stated that the religion of the *Vedas* was unsuited for the *Kaliyuga* when all *dharma* had been defiled. Śūdras had no right to recite the *mantras* while they could achieve salvation through the *nāma-kīrtana* preached by Śāṅkardeva. It was said that all kinds of religious activities converged

on the chanting of the *Harināma*.²

Before the emergence of the *sattras* the primary occasion for the congregation of the *bhaktas* was the *kīrtana* sessions.³ Even when the *sattras* became widespread from around the end of the 16th century, *kīrtanas* continued to be one of the principal features of the movement. The prayer-hall known as the *nāmghar* or *kīrtana-ghar* came to occupy a central place within it.⁴ Devotional religion being essentially popular in character, the *bhakti* teachings aimed at gaining the adherence of the vast majority of the population in the society.⁵ Society in medieval Assam was largely composed of the rural peasantry, petty traders and the recently Hinduised and non-Hindu tribal communities, who were mostly illiterate. Śaṅkardeva, like most other *bhakti* saints of India, adopted the vernacular language for his preaching which were easily comprehensible to the common people.⁶

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2. D. Borkotoki (ed.), Śri Śri Śaṅkardeva by Bhūṣaṇa Dvija, Jorhat, 1986, p.75; M. Neog (ed.), Guru Carita Kathā. Gauhati, 1987, p.15.
 3. M. Neog, Śaṅkardeva and His Times, Gauhati, 1965, p.312.
 4. Ibid., p.314.
 5. K. Chakrabarti, op. cit., pp.446-447.
 6. M. Neog, Śaṅkardeva and His Times, op. cit., pp.362-377.

Apart from singing in praise of the lord, the prayer sessions included regular readings from the *guru-carita*. The *Guru Carita Kathā* relates how after the death of Śaṅkardeva, his successor Mādhavdeva incorporated the practice of reciting the *guru's* life story or *caritra* within the *kīrtanas*, and systematized it into fourteen parts.⁷ Thereafter, an entire corpus of hagiographical works i.e. the *carita-pūthis*⁸ came to be written mainly about the lives of Śaṅkardeva and Mādhavdeva, but also about a large number of other Vaiṣṇava preachers.⁹ These provided information regarding the development and changes in the *bhakti* ideals, and through the institutionalization of the reading of these texts they were transmitted to the common devotees.

The writers of the *caritas* also continued the practice of using the vernacular language. The pattern of composition of these texts was also designed keeping the needs of the illiterate common people in mind. These works were mainly anecdotal and episodic in form. Each episode was a compact whole and could be narrated independently in one

7. M. Neog (ed.), *Guru Carita Kathā*, *op. cit.*, p.1.

8. M. Neog, *Śaṅkardeva and His Times*, *op. cit.*, pp.4-26.

9. The *Guru Carita Kathā*, relates the life stories of two *guru*, nine *ātas*, two *thākurs* and several others. Madhavdeva appointed twelve *gurus* to preach *bhakti* in different parts of Assam. The number of preachers grew. Many later came to be venerated and *caritas* were written about them, p.2.

sitting.¹⁰ This narrative style was ideal for holding the attention of the lay listeners. The common mode of enunciation was the *śrāvana-kīrtana*, where the *guru* narrated the events and the disciples listened to them. This was obviously an effective means, for Bhūṣaṅga Dvija writes, 'After listening to the *prasāṅga*, all were satisfied and went to sleep. Waking up the next morning they once again went to listen to the words of Śāṅkara.'¹¹

That the complexities of the brahminical religion were denounced by the Vaiṣṇavas is known from various episodes. In the course of the debate between Śāṅkaradeva and Mādhavdeva, on the eve of the latter's conversion to the *bhakti* faith, Śāṅkaradeva said:

'One who performs rituals and animal sacrifices to propitiate numerous gods, meets his end in the same sacrificial altar'.¹²

If Vedic rites are not performed with total concentration, or according to the prescribed rules, they yield no

10. M. Neog (ed.), Guru Carita Kathā, "Introduction", op. cit., p.138.

11. D. Borkotoki (ed.), Śrī Śrī Śāṅkaradeva, op. cit., p.153; M. Neog (ed.), Guru Carita Kathā, op. cit., p.38. All the *carita* are filled with such references to *śrāvana-kīrtana*.

12. D. Borkotoki (ed.), op. cit., p.50.

fruit'.¹³

If the one who decapitates animals goes to heaven, who will go to hell?¹⁴

In another episode, he told Rāmrāi and other *bhaktas*:

'Give up all other rites and rituals (*karma-dharma*) and adopt *bhakti* by taking *ekānta śāraṇa* in Kṛṣṇa'.¹⁵ Moreover, unlike brahminical religion, scriptural knowledge or formal learning was considered unnecessary for *bhakti*. The *Guru Carita Kathā* relates the case of Buddhā Ata who approached his *guru* in the hope of acquiring scriptural wisdom. The latter then distinguished between learning that bred arrogance in a person (scriptural) and therefore redundant and knowledge of the meaning of the *geet-ghoṣa* which was enough for devotion. He therefore explained to him the latter.¹⁶ The authors of the *caritas* repeatedly emphasized their proximity to the audience by referring to themselves

13. *Ibid.*, p.53.

14. *Ibid.*, p.54; M. Neog (ed.), *Guru Carita Kathā*, *op. cit.*, p.57.

15. D. Borkotoki (ed.), *Śrī Śrī Śaṅkardeva*, *op. cit.*, p.60.

16. M. Neog (ed.), *Guru Carita Kathā*, *op. cit.*, pp.253-254.

as ignorant and devoid of scriptural knowledge. 17

The simplicity of *kīrtana* as a mode of worship, which was devoid of both complex ritualism and high philosophical discussions, and its inherent spontaneity thus attracted those sections of the people who were burdened by the expensive brahminical religion, and who were also disallowed direct participation in it. Moreover, the tone of humility adopted by the Vaiṣṇava preachers, undoubtedly appealed to the large illiterate masses who were considered socially inferior by the *brāhmaṇas*.

