ROLE OF THE STATE &TRADITIONAL INSTITUTIONS IN IDENTITY FORMATION:

A STUDY OF THE SRIMANTA SANKARDEVA SANGHA IN ASSAM

Thesis submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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2020

DECLARATION

This is to certify that the thesis entitled **"Role of the State and Traditional Institutions in Identity Formation: A Study of the Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha in Assam"** submitted by me in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of **Doctor of Philosophy** of Jawaharlal Nehru University is my original work to the best of my knowledge and has not been previously submitted for any degree of this University or any other university.

Ankita Dutta 15/01/2020

CERTIFICATE

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

Prof. Asha Sarangi 15/01/2020
Chairperson

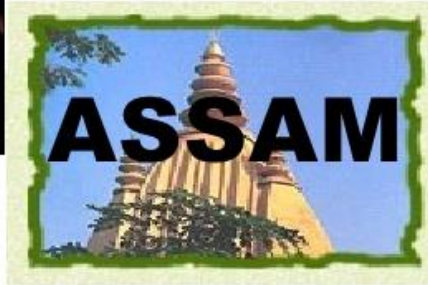Prof. Anupama Roy 15/01/2020
Supervisor

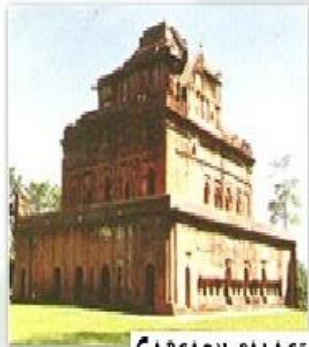# *Dedicated to my land and its people….*

Tea Garden

Sunset on the Brahmaputra

Deer

GARGAON PALACE

Kalia Bhomora bridge

Umananda Temple

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This thesis is the result of enduring years of hardships, financial frustration and emotional setbacks, that have come out time and again either in the form of unexplained anger or tears. As the extremely exhausting but equally exciting journey of writing the PhD thesis finally draws to a close, I would like to express my sincere note of thanks to a few people around me without whose support this project would never have been have been possible. Although a mere thanks seems insufficient for what they really mean to me, I would still like to acknowledge their constant encouragement for all my endeavours in life and express deep appreciation for being with me all throughout this journey.

Having been born and brought up in the Assamese Vaishnava Mahapurusiya Naam-Dharma tradition, there have been so many people around me who have helped me learn the significance of the Hindu way of life that it is impossible here in a few pages to talk about each one of them and their role in shaping my values and beliefs. This particular way of life and the values associated with it have played a very significant role in writing this thesis and carrying out of the field work across different places of Assam. My association with the *Sattra* and the *Namghar* started since childhood when I used to visit my Aita (maternal grandmother) and Koka (maternal grandfather) every year during the summer vacations. Although Koka is no more, his early morning ritual of reciting the *Kirtan-Ghosha* and the *Naam-Ghosha* along with the rhythmic vibrations of the *taal* in the *Goxain-Ghor* (prayer room) of our ancestral home, left a deep impression on me as a child. Almost everyday after lunch, Aita used to go the nearby Namghar for *diha-naam* which was exclusively reserved for the local women of the village. She had numerous stories to tell after coming back home and the topics could be as diverse as religion and spirituality to cooking and local politics. As I grew up, I gradually became more and more interested in learning and knowing about the *Sattriya-Sanskriti* of Srimanta Sankardeva and the way it had been preserved by people like my Aita and Koka in its purest form. These factors have been really crucial in shaping me as the person that I am today and instinctively guiding me during the entire journey of carrying out the field studies and then putting the same in the form of writing.

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to give my best efforts in completing my thesis. A supervisor with whom I could share everything, from personal to financial, she has been a pillar of immense inspiration throughout. Besides giving me ample space and mental freedom to carry out this research in my own way and introduce my own ideas, her extremely understanding nature left me with enough time to simultaneously pursue my hobbies back at home. Without her presence and timely intervention to correct my mistakes, it would never have been possible to submit this thesis. I admit that certain faults in the different layers of the arguments have still remained, but they are entirely on my part.

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Center, Srimanta Sankardeva University library (both Nagaon and Guwahati), library of the Omeo Kumar Das Institute of Social Change and Development (OKDISCD), and the Women's Studies Department situated within Gauhati University campus. Their warm and welcoming attitude in availing the facilities in their institutions proved to be of immense help and encouragement in the final completion of this work.

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Chapter - 1

INTRODUCTION

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Background of the Study: Traditional Institutions, *Sattra* and *Namghar* in Assam

Traditional institutions can be understood as one of the manifestations of the coexistence of the "traditional" and the "modern"in which the modern represents itself as a reincarnation of the traditional. The importance of traditional institutions primarily stems from the legitimacy accorded to these institutions by society, and respect for certain values and belief systems that characterise the functioning of such institutions. Initially, these institutions were generally localized, usually restricted to one single village. With time, these institutions have expanded their administrative sphere to clusters of villages or even to the whole of a community. The *Namghar* is one such institution in Assam having its roots in the Vaishnavite movement of Srimanta Sankardeva in the medieval period. It is a multi-dimensional institution in the Assamese society, endowed with the authority and legitimacy to make decisions and enforce the same on the local population of a village/locality/town wherever it is situated. This has been the case despite the establishment of local-self government institutions such as panchayats that are based on a constitutional recognition by the state after the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1993.

In Assam (both in Upper and Lower Assam), in religious terms, the *Namghar* is commonly understood as a prayer hall where Vedic rituals involving *hom* or fire worship and the chanting of *mantras* in front of an idol are not performed.It also serves as a community meeting-place and is multi-dimensional in the sense that the *Namghar*performs various roles such as a place of religious worship, community gathering, and also an institution of conflict-resolution. The Vaishnavite movement of Srimanta Sankardeva played a crucial role in the gradual formation of an 'Assamese' identity centering around two different institutions of religious, cultural and social significance – the *Sattra* (a Vaishnavite monastery originally established along the lines of a Buddhist *vihara*) and the *Namghar* (an extended wing of the *Sattra*). The importance of these institutions arises from their intimate association with diverse aspects of the Assamese society ranging from the cultural and the political to the religious and the spiritual. Though first born in the 16th century, the Vaishnavite *Sattras*are vibrant entities till date and have continuously served as the custodians of the Assamese philosophy, art and culture. The institution of the *Namghar* can be noticed in almost every

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Assamese village, town and even big cities like Guwahati where they have been set up either locality-wise or area-wise mostly. The corporate life of the village centres around the *Namghar*. It serves as a common platform for the villagers to gather together and discuss their common issues and problems in a collective spirit. In this context, the role of the *Namghar* as a mechanism of dispute resolution has been discussed in the latter part of Chapter 3 with reference to certain locally evolved judicial procedures and methods that have become significant in dealing with matters concerning a particular community.

The community of the Assamese Vaishnavas which earlier included both hills and plains tribes of Assam as well as different castes (including lower castes like *Doms*) have now split into different sects and sub-sects. On the ground of discrimination by their fellow Assamese (the so-called upper castes like *Kalitas*), they have also set up their own *Namghars* propagating their own set of principles and ideals.[1] This has posed a challengeto the notion of a singular 'Assamese' identity. The latest political developments in the state centering around the question of identity between the native inhabitants and the outsiders, and the process of updating of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) have further complicated the scenario over the issue of legality versus illegality.

Review of Literature

Any institution that has been functioning as per its own rules and norms within a specific community/locality since a long time, and does not fall within the ambit of those institutions that are recognized within the legal and constitutional domains of the state, is generally understood as a traditional institution. As such, the distinction needs to be made between

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[1] The *Mising* tribe, a plains tribe of Assam, have their own *Namghars* in several places of Upper Assam where they are majorly concentrated. This was taken note of during a visit to the Gogamukh area of Dhemaji district in November, 2016. Several *Misings* have complained of having meted out discriminatory treatment at the hands of the *Sattradhikars* (the head of a *Sattra*) and *bhakats* (priests) who, in order to avoid close bodily contact with them (because of the popular belief that tribals are pork-eaters and hence 'dirty'), throw away the *prasad* from a distance. Overall, the *Misings* still follow *Mahapurusiya Vaishnava Dharma* of Sankardeva but they also worship their own local gods and goddesses. Worshipping of spirits, sacrificing of fowls and pigeons and consumption of rice beer are practiced hand in hand with the Vaishnava ideals, under which such rituals are strictly prohibited. Thus, in place of the *Namghar*, age-old institutions of the *Misings* such as the *Morung*(a local community institution similar in its functions to the *Namghar*),*Kebang*(village council) and *Bane-Kebang*(inter-village tribal council) have assumed more significance in the present times.

modern and traditional institutions – the former a part of the state machinery and legally recognized by the state, and the latter also a part of the state although indirectly. The 'traditional' in itself is an elusive category and its ambiguity continuously persists when we seek to explain and understand the nature and functioning of such institutions that are a part of the same society as the state is.

Even within the category of traditional institutions, variations occur across cultures and communities, so much so that all such institutions recognised as "traditional" cannot be placed together under one common framework. Different institutions such as marriage or kinship recognised as "traditional" are subject to the formal constitutional law of the state; e.g. as per the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955, the bridegroom must have completed the age of 21 years and the bride the age of 18 years at the time of their marriage.These are generally understood as a mechanism of exercising state control over community life. Thus, traditional institutions like marriage and family are brought under the purview of state laws, both incorporating elements of the other. As a result, in due course of time, institutions change their forms across history and cultures to eventually acquire "modern" forms.

The origin of traditional institutions in Northeast India can largely be traced to the pre-colonial times. The roles and functions of these institutions have followed a pattern similar to that of the formal elected institutions at the state level. Unlike the former, the latter are endowed with a statutory and constitutional basis in the politico-legal domain of the state.[2] In order for any institution to become a tradition, the evolution is rooted in a historical past where people lived according to their own structures of tradition and authority. At this time, these institutions fulfilled a role which could not have been better fulfilled by any other institution existing at the time. Gradual expansion of the state machinery has gone alongside an expansion of the powers of these institutions at the local level. Many political leaders are elected into the state level from the community. These leaders, at times, for their own political gains, may even use their dependence on these traditional institutions in order to secure funds for the development of public services such as roads, education, water supply, and infrastructure within their respective jurisdictions.[3]A well-functioning democracy demands a healthy relationship and co-existence between both formal state institutions and

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[2]Alaka Sarmah, "Role of Traditional Institutions in Governance: Experience from Karbi Anglong, Assam," *Dialogue* 13, no. 2 (2011): 8-13.

[3] David R. Syemlieh, "Traditional Institutions of Governance in the Hills of Northeast India: The Khasi Experience," *Man and Society: A Journal of Northeast Studies* III, no. 117 (2006): 117-137.

traditional institutions. The role played by such institutions in a democratic society and polity is critical in providing researchers with certain evaluative standards through which their functioning in the context of different socio-cultural and community norms and value-systems can be appraised and understood.

Interaction between the state and traditional institutions has, at times, however, led to endemic conflicts between both. In many instances, the former views the latter as reactionary or thriving in conservative ideas and values. Whereas, for these institutions, the state is seen as unresponsive and sometimes even beyond the reach of local communities. For instance, conflict of values between khaps in Haryana and state rulings are well known. Here, the state is seen as a distant or alien entity, not being able to protect the community value systems in the contemporary world. Moreover, certain societies and communities have set up such institutions so as to keep intact their traditional values and community practices in the context of changes unleashed by the forces of globalisation, e.g. the transition from joint family to nuclear family and the consequent changes of familial values, the impact of which has been felt in both rural and urban India.

In this context, a question which is of utmost relevance to the Indian case is whether primordial groups and traditional institutions such as caste, kinship, ethnicity and religion are a part of civil society.[4] Grounded on the modernization theory, the growing literature on civil society today excludes such primordial and traditional groups, regarding them as "pre-civil". Social theorists and sociologists such as Andre Beteille and Dipankar Gupta have argued that traditional communities or ascribed institutions are irreconcilable with the civil society because they are repressive and hierarchical; they represent spheres of unfreedom and are impervious to individual choice. Civil society, according to the modernists, refers to only those 'intermediary institutions' that are open and secular in nature and which promote the idea of citizenship. Similarly, Kaviraj has argued that civil society is composed of autonomous individuals capable of making rational and deliberate choices, rather than possessing any intrinsic political attributes.[5]However, to characterise these institutions as partisan and parochial and hence not a part of civil society, is to ignore the fact that civil society is nothing but an organised segment of the society.[6] In India, primordial factors such as religion, caste, ethnicity and language have been very effectively mobilised in articulating

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[4] Sudipta Kaviraj, "On State, Society and Discourse in India," *IDS Bulletin* 21, no. 4 (1990): 11-18.

[5] Ibid.

[6] T.K. Oomen, ed., *Social Movements I: Issues of Identity* (New Delhi: OUP, 2010).

and representing group identities and interests, chiefly with the motive of gaining electoral dividends.

The overarching nature of the process of globalisation has facilitated the transnational flows of commodities and capital and the subsequent growth of supranational political and economic organisations. As a result, similar social and cultural patterns seem to have emerged across different parts of the globe encompassing diverse aspects of people's day-to-day lives. The world has thus now come to be imagined in terms of a single interconnected entity governed by a collective consciousness among its inhabitants of being a part of a global culture that is predominantly 'American' in its values and orientations. At the same time, however, contemporary world politics has been marked by the rise of social and political movements across societies that are largely predicated upon a revival of primordial identities and affiliations of individuals and collectivities. Thomas Hylland Eriksen, in his book,*Globalisation: The Key Concepts*, observes that "the centripetal or unifying forces of globalisation and the centrifugal or fragmenting forces of identity politics are the two sides of the same coin."[7] Hence, globalisation does not merely signify the emergence of homogenised cultures as had been initially speculated by many in the academia. In reality, it is the other way round, i.e. societies affected by globalisation gradually get enmeshed into it with all its accompanying processes, so much so that with time, they come to be characterised by complex and sometimes deeply contentious negotiations related to the issues of identity and identity politics.[8]

With respect to India, contestations over identity have long been a hallmark of both its pre- and post-colonial polity. This reality was duly recognised by the post-Independent Indian state, which thus found it necessary to address the traditional divisions based on caste, religion and community existing among diverse sections of the people of the country through a pan-national identity. It was because such an identity was based on a due acknowledgement of the internal differences of caste and religion based on narrow, parochial grounds, while at the same time representing an idea of transcending the boundaries beyond such narrow worldviews.[9]This unity-in-diversity approach was reinforced through several ways, e.g. in the

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[7] Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Globalisation: The Key Concepts* (Bloomsbury: Bloomsbury Academic, 2007), 36-48.