Śaṅkardeva devised certain other means of popularizing the *Vaiṣṇava bhakti* ideals among the common people. He composed *bargītas* or devotional songs and popular plays, the themes of which were mostly derived from the *puraṇas* and the *epics*. The *caritas* contain information regarding their composition, performances and the immense impact these had on the people. These were heavily imbued with devotional fervour and extolled the *nāma dharma*.¹⁸ The *Guru Carita Kathā* relates how Śaṅkardeva composed a song *Rāma meri*

17. Daityāri Tḥākur asked god to be merciful towards him who was foolish, and keep him in the company of *bhaktas*. Bhūṣaṇa Dvija also called himself foolish, immature (having the mind of a child) and pleaded that his errors be forgiven. This is a common refrain of the *carita* writers.

18. M. Neog, *Śaṅkardeva and His Times*, *op. cit.*, pp.178-181.

hṛdaya-pankaje raiche' (Rāma dwells in the lotus of my heart)¹⁹ or on another occasion, *mana meri Rāma caranahi lāgu* (Rest my mind, rest on the feet of Rāma) and these were sung by the *bhokots* while they were clearing the land.²⁰

Rāmcaraṇa Ṭhākur describes an incident when Nārāyaṇa Dāsa on his way to meet Śaṅkardeva, came across three boatloads of people singing the *gīts* composed by the latter.²¹ The *Guru Carita Kathā* refers to 240 of such lyrical compositions of Śaṅkardeva which were destroyed in a fire. Only 34 songs still survive.²² These songs were clearly meant for the popularization of the faith. Mādhavdeva reprimanded Śrirāma Ata for his delayed appearance at a *nāma* session. He said that Śaṅkardeva was displeased with him, because despite composing many *gīts*, *ghoṣa*, *padas* and *bhatimās* (songs), he had not utilized them for converting people to the *bhakti* fold.²³ Apart from these the dramatic compositions of Śaṅkardeva known as *nāṭakas*, *nāṭas* or *yātrās*, were

19. M. Neog (ed.), Guru Carita Kathā, op. cit., pp.114-115.

20. Ibid., pp.75-76.

21. B.K. Bhattacharya (ed.), Guru Carita, by Rāmcaraṇa Ṭhākur, Tihu, 1985, p.543; D. Borkotoki (ed.), Sri Sri Śaṅkardeva, op. cit., p.77.

22. M. Neog (ed.), Guru Carita Kathā, op. cit., pp.177-178.

23. Ibid., pp.115-116.

performed in order to attract the people.²⁴ The *guru-caritas* describe many such performances, and the impression they created in the minds of the people. For instance, the *cihnā-yātrā* play attracted a large number of people including women and the *brāhmaṇas*²⁵ who eventually accepted *bhakti*. After the *Nṛsimha-yatra* in which Śaṅkaradeva himself played the role of Nṛsimha, the *Atois* received gifts from the people. Many peasants left their land and took to *bhakti* among which were 60 households of *parhiyās* (persons who make clothes from animal skins).²⁶

This brings us to one of the most important features of the movement its inherent syncretism and its liberal attitude towards caste. These enabled it to subsume various, and often conflicting, beliefs, whereby, all sections of the people could be absorbed within its fold.²⁷ Despite its apparent anti-brahminism, it came to have many *brāhmaṇas* among its followers. It aimed to reach the vast majority of the people and could not afford to make distinction between high and low castes. The *kīrtanas* and the devotional plays were characterized by spontaneity and direct participation which appealed to everyone, irrespective of caste and other

24. M. Neog, *Śaṅkaradeva and His Times*, *op. cit.*, p.246.

25. *Ibid.*, pp.205-206.

26. *Ibid.*, pp.205-206.

27. K. Chakrabarti, *op. cit.*, pp.446-447.

social differences. The fact that it included people from the lowest to the highest sections is well attested by the *caritas*. Daityāri Thākur relates how Śaṅkardeva on hearing a *caṇḍāla* (fisherman) take the name of Kṛṣṇa, stated that he (the *caṇḍāla*) was the highest of men and was even superior to a *brāhmaṇa*.²⁸ On another occasion, he is said to have come upon a few young cowherds who took to Kṛṣṇa's name, and he was filled with happiness.²⁹ Bhūṣaṇa Dvija relates that the *brāhmaṇas* complained before the king Naranārāyaṇa that a *sūdra* named Śaṅkardeva had translated the *Bhāgavata* into verse and converted *brāhmaṇas*, *kaivartās* and *sūdras* into *Hari bhaktas*. He did not follow brahmānical rites nor paid respect to the *brāhmaṇas*.³⁰

Śaṅkardeva himself declared that *nāma* did not discriminate between *jāti* and *ajāti*. The *brāhmaṇas* and others, including the *caṇḍālas*, had a right to it.³¹ Thus by rejecting caste within the community of *bhaktas*, it opened up the possibility of recruiting devotees from all sections of the society and in the process effected a great social

28. R. Nath (ed.), Sri Sri Śaṅkardeva-Mādhavdeva Carita, Sylhet, 1869 Saka, pp.118-119.

29. Ibid., pp.119-120.

30. D. Borkotoki (ed.), Sri Sri Śaṅkardeva, op. cit., p.171.

31. Ibid., p.70; B.K. Bhattacharya, (ed.), Guru Carita, op. cit., p.493.

change. While on the one hand, it enabled the socially degraded castes access to worship, it also considerably loosened the rigours of the brahminical system.

Therefore a look at the neo-Vaiṣṇava institutions, their role in spreading of *bhakti*, and the adjustments that it had to make in the process of social organization is called for. As the number of the Vaiṣṇavas increased, the need was felt for a central organization which could control the direction of the movement, adjudicate in disputes and weld the dispersed devotees into a community.