[8] Kalyani Chadha, "From Caste to Faith: Contemporary Identity Politics in a Globalised India," *Journalism and Communication Monographs* 20, no. I (2018): 84-87.

[9] Ibid.

commemorations of India's annual Republic Day celebrations, the construction of a policy discourse by the post-Independent Indian state claiming that infrastructural, industrial and scientific development was the ultimate national need and the foremost priority that the state must address, etc. However, there were certain inherent flaws associated with this unity-in-diversity approach, which Srirupa Roy calls the gap between "paper truths and lived realities, or between procedural commitments and their actual implementation."[10] Hence, a variety of sub-national identities could not be eliminated, and they continued to persist, raising their demands on the body-politic from time to time. It was in the 1970s with the appointment of the Second Backward Classes Commission by the Morarji Desai Government under the chairmanship of B.P. Mandal that identity politics based on caste sought to directly pose a challenge to the Nehruvian nationalist project of the post-Independent Indian state. Caste identity, which once provided one of the primary fodders for political-social cohesion and mobilisation, has now become connected to and absorbed within the framework of religious identities, which are understood as largely monolithic by the people affiliated to it most of the times.[11]

Kenneth J. Gergen argues that identity politics is the descendant of a Western, individualist ideology where individual identity is conflated with a group identity and hence it is relational. This eventually helps develop a common ground between individual and group interests (and rights). It is in this way that the group replaces the individual as the primary centre of political discussion, but it does not completely disrupt the discourse of individuality.[12] Rather, the group is treated in much the same way discursively as the individual – imbued with both good and evil intent, held blameworthy, deemed worthy of rights, etc. Advocates of identity politics are now becoming keenly aware of the problematic of separation – because, the dominant culture is already prone towards objectification of the "Other" which is forced into identity traps that further confirm the dominant culture's sense of superiority and self-righteousness.[13] The existing discourses of oppression, justice, equality, and rights are no

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[10] Srirupa Roy, *Beyond Belief: India and the Politics of Post-Colonial Nationalism* (Duke University: Duke University Press, 2007), 66.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Kenneth J. Gergen, "Social Construction and the Transformation of Identity Politics," in *End of Knowing: A New Developmental Way of Learning*, eds. F. Newman and L. Holzman (New York: Routledge, 1999), 7-9.

[13] P. du Preez, *The Politics of Identity* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980), 132.

doubt, important in understanding the diverse traditions within identity politics and activism associated with the same. However, the art of relational politics attempts to develop a new vocabulary, a new consciousness, and a new range of practices that are collaborative and incorporative of identities.[14] Individual identities are understood and imagined with reference to the group/community to which he/she belongs. These identities are continuously shaped, re-shaped, and re-inforced in their interaction with the state and the political narrative that thereby develops, encompassing the interests and concerns of different groups of people at different periods in history.

The concerns and grievances of each state in North-eastern Indiais location-specific, location here meaning primarily geographical location. Since Independence, the Indian state has often been accused of having a myopic vision in its dealings with this region of the country, which has failed to address the real ground-level issues for petty electoral gains.[15]To quote Prof. Udayan Misra, "Present-day Assam, made up primarily of the Brahmaputra and Barak Valleys, presents a very different picture when compared with the other neighbouring states of Meghalaya, Mizoram, Manipur, Tripura, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh. Assam had a deep and wide-ranging cultural intercourse with the rest of the Indian subcontinent, centuries before the other hill regions of the Northeast came to know of the so-called 'mainstream'."[16]Unlike other areas of this region which thrived largely on a subsistence economy for quite a long period of time in history, the continuous engagement of Assam in trade and commercial activities with neighbouring Bengal and other parts of the country gradually led to a process of state formation.[17]The politics of Assam has, time and again, been continuously engulfed within a wave of resistance and identity assertion vis-à-vis a mainstream Hindi "heartland" – majority represented by Hindi-speaking people from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Rajasthan, who form a significant chunk of the population in Assam engaged chiefly in petty trade and other manual jobs.[18]

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[14] No. 10

[15] Udayan Misra, "The Assamese Movement and the Assamese National Question," in *Northeast Region: Problems and Prospects of Development*, ed. B.L. Abbi (CPRID: Chandigarh, 1984), 33-40.

[16]Ibid, p. 38.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Amalendu Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam: Society, Polity, Economy* (Center for Studies in Social Sciences: Calcutta, 1991), 23.

The existing literature on traditional institutions in Northeast India seems to be primarily focussed on the issue of autonomy and the role of customary law among the tribal population. The institution of the *Namghar* in Assam has its roots in the Vaishnavite movement of Srimanta Sankardeva in medieval Assam which first led to the emergence of the institution of the *Sattra*. The *Sattra* is popularly touted as the parent institution of the *Namghar*. Various local literatures available on the origins and role of the *Namghar* have looked at it as a multi-dimensional institution. Whether it is endowed with sufficient legitimacy and authority in society is a question that needs further exploration, but the decisions upheld by it are being strictly adhered to by the community. Specific *Namghars* of Assam such as the *Dhekiakhowa Bornamghar* in Jorhat district of Upper Assam, the *Athkhelia Namghar* in Golaghat district, etc. have played an important socio-cultural and political role throughout history. The existing literature on the subject has dealt with in detail the emergence of the Vaishnavite movement through the institutions of the *Sattra* and the *Namghar*. Research on the *Namghar*until now has primarily dealt with it as an institution of people's participation that is responsible for facilitating community development at the grassroots level of the political spectrum.

Tracing its roots back to the 16th century, the *Sattras* are a part of the living cultural tradition of Assam, patterned on the lines of the Buddhist *viharas* or monasteries. Initially, it was set up as a place for the Vaishnavite monks to reside, pray and meditate. In due course of time, the *Namghar* emerged as its offshoot and functioned as the prayer hall. The Assamese Hindus were now bound by two unavoidable affiliations – temporal allegiance to the state and the king, and spiritual submission to the *Sattradhikar* or the superior of a *Sattra*. These institutions played a very significant role during that period of time by providing a platform for people to raise their voices and also get them heard at the higher level of decision-making of the state. However, since no society and its people are immune to change, the same holds true for its institutions as well. Thus, institutions recognised as traditional just because they seem easily accessible to a certain category of people at a certain time may not always remain so.

The unpopularity of the *Sattras* in present-day Assam stems from several reasons. Entrenched forms of hierarchy and rigid norms of caste taboos are explicitly reflected in its organization and functioning both. These strictures apply especially to the tribals and the lower castes. Such decadent customs are now resented by many, especially the educated youth who equate them with the hierarchical relationship existing between different castes in the varna order.

However, despite this unequal relationship, the authority of the *Sattra*and the word of the *Sattradhikar*are still not openly resented in many places. This is where the idea of legitimacy comes in. It means that although traditional institutions may not always be open and democratic in their organization and functioning, followers still adhere to their basic tenets which govern the way society itself is organized around these institutions.

In order to assert their authority, these institutions might embody the same values and ethos against which they claim to resist. The *Namghar*, also, is not entirely free of narrow parochial tendencies of caste and gender hierarchy in its organization. Social and economic changes have also led to changes in people's aspirations. As a result, the traditional understanding of Sankardeva's teachings based on "egalitarianism" free of distinctions based on caste, creed, or gender, has now been openly challenged by the emergence of the *Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha*. As an institution, the *Sangha* has sought, on the basis of Sankardeva's writings, to abolish caste completely and introduce widespread social reforms so as to broaden the appeal of Vaishnavism among all who reside in Assam, including Marwari businessmen and tea-garden tribes.

The *Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha*can be understood as a part of the institution of *Mahapurusiya Naam-Dharma* itself, albeit with a changed narrative that seeks to reform and put an end to certain untoward practices that have crept into the original system. It was initially formed with the assistance of a number of *sattradhikars* (chiefs) of different *sattras* and poor *Gosains* (priests) of many *Namghars* spread across the state. They, however, later withdrew when the *Sangha* seemed to adopt a more extreme stance regarding its views.[19] The leaders and members of the *Sangha* now criticise the *sattradhikars* for corrupting the religion of Sankardeva and robbing it of its original appeal. What needs to be looked at is how the emergence of the *Sangha*as an institution that still adheres to the authority of the *Namghar*, represents a social reform process within the community of the Assamese Vaishnavas, challenging long-held beliefs of equality and community.

Under the existing system of *Naam-Dharma*, the gradational relationship and ritual hierarchy between the *bhakat* and the *bhakta* is seen when the *sattradhikar* is invited to conduct the *naam prasanga* in a *Namghar*. In most cases, he takes along with him his own cook to prepare his food. The same also holds true of many *gosains* of several *Namghars*, who, when invited to *naam prasangas* to different households, either take along with them their own

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[19]Audrey Cantlie, *The Assamese* (London and Dublin: Curzon Press Ltd., 1984), 48-52.

cook to prepare their food or do not eat the offerings prepared in the household and served to others in common. This is so primarily in order to assert the spiritual pre-eminence of the guru that there exists no one of equal status to him. This is coupled by the fact that the *maah-prasad* (religious offering) offered by the guru's hands to the god is sought by those suffering from any disease or life-threatening illness on account of the belief that it is bestowed with magical qualities which can cure one of many ills.[20] Also, the *sattradhikars* and *gosains* of many well-known *Sattras* and *Namghars* of Assam respectively, cannot be touched and do not set foot on the ground outside the precincts of these places. When they go out on tour with their assistants to visit their disciples during cold weather, they travel by boat or are carried in litters to camps. These camps are especially built for them by the villagers and fine clothes are spread on the ground before them as they walk. All these factors have thus set in motion a new wave of social reforms within Vaishnavism in Assam.

During the time of Sankardeva, a simple and egalitarian way of life prevailed, devoid of any influences of the caste system, rich-poor divide or the system of private property. This can be inferred from the scattered descriptions given by some early writers. For instance, Daityari Thakur has written that in the *Sattra*, people of all castes including the *Kaibarttas*, the *Kalitas*, the *Koch*, the Brahmins, took their meals together which consisting mainly of raw fruits, parched rice, and milk.[21] The same held true of the *Namghar* as well. No distinctions of caste or class existed at the time. Gradually, however, this simple community life gave way to a life where inequalities and differences based on caste and class raised its ugly head. The search for salvation and *bhakti* gave way to the cravings for pomp and power. Many writers on the subject have attributed the reasons for the present decadence and decline of the principles underlying the Vaishnavite institutions to Sankardeva's social philosophy itself. They have raised the criticism that Sankardeva did not strike at the very roots of the economic and social fabric of the society in Assam as it existed then. Instead, in a sense, he wanted to run away from the real problems facing the world by building small islands of peace in the midst of the ocean of suffering and misery that surrounded the society of the time. According to Sivanath Barman, the major weakness of Sankardeva as a social philosopher is that he was reticent on a social upheaval on an economic basis. This was to be

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[20]Ibid: 56.

[21] R.M. Nath, ed., *Sankardeva Madhavdeva Carit* (Sylhet: Dhaka University Press, 1896).

seen even within the institutions of the *Sattra* and the *Namghar*, where very little importance was given to the immense potentiality of human productive power.[22]

The allegation has been raised that the monks living within these institutions did not do any productive labour at all, but lived on alms. At the initial stages, they primarily used to live on charity which, in the later stages, transformed into seeking patronage by the *Sattradhikars* first of the royal officers and then of the kings themselves. The kings were initially reluctant to patronise these institutions apprehending that these might run counter to the administrative machinery of the state. But the moment it came to be realised that these institutions were politically harmless, they bestowed gifts on them in the form of land and property in an attempt to win over their allegiance. They also conferred royal titles and other privileges on the *sattradhikars* and *gosains*. Royal patronage gradually made these institutions deviate from their original foundational principles. Heated debates on theology and ritualism became the order of the day, while the practical problems and concerns of the common masses came to be relegated to the background.[23] Thus, the overall contribution of the Vaishnavite movement of Srimanta Sankardeva through the twin institutions of the *Sattra* and the *Namghar* towards bringing about real social change needs to be analysed in this context. His emphasis was more on a change of the religious and spiritual aspects of people's day-to-day lives rather than bringing about overall transformation of the then-existing society and the social order. It was ultimately the latter that determined the former rather than being the other way round.

The ideas of monotheism and *bhakti* were reflected in the institution of the *Namghar* which represented an all-encompassing entity of the Assamese society at the time. However, these ideas indirectly strengthened the basis of feudalism in Assam in due course of time. As has been opined by Sivanath Barman, a reading of Sankardeva's *Raja-bhatimas* or eulogies to the king would clearly show that he was on the side of the feudal monarchy.[24] Thus, the very philosophy of Sankardeva's Vaishnavism appears to be a conflicting one. Initially, his aim was to build a classless society through the *Sattra* and its offshoot – the *Namghar* – in every village of Assam, by preaching the ideals of monotheism and *bhakti*. However, the hold of feudalism in Assam was gradually tightened, which did not completely do away with the

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[22] Sivanath Barman, *Tradition to Modernity: Essays on Assam* (Guwahati: Bhabani Books, 2012), 57-64.

[23] Ibid: 15-20.

[24] Ibid.

caste-based division of society based upon the ritualistic aspects of purity and pollution. This was the contradiction that ultimately shook the very foundations of these institutions resulting in splits and fragmentation within the community.