Śaṅkardeva thus laid the foundation of the institution of *sattra* or the residential monastic organization.³² During his life time this probably revolved around the assembly of the *kīrtana*.³³ His death saw the first schism in the faith, and Mādhavdeva and Dāmodardeva set up separate establishments.³⁴ After the demise of Mādhavdeva the number of sub-sects increased. In the *Guru Carita Kathā* it is mentioned that Śaṅkardeva once told Mādhavdeva, "after you and me, *dharma* will go in three directions - *nirgūna*, *kewal* and *bhāgavati* (i.e. *Brāhma*, *Nikā* and *Kāla Samhatis*).³⁵ In

32. M. Neog (ed.), *Guru Carita Kathā*, *op. cit.*, ,p.26.

33. M. Neog, *Śaṅkardeva and His Times*, *op. cit.*, p.312.

34. The *carita-pūthis* refer to this incident.

35. M. Neog (ed.), *Guru Carita Kathā*, *op. cit.*, p.497.

Assam, however, despite the emergence of the sub-sects, the institution of *sattras* kept up a certain underlying sense of cohesion among the devotees. Each group established its own *sattra*, and through these *bhakti* continued to exert its influence in the region. This was probably due to the fact, that despite certain subtle doctrinal differences they managed to retain a fundamental unity in philosophical principles, unlike in Bengal.³⁶

Maheswar Neog in his Saṅkardeva And His Times, and S.N. Sarma's in his The Neo-Vaiṣṇavite Movement And Satra Institutions of Assam, have discussed in detail the architectural structure, functionaries and management, and the rites and practices of the *sattras*.³⁷ They, however, have not examined the role of the *sattras* in the adjustments made by the movement in the realm of ideas, and their contribution to its growing popularity.

A *sattra* may be described as similar to the *mathas* or *viḥāras* in North India i.e. residential monastic organizations.³⁸ In Assam, they became the chief instrument through which neo-Vaiṣṇavism was propagated amongst the people.

36. K. Chakrabarti, op. cit., pp.450-452.

37. M. Neog, Saṅkardeva and His Times, op. cit., pp.309-359; S.N. Sarma, op. cit., pp.100-153.

38. M. Neog, Ibid., pp.309-311.

The *nām-ghar* or *kīrtana-ghar* was the basic nucleus around which the *sattras* emerged. This prayer or assembly hall was the central feature within a *sattra*. Besides this, there were rows of huts called *bahā* or *hāti* which were the residences of the *bhokots* or monks. Initially the structure of the *sattras* was generally composed of the *nām-ghar* and a few *hātis*, but gradually, with the increase in the number of the occupants and functionaries, there appeared different categories of *hātis* and such structures as the *maṅikut* or *bhāj-ghar* or *bharāl-ghar* (storehouse) as adjuncts to the *nām-ghars*.³⁹

The proliferation of the *sattras* in the 17th century, is attested by the *guru-carita* literature, especially the later work the *Guru Carita Kathā*. It mentions a number of places where *sattras* were established and (Śaṅkardeva's) search for suitable places where *sattras* would be set up later. It appears that availability of food-stuffs was one of the main consideration in the choice of places for the *sattras*. The *text* further states that wherever the *guru* thus cast his eyes, *sattras* or *thāns* were eventually established.⁴⁰ *Sattras* or *thāns*, *nām-ghars*, *hātis*, etc., occur frequently in the *caritas* and are scattered throughout

39. *Ibid.*, pp.314-315.

40. M. Neog (ed.), *Guru Carita Kathā*, *op. cit.*, pp.206-207.

the *Guru Carita Kathā*. At Tāntikuchi, Mādhavdeva established a *sattra* with a *devagrha* and spread *bhakti* among the people.⁴¹ During Mādhavdeva's period as the leader of the movement the monastic ideals were emphasized and the *guru-caritas* reflect this trend. There are several references to persons who left their wives, accepted *bhakti* and came to reside in the *sattras* in the *Saṅga* (community) of *bhaktas*, such as Jainti Madhāi⁴² *Atoi*, Govindra *Atoi*,⁴³ and Karingana Govinda.⁴⁴ There also grew up a body of celibate our *kewaliyā bhokots*⁴⁵ However, this could not be imposed on the devotees in general. Therefore, the *sattras* came to have separate *hātis*, for the two categories of devotees - those within the *sattra*'s inner walls were meant for the celibates or *kewaliyās*, while those outside of it were for the non-celibates called *bāhir* or *bāj-hāti*.⁴⁶ For instance *Guru Carita Kathā*, relates the following incident: -the choice of a person to be in charge of the cooking in a *sattra* was being considered. Śrīrāma *Ata* refused to give up

 41. D. Borkotoki (ed.), Śrī Śrī Śāṅkardeva, op. cit., p.144.

42. M. Neog (ed.), Guru Carita Kathā, op. cit., p.82.

43. Ibid., p.245.

44. Ibid., p.251.

45. Ibid., p.309; *Kewaliyās* were also known as *udāsins*.

46. Ibid., p.91.

married life, and an argument followed whether a man, who did not sever his worldly ties, could be assigned this responsibility. Finally, the *guru* stated that being a householder did not debar one from being a *bhakta*. If one lived with his own wife (*svāvivāhita bharja*), *bhakti dharma* was not defiled. He told the *bhokots*, not to hesitate to marry, if one so desired.⁴⁷ Jainti Madhāi Atoi, who had left his wife to become a *bhokot* went back and found her in poverty. He then brought her to the *guru*, and thereafter stayed in a *bāj-hāti* meant for married *bhokots*.⁴⁸

In matters of food too *bhakti* showed a certain flexibility, in keeping with the existing social norms. The common articles of food mentioned in the *caritas*, were milk, banana, flattened rice, curd and boiled rice, apart from vegetables. Though meat was not recommended and Śāṅkardeva told Mādhava, not to kill animals,⁴⁹ this does not seem to have been strictly followed. Moreover, partaking of fish was a common occurrence as attested by the *caritas*. Thus, though largescale sacrifices were interdicted due to its adverse impact on the agrarian economy, the rule was not applied when it came to food. Infact, given the limited

47. *Ibid.*, p.248.

48. *Ibid.*, p.91.