Moreover, monotheism meant the worship of only one single god (Lord Krishna) through *naam-kirtan*, to the exclusion of other gods and goddesses. This was, however, rooted in its own complications as there were, originally, many communities and tribes, including hill tribes, tea-garden tribes, etc. within the fold of Sankardeva's Vaishnavism, most of whom were not only animists but also worshippers of various other gods and goddesses. The question of efficient accommodation of the pluralistic beliefs and practices of these people throughout the entire length and breadth of Assam spreading from Cooch Behar to Sadiya, was something that remained unanswered. This later paved the way for dissensions to emerge among the people leading them to question the basic ideas foregrounding Vaishnavism. Several factions now came up within the Vaishnava/*Mahapurusiya Naam-Dharma* tradition that started to reinterpret the original ideas of Sankardeva in the light of the changing circumstances of the times. The contemporary socio-political problems of separatism based on religion, ethnicity or language in the state of Assam can be understood within this context. They have mostly centred around the conflicting notion of identity between Assamese and non-Assamese people and also between the plains and the hill tribes in the region.

Scope and Rationale of the study

The role of the *Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha* in carving out a separate identity for the Assamese centred around the institution of the *Namghar*, has been analysed from a limited perspective in the current available literature. This thesis has sought to fill in this gap by undertaking a comprehensive study of the different factors that led to the emergence of the *Sangha*and the resulting impact it has had on the "Assamese identity" over the years. In this context, the elusiveness of the idea of "identity" has been examined critically, keeping in mind people's identification with an identity at a time, and withdrawal from the same later. Secondly, the role and activities of the *Sangha*in the larger Assamese society have been talked about keeping in mind certain minute intricacies and details of the history of its emergence and the resultant effect it has had on the formation of an Assamese identity. It is also an attempt to critically analyse the many layers of cooperation and conflict among the various Vaishnava sects, under the prevailing dominance of the *Sattra* and the *Namghar*. Thepoints of convergences and divergences among these communities on a host of issues ranging from social to religious are also a part of the study.

Societies and their value-systems change, and with it, the institutions forming a part of it, also change. This study also seeks to emphasise in detail the complementary yet conflicting relationship existing between the concepts of the "traditional" and the "modern". The emergence of institutions and laws understood as traditional or customary, is a process that remains directly or indirectly guided by the state. Although generally representing themselves as a form of resistance against the state, the so-called "traditional" institutions try to replicate ways and means of the state in their methods of functioning. This means that the distinction between the traditional and the modern cannot provide the basis for establishing a coherent framework of study to understand and analyse the changing socio-political dynamics of any society.

Objectives of the Research

- To examine the idea and source of authority and legitimacy of institutions recognised as "traditional" and "modern".

- To analyse the various ways in whichsuch institutions have adapted themselves to the contemporary times and circumstances so as to retain their relevance.

- To understand the different ways in which institutions recognised as "traditional" create new identities or reinforce the already existing ones vis-à-vis the different stages of political development in a society.

- To understand the "location" of traditional versus modern institutions within the over-arching umbrella of the state and interaction between both.

- To problematise the question of 'identity' with respect to the 'Assamese', their changing relationship with the *Sattra* and the *Namghar* over time, vis-à-vis an 'Indian' identity.

Statement of the Research Problem

Both the state and community institutions are constitutive of the same process of social change and transformation that is a basic characteristic feature of any society. In the words of Kaviraj, "The idea of the state has now been transformed into that of a central moral force regulating the activities and behaviour of all individuals, institutions and laws. In contrast to European society, in India, the state has been the primary driver of modernity. Despite the emergence of a global world order and predominance of the ideas of liberalisation and globalisation, the "enchantment" of the state still remains unchallenged in social and

economic matters."[25] For example, many *Namghars* situated in different parts of Assam have adopted a constitution clearly delineating the powers and functions of the different offices attached to it and the nature of duties to be performed by the persons occupying these positions; formal elections based on voting by the locals of a village/town/city of the members of the management committee of a *Namghar* are also held periodically, etc. These are practices that can be understood to have been inspired from the constitutional framework of the state that also bring to light the overwhelming presence of the state in our day-to-day lives.

To quote James Scott, "Through a process of 'legibility', the modern state has imposed order upon those aspects of the society that it needed to understand and control."[26] This is similarly true of different institutions and institutional practices that have adapted themselves to different situations in ways that can be located within a framework of the overarching presence and influence of the state. For instance, the Census reports carried out by state departments are exercises of classification, enumeration, and identification of different groups of people and communities into their castes and sub-castes. The formation of different institutions, whether modern or traditional, is replete with traces of history which determine the different ways they adapt themselves to different times and circumstances. The laws of the state are often perceived differently by communities, and especially in a multi-ethnic and diverse country like India, one law may contradict the practices of some communities, while the same might not be true for another community.[27]

The composite, homogenous community of the Vaishnavas under Srimanta Sankardeva was never as unified as it seemed to be. Dissensions within the community later gave rise to divisive tendencies. These secessionist tendencies within Vaishnavism have come to the fore not only among people belonging to diverse tribes and communities, but also within the Vaishnavite community itself. Many different sects claiming themselves to be true or real Vaishnavas challenging brahmanism to the core have now emerged. The result has been that

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[25]Sudipta Kaviraj, "On the Enchantment of the State: Indian Thought on the Role of the State in the Narrative of Modernity," *The European Journal of Sociology*3, no. 2 (2005): 46-57.

[26]James C. Scott, *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1998), 21.

[27]Gurpreet Mahajan, *Accomodating Diversity: Ideas and Institutional Practices* (New Delhi: OUP, 2011), 33.

unlike earlier, when a single *Namghar* in a village represented the entire village community, many *Namghars* have now emerged. At times, hostile relations between communities have also developed on account of their differences regarding the way the *Namghar* is organised or certain rituals are being performed.

Research Questions

- How do institutions recognised as "traditional" create new identities or reinforce the already existing identities?
- How does identity formation occur in a context where the role of both state-led institutions and institutions recognised as "traditional" are seen as legitimate?
- Do dissensions within a community challenge the status quo and if so, how?
- What is the importance of institutions such as the *Namghar* that their management and way of functioning hold a special significance in the domain of the state?
- In what ways have the formation of separate *Namghars* by different groups and sects created completely new identities or overlapped the already existing identities?

Hypothesis: The core values and organisational principles of traditional institutions lead to socially divisive tendencies within a community.

Research Methodology

The nature of study in this research is both descriptive and analytical. The theoretical part of the study is based on a socio-politicaland socio-anthropological analysis of the questions of identity, state, tradition and culture. It has been carried out using relevant theories and concepts borrowed chiefly from the available literature on political sociology and anthropology. It has made use of both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources include government documents, including the text of the Assam Accord (1985) that consists of an entire chapter dealing with the establishment, functioning and management of *Namghars*. The study has also relied upon secondary sources such as books, academic journals, working papers, periodicals, project reports, seminars and symposia to understand the complex and multifaceted nature of a dynamic institution as the *Namghar*, and its historical evolution at different stages of political development. Resources related to the funding and management issues of *Namghars* available on the websites of various departments of the Government of Assam, NGOs and newspaper articles have also been

consulted. A content analysis of some of the major monthly and annual publications of different *Namghars*has also been done.

As a first step of initiating the study, books on philosophy, religion, society, economy, social geography and anthropology and other related disciplines were consulted. After this initial stage, materials and relevant information was collected from various sources like books, administrative reports, documents, research journals, both published and unpublished PhD theses, newspapers, etc. from various institutions and libraries in Delhi and Assam. I would especially like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to Dr. Jayanta Madhab Tamuli, former PhD research scholar at the Department of Peace and Conflict Studies and Management, School of Social Sciences, Sikkim University. His thesis on the "Role of Traditional Institutions in Peace Building with special reference to the *Sattra* and the *Namghar* proved immensely useful during the course of my work.

Intensive library work was conducted in the Center for Political Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University library; library of the Department of Anthropology, Gauhati University; Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Guwahati; Krishna Kanta Handique Library, Gauhati University; Office of the State Museum Library, Guwahati; North-East Social Science Research Center; Library of Omeo Kumar Das Institute of Social Change and Development; and, research institutions like Kamrup Anusandhan Samiti, Guwahati, Anundoram Barooah Institute of Language and Culture (ABILAC), Guwahati, District Library, Guwahati and Vivekananda Kendra Institute of Culture, Guwahati.

The other half of this research is primarily ethnographic and qualitative. Detailed ethnographic studies have been done with respect to specific *Namghars* affiliated to the *Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha* and others not affiliated to it. The territorial distribution of the *Namghars* (both large and small, in terms of the area it covers) undertaken for the purpose of the field-study is primarily confined to South Guwahati area in Kamrup (Metropolitan) district, *Bardowa Thaan* in Nagaon district, *Dhekiakhowa* and *Moinapuria Bornamghar* in Jorhat district, *Athkhelia Namghar* in Golaghat district, and a small part of the *Cari-Sattras* in Majuli, India's first river-island district. Certain problems faced during the field study were perennial floods in the state, besides a general cynicism sensed by the researcher among the respondents with whom she had spoken to. The qualitative part of this research is an attempt to bring out the contrast in the functioning of the same institution, i.e. the *Namghar,*within the same society. Informal chats and drawing-room discussions have been undertaken with

people who are associated with the working of the *Srimanta SankardevaSangha* and have an in-depth knowledge of its functioning.
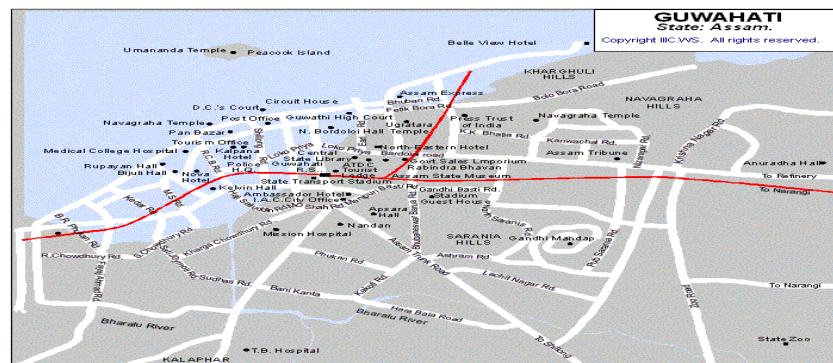
Geographical map of South Guwahati in Kamrup (Metropolitan) district where the field survey was carried out (Source: Wikipedia.org)

The importance of Majuli for the purpose of this study stems from the fact that Majuli is the cradle of Assamese Vaishnavite culture and traditions. Since its emergence, the relationship of the *Sattra* with different castes and tribes inhabiting the island has undergone far-reaching changes. The institution of the *Sattra* is found only in Assam and a part of Cooch-Behar in West Bengal. Since almost every Hindu family of the Brahmaputra Valley is directly or indirectly governed by the *Sattras*, this institution has a great influence on the land and people of the Valley. The location of the *Sattra* and the *Namghar* in the political milieu of Majuli, i.e. their relationship with the panchayats, and their role in the electoral processes have also been analysed as a part of this research work.

Many *Sattras* like Auniati, Garmur and Dakshinpat have their own publications such as *sanchi paator puthi* (manuscripts written on the bark of the *Sanchi* leaf), books, monographs, articles and souvenirs released on different occasions. Annual publications released on the occasion of the Golden Jubilee celebrations of Jengraimukh College, Majuli and Majuli College have also been consulted to collect requisite information on the subject. A few first-hand written records and archived documents preserved in the *Dhekiakhowa Bornamghar* in Jorhat have also been made use of for the purpose of obtaining valuable information regarding the history and evolution of the *Sattras*and the *Namghars*till date. Data for understanding the demographic and social characteristics of the respective *Sattras* and *Namghars*have also been collected from the field study.

Although much still needed to be done, but a comprehensive research design for the present study was prepared after the completion of the initial work, chiefly pertaining to library visits for collection of secondary data. A schedule for informal discussion with the *bhakats* and *Sattradhikars* and a few people associated with the *Sangha* was also prepared for collecting requisite ethnographic data in the field for obtaining first-hand information. A visit was undertaken to the four most popular *Sattras* in Majuli or *Cari-sattras* (Dakshinpat, Garmur, Kamalabari and Auniati) for personal observation and also to get an insight of their day-to-day functioning. The schedule was so prepared in order to cover almost every historical, demographic, economic and socio-cultural aspect of the area that was visited. Interestingly, it was revealed during the course of this study that the influence and cover of certain *Sattras* in Majuli and a few *Namghars* of the *Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha* is spread as far as Bongaigaon, Udalguri and Kokrajhar districts in Lower Assam. This is indeed a very elephantine task that requires years of research to cover each and every *Sattra* in both Upper and Lower Assam. Hence, for the purpose of a PhD degree, this work is confined to only the four major *Sattras* of Majuli, besides a few *Namghars* mentioned above.

Field-visits were conducted between the years September, 2017 till December 2018, covering a period of one week to ten days on every occasion of the visit. Data for the study have been collected by using various research methods like informal discussions, personal observation, and case studies through a period of continuous stay at the place. Leisurely and informal chats were conducted through the local (Assamese) language (since the respondents are not very comfortable with the use of English) with the inmates of the *Sattras*, including the *Sattradhikar* (principal custodian) and *bhakats* in the *Namghars*.This was aimed at collecting information about the day-to-day management of these institutions*,* different functionaries attached to them and also to know about their structural features. These informal chats were held with the *Sattradhikars* and other inmates only with their prior information and consent, and focussed group discussions have also been made use of in this process.

Group discussions have also been conducted with the local people of Majuli, a few areas in South Guwahati, Dhekiakhowa and Moinapuria villages in Jorhat and Bardowa in Nagaon to gather information about their worldviews regarding the changing role and nature of the *Sattra* and the *Namghar*as a community institution. The questions asked were mostly open-ended. The demographic structure of Majuli, caste distribution and relations between the different castes with the rise of the *Sangha*, have been the major areas of study. The participatory observation method was used where the researcher stayed in the *Sattra* for a few

days and observed the different functions closely, especially during the important festivals held annually or bi-annually like *Palnam*, Bihu, the *tithis* of the saints and *bhaona*. This method was primarily used for understanding certain basic intricate details related to the daily lives of the inmates of the *Sattra* and the religious aspects associated with the same. The complete list of all the existing *Sattras* in Majuli (both operational and non-operational) have been enclosed at the end of this thesis in the appendix.

Besides these, informal chats were also carried out with a few prominent persons including the *gaonburas*(heads of the panchayats), writers, college teachers of Majuli College, Jengraimukh College, Jagannath Barooah College, Jorhat, R.G. Baruah College, Guwahati and a few administrative officials, besides officials of the Majuli Cultural Landscape Management Authority. In this context, mention may be made of Dr. Punamjit Nath, then posted as the Deputy Superintendent of Police (DSP) in Majuli. During the field study in Majuli, the researcher mostly stayed at the Government Circuit House in Jorhat and went to Majuli the day after via ferry boat service. She had also stayed a couple of times in the Natun Kamalabari *Sattra* guest house situated in Majuli itself, and the opportunity was best utilized for collection of data through the observation method of study. It is because the Natun Kamalabari *Sattra* and Uttar Kamalabari *Sattra* are branches of the erstwhile Kamalabari *Sattra*. Formal discussions on the subject were conducted with Shri Shri Narayan Chandra Deva Goswami, the *Sattradhikar* and Shri Shri Kusum Mahanta, the *Deka Sattradhikar* (young custodian or second-in-command) and a few inmates of the *Sattra*. In Jorhat and Nagaon, the researcher mostly stayed at her relatives' place. In Nagaon, however, there were two occasions when she stayed at the guest house of the *Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha Kendra* at *Kalongpar*, so as to make comprehensive use of the library there. After every phase of field work, the information collected was systematically written down. This was later integrated with the subsequent field data collected from the remaining phases of the field study. After completion of the entire fieldwork, the ground-level data that was collected was analyzed as a whole and the different chapters of the thesis written accordingly.

In addition, the available folk and local literature of the region has been studied and analysed in order to understand the nature of the problems and complexities involved in the process and also provide solutions for the same. Caste relations have been reordered in villages and towns across Assam centering around the institution of the *Namghar*. As a result, socially divisive tendencies that had already been a part of the society in which the *Namghar* at first emerged have now come to the fore.However, the legitimacy that this institution still

commands in various spheres of the state and the society among both the Assamese and non-Assamese residents of Assam is quite interesting. It is proved by its continuing visibility as a community institution in the political arena of the state, despite the existence of gram sabhas and gram panchayats which are constitutionally recognised within the politico-legal domain of the state.

The major variables in the study include varied concerns of people of different communities heard and raised by different *Namghars*, convergences and divergences of interests of people affiliated to different *Namghars*, the community divide, the socio-economic and political issues arising from different notions of the "community", and the larger question of who is an "Assamese" in the context of the prevailing situation of conflicts over rights and citizenship, etc.

Overview of the Chapters

The thesis has been divided into five different chapters, the major themes of which are briefly discussed as follows:

- The **first chapter** titled **"Identity, State and Tradition: A Theoretical Perspective"**discusses in detail the notion of 'identity' and the process of identity formation, keeping in mind the social complexities and the politics around the same. It draws upon resources primarily from sociology and political anthropology. As an introductory chapter, it attempts to present an overall framework of the theoretical aspect of the study and also tries to look at the engagement and interaction between the state and various institutions in society that influence the policies of the state in myriad ways. It analyses the diverse roles played by both the state and institutions recognised as "traditional" in creating a space for individuals to identify themselves.

- The **second chapter** titled **"The State and 'Traditional' Institutions: A Brief History of the Vaishnavite Movement with Reference to the Role of the *Namghar* in Assam"** is an analysis of the continuous interaction between tradition and modernity with special reference to the relationship between the state and traditional institutions. It tries to bring to light both the salience of the state in matters of policy and decision-making as well as its elusiveness in understanding its relationship with society and vice-versa. It also describes the pivotal role that has been played by the *Namghar* in Assamese society since the mid-15th century and the formation of an "Assamese identity" through this institution.

- The **third chapter** titled **"Dissensions and Splits in the Vaishnavite Movement in Assam: A Case Study of the _Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha_"** looks into the various conflicting points of view regarding the functioning and management of the _Sattra_ and the _Namghar_. These differences, in due course of time, gave birth to different religious groups and factions within the community of the Assamese Vaishnavas. Each such group has tried to assert its own dominance and control over the politics of the state and therefore have staked claims to differing notions of identity based upon the question "Who is an Assamese in the land of Sankar-Madhab?" Based on an ethnographic study, it looks into the role played by the _Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha_ as a socio-political and reform organisation since its emergence till the present-day.

- The **fourth chapter** titled **"Exploring the Multi-Dimensional Nature of Caste in Sankardeva's Vaishnavism and the _Sangha's_ Resistance to it: A Field Study"** looks into both the overt and quite covert roles that caste play in the determination of people's social and economic mobility in a deeply religious society. Based on experiences of field visits and interaction there with the locals, this chapter seeks to make a critical analysis of the caste factor in the politics of identity in the region. The emergence of the _Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha_ as an institution of reform has sought to challenge this dynamics of caste that has for long been upheld by the chief custodians and priests of the _Sattra_ and the _Namghar_. However, the extent to which it has been successful in completely eliminating caste differences is debatable. Of late, matters have been further complicated by the issue of illegal infiltration of foreigners from neighbouring Bangladesh and their assimilation into the Assamese society over a period of time. This has added a new twist to the regional political developments related to the question of identity in terms of religion.

- The **final chapter** titled **"The Assamese – An Identity in Flux: A Socio-Cultural and Political Analysis"** builds upon the arguments of the previous four chapters and tries to present a critical commentary on the present-day identity politics of the region. In this context, the role and powers of the _Sattra_ and the _Namghar_ in the political milieu of Assam have been discussed with special reference to their relationship with different tribes and caste and religious groups of the region. It brings to light the extremely fluid and dynamic nature of people's identities concerning matters over citizenship, land rights, etc. Similarly, the "Assamese" too is not a homogenous entity. It is an amalgam of diverse castes, sub-castes, tribes, communities and

religious groups that are constantly in negotiation with the state, and herein lies the importance of traditional institutions in the constitutional and socio-political domains of the state.

Chapter – 2

IDENTITY, STATE AND TRADITION: A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

This introductory chapter discusses in detail the notion of 'identity' and the process of identity formation. It is divided into three parts:

- ➢ The first part gives a theoretical framework of the concept of 'identity' as a social construct. However, a comprehensive understanding and analysis of 'identity' needs to go beyond this particular framework of identity as a social and historical construct. It therefore becomes imperative to bring in the various contestations and debates around the notion of identity having varying consequences for the society and its people. According to Kenneth J. Gergen, "Social construction and identity politics form a pair of star-crossed lovers, entwined in a relationship suffused with passion, provocation and perfidy. No easy relationship is this, but one in which deep intimacy has given birth to an enormously influential array of movements across the land."[28]

- ➢ The second part looks into the relationship between identity politics and the state, with reference to Northeast India and particularly, Assam. The state is not a static entity. It is very much affected by the changes taking place in society which in itself is representative of diversity and heterogeneity. In this context, the category of the 'society' in the discipline of political science is not simply cultural. Accumulation of power relations which take place in the society is eventually reflected in the superstructure of the state. This part of the chapter therefore tries to look into the role of the wider socio-political processes, especially tradition and institutions recognised as "traditional", which guide the formation of identities within the political processes of the state. In this context, the socio-political relationship between culture and power looks at different conceptualisations of power as important elements of culture that serve culturally relevant goals. Cultural variables are shown to predict beliefs about the appropriate uses of power, episodic memories about power, attitudes in the service of power goals, and the various contexts and ways in which power is used and defended.[29]

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[28]No. 10

[29] Carlos J. Torelli and Sharon Shavitt, "Culture and the Concepts of Power," *TheJournal of Personality and Social Psychology* 99, no. 4 (2010): 2-16.

➢ With reference to the above two sections, the third part of the chapter talks about the role played by these traditional institutions in reflecting the changing power relations in a society in a context of the centrality of law in the practices of the state – of ruling and also claiming authority and acquiring legitimacy.Both formal state laws and community-backed laws play an important role in society. Keeping this in mind, it argues that all laws function within a particular societal context. It takes into account the process of 'manufacturing of consent' that leads to the internalisation of the law among people through the persuasive and coercive powers of the state. The way this gets reflected in the formation of various social identities is the core concern of this chapter.

Organisation of the state machinery and its functioning is dependent upon the effective usage and exercise of power in the society. The state constantly interacts with people living within its jurisdiction either directly or indirectly through various institutions, organisations and associations. The legislative process of law-making and the implementation of these laws are processes that eventually bring about coordination and coexistence among different structures and institutions of power that constitute a part of 'society'. Traditional institutions provide a platform for local communities to respond to and adapt themselves to the changing times and conditions.[30] It is through these institutions that socio-political mobilisation around issues of immediate importance concerning such communities takes place. These institutions, therefore, serve as the foundations that enable local communities to voice their interests and extract bargains from the power holders of the formal state machinery.

The formation of the state is, in itself, a product of diverse mix of institutions, laws and policies. The process of interaction between the state and its institutions produces consequences that effect the everyday life of its subjects – the choices they make, the kind of life that they wish to live, the goods they desire to have to make their lives satisfying, etc.[31] This engagement of the state takes place through various institutions and groups in society and it is here that we need to understand both the salience of the state in matters of policy and decision-making as well as its elusiveness or ambiguity in understanding its relationship with society and vice-versa. According to Sudipta Kaviraj, one of the fundamental ideational

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[30] No. 2

[31] Rajeev Bhargava and Ashok Acharya, eds, *Political Theory: An Introduction* (New Delhi: Pearson Longman, 2008).

changes brought about by modernity into Indian intellectual culture was a gradual transformation of the idea of the state. As an institution, the state was traditionally seen and understood as a necessarily limited and distinctly unpleasant part of the basic structure of any society. However, in the contemporary times, the idea of the state has been transformed into that of a central moral force, producing an immense enchantment in India's intellectual life.[32] It is because in the Indian context, unlike in Europe, the state has been the primary driver of modernity. Global dominance of the ideas of liberalisation has resulted in a reduction of the state's interference in the socio-economic life of the country; but, the enchantment of the state still remains undiminished.[33]In the words of Kaviraj, "The distinctive presence of the state as a powerful regulatory idea cannot be denied. It is implicitly invoked in every demand for justice, equality, dignity, assistance, etc. and onus of responsibility lies on the state to meet all these expectations."

Unlike Europe where economic and intellectual transformation of its society ushered in the era of modernity, in India, modernity itself was responsible for shaping the country's economic and intellectual foundations in due course of time. Initially, this 'politics' started with the establishment of the institutions of colonial rule which laid the basis for the legitimisation of the colonial state in which the British rulers and the Indian elites both exercised their due influence. This was followed by the state's extension from the 1920s to a more inclusive but still limited transformative nationalist movement.[34]The post-colonial Indian state was heir to both the British colonial state and the Indian nationalist movement. A new change that however, came about with Independence was the introduction of universal adult franchise and the expansion of state responsibilities beyond law and order into the domains of welfare and development which were to be executed through the medium of the bureaucracy. This had also led to a significant expansion of the bureaucracy which, paradoxically, gave rise to an overextended, corrupt and inefficient state.[35]Since the 1970s, the Indian state has evolved into a truly expansive domain especially with the entry of lower class politicians into the growing political space of the country.[36]According to Kaviraj,

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[32] No. 25

[33] Ibid.

[34] Sudipta Kaviraj, *The Imaginary Institution of India: Politics and Ideas* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 210-233.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Ibid.

politics now became increasingly 'vernacular' both in the literal and conceptual senses. There was also the simultaneous consolidation of the 'logic of bureaucracy' and the 'logic of democracy' – both deeply rooted in the historical legacies of the British colonial rule. This apparent paradox between statist and participatory tendencies is resolved when the rise of participatory politics is seen to generate greater demands on the state to deliver the expectations of the voters.[37]

Rudolph and Rudolph's distinction between command polity and demand polity becomes significant in this context. According to them, in the command polity model, the state is sovereign – differentiated, autonomous, and authoritative.[38] Command politics can orient policy towards harnessing future societal benefits and public and collective goods. It may also lead to the appropriation of state-generated wealth, power and status by political elites, officials and employees of the state.[39] In the demand polity model, policy is oriented towards satisfying short-term consumption needs, services and input requirements of mobilised constituencies. It can do so in ways that promote social justice, enhance human capital, and encourage investment and productivity. It may, however, also reward the powerful at the expense of the weak, allow consumption that limits savings and investment and move the state towards a state of entropy.[40]

According to recent theorists, state-society distinctions are to be understood in ways that are not a result of external forces. These distinctions are created internally, which are an aspect of more complex power relations. This necessitates an understanding of the relationship between state and society in historical terms that gave rise to the modern nation state and the accompanying social order. It was characterised by several new technological innovations that gave rise to new methods of organisation, surveillance and control of citizens. These new methods have created the effect of an all-encompassing state structure that is not only external to but also one that stands apart from society.[41] In this context, Lloyd Rudolph and John Jacobsen have clearly stated that the "idea is to treat the state as an imagined

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[37] Ibid.

[38] Lloyd I. Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph, *In Pursuit of Lakshmi: The Political Economy of the Indian State* (New Delhi: Orient Longman Limited, 2007), 168.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Timothy Mitchell, "The Limits of the State: Beyond Statist Approaches and Their Critics," *The American Political Science Review* 85, no. 1 (1991): 77-96.

community. It matters what and who regularly and routinely gets left out; how things, people, events, relationships are represented; and, how meanings are produced within relations of power."[42] It therefore makes an understanding and analysis of the state in terms of its all-encompassing nature, i.e. surveillance and control exercised by the state apparatus that imposes severe limitations upon the rights of citizens and also restricts human freedom. According to them, "The idea of the state has come to acquire a certain degree of abstraction by universalising and standardising it in terms of what the state is and does."[43] Thus, historicisation of the institution of the state would require us to locate it within a specific time-period, place and circumstances so as to clearly understand the different trajectories of its formation and also in order to avoid generalisations.

However, an approach to the study of the state as a category separated from the rest of society remains superficial. Such an analytic isolation of the state, in course of time, produces a mystification of its capabilities and power. The relationship of the state with several other groups and institutions that are considered a part of society is what we need to look at for a proper understanding of the process of identity formation. We need to approach the study of the state by recognising it as a "limited" state.[44] The fact that states are both constituted by, and constitutive of society, and vice-versa, looks at the engagement between both that has implications for the way identities take root. Diversity is a unique characteristic of any society and any efforts of the state to achieve uniformity in governance and administration is thwarted by this diversity.[45] In this mutually transformative process, contending coalitions representing sites of struggle and differences emerge. As a result, the lines of distinction between state and society stands blurred. It is this relationship of the state with society that determines the state's power over its citizens and the way of formation of identities.