49. *Ibid.*, p.89.

agricultural area in the region and the fragile structure of the agrarian economy, fish and meat were important supplement for the people. Generally, the *Vaiṣṇavas* made it a point to dine together, particularly in the *sattras*. Within the community of *bhokots*, no consideration of caste seemed to have been followed, and food was shared by all. After the daily *nāma-prasaṅgas*, *prasāda*, was distributed and was taken by all.⁵⁰ However, the *Vaiṣṇavas* abstained from food given by the non-*Vaiṣṇavas*. There are innumerable instances of *Vaiṣṇavas* refusing food from their own relatives. Mādhavadev refused food from his uncle Dighāla Kāth as he was not a *bhakta* (*harivīmūkha*).⁵¹ Again Govinda Garamali refused to eat in his own house. He told his wife, 'I shall go home and eat, only if you accept the *dharma* preached by the Mahapurūṣa', just as I have done.⁵²

It may be observed that despite the strong anti-ritualistic stance and non-recognition of caste espoused by the *bhakti* movement, there was a certain ambiguity in the attitudes of the *Vaiṣṇava* preachers. This was because, in order to become a viable alternative to the dominant religious trend it had to accommodate many disparate elements within

50. All the *caritas* are filled with such references.

51. M. Neog (ed.), *Guru Carita Kathā*, *op. cit.*, p.88.

52. *Ibid.*, p.79.

the existing tradition. Śāṅkaradeva, despite denouncing the brahminical religion, did not close the doors of *bhakti* to the *brāhmaṇas*, and agreed to initiate them if they discarded their priestly function. The *Guru Carita Kathā* relates that after the *cihnā-yātrā* was performed, many *brāhmaṇas* sought to adopt *bhakti*. Śāṅkaradeva agreed on condition that they would give up the worship of Durgā.⁵³ The number of *brāhmaṇas* who accepted *bhakti* increased to such an extent that the *sattras* became grouped into brahminical and non-brahminical categories.⁵⁴ The *guru-caritas* provide evidence of the penetration of many brahminical rites and practices among the Vaiṣṇava devotees. The brahminical rites of passage were generally observed. *Śrāddha* was performed in most occasions. After the death of Śāṅkaradeva, his son Rāmananda is said to have performed all the required rites. On the death of Mādhava's mother, he went in search of a loan to pay the *brāhmaṇas* to perform the monthly rites.⁵⁵ There is also reference to the *nityākarma* or daily rituals performed in a *sattra*.⁵⁶ Rules of purity and pollution played a role, and cleansing of the household items and

53. *Ibid.*, p.88.

54. S.N. Sarma, *op. cit.*, pp.67-99.

55. M. Neog (ed.), *Guru Carita Kathā*, *op. cit.*, p.77. References to the performance of *śrāddha* appear frequently in the *caritas*.

56. *Ibid.*, p.89.

utensils before *śāraṇa* seems to have become the general practice. It also was necessary to observe a day's *vrata* or fasting before *śāraṇa* into *bhakti*. On certain occasions such as *ekādasī* fasting was observed.⁵⁷ Moreover, *tīrthas* are often mentioned in the *caritas*. Mādhavdeva once regretted before Nārāyaṇa Dāsa that he could not accompany the *mahapurūṣa* on the *tīrtha*, and was sent back from Ganga *tīrtha*.⁵⁸ Bhaskar brāhmaṇa told Nārāyaṇa Dāsa that his guru Śāṅkardeva was on his way to Jagannātha on *tīrtha*.⁵⁹ Groups of *bhaktas* undertaking a pilgrimage occur occasionally in the *Guru Carita Kathā*. The performance of the *śāraṇa* ritual became essential for membership to the *saṭtras*, as is evident from the above discussion.

Bhakti could not ignore the presence of brahminism, which, despite the popularity of the former, continued to exert some influence on the society.⁶⁰ Moreover, it also enjoyed the patronage of the rulers. Devotional religion could subsume many of its elements within it so long as extreme ritualism and animal sacrifice were abandoned.

57. Ibid., p.79.

58. D. Borkotoki (ed.), Śri Śri Śāṅkardeva, op. cit., p.155.

59. Ibid., p.76.

60. This is also supported by the fact that when Udayaditya Singha persecuted the Vaiṣṇavas, the *brāhmaṇa bhaktas* and *saṭtras* were generally spared.

However, the brahminical influence remained largely confined to the brahminical *sattras*, while the non-brahminical ones of the *Kāla samḥati* kept away from them.

Though the notion of purity, manifested in such practices as cleansing of the household before *śaraṇa*, was prevalent, within the community of *bhaktas* such practices lost their importance. Thus, the impact of *bhakti* on brahminism made it lose much of its rigorousness. Within the *sattras*, *nāma-kīrtana* remained the most important mode of dissemination of the *bhakti* ideal. In the *sattras*, daily *nāma-prasaṅgas* were held in the mornings and evenings.⁶¹ Infact, the institution of the *nām-gḥar* played a very important role at the village level and almost every village, came to have a *nām-gḥar*. Śaṅkardeva had set up *nām-gḥars* in a number of villages as he travelled along with his *bhaktas*, staying at each of these for brief periods. He established a *hari-gḥa* at Palengdighat and at other places.⁶² Balokadas *kamār* is said to have had a *hari-gḥa* in his house.⁶³ The *nām-gḥar* came to symbolize the collective participatory aspect of *bhakti* worship, and the *caritas*, which were an

61. The *bhaktas* come everyday in the mornings and evenings to listen to *kṛṣṇa-kathā*. M. Neog (ed.), *Guru Carita Kathā*, *op. cit.*, p.58.

62. *Ibid.*, pp.82-86.

63. *Ibid.*, p.251.

important part of the *kīrtana*, clearly reflect the ways in which it appealed to the shared experiences of the people. At the same time, it also took into account the differences and moulded itself accordingly. Thus, in course of time both higher and the lower sections of the society found it acceptable and from within it emerged the distinct regional culture of Assam.