The study of institutions and identity formation thus need to be located within the dynamism of this state-society paradox. For the purposes of our study and analysis, the historical institutionalist perspective and the culturalist perspective to the study of the state need to be

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[42] Lloyd I. Rudolph and John Kurt Jacobsen, *Experiencing the State* (New Delhi: Oxford India Paperbacks, 2010), 134-141.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Joel S. Migdal, "Studying the State," in *Comparative Politics, Rationality, Culture and Structure*, ed.Mark Irving Lichbach and Alan S. Zuckerman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 231.

[45] Ibid, pp. 232-233.

eclectically mixed instead of resorting to an approach that isolates the state as a single study of research and analysis. Only then can we undertake a realistic appraisal of the development process of the state. This would mean shifting our focus from a study of the state as a free-standing organisation to a view of the state that exists within the larger society.[46]

The culturalist perspective on the study of the state is based on the study of the role of culture in state and society. Culture is seen as providing the primary causal explanation for the centrifugal tendencies that tend to emerge in various complex organisations including states. According to the culturalist approach, the state is composed of several parts whose basic cause of drifting apart and gradual disintegration over time lies in culture. It argues that the various rituals associated with the state, glorification of its powers or otherwise, are reflective of the cohesive power that culture offers.[47] This seems especially true in the context of modern bureaucratic states where each bureau or department is entrusted with widely divergent functions, role, and responsibilities to perform. All these are aimed at the purpose of effective and resourceful maintenance of the system. Mundane bureaucratic procedures provide important clues to understanding the micropolitics of sate work, how state authority and government operate in the daily lives of people, and how the state comes to be imagined, encountered and re-imagined by the population.[48] Paying attention to everyday bureaucratic practices helps bring to light the sources and nature of inter-bureaucratic conflicts. This, in turn, can help explain the various impediments to the proper implementation of state-sponsored development programmes.

According to Akhil Gupta, "The boundary between state and non-state realms is drawn through the contested cultural practices of bureaucracies, and people's encounters with and negotiations of these practices. Everyday statist encounters not only shape people's imagination of what the state is and how it is demarcated, but also enable people to devise strategies of resistance to this imagined state.[49] The common citizens of the country who are the targets of development programmes of the state are "outside" bureaucracies. In due

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[46] Ibid, p. 233.

[47] Ibid, pp. 233-235.

[48] Akhil Gupta, "Introduction: Rethinking Theories of the State in an Age of Globalisation," in *The Anthropology of the State: A Reader*, ed. Aradhana Sharma and Akhil Gupta (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 3-43.

[49] Ibid.

course of time, they learn to use the very same techniques that lower-level state agents or clerks use to sabotage official mandates and orders, e.g. paper pushing, leaving paper trails, and adopting official mannerisms. They not only use these practices in their everyday interactions with officials in order to gain institutional access or to subvert official scrutiny, but also while interacting with non-officials in order to establish their authority over others.[50] In the words of Gupta, "Bureaucratic practices are a crucial mechanism through which the shifting effect of the state is produced and reproduced." Besides explaining the production and circulation of discourses about the state, ethnographies related to the state and the exercise of power by it also involve an analysisand interpretation of people's different understandings of the state depending upon their particular socio-cultural, political and economic contexts.

Early modern European statecraft was highly devoted to rationalising and standardising society into a legible and more convenient administrative format. The social simplifications thus introduced not only permitted a more finely-tuned system of taxation and conscription but also greatly enhanced state capacity. This also made possible quite discriminating interventions of every kind, such as political surveillance, public health measures, and relief measures for the poor.[51]These simplifications of state procedures underlay the basic tenets of modern administrative statecraft which Scott refers to as "abridged maps". He called them "maps" in the sense that when allied with state power, these simplified processes and procedures would enable much of the reality they depicted to be remade. Thus, for instance, a state cadastral map created to designate taxable property-holders does not merely describe a system of land tenure; instead, it creates such a system through its ability to give its categories the force of law. With reference to the arguments made above, the idea of early modern statecraft as postulated by Scott can provide a lens through which a huge number of development disasters in poorer Third World countries and also the countries of Eastern Europe, e.g. collectivisation in Russia, can be usefully viewed.

Thus, the state and especially its bureaucracies have proved immensely fruitful sites for unsettling easy understandings of the relationships between rules and practices. In this context, Nayanika Mathur, in her understanding of the Indian state as a 'Paper Tiger' provides a new a dynamic ethnography of the state amidst the backdrop of a study of the

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[50] Ibid.

[51] No. 25.

social life of law, bureaucracy and development in a remote village of the Himalayas far away from the centre of the state. Mathur critically engages the concepts of *sarkar* and *sarkari* to unravel the complexities of the Indian state. On the one hand, state officials are constantly engaged in the material production of state power through the generation of copious amounts of office-related work and their documentation on paper. While on the contrary, this "paperness" of the government often does not correspond to real or concrete outcomes, i.e. the proper implementation of projects on the ground level.[52] She says that "We need to understand the intimate, complex, and context-dependent entanglement of the *sarkari* and the real."[53] Hence, state power is a complex and nuanced category that can not only be seen as the performance of domination over the citizens of that state but also as a set of lived negotiations and relationships between "state" life and "real" life. This insight is also an important contribution to how we might think about the dilemmas and limits of what Philip Abrams famously called "politically grounded subjection."[54]

Modern nation-states have also resorted to violence in order to establish the fact of their legitimacy and organise societies and their population within the defined limits of well-demarcated territorial boundaries. Although any form of state violence can be ruled out in the case of a state with a democratic form of government in which the state is run by the elected representatives of the ruled, however, many official democracies employ in a routine manner the armed, paramilitary and police forces of the state against its own people. The history of the democratic state in post-colonial provides ample proof of this fact.[55] Some early violent developmental moments such as the Telangana movement, offensives against the princely state of Hyderabad, and against the aspirations of the Nagas in North-eastern India, had led to give the present shape to the Indian state. Since then, the state in India has been using violence in various forms ranging from direct physical force and killings, to violence in the forms of deprivation of people of their means of livelihood, e.g. the national emergency of the mid-1970s, army operations in Punjab in the mid-1980s, army and paramilitary operations

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[52] Nayanika Mathur, *Paper Tiger: Law, Bureaucracy and the Developmental State in Himalayan India* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2015), 34-50.

[53] Ibid.

[54] Philip Abrams, "Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State," in *The Anthropology of the State: A Reader*, ed. Aradhana Sharma and Akhil Gupta (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 112-130.

[55] Santana Khanikar, *State, Violence and Legitimacy in India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 43-62.

against ethnic groups in India's Northeast, to the more routine and mundane violence towards sections of the urban poor.[56]

However, despite the regular use of such force, the democratic procedures of the Indian state seem to have survived and sustained. It is because of the fact that violence perpetrated by the state is often legitimised in the name of the need for societies to modernise, for maintaining law and order, and also in the name of strengthening the unity and integrity of the country. Such necessary 'force'/violence is often wrapped in the garb of legislations like the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), 1958 and other such laws termed 'extraordinary', but used often in ordinary situations. No matter how repugnant an act may seem to the common people in their individual capacities, as members of the state, people are required to do it for the sake of 'survival of the state'.[57]

The culturalist perspective on the study of the state thus explores the critical nuances related to the particular political culture of a state and its impact on the pattern of psychological orientations that the people in a given society would have towards their political system.[58] Myron Weiner, in one of his famous works on the Indian political culture, posited the existence of two different 'political cultures' – one that manifested itself in the districts and localities, both urban and rural, and the other that inhabited the national capital. Weiner did not make use of simple binary concepts like traditional and modern in order to describe the much complicated concept of Indian political culture that is characterised by a refined amalgamation of elements of both tradition and modernity. Accordingly, he identified two distinctive streams clearly visible in Indian political culture – 'mass political culture' akin to the traditional but not wholly traditional, and 'elite political culture' akin to modernity.[59] At the same time, however, Weiner also argued that the traditional components ran through the veins of the elite political culture as well. While the elite culture radiated from its political centre in New Delhi, the mass culture expanded from the localities upto the level of the state legislative assemblies, state governments and state administration. Since they were both

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[56] Ibid.

[57] Ibid, pp. 74-82.

[58] Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 10.

[59] Myron Weiner, *Political Change in South Asia* (Calcutta: Calcutta Firm K.L. Mukhopadhyaya, 1963), 52.

expanding in two opposite directions, a clash between the two seemed inevitable and this gap had to be bridged in order to prevent a more direct conflict.[60] Arguing in the same line of thought, Sudipta Kaviraj had made use of the Foucaludian term 'discourse' to describe 'two cultures' existing in the political arena. Kaviraj uses the terms 'upper discourse' and 'lower discourse' to refer to these two cultures.[61]

Later, scholars like Rajni Kothari developed other ways of analysing the political culture of a nation-state, with reference to India. He enumerates a few politically significant orientations of the Indian political culture, viz. tolerance of ambiguity; fragmented, dispersed and intermittent authority; a close relationship between ideology and politicsemerging from the elites' self-image of 'morality inducer' and 'interpreter of the moral dimension of this worldly existence'; patterns of trust and distrust in collective undertaking.[62] However, there are certain problems inherent in this framework that failed to address the complexities of ever-changing political realities of the day. For instance, Kothari's conceptualisation of the Indian view of authority as 'fragmented', 'dispersed' and 'intermittent' seems to ignore the existence of patrimonial authority in India since the ancient times.

It was at this juncture that scholars like Asish Nandy sought to provide a new discursive framework for a critical analysis of the Indian society and its politics. In his seminal essay, "The Making and Unmaking of Political Cultures in India", Nandy depicted political culture as an 'act of choice' for it is subjected to multiple interpretations from various quarters.[63] No watertight classification, he felt, can help us in understanding the evolution of this concept. In this context, Nandy had identified four different phases through which Indian political culture made and unmade itself. However, it needs to be mentioned here that Nandy did not make use of the term 'phase' in terms of history and chronology but rather as an act of choice being made at a particular time by a particular community of people. He says that the primacy of politics in India has been proved by the fact that India's political culture derives its

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[60] Ibid.

[61] No. 4

[62] Rajni Kothari, *Politics and the People: In Search of a Humane India* (Delhi: Ajanta Publications, 1990), 131.

[63] Asish Nandy, *At the Edge of Psychology: Essays in Politics and Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), 72.

distinctiveness not from any shared set of norms but from continuous and persistent efforts to create them.[64]

During the post-Independent period in India, the primacy of politics in the politics-society relationship accounted for a new intellectualism which was subsequently followed by a new wave of anti-intellectualism.[65] The former was initiated by the Brahmanic pro-British and urban-centred literary class who evoked a new concept of Indianness consistent with the modern notion of citizenship. The beginning of participatory politics in the course of the national movement led to an aggressive anti-intellectualist backlash. In the words of Nandy himself, "A more populist political culture, a growing faith in *realpolitik* and the persistence of the old belief in the separability of statecraft from intellectual activity continue to sustain this anti-intellectualism."[66]According to him, after Independence, political culture had lost its autonomy to the bureaucratic machinery which represented the society's urge to 'hierarchise' the new and the disruptive.

On the contrary, the historical institutionalist perspective to the study of states does not give primary adherence to culture. It looks into the particular configuration of institutions that determine, influence, modify, orient and re-orient individual motives. Interaction between the state and its institutions through various roles, structures and procedures, produces effects in society that are critical for understanding state actions.[67]The institutionalist perspective thus argues that political institutions are autonomous in their arena of functioning and roles and responsibilities. It emphasises less on symbols and meanings with a cultural overtone. However, while some traditions within historical-institutionalism have described the role of political institutions in analytic isolation from the society, others have looked at them as a part of the larger political process that influences and is, in turn, influenced by the changes within these institutions. Overall, the primary understanding of the historical-institutionalist perspective to the study of the state is that political institutions determine the functioning of a society with reference to behavioural norms in particular socio-political contexts.

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[64] Ibid.

[65] Asish Nandy, "Culture, State and the Rediscovery of Indian Politics," *Economic and Political Weekly* 19, no. 49 (1984): 2078-2083.

[66] Ibid.

[67] No. 44

The way actors and their interests are constituted historically is a major theme in the historical institutionalist perspective. Institutions, however, also need to be viewed in terms of their coordinating functions. It is because institutions are embedded in a particular socio-political context that cannot be understood in isolation from the larger societal and political processes that are a part of the state. Understanding of the stability that is sustained by the political system over time requires a blending together of the various perspectives of institutional analyses in the new institutional literature. The concept of new institutionalism is based on three different analytical approaches to the study of institutionalism. Along with the historical institutionalist perspective, it includes rational choice institutionalism and sociological institutionalism. All of them seek to explain the role of institutions in the determination of social and political outcomes.[68]Determination of the patterns of collective behaviour and the generation of distinctive outcomes are a function of the institutions and the way the political system is organised around these institutions. Some writers have argued that new institutionalism provides a ground for the study of institutions through both the culturalist and the historical institutionalist perspectives that we discussed above. Since institutions are socially constructed, they embody shared cultural understandings of a society. As such, changes in the specific organisational structure and functioning of institutions do not imply a complete overhaul of the institutional design. It is because institutions are embedded in certain cultural and societal constraints that impose limitations of the efforts of policymakers to effect any far-reaching changes.[69]

It becomes clear from the above that institutions are the foundations of organised political and social behaviour. Institutions determine the participants of a particular political arena, shape their various political strategies and also influence their preferences.[70] Institutions are generally understood in terms of formal and informal institutions. The former are based on formal constitutional rules of the state, whereas the latter are based on shared cultural norms of a particular society or community. Although the latter are not as such formally recognised

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[68]Peter A. Hall and Rosemary C.R. Taylor, "Political Science and the Three New Institutionalisms," *Political Studies*38, no. XLIV (1996): 936-957.

[69] Kathlen Thelen, "Historical Institutionalism in Comparative Politics," *Annual Review Political Science*8, no. 2 (1999): 369-404.

[70] Sven Steinmo, "The New Institutionalism," in *The Encyclopaedia of Democratic Thought*, ed. Barry Clark and Joe Foweraker (London: Routledge, 2001), 23-36.

by the state, they play an important role in providing a space for community decisions to be made and communicated to the higher levels. The design, structure and functioning of these institutions have far-reaching implications on the overall working of the socio-political system.

According to Andre Beteille, "An institution is not just a social arrangement with a certain form and function; to survive, it must also have a certain degree of legitimacy and meaning for its members such that they are willing to put its demands above their individual interests at least some of the time."[71]In his collection of essays, 'Democracy and its Institutions', Andre Beteille argues that a democratic form of government is as good as its institutions. He writes, "Democracy itself rests on a tension between the principles of the 'rule of numbers' and the 'rule of law'."[72] In India, 'constitutional democracy' is being increasingly threatened by 'populist democracy', wherein the former abides by impersonal legality and the latter gives primacy to the might of numbers and mass mobilisations over the rule of law. He considers civil society as an important set of institutions, ideas and social arrangements in a democracy that has emerged in the light of distinct historical conditions. According to him, the study of institutions, whether classified as formal or informal, is important because they are 'more concrete and tangible as objects of enquiry and investigation'. It does not matter whether scholars adhere to the culturalist or the historical institutionalist perspective to the study of these institutions. What they all agree in common is the inevitability of the existence of institutions, whether formal or informal, and their determination of the patterns of formation of different identities of people in society.

A Social Construction of 'Identity'

For a layman's understanding, the basic nature of identities can be described as plural as human beings or individuals in a society simultaneously belong to different groups and associations, both primary and secondary. Identity has been famously defined by Charles Taylor as "something like a person's understanding of who they are, of their fundamental defining characteristics as human beings".[73]Identities can be seen as essential and primordial,

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[71] Andre Beteille, "Universities as Institutions," *Economic and Political Weekly* 30, no. 11 (1995): 2135-2152.

[72] Andre Beteille, *Democracy and its Institutions* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012), 78-83.

[73] Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in *Contemporary Political Theory: A Reader*, ed. Colin Farrelly (New Delhi: Sage, 2004), 269-278.

constructivist and epistemic. In this context, Nivedita Menon's analysis of identity with respect to the conflicting issues of sexuality including transgressive and marginalised sexualities, brings forth new dimensions of looking at institutions and practices and their role in the creation and re-creation of power relations.

The transgression of the standard and conventional norms of heterosexuality and gendered bodies classifies sex itself into binary categories of legitimate and illegitimate which creates new identities for such people. She says that in the contemporary times, since the identity of a woman is no longer unproblematically available, the subject of something called feminist politics is, in itself, debatable. For instance, there are specific and localised ways in which Vankar, Bhangi and Koli-Patel women of the Bhal region of Gujarat experience sexuality and motherhood.[74] The classification of bodies into the binaries of male and female has failed to look beyond the basic gender identities of a man and a woman that represents a fossilisation of the fluid and dynamic nature of identities. E.g. male domestic servants in South Asia who 'work as women for women', have often earned the title of 'incomplete men'.[75]The gradually evolving politics around lesbian, gay, trans and bi-sexual identities and their continuous struggle against the state law, have eventually sought accommodation within the larger framework of the nation.

Human beings belong to different groups and collectivities and their being a part of one of them becomes the decisive factor of their identity. But, identity formation is always dependent, either directly or indirectly, upon the socio-political context. The notion of identity has gained enormous attention and popularity in contemporary societies. 'Identity' has developed into a contentious subject, where the fear of losing and asserting one's identity, whether individual or collective, is at the crux of various ethnic and socio-political movements worldwide. In Taylor's understanding, the demand for recognition of identity comes to the fore in a number of ways in today's politics, for instance, on behalf of minority or subaltern groups, some forms of feminism as mentioned above and what is today called the

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[74] Nivedita Menon, ed., *Sexualities: Issues in Contemporary Indian Feminism* (London: New York University Press, 2007).

[75]Radhika Chopra, "Invisible Men: Masculinity, Sexuality and Male Domestic Labour," in *Sexualities: Issues in Contemporary Indian Feminism*, ed. Nivedita Menon (London: New York University Press, 2007), 148.

politics of "multiculturalism".[76] He posits a link between recognition and identity and argues that our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, or often by the *mis*recognition of others. Thus, a person or a group of people can suffer real damage and real distortion if the people around them or the society in which they live mirror back to them a demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. It is because *mis*recognition or even non-recognition can inflict harm on the personalities of individuals, which, in the long-run, can become a form of oppression and domination.[77] It means imprisoning someone in a false, distorted and reduced mode of being.

Taylor speaks in length about the importance of dialogue and the "fundamentally *dialogical* character" of human life in this context. One's discovering of one's identity means that it has been through a continuous process of both overt and covert negotiation and dialogue with others.[78] Taylor's understanding is that identities are formed in conditions of open dialogue, unshaped and undetermined by predefined codes of conduct or any other rigid social strictures. This has made the "politics of recognition" more central to academic and political debates of late. Refusal of the right of equal recognition can inflict severe psychological damage on those who are denied it, for it is one of the most appropriate and suitable modes for ensuring a healthy, and fee and fair democratic society based upon the principles of inclusion, diversity and plurality.[79] Contemporary feminism, race relations and discussions of multiculturalism are undergirded by the basic premise that the withholding of recognition can be a form of oppression, so much so that this image gradually comes to be internalised by the one who is oppressed. Recognition, thus, remains a vital need of human beings who form the part of moral life based on face-to-face social relations.

Another perspective on identity has been offered by Prof. Gopal Guru in his scholarship on humiliation – a complex social phenomenon which pervades several spheres of our socio-political life, contexts and discourses, yet is often absent in our academic analyses. Humiliation rests at the heart of the major problems of modern Indian life – a state based on the western ideas of self and society, and a culture that is based on inherent inequality. For instance, in the West, it is the attitude of race that is the basis of humiliation, and in the East,

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[76] No. 73

[77] Ibid.

[78] Ibid.

[79] Ibid.

it is the notion of caste and untouchability that foregrounds the form and content of humiliation.[80] The reorganisation of modern society was based on the division between the public and the private spheres, which was accompanied by the possibility of misrecognition, degradation and humiliation of people's identities. Gopal Guru argues that the cultural reduction of a human being from the cultural to the natural, i.e. anti-civilisational, takes place through the infliction of mental and moral injuries that assigns differential inferior/hierarchical meanings to the corporeal body.[81]A person or social group who is not only sensitive about self-respect and their identity, but can also protest cannot be humiliated. The target of humiliation could be an individual, or a group, community, and even an entire country. Bhikhu Parekh gives different examples to show how the re-description of the identity of a person or the entire community can eventually lead to social degradation. According to him, pathological re-description, which is based on race, caste, region or gender, does constitute humiliation of one's identity.[82]

Any institution enjoying the credentials of legitimacy and acceptance of people in a society/community is based on certain norms, rules, and an operational framework within which it functions. Within the over-arching and all-encompassing umbrella of these institutions, community identities and associated consciousness take root. This process of identity formation is in itself guided by various factors emanating from the society of which the community forms a part. Within this framework, there is a consequent articulation and re-articulation of community interests and aspirations. It leads to gradual shifts and transformations that are, in part, a reflection of the societal cleavages and tensions that underlie the very process by which a group of people imagines itself as a community. No society is stagnant and its values and ideas keep on changing. Similarly, the core values and organisational principles of institutions change with the changing times. It reflects people's changing world-views, desires, and aspirations which at times even lead to socially divisive tendencies within a community resulting in assertions of identity, splits and dissensions.

In this context, Benedict Anderson's definition of the nation as an 'imagined political community' – imagined as both limited and sovereign – is of particular importance. It is

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[80] Gopal Guru, ed., *Humiliation: Claims and Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[81] Ibid.

[82] Bhikhu Parekh, "Logic of Humiliation," in*Humiliation: Claims and Context*, ed. Gopal Guru (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 137-151.

imagined because the members of even the smallest nations of the world will never know most of their fellow members, meet them or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.[83] In the words of Anderson, "Communities are to be distinguished not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the unique style and manner in which they are imagined." Since World War II, every successful revolution has defined itself in national terms – the People's Republic of China, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, etc. In so doing, they have grounded themselves firmly in a territorial and social space inherited from the pre-revolutionary past.[84] Thus, the nation is imagined as a *limited* entity because even the largest of them, encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite boundaries beyond which exist other nations. No nation imagines itself as coterminous with mankind. It is imagined as *sovereign* because the concept of the nation was born in an age in which the Enlightenment and the French Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm.[85] Finally, the nation is imagined as a *community* because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always understood as a deep, horizontal comradeship. It is ultimately this fraternity of people which provides them an identity distinct from others.

According to Partha Chatterjee, when Anderson argued that the nation lives in homogenous empty time[86], he captured the universal idea of civic nationalism. Anderson followed up his analysis of nations as 'imagined communities' in his later work "The Spectre of Comparisons" by distinguishing between nationalism and the politics of identity in an era of global mass migrations and the proliferation of the IT revolution. He identified two different kinds of seriality produced by the modern imaginings of community – the unbound seriality of the everyday universals of modern social thought such as nations, citizens, bureaucrats, intellectuals, workers, etc. and the bound seriality of governmentality, i.e. enumeration of classes of population through the modern census and the modern electoral systems.[87] Whereas unbound serialities are potentially liberating, bound serialities are constricting and

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[83] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso Publications, 1991), 23.

[84] Ibid.

[85] Ibid.

[86] Ibid.

[87] Benedict Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia and the World* (New York: Verso Publications, 1998), 43-51.

inherently conflictual. The former enable individuals to imagine themselves as members of larger than face-to-face solidarities, while the latter sow the seeds of identity politics.[88] Critiquing Anderson's concept of 'homogenous empty time', Chatterjee suggests the presence of an unevenly dense and heterogeneous time. Here, he talks about the unresolved conflict between universal affiliations and particular identities at the founding moment of democratic nationhood in India. Chatterjee argues that it is "morally illegitimate" to uphold the universalist ideals of nationalism without simultaneously demanding that the politics of governmentality be recognised as an equally legitimate part of the real time-space of the modern political life of the nation.[89] Without it, governmental technologies will continue to proliferate and serve as manipulative instruments of class rule in the global capitalist order of the day.

As mentioned above, identity refers to the idea of how one perceives the self. It is a prescription of who one is, what role one is to enact, and how one is unique from others in a society. The concepts of 'self' and 'other' are evoked whenever we talk about identity and identity-related issues. Societies across the globe today are dominated by discourses of identity – a complex web of representing, preserving or contesting one's identity. In sociological terms, the various traits and characteristics, social relations, roles, and social group memberships that define who one is can be placed within the understanding of identity. Based on different social situations and belonging, an individual can have multiple identities. One can have a personal, social, or role identity depending upon the context.[90] According to Brubaker and Cooper, identity can either be based on 'relational' web or 'categorical mode'. The former, as the name suggests, establishes identity in relation with others (teacher-student, mother-daughter relation), while the latter occurs when people organise themselves into group or communities based on shared categories such as race, religion, ethnicity, or language.[91]

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[88] Ibid.

[89] Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 63.

[90] Oyserman Dapna, Kristen Elmore and George Smith, "Self, Self-Concept and Identity," in *Handbook of Self and Identity*, ed. Leary, Mark R. and June Price Tangney (New York: The Guildford Press, 2012), 27-35.

[91] Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, "Beyond Identity: Theory and Society,"*Theory and Society*29, no. 6 (2000): 1-47.

The idea of identity has an interesting trajectory of development since the pre-modern times. The pre-Enlightenment and pre-Hobbesian notion of identity was based on primordial and religious ties. At this point of history, it was the membership of a community that was at the core of man's identity, which was always socially derived and identified with his religion, tribe or clan. With the advent of modernity, a rational, secular concept of identity emerged wherein religious or other social relationships were no longer considered crucial in the process of identity formation of an individual. The identity associated with the community was now overpowered by an individual-centric notion of citizenship. Man came to be identified by his rational position vis-à-vis the state rather than his community or religion. The emergence of liberal bourgeois values in the West further pushed into oblivion the concept of community identity further and the concept of citizenship now became more individual-oriented, which formed the foundation of man's identity.[92] The earlier affiliations of religion, caste, language, tribe, etc. were suppressed and came to be regarded as inimical to the stability of the social and political system. The idea of a secular, liberal, hetero-sexual, white, able-bodied male came to be projected as the universal and core idea of understanding identity and identity-related issues. Any deviation from this framework of normality was considered as deviant and he/she was either assimilated into the mainstream or, in some case, even excluded, stigmatised, and marginalised.

Several *realpolitik*developments such as the disintegration of the former Soviet Union, rise of ethnic issues in Eastern Europe and other parts of the world, globalisation and the emergence of a free market economy, besides revolutionary changes in information and communication technology questioned the earlier liberal notion of identity.[93] Liberal politics failed to integrate diverse indigenous groups within the national culture, thereby leaving them with a feeling of marginalisation and exclusion from the mainstream. Therefore, the idea of community identity again resurfaced during the last decade of the 20th century. The liberal model of understanding identity and related issues now came to be challenged by the emergence of different streaks of thoughts like communitarianism, multiculturalism, feminism, and post-modernism. Communitarianism advocated the idea of a community-based identity and the entire decade of the 1980s was dominated by the liberal-communitarian debate in the academic discourse. The sense of belonging to one's own community is an

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[92] Molly Ghosh and Sutapa Ghosh, ed., *Questioning Identity: Response of the State and Community in Contemporary India* (Kolkata: KP Bagchi & Company, 2011).

[93] Ibid, p. xi.

extension of one's own self and social identity is the only identity that man can have, argued the communitarians.[94]

It may be mentioned here that this development was not limited to the field of political philosophy alone. Nations across the world experienced political movements termed variously as identity politics, politics of difference, or politics of recognition, whereby erstwhile marginalised or excluded groups asserted their difference and demanded that they be provided with group-differentiated rights for moral, social and economic upliftment. Thus, identity now became linked with recognition. As Taylor had argued, the "non-recognition or *mis*recognition of people's identities can inflict harm on their personal self-esteem, and can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted and reduced mode of being."[95] People who had earlier internalised these distorted images now started seeking to get themselves out of this imposed identity. Ethnicity, gender, sexual preferences, race, caste, etc. now became heavily politicised categories, which came to challenge the entire liberal discourse on rights and identity. Voices came to be raised for an inclusive model of democracy which would recognise people's identities and also at the same time, accommodate their differences.