Kīrtana became both the carrier and the expression of this regional culture because it did not consist of the chanting of the name of the god alone, but included performance of folk arts, and most importantly, recitation of hagiographies which represented and shaped popular consciousness. A. Gurevich has pointed out, how hagiographies reflect the attitudes and consciousness of the common people in medieval Europe. Both in form and content, these works were suited to the needs and minds of the lower sections of the society. At the same time, however, they provided a meeting place for both the high and the low cultures which were not mutually exclusive.⁶⁴ In the light of this, we shall explore the role of the *carita-pūthis*, in organizing the movement in Assam. The *carita-pūthis* truly represent the consciousness of the people of medieval Assam, which became an instrument for the transmission of bhakti ideals

64. A. Gurevich, op. cit., pp.1-20.

in this region. There is no doubt that the general orientation of these texts was towards the common people, both in style and subject matter. It is important to note that though *bhakti* was simple, non-ritualistic, and unpretentious in its mode of worship; it did require a certain textual basis. The brahminical scriptures, such as the *Gita* and the *purāṇas*, were often cited to meet the challenge of *bhakti*. Śāṅkaradeva refuted the arguments put forth by Mādhavdeva before his conversion, on the basis of these texts.⁶⁵ This was also true of the numerous debates with the *brāhmaṇas*.⁶⁶ Therefore it was necessary for *bhakti* to have a comparable scriptural support which was provided by the *carita-pūthis*. We shall now focus on certain elements of the *caritas* incorporated in the *kīrtana*, for an understanding of the processes of cultural penetration of the *Vaiṣṇava* ideals among different groups.

The bulk of the followers of the *nāma-dharma* comprised of the peasantry. Their religious practices were often marked by belief in magic, and the supernatural. Moreover, being largely illiterate, they found it easier to identify with or grasp the concrete rather than abstract

65. All the *caritas* discuss this incident in detail.

66. This is evident from the discussions in the texts.

philosophical speculations.⁶⁷ This is evident from the nature of the *caritas*, which included miraculous acts of the saints aimed at captivating the imagination of the common people. The *caritas* as a form of *kīrtana* was in the spoken form, which is extremely important in a society where the majority of the people were unacquainted with the written word.⁶⁸ The *caritas* emphasize the importance of song and dance in inducing devotional fervour. The tradition of song and dance formed an important aspect of the religious practice of the *tāntrics* which however were mostly performed in secrecy.⁶⁹ In the *kīrtanas* these were performed openly in the *nām-ghars*. It is because of this that the *bargītas*, *yātrās* etc., gained immense popularity in the region. The *nām-ghars* which came up in the villages, and were often the venues of such performances, thus became the place for the common folk to congregate, participate in community activities and share their collective experiences and beliefs. These also provided a pleasant diversion from the problems of their day to day existence.

In the *caritas* frequent comparisons are drawn between *bhakti* and the agricultural process. Once a few devotees

67. A. Gurevich, op. cit., p.17.

68. Ibid., p.3.

69. S.N. Sarma, op. cit., p.6.

arrived late for the *nāma-kīrtana (hari-kathā)*, session and explained to Śrīrāma Ata that the delay had been caused by their engagement in the field. Ata then said, "just as sowing and cultivation earns people their food, the place to earn *hari-bhakti* is the *guru -bhumi* (place of the *guru*), through *śaraṇa* and *saṅga*. Why don't you cultivate this (*bhakti*), instead of engaging in cultivating your fields and missing the *nāma*."⁷⁰ Mādhavdeva, is said to have himself taken the spade in his hands and sowed (the seeds of) *bhakti-panth*.⁷¹ Such references exhorting people to cultivate *bhakti* abound in the texts. In a predominantly agricultural society, the people could easily relate themselves to such imageries.

Moreover, the saint represented for them a concrete object of veneration who also fulfilled many of their practical and emotional needs. Though Śaṅkardeva and Mādhavdeva were the two most prominent saints in Assam, the *caritas* of many local *gurus* came to be written, and they enjoyed a certain influence within particular localities. It is noteworthy that in the *caritas* the names of the *Vaiṣṇava* preachers generally came to be prefixed with the name of the particular area in which they operated, or the tribes to -----

70. M. Neog (ed.), Guru Carita Kathā, op. cit., p.222.

71. D. Borkotoki (ed.), Śrī Śrī Śaṅkardeva, op. cit., p.58.

which they belonged. We thus have references to Bhavānipuriya Gopāla Ata, Dakśinkuliyā Biṣṇu Ata, Behēria Biṣṇu Ata, Jainti Madhāi Atoi, Gārora Govinda Atoi, Nāgār Balai Atoi etc. in the *Guru Carita Kathā*.⁷²

The subject matter of the *carita-pūthis* was usually drawn from the popular themes of the existing society. In the *Guru Carita Kathā* we have numerous examples of Śaṅkardeva performing miracles, which were closely related to the day to day experiences of the people. For instance, it is said that once Bangayā (Śaṅkardeva's brother) fell ill while working in the paddy field and suffered from severe pain and high fever. But he was cured by a mere touch of the latter's hand.⁷³ On another occasion, Bora was afflicted with high fever which the *guru* cured by his touch.⁷⁴ Once Kṛṣṇadeo was bitten by a snake while working in the fields and his wound bled profusely. The blood touched the feet of the *guru* and he was saved.⁷⁵ The theme of the healing touch is common in the texts. There are many references to illnesses such as small-pox etc., leading to deaths. People often

72. These are found scattered all over the texts. M. Neog (9ed.), *Guru Carita Kathā*, *op. cit.*, pp.325, 98, 443 etc.

73. *Ibid.*, p.21.

74. *Ibid.*, p.44.

75. *Ibid.*, p.20.

offered worship to various gods to save them from illness. Śāṅkardeva specifically forbade this and even expelled one of his favourite disciples when he worshipped Durgā to ensure the recovery of his son. There are references to *vaidyas* or physicians, but they were often ineffective. Diseases were dreaded by the people and the miraculous acts of the saints gave them assurance. In the miracles, people also found an explanation of things with which they were unable to cope. These miracles did not merely attract the lower sections of the society. All classes of people were drawn by these fantastic occurrences, which were closely related to the problems and insecurities of their existence. Consequently the *guru* became an important element in their daily lives and this sense of personal dependence helped in the transmission of *bhakti*. The *Guru Carita Kathā* contains references which show that the idea of *gurusevā* was strongly recommended. Mādhavdeva is said to have performed *gurusevā-mālasevā* before a session of *Kṛṣṇa Kathā*. Kālıram Atoi offered *gurusevā* everyday.⁷⁶ There also developed the practice of relic worship which, in the *guru-caritas*, is reflected in the veneration of the *guru's* footprints, or the dust from his feet. *Guru Carita Kathā* relates that Śāṅkardeva once leaned against a mango tree, with one foot against

76. *Ibid.*, pp.89-90.

the tree and another on the ground. When he removed his foot, his footprint appeared on the tree, as though it had been engraved on it. A young boy who came to pay respect to the *guru* touched his head against the mark.⁷⁷ There are numerous references to the grace of the *guru's* dust or *bhokoti dhulīr mahimā*.⁷⁸ The *Vaiṣṇavas* often carried the dust from the *guru's* feet when they undertook a mission or a journey. Thus Gopāla and Janārdan Ata, on their way to the king's palace, bathed in the stream and took the dust of their *guru's* feet.⁷⁹

In fact, the importance of the *guru* as the object of *bhakti* assumed immense importance in the later period. It became very popular among the non-brahminical *sattras* of the *Kāla samhati*, which comprised a large number of tribal people such as the *Chutiyās*, the *Morāns* and the *Borāhis*. These tribals revolted against the Ahom, king in the 18th century, when one of their *gosāins* or *gurus* was put to death by the king.⁸⁰

77. *Ibid.*, p.206.