The notion of identity, of late, has garnered enormous attention in contemporary societies so much so that it has developed into a contentious subject, where the fear of losing and asserting one's identity, either individual or collective, is at the centre of several conflicts. People have initiated movements, struggles, and engaged in conflicts to safeguard or claim a distinct identity for themselves and the members of their clan/group/tribe/community, etc. Ethnic groups the world over differ in the way they consider and understand the concept of identity. Whereas in some societies, different ethnic identities have lived in a situation of relative harmony and peaceful coexistence for quite a long period of time in history, in others, they are constantly battling with other such identities in order to preserve their own. To a large extent, the socio-economic and the political environment to which the identities belong determine the presence or absence of such differences among different communities.

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[94] Will Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy* (New Delhi: OUP, 2002), 201-220.

[95] No. 73

Conflicting situations arise due to an imbalance in the socio-economic and power sharing arrangements in a society between ethnic identities.[96]

Identity involves the idea of giving precedence to micro rather than macro variables, which, in the case of India, implies that due recognition and importance needs to be given to caste, ethnicity, community, tribe, gender, etc. rather than the macro notions of state, nation, class, etc. Understandably, this outlook challenges the liberal institutional approach as well as the Marxist approach, which have as their area of focus primarily the macro categories of state, class, etc.[97]History has been a proof of the fact that the right to assert the collective identity of a group/community has surfaced at different periods of time in the form of various movements and struggles. Whether it is a religious movement, social movement, gender movement, ethnic clash, regional clash, the issue of identity has remained a decisive factor for attaining collective goals and aspirations. The ethnic cleansing of Kashmiri Hindus from the Kashmir Valley, the decades-old Sinhalese and Tamil identity conflict in Sri Lanka, the anti-Sikh riots (1984), etc. are just a few examples of identity conflict. In the contemporary Indian society, identity politics has become a celebratory expression of asserting oneself in the public domain and seeking favours from the state. It has thus been considered to be synonymous with the spirit of democratisation, further enhancing the process of 'deepening of democracy'[98] and an acknowledgement of the pluralism of our polity.

A multi-ethnic and multi-cultural democracy like India is characterised by regional variations in demographic composition, inequitable distribution of power and resources and the inevitable presence of other ethnic differences based on language, caste, community, religion, etc. Thus, cultural and religious movements have surfaced time and again in the political map of the country. Undoubtedly, the introduction of democracy in India was thought to be problematic by the West and also certain sections of the population in India, as the very idea of democracy was an imported one. However, the founding fathers of our constitution were well aware of the problems and challenges before the new nation that had just borne the

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[96]Gulshan Majeed, "Ethnicity and Conflict: A Theoretical Perspective," *The Journal of Political Studies* 20, no. 1 (2013): 97-109.

[97] Sobhanlal Datta Gupta, "The Politics of Identity: Some Critical Notes in the Indian Context," in *Questioning Identity: Response of the State and Community in Contemporary India*, ed. Molly Ghosh and Sutapa Ghosh (Kolkata: KP Bagchi & Company, 2011), 36.

[98]Atul Kohli, *The Success of India's Democracy* (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 201-231.

horrors of partition. This awareness and long-term foresightedness led them to build such an institutional set-up step-by-step which, at least during the immediate post-independence years, allowed a plurality of voices to be heard. In this context, Kaviraj argues, "Secularism provided for a pluralism of religious practices; federalism encompassed the pluralism of regional cultures, and democracy allowed the expression of plural political ideals…. Being a Bengali or Tamil or Punjabi, or Hindu or Muslim, or agnostic was not contradictory with being an Indian…"[99] However, this Nehruvian perception of democratic accommodation gradually faded away and came to be substituted by regional party politics espousing various group demands.

Hence, the issue of identity assumes a unique dimension in a multicultural and diverse society like India, where multiple identities have always been an indispensable part. The post-independent Indian state devised its own way of dealing with and accommodating these diverse identities through numerous constitutional provisions, legal interventions, and policy frameworks of the liberal-democratic welfare state. The contemporary Indian socio-political structure has acquired certain new dimensions, which is often at odds while dealing with the resurgence of different identities. The various development initiatives related to infrastructure, environment, etc. that have been adopted under the neo-liberal framework are said to pose a threat to the distinct ethos of community living. This has infused further energy into the whole process of identity formation and the politics around it.[100]Such a process has resulted in the crystallisation and politicisation of new types of identities such as gender and sexuality, besides conventional forms like caste, tribe, and religion. Needless to say, such a reassertion of identity has a dialectical relationship with the democratic state as they not only signify a 'deepening of democracy' but also has the potential to jeopardise the stability of the democratic state.[101]

The search for identity is essentially a demand for the recognition of one's selfhood and identity politics thereby is ultimately a demand for the politics of recognition. Undeniably, the emotional stirrings for identity are aspirational assertions, resulting out of deprivational maladies and are not historically unjustified in many respects.[102] But, the difficulty arises

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[99] Sudipta Kaviraj, *The Trajectories of the Indian State* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2012), 212.

[100] No. 93.

[101] No. 99.

[102] No. 96.

when the politics of recognition of identity is transformed into a politics of celebration in absolute terms.[103] It is then that the issue of recognition becomes an irrational defence of certain values and norms which turn out to be non-negotiable in the long-run. In other words, historically reasoned demands give way to emotive appeals the constituent elements of which are vague and indeterminate, at times couched in the language of hatred, violence, and intolerance. Its implications may be quite severe for the values of democracy, pluralism, and freedom.

Will Kymlicka, while reflecting on the adverse effects of multiculturalism, laments that it is this ghetto mentality that characterises the minority groups/communities living in North America, who consider their cultures as "closed" and thereby non-negotiable vis-à-vis the culture of the American continent. The possibility of cross-fertilisation or flow and negotiation of cultures is thus permanently blocked.[104] This is precisely the argument that underlies the notion of "Asian values", flaunted by the countries of South-East Asia in defence of their authoritarian style of functioning and denial of democracy. In the name of Asian exclusivism, which eschews Western values like democracy and pluralism, the argument made is that there is nothing wrong with the so-called authoritarian, undemocratic structures of these polities. They are regarded as quite "normal" and "natural", being in conformity with the Asian tradition. Questioning their justification means to question their historicity and legitimacy, which are grounded in beliefs and memories that cannot be contested.[105]

An important issue that arises here is with regard to the state policy concerning identity politics, which needs to be addressed at two levels. On one level, the state policy is, by and large, that of non-interference with regard to cultural matters involving different groups and communities. This stands in sharp contrast to the state's active role, as in the Indian context, in the adoption of programmes aimed at "uplifting" the socially and economically marginalised sections of society. This policy of non-interference raises several intriguing questions, in matters of identity politics. First, it is completely unjustified for the state to

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[103] Ibid.

[104] Will Kymlicka, *Politics in the Vernacular: Nationalism, Multiculturalism, and Citizenship* (New Delhi: OUP, 2001), 33-48.

[105] Ibid.

remain neutral if a community, in the name of defence of its cultural identity, indulges in certain practices which go against the basic ethos of the society in question, and democratic norms and values. Second, if the state decides to permanently maintain neutrality on the question of cultural matters, then eventually, a situation of "cultural divide" may emerge between the more advanced and the less advanced groups within the same society. Third, in the name of passivity and non-interference, state policies will assume the form of populism which may ultimately hamper the healthy functioning of a democracy.[106]

Therefore, the rise of identity politics was a critical reaction to the spirit of Western universalism and its overarching idioms of modernity. It overlooked the micro dimensions of Indian society and politics, resulting in a macro versus micro situation in the years that followed after independence. Therefore, against the pan-Indian nationalism of India that conceived of the Indian nation-state as an invincible and indestructible entity, a counter theory of sub-nationalism now emerged. However, in India, a cohesive, overarching Indian identity has more or less, been highly accommodative of sub-nationalism and people's desire for identifying themselves with their local identities, leading to various political demands.[107]The term 'sub-nationalism' designates, what M. Crawford Young aptly describes as "identities that meet some of the criteria of politicisation and mobilisation" associated with nationalism "but are not firmly committed to a separate statehood."[108]

In the era of globalisation, identity-related movements have assumed a more virulent and intensified form. There has been a crystallisation of demands based on or catering to the cultural, ethnic, gender, religious, or racial interests which characterise a group's identity. It signifies a range of political activities and behaviour based upon the perceived notions of injustice or shared experiences of injustice to members belonging to certain social groups. They aim to justify and secure their due rights and status within the larger societal context. This, they try to do, by raising the issue of historical discrimination meted out to them in the public sphere and also locate the arena where and how these can be addressed. Since their

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[106] No. 96.

[107] KoyelBasu, "Ethnic Conflict and Sub-nationalism in Assam: A Case Study," in *Questioning Identity: Response of the State and Community in Contemporary India*, ed. Molly Ghosh and SutapaGhosh (Kolkata: KP Bagchi & Company, 2011), 59-73.

[108] Ibid.

demands are related with the whole community, collectivity is regarded as a unit and individual identity naturally dissolves into the domain of the community.[109] Thus, liberal democracy becomes more broad-based with unrepresented issues and challenges now finding support in a larger way. But, the flip side is that the compartmentalisation of groups and the coming up of discrete demands prove to be an impediment in the making of a well-knit community in the long-run. It is because of the fact that the rise of sectarianism and the accompanying narratives of identity in the name of caste, religion, tribe, etc. have often unleashed violent conflicts in an already fragmented and diverse society. Lately, societies across the globe have been a witness to various social and political movements predicated upon a revival of and respect for primordial identities and affiliations. In this context, Manual Castells writes, "At the same time that economies, societies and institutions are being globally structured, different cultural identities are also being reaffirmed."[110]

What now emerges from the discussion of identity is that the notion of collectivity lies at the crux of identity politics. It is understood as a self-identified social interest group whoemphasises on a strong collective group identity through efforts to establish its group distinctiveness, and achieve rights, recognition, and dignity that have so far been denied to them. The struggles for identity assertion and rights in different parts of the world are found to have developed along certain paradigms like race, religion, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, region, language, history, culture, etc. A general and common trend of identity politics is to vent out the grievances of oppression and deprivation by the marginalised social groups. In this way, it creates a sense of consciousness within the group about their own rights, and restoration of their lost dignity and justice. However, to perceive the horizon of identity politics only in terms of its obvious forms like movements for recognition or identity-based organisations, presents only one side of the picture. It is equally important to identify those issues that are or can be potential spaces for the emergence of identity politics but remain outside its purview.[111] In other words, these are certain areas that can be traced as

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[109] Ibid.

[110] Manual Castells, "Globalisation and Identity: A Comparative Perspective," *Transfer, Journal of Contemporary Culture*XVI, no. 1 (2006): 56-65.

[111] Sreemoyee Ghosh, "Class-Gender Interaction in the Issue of Sexual Harassment of Industrial Informal Women Workers of Durgapur," in *Questioning Identity: Response of the State and Community in Contemporary India*, ed. Molly Ghosh and Sutapa Ghosh (Kolkata: KP Bagchi & Company, 2011), 92-117.

silent zones of identity politics in the sense that the struggle for identity is yet to germinate there.

Locating Identity within the Framework of State Politics

The essence of democratic governance lies in the fact that it facilitates healthy interaction, cooperation and coordination between the state and society through a diverse range of institutions. All societies are organised and governed through certain institutions – executives, legislatures, courts, police, regulatory authorities, bureaucracies, development agencies, independent statutory bodies, etc. They structure the ways in which societies function and constitute an important arena for the exercise of state power. In other words, it is through these institutions that states function to secure legitimacy from its citizens and also carry out several development-related tasks. Irrespective of their ideological orientation, these institutions often compete with each other and set limits on what other institutions can or cannot do.

Institutions perform a variety of functions – they structure incentives for actors within society and provide mechanisms for coordination, sometimes enabling and sometimes impeding it.[112] Anthropologists are of the view that institutions have a considerable impact on the process of recognition and classification in society, i.e. most aspects of our collective existence can be grasped by taking into proper account the role of institutions in society. Kapur and Mehta have argued that institutions can be a focus of study in two different ways – firstly, to be used as an explanatory variable. This, they mean to be, a delineation of mechanisms through which institutions function producing certain outcomes of interest, such as, use of the category of institutional variation to explain phenomenal variations in development across societies; second, by referring to institutions as the objects of explanation, they have focussed primarily on the ways in which micro incentives of actors within an institution help to explain certain features of the institution itself.[113]

Bothe formal and informal institutions perform their own important roles both in the areas of framing of state policies and the overall functioning of the state. There are different institutions which vary in their forms, functions, and scope. Every institution is, however,

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[112]Devesh Kapur and Pratap Bhanu Mehta, *Public Institutions in India: Performance and Design* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007), 88-109.

[113] Ibid: 26-28.

constituted through certain norms, rules and procedures, which define their aims and objectives and also facilitate the process of socialisation. They also set incentives on how decisions within institutions are to be made. Socio-political mobilisation of diverse groups and communities questions the very foundations upon which state institutions are built and place demands upon them. The need for a consensus-based democratic polity has now become all the more pressing, thus checking unhealthy trends towards excessive centralisation and unitary rule. India is one of the most socially heterogeneous societies in the world. Thus, the performance of India's public institutions has implications for one of the most crucial issues facing the global community – to develop consensual forms of authority and manage the competing claims of different individuals and social groups in socially heterogeneous societies.[114] The central paradox of the Indian state, as many social scientists argue, is the fact that it is captured by a particular configuration of social forces. Being procedural and rule-bound, the Indian state also places tangible limits on the capacity of social forces to manipulate the state and its policies according to their own whims and fancies.