78. *Ibid.*, p.491.

79. *Ibid.*, p.362.

80. H.K. Barpujari (ed.), *op. cit.*, p.61; M. Neog, Socio-Political Events in Assam Leading to the Militancy of the Mayāmāriya Vaiṣṇavas, Calcutta, 1979, pp.23-27.

The recitation of the *caritas* as a part of the *nāma-prasaṅgas* thus played an extremely significant role in the popularization of *bhakti*. Being rooted in the local folk tradition and incorporating images of everyday life, the *gurucaritas* succeeded in bringing a large section of the population within the *bhakti* fold. This is also suggested by the later efflorescence of *guruvāda* among the common people of Assam. We know from the *caritas* that the peasantry - both *ryots* and the *paiks*⁸¹ and the artisans such as the *kumār* (potter), *kamār* (blacksmith), *tānti* (weaver), *hirā* (wheel-less potter) *ḍom*,⁸² and *jalovā* (both fishermen)⁸³ etc., were the major followers of the *nāma-dharma*. The tribals took to *nāma-dharma* in large numbers and some of them such as Madhāi Atoi - a *Jaintiya*,⁸⁴ Govinda Atoi - a *Gāro*⁸⁵ and Bolai Atoi - a *Nagā*⁸⁶ even became *Vaiṣṇava* preachers. The petty traders, who had come to occupy an important position in society by the 16th-17th centuries, also became one of the major adherents of *bhakti*. *Nārāyaṇa*

81. A common statement in the *caritas* runs thus, 'many *ryots* left their land and became *bhokots*'. M. Neog (ed.), *Guru Carita Kathā*, *op. cit.*, p.206.

82. *Ibid.*, pp.83-85.

83. *Ibid.*, p.244.

84. *Ibid.*, pp.82-83.

85. *Ibid.*, p.94.

86. *Ibid.*, p.443.

Dāsa Ṭhākura Ata, one of the prominent disciples of Śaṅkaradeva, was a trader before he took śaraṇa into the bhakti faith. Alongwith him, six of his fellow traders also became bhaktas⁸⁷ The *Guru Carita Kathā* relates that once when the two gurus were travelling by boat they came across a man selling cotton. Śaṅkaradeva told Mādhavdeva, 'making our minds the guide of our boat, sell it at the feet of the *Paramātmā Sadāgar*' and sang, 'we have engaged in trade, and have put all our wealth at the feet of Hari.'⁸⁸ Once again this is a clear example of borrowing imageries from the profession of the target group and integrating it with the preaching, so that it appeals, directly to them. Women do not seem to occupy an important position in the community of the bhaktas, in the initial phase, as attested by the earlier caritas. The Vaiṣṇavas emphasized the need to follow a strict ethical code, and probably regarded women as a source of distraction from bhakti. By the 17th century however, women began to be inducted within the fold. On numerous occasions entire families were converted to nāma-dharma, and women even came to live in the sattras.⁸⁹ It is possible that with the proliferation of the non-brahminical

87. *Ibid.*, pp.78-79.

88. *Ibid.*, p.114.

89. *Ibid.*, p.91.

sattras the attitude towards women became more liberal. Infact, during the reign of king Lakshminarayana, Ai Dayāl, the wife of Telikṛṣṇa Atoi, was made *medhī* over 120 persons who had become *bhokots*.⁹⁰

As the movement gained in popularity, the *sattras* proliferated and eventually became the most important institution of rural Assam. People spontaneously rallied round the *sattras* and these were maintained by the voluntary contributions from the devotees. The *Guru Carita Kathā* is full of references to people giving various articles of food such as rice, gram, vegetables etc., to *bhokots*.⁹¹ The *sattras* also came to acquire royal patronage. The king Lakshminarayana is said to have given the revenue from seven villages to Ai-Dhāi (Ai-Dayāl).⁹² As the *sattras* grew, their organization became more elaborate and a whole range of functionaries came to be associated with them. These were assigned fixed duties, and many of these were connected to the various ceremonials. The head of a *sattras* was called the *sāṭṭriya*,⁹³ *mahantā*⁹⁴ or

90. *Ibid.*, p.470.

91. *Ibid.*, pp.247, 491 etc.

92. *Ibid.*, p.470.

93. *Ibid.*, pp.2, 480, 485.

94. *Ibid.*, p.447.

adhikār.⁹⁵ The *Guru Carita Kathā* refers to the nomination of Achyut guru as a sāttriya.⁹⁶ A functionary called the āl-dhara or attendant to the sāttriya also became common.⁹⁷ The other functionaries were the pāṭhak,⁹⁸ who had the duty of reading the *Bhāgavata* aloud during the nāma-prasaṅgas and leading the congregational prayer. There are references to gāyan - bāyan, nāṭuwa, ojā, deuri, bhāndāri, likhak, etc.⁹⁹ The duties of the sattrā functionaries thus indicate that musical and dramatic performances also became well organized by this time and occupied an important place within it.

Having developed a strong organizational base, the ekāśaraṇa nāma-dharma became firmly entrenched in Assamese society. Nāma continued to be the centre around which all activities in a sattrā were organized. It was extremely effective as a collective platform for the people to express their shared experiences. The divergent beliefs and practices came to be subsumed under the syncretic formulation of

95. *Ibid.*, p.413.

96. *Ibid.*, p.480.

97. *Ibid.*, p.321.

98. *Ibid.*, pp.230, 233.

99. These are often mentioned in the *Guru Carita Kathā*. The gāyan was the singer, bāyan the drummer and dance instructor, nāṭuwa dancer and actor, ojā choral leader, deuri the distributor of prasād, bhāndari keeper of stores, likhak the copyist.

nāma, which made diverse social groups rally round it and give Assam its distinctive regional profile.

CONCLUSION

It is evident from the foregoing discussion that the philosophical and doctrinal aspects of the neo-Vaiṣṇava movement in Assam have been the principal preoccupation of the studies hitherto conducted on the subject. The political and socio-economic realities were depicted as a static backdrop, having no active role in the unfolding of the phenomenon. At best, the excesses, of the existing religious system were cited as having produced a reaction, in the form of the bhakti movement. The changes in the socio-cultural spheres and their impact on the overall society were ignored, or were marginal to these analyses.

Instead we have attempted to emphasize the need to bring these neglected aspects into focus for a more complete understanding of the phenomenon, to view the movement as an expression of various social processes and tensions, rather than treat it exclusively as a religious ideology. We have not characterized it simply as a protest movement as has been done by scholars with regard to the similar movements contemporary north and south India,¹ but have explored the

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1. S.C. Malik (ed.), Indian Movements : Some Aspects of Dissent, Protest and Reform in Indian Civilization, IIAS, Shimla, 1977. See M.G.S, Narayanan and V.Keshavan, "Bhakti Movement in South India"; C.Paravathamma, "Veerasaivism - A Saivite Sectarian Movement of Protest". etc.

processes involved in its precipitation and manifestation in terms of social change. We have also discussed the importance of hagiographical literature as a source material for the study of social history. What has primarily been at issue is the interplay between religious ideas, beliefs and symbols, and the social experiences and structure.

In the first chapter the five major carita-pūthis, which form the primary source for the present study, have been located within their broader cultural milieu. We have argued that despite containing much that is legendary and fantastic, they also present valuable historical information, and through these one may infact get glimpses of the popular consciousness of the contemporary society.² We have discussed the evolution of this genre of literature, culminating in such detailed biographies as the Guru Carita Kathā, and have shown how they reflect the changing social reality over a period of time.

The ecological, political, socio-economic, and religious contexts of neo-Vaiṣṇavism constitutes the subject of the second chapter. In this, the importance of the distinct topographical features of the region -- the hill-plain continuum marked by different levels of material

2. A. Gurevich, op.cit., pp.4-21.

culture, the river network of the Brahmaputra providing the main line of communication and its role in the agrarian economy have been taken into account.

We have shown that the interaction between the agrarian communities inhabiting the limited cultivable area in the plains, and the tribal groups of the hills, was operating at two levels. On the one hand, this was characterized by conflicting relations between them, due to clash of territorial interest and economic disequilibrium, further aggravating the pressures on both the groups, and socio-cultural exchanges between the two, resulting in the creation of a complex socio-religious situation marked by the predominance of śakta-tāntric practices. This also saw the incorporation of the tribal population within the caste stratified brahminical social order, and the simultaneous proliferation of the śūdra sub-castes, as the greater part of them tended to be lumped together in the lowest rung of the social hierarchy. The peasantry was most immediately affected by these changes.

The kāvastha bhūyans, who were mostly landed chieftains, were also subject to certain political tensions. In this the role of the Ahom State, which had emerged as a major power by the 16th century, has also been taken into account. The Ahoms had established themselves after displacing the bhūyans as well as several incipient tribal states, such as those of the Chutiyās and the Kachāris.

Their attempts at consolidation centred on an increasing tendency towards centralization and the creation of a military administrative organization based on the paik system and the parallel khel organization. Apart from the social pressures, the burden of growing authoritarianism, increase in taxation and corruption of the state officials was most acutely felt by the conquered people, the rural peasantry, and the class of petty traders who had emerged by this time. The cumulative pressure on these various groups have been dealt with, for an understanding of the support base of the bhakti movement, which mostly consisted of these elements. It is not without reason that the bhakti ideal was first adopted by the bhūyans and it then percolated down to engulf the majority of the rural population. Thus the interlinkages between the various socio-cultural and politico-economic factors operating within medieval Assamese society have been discussed to explain its growing popularity among the lower sections of the society.

The next chapter deals with the social organization of the movement which facilitated the permeation of the bhakti ideals among the people.

The bhakti movement in Assam developed a strong organizational base, which ensured its continued influence over a long period of time. The culmination of its organizational structure was the institution of the sattra, within which the Vaiṣṇava ideals were preserved, and further

disseminated in the larger society. By the 17th century, the sattras proliferated and was backed by a carefully organized structure which helped bhakti to become well entrenched in Assamese society. These sattras, which came to support a whole body of functionaries, also became prosperous due to regular contributions from its body of followers. With this developed organizational support, bhakti could sustain itself despite opposition from the orthodox sections of the society as well as from the state. However, at the very basis of its social organization was the performance of kīrtana - reciting the name and singing in praise of the lord, which was characterized by collective participation of all, transcending caste barriers. This uncomplicated mode of articulation of one's relationship to the divine, lay at the root of the success of kīrtana, which brought together disparate elements within the existing society into the fold of bhakti.

The various musical and dramatic performances, such as vātrā, oīā-pāli etc., which Śāṅkardeva utilised for the dissemination of his ideals, also helped in the process. Being rooted in the local folk tradition these performances evoked immediate response among the people. The dominant tantric practices were not altogether discarded but were accompanied by singing, dancing and playing of various instruments, which transformed the nature of religious worship and made an appeal to the people of the region.

The institution of nām-ghar, which sprang up in almost every village, provided a platform for the people to share their experiences and imparted to them a sense of community. It was in the nām-ghars that the entire village congregated to perform kīrtana or watch and participate in dramatic and musical performances.

After Śaṅkaradeva's demise, despite internal division of the bhaktas into several groups or sāṅghatis, it was these common experiences and the fundamental organizational unity of the faith that sustained the popularity of the movement among different sections of the people. Its ability to accommodate itself to the social requirements of the different groups, its inherent syncretism whereby it could subsume various belief systems within it, and most important of all, its organizational strength, kept alive its impact on the common people.