The Indian state with its rich history, the sheer size of its population, along with its diversity, faced significant challenges to its post-independence consolidation. Thus, the tussle over identity and rights can be said to underlie much of the conflict that erupted in Independent India. Assertion of one's identity would appear quite natural especially in societies where primordial loyalties have a dominant say over one's worldview. Movements for identity are often the by-product of the absence of due recognition that tribes/groups of people demand in a potentially competitive social and political set-up.[115] Clash of identities and conflict over space exists not only between national and regional groups but also various sub-regional groups.

Assam has never been a monolingual region; people speaking different dialects and languages have made Assam their homeland during different periods of history. Present-day Assam is only one of the seven states of North-eastern India; it is the largest state in terms of population but not area, and serves as an important gateway for communication with other states. Today, Assam is a hotspot of multiple ethnicities and diversities. Assamese, Bodo,

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[114] Ibid: 29.

[115] No. 108: 53-56.

Mising, Karbi, Garo, Rabha, and Manipuri are considered the "indigenous" languages of Assam.[116] In contrast, the speakers of Bengali, Hindi, Oriya, Nepali, or Santhali are considered "non-indigenous".[117] Assamese speakers, for instance, include not only ethnic Assamese but also a very large number of people from the "immigrant" and "tribal" communities.[118] Even by excluding immigration as a factor, it goes without saying that Assam's indigenous population is extremely diverse in terms of culture, language, and religion.

The ethnic diversity of Assam indeed makes for a complex case of clash over identities. For the various tribal groups of Assam, identity is the only way to create an "other". It becomes important in a context when one seeks to politically mobilise one's own tribe to demand a greater share of the economic and political resources of the nation. In most cases, the significant "other" is the more dominant community that seemingly has easy access to much of those resources.[119] Strident demands for political autonomy have been made by the various ethnic communities of Assam from time to time. However, the word "Assamese" itself has today become the subject of a contested debate. Thus, the question that becomes very problematic here is the definition of an "Assamese" or who is an "Assamese" in Assam.

The term "Assamese" has been used in at least four different senses in the academic literature of the region.[120] Firstly, it is meant to describe a territorial identity, a generic name for the multiple identities existing in the state of Assam including the ethnic Assamese, Rajbongshis, Kacharis, Kochs, among others. Secondly, the word "Assamese" refers to the group of people who speak in the native 'Axomia' language. Thirdly, it refers to the ethnic Assamese community, which involves some element of descent and shared culture between the members of the group as well as with their ancestors, besides a shared language. Fourthly, it is used to refer to the *bhumiputras* (sons of the soil) of Assam. The United Nations Organisation (UNO) and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) have used this term to refer to any ethnic group which inhabits the particular geographical region with which they share the earliest historical connection.

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[116] Ibid: 57

[117] Ibid.

[118] Ibid.

[119] Ibid: 60-68

[120] Ibid.

However, this form of classification of the Assamese seems too simple to explain the various complexities and incongruities in present-day Assam. This is precisely because of the reason that over the years, the word "Assamese" has come to be identified with a particular ruling and dominant economic elite. For instance, the Bodos say that they are not Assamese and wish to be called the Bodos of Bodoland in Assam. Numerous other smaller tribes like the Karbis and the Dimasas are now being politically mobilised to voice their demands for greater autonomy so that they can also attain for themselves a state within a state. Other ethnic groups are still in the mode of raising their demands and some are even currently holding talks with the Union as to what would be the best arrangement for them under the existing circumstances. There exists a vast difference between the aspirations of the ethnic Assamese community to establish Assam as the "nation province" of the Assamese and the historically developed multi-ethnic social base of territorial Assam of the present times. This is where the root of the problem lies. Demands for homogenisation and realisation of the goal of making Assam a nation-province of the ethnic Assamese during the 1950s and 1960s further aggravated the ethnic cleavages that were developed during the colonial period.

State institutions are therefore embedded in the wider array of social and political processes at work. To quote Sanjay G. Reddy, "States are embedded in societies". As seen in the case of Assam, India's public institutions function within the context of a shifting pattern of societal demands caused by its experience of a 'long democratic revolution'.[121] The evolution and development of institutions is determined by various conflicts in the society of which they are a part as well as within and between the institutions themselves. Institutions perform the functions of allocation of resources and distribution of power in society among various conflicting views and interests. Institutions are therefore not homogeneous. Changes in the wider socio-political processes of society exercise a significant influence in the functioning of these institutions. This is especially true in the context of a democracy like India where institutions act as the primary mechanisms through which the demands and aspirations of different sections of people in the society are sought to be reconciled with the goals and objectives of the government.[122]

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[121] Sanjay G. Reddy, "A Rising Tide of Demands India's Public Institutions and the Democratic Revolution," in *Public Institutions in India: Performance and Design*, ed. Devesh Kapur and Pratap Bhanu Mehta (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007), 71-92.

[122] No. 111.

The way of functioning of institutions in any democracy is related to the quality of government – its capacity to deliver goods and services, regulate the levels of public corruption, etc. and thereby ensure democratic stability. Indian democracy is a characteristic example of institutional pluralism; e.g. in India, education may be provided simultaneously through the private sector and also through the government. The emergence of new institutional forms is a response to the constantly changing, heterogeneous social order. The political systems of many developing countries such as India are especially likely to be 'unconsolidated'.[123] This means that the formal institutions of the modern state such as legislatures, executives, and courts have not been able to establish complete dominance and control over other sources of public authority associated with formal state-building. Even in countries that are politically stable at the national level, political authority is frequently contested and ambiguous at the local level. Informal/traditional institutions play a parallel role in several societies, so much so that their rulings are adhered to as binding decisions of the community at large. According to Ananth Pur and Moore, the genesis of many such institutions can be historically traced to colonial systems of 'indirect rule' through 'traditional authorities'.[124] Formal bureaucratic organisations often ceded local territorial authority, including policing and judicial authority to traditional chiefs, clans, councils, or landlords. Even today, in many parts of Asia and Africa, policymakers at the higher levels have sometimes had a hostile attitude to any form of 'traditional authority' and institutions characterised as traditional.

As mentioned earlier, the 'traditional' as a socio-political concept is riddled with subjectivities and ambiguities that make it difficult for us to make a conclusive statement on what actually constitutes tradition or which institutions in society come under the scope of traditional institutions. The co-existence of several kinds of traditional institutions within the same society may help us in evolving evaluative frameworks through which we can understand the close and intricate relationship between tradition and modernity within the framework of a constitutional democracy like India. It may be mentioned here that Morris Jones' analyses Indian political culture through his trichotomous conceptualisation of three idioms, i.e. the modern, the traditional, and the saintly (his own original contribution). The modern idiom can be noticed in the languages of the constitution of India and of the law

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[123] Kripa Ananth Pur and Mick Moore, "Ambiguous Institutions: Traditional Governance and Local Democracy in Rural South India," *Journal of Development Studies* 46, no. 4 (2010): 603-623.

[124] Ibid.

courts and the higher administration; the traditional idiom is local and sectarian and represents the language of the villages, castes, tribes and communities; whereas, the idiom of saintly politics refers to the politics of Mahatma Gandhi and Acharya Vinoba Bhave. These terms, however, did not necessarily reflect the existence of sharply differentiated ideologies, worldviews or culture, but the interaction between them reflects both general and particular aspects of Indian political life and the Indian political system.[125]

In his own words, "The meeting, mixing and the confrontation of these three political idioms provide Indian political culture with its distinctive tone."[126]However, Morris Jones does not delve deep into how and by whom the modern idioms were modified to suit the demands of democratic politics. It seems that the architects of this new mass culture borrowed elements from the society's traditional culture and the nation's elite culture in order to shape and create its emerging mass culture. Morris Jones' framework, suitably modified and elaborated, is still useful in understanding the various styles of political leadership that have been on display in Independent India. With reference to the idiom of the traditional, historian Ramchandra Guha talks about the politics of language, region, caste, religion, etc. in the context of India which have sought to define a political community on the basis of a single, primordial identity.[127] It is because of the fact that they all claim that their party alone represents the interests of the community so defined, sometimes defensive and sometimes offensive. On the contrary, the modern idiom of politics based itself on a wider vision, beyond the sectarian demands of caste, religion, region, language, etc. However, with the fragmentation of the polity, the Government of India is being increasingly influenced by the claims of various political parties based on traditional, ascriptive identities, which have now begun to assert their influence in the political arena of the nation.[128]Guha describes the modern idiom as the "rhetoric of hope", the traditional idiom as the "rhetoric of fear" and the saintly idiom as the "rhetoric of sacrifice".[129] This is greatly helpful in understanding the various facets of institutions that may be classified as both traditional and modern at the same time. It is also

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[125] W.H. Morris Jones,"India's Political Idioms," in *Politics and Society in India*, ed. C.H. Philips (New York: New York University Press, 1963), 62.

[126] Ibid.

[127] Ramchandra Guha, "Political Leadership," in *The Oxford Companion to Politics in India*, ed. Niraja Gopal Jayal and Pratap Bhanu Mehta (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 288-298.

[128] Ibid.

[129] Ibid.

not necessary that all institutions need to fit into this binary categorisation at all times and places. Societies change, value-systems too change and institutions adapt themselves accordingly to the changing circumstances.

Traditional institutions have continued to exist since the ages till the present times, albeit with certain changes and modifications in their structures and ways of functioning. These institutions have commanded an aura of respect in the particular society in question for a long time, which has made them legitimate sources of power and authority over time. It means that even in the context of today's fast changing value systems and questioning of age-old beliefs, these institutions have carved out a niche for themselves within societies and communities. Although they have adapted themselves to the changing times and circumstances, but the fact of their existence and importance has never been denied. Their authority has hardly ever been questioned by people who have for long, accepted their rulings and diktats as legitimate and as something meant for their good. Hence, these institutions that are understood and viewed as "traditional" have co-existed alongside those institutions that are legally and constitutionally recognised by the state. For instance, khap panchayats in parts of Haryana, Rajasthan and Western Uttar Pradesh are institutions that were originally designed for defence against Islamic invaders have today transformed themselves into essentially caste panchayats comprising mostly of upper and middle-caste land owners.[130] They function as judicial entities parallel to the state judiciary and have exercised their power mainly by subordination of the poor. At a time when the country is going through rapid economic and social advancements, khaps are active various parts of the country and their *diktats* (rulings) are focussed on perpetuating the existing caste hierarchies (e.g. by regulating 'gotra' marriages in a community). Hence, these earlier credible bodies with a broad-based social outlook have now become highly politicised.

Originally, traditional political institutions were generally localised, usually restricted to one single village or locality. However, with time, these institutions as centres of decision-making have expanded their administrative sphere to clusters of villages, and are no longer restricted to one single community in several cases. They play an important role in local governance and the universal legitimacy and constitutionality of the state and state law, does not undermine the hold of the former in matters of community decision-making. These

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[130] Ajay Kumar, "Khap Panchayat: A Socio-Historical Overview," *Economic and Political Weekly* XLVII, no. 4 (2012): 59-64.

institutions have provided a space for popular participation of people in grassroot-level politics primarily centering around the issues of power, resources, and identity. Mobilisation around identity issues facilitates awareness and capacity-building with the need to maintain cohesion and unity of the community in question. In certain instances, this is however, complicated by the existence of customary laws and justice systems among indigenous communities.[131] In such a system, the rulings of elders, local chiefs, and village councils are considered as the exercise of legitimate judicial authority, sometimes even surpassing state laws. It may be mentioned here that the Indian judiciary has played an important and active role to curb the power of khap panchayats. However, the rapidly rising terror of undeterred khap panchayats' illegal *diktats* from time to time reflects the failure of the constitutional spirit. It is because of the fact that the law enforcement agencies strike a conciliatory note as there is hardly any case reported or action taken against the perpetrators of injustice. Moreover, police and top political leaders also have their own vested interests in the continuation of these institutions. It is this informal collusion between state actors and local leaders that helps us to understand the many varied layers of interdependence and interaction between the 'traditional' and the 'modern'.

As mentioned earlier, for any institution to become a tradition, the evolution is rooted in a historical past where people's lives were largely determinedby the rulings of traditional authority, which was both rigid and flexible according to the prevailing circumstances of the time. At this time, these institutions fulfilled a role which could not have been better fulfilled by any other institution existing at the time. Both the institutional theory and the structuration theory contend that institutions and actions are inextricably linked with each other, and that institutionalisation is best understood as a dynamic, ongoing process. However, the structuration theory explicitly focuses on the dynamics by which institutions are reproduced and altered with time, an issue that has been largely neglected by institutional theorists.[132]Institutions, whether modern or traditional, are historical accretions of past practices and understandings that set the conditions on action. Gradual enlargement of the state machinery has taken place simultaneously with the expansion of powers of the traditional institutions at the local level. For instance, many political leaders are elected into the state level from the community. These leaders, at times, for their own political gains, may

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[131] Ibid.

[132] Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory* (California: University of California Press, 1979), 236.

even depend upon these traditional institutions in order to secure funds for the development of public services such as roads, education, water supply, and infrastructure within their respective jurisdictions.[133]

We have seen a revival of traditional institutions in a large number of countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America in the recent years. In some places of these countries, governments have formally ceded more authority to such institutions at the local level. Sometimes, the emergence of these institutions has also been the result of a more spontaneous response to the failure of the state to deliver. In the case of India, as mentioned above with reference to the khap panchayats, support for traditional institutions, in most cases, has been a way for politicians to mobilise ethnic, regional or caste identities. Within the same country, the form of these institutions may vary widely from state to state or village to village and also within the same states and villages. According to a research report conducted by the Centre for the Future State, in most parts of India, villagers are sufficiently aware of the fact that people harbour prejudices against informal institutions for representing backward and conservative forms of authority. This is further compounded by the fact that most of these institutions are mis-represented with inadequate facts and details in the so-called "mainstream" media. Informal institutions regulate people's lives and perform productive services of many kinds on a consensual basis.[134] Sometimes, people have even perceived a threat to their local cultures and customs as a result of the changes brought about by neo-liberalism. It is then that they turn back to these institutions for protecting what they consider to be an assault on their long-held beliefs and traditions. The rulings delivered by these institutions, no matter how controversial they might be in the public sphere, are hardly questioned by people who unquestioningly adhere to them. This is what makes these institutions legitimate and credible decision-making bodies. It is this legitimacy which is the chief source of power for these bodies. It may be derived either from religion or local cultural practices