Of particular interest in this context is the role of the carita-pūthis in the entire process of social organisation. Both in their form and content they were oriented towards the needs of the common illiterate folk, and were rooted in the rural agrarian milieu. At the same time, they contained elements which could appeal to all sections of the medieval society. Infact, the caritas reflect the general consciousness of the people of that period. The incorporation of the caritas within the nāma-prasaṅgas was

thus an effective means of communication of the bhakti ideals, which gained immense popularity among all sections of the society -- peasants, traders and craftsmen, tribals and women, and even the brāhmanas.

Both brahminism and bhakti underwent transformation in the process. Some of the brahminical practices filtered into the bhakti faith and gained acceptance among certain sub-sects, but brahminism lost much of its stringency and much of its restrictions were relaxed for the community of bhaktas. On the other hand, bhakti could even allow space to the earlier followers of tāntric practices by its general attitude towards matters of purity and pollution, dietary habits etc., which was not possible within the bounds of orthodox brahminism.

The bhakti movement also brought about certain decisive changes in the social structure of medieval Assam. Though bhakti did not completely obliterate the caste system from the society, and despite the fact that sattras became divided into brahminical and non-brahminical sāmhatis, it did lead to a further relaxation of the caste rules. There was considerable intermingling among the community of bhaktas belonging to it and provided different caste groups an opportunity for upward mobility. Various Hinduized tribal groups, who took to agriculture, such as the Koches etc., mixed with the dominant Hindu peasant castes like the kolitās. Moreover, many of the kāvasthas and other non-

brāhmana castes became mahantās or heads of the sattras and occupied a position of respect in the society. These groups thus gained prominence within the social structure. One of the complaints made by the orthodox brāhmanas pertained to the śūdra gurus preaching to the brahmana disciples. Śaṅkardeva himself gave śaraṇa to many brāhmanas who became bhaktas, although, being pragmatic, he later assigned this task to some of his brāhmana disciples. On the whole, however, bhakti was effective in a further loosening of the caste rules, and it could never acquire a rigid form in this region. The broad division between the brāhmanas and the non-brāhmanas remained, but even the brāhmanas were considerably less rigid than their north-Indian counterparts, in terms of dietary and other practices.

In the cultural sphere too, bhakti led to a general efflorescence in the fields of language and literature, music, dance etc., which became important aspects of the sattra culture, and gave a boost to the formation of an Assamese identity.

Although it is outside of the purview of my dissertation certain areas need to be further explored in the study of the bhakti movement in Assam. While we have referred to the large number of preachers who operated in particular localities and who very often had their caritas composed by their disciples, a closer look into the sub-regional specificities can yield interesting insights.

Secondly, the role of women in the neo-Vaiṣṇava movement also deserves greater attention. While it is generally accepted that an established order among the Vaiṣṇava women did not develop and that the nāma sessions³ were held separately for men and women, the case of Ai Dayal who became a Vaiṣṇava medhī (sattrā functionary incharge of affairs in the villages) is interesting, and provides scope for further probing.

Another area which awaits further research in the context of Assam Vaiṣṇavism is its links with the forms of bhakti prevalent in the other regions of eastern India such as Bengal and Orissa. Such comparative analysis is of particular significance in view of the general tendency among the historians of Bengal Vaiṣṇavism to regard the bhakti movement in Assam as only a variant of the Caitanya movement. For instance P. Jash states that Gaudiya Vaiṣṇavism 'produced unprecedented sensation and enthusiasm in Bengal and adjoining regions of Orissa, Assam etc., and the whole country was 'surcharged with the spirit of bhakti bursting⁴ as a flood of ecstatic experience;. Although M. Neog does

3. M. Neog (ed.), Guru Carita Kathā, op.cit., pp.470-475.

4. P. Jash, History and Evolution of Vaiṣṇavism in Eastern India, Calcutta, 1982, p.207.

point to the particular identity of the Assam Vaiṣṇavism and rejects the notion that it was an extension of the Caitanya movement, his discussion of the philosophical aspects of Śaṅkaradeva's variety of bhakti tends to strengthen the view that it was a derived phenomenon.⁵

It may be pointed out that despite certain apparent similarities in social conditions in Bengal and Assam, both in the philosophical and organizational levels they reveal distinct differences. The central and most striking feature of Bengal Vaiṣṇavism was the expression of ecstatic devotion, which is clearly evident from the various studies on the subject. Thus the Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa element and the rasa-sāstra gained predominance within it.⁶ Later the yugalāvatāra theory was introduced, whereby Caitanya came to be looked upon as the simultaneous manifestation of both Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā.⁷ David Kinsley has also emphasized the element of "divine play" in his study of Kṛṣṇa-līlā and pointed to its significance in the context of Caitanyite Vaiṣṇavism.⁸

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5. M. Neog, Śaṅkaradeva and his Times, pp.vi-vii.
 6. S.K. De, Early History of the Vaisnava Faith and Movement in Bengal, Calcutta, 1961,(reprint); R. Chakrabarti, Vaiṣṇavism in Bengal 1486-1800, Calcutta, 1985.
 7. K. Chakrabarti, op.cit., p.452.
 8. D.R. Kingsley, The Divine Player: A Study of Kṛṣṇa-līlā, Delhi, 1979, pp.205-220.

However, despite the fact that the later carita-pūthis of Assam do contain some deferential references to Caitanya, the expression of ecstatic emotion never came to occupy a dominant place in Śaṅkaradeva's movement, nor was Rādhā given a prominent position within it. It is possible that with greater contacts in later centuries, strains of these did filter through to Assam, particularly when Assam falls between Bengal and other areas of eastern India where Caitanyaism had greater influence, such as Manipur. Though kīrtana formed the primary mode of worship in both Bengal and Assam, a central monastic organization did not develop in the former, while in Assam the institution of satras gained wide popularity and became both the centre of neo-Vaiṣṇava culture as well as the base from which bhakti continued to derive its sustenance through the centuries.

Thus, in the light of the above mentioned factors, it is felt that a more thoroughgoing comparative analysis of the two variants of bhakti could yield fruitful results.

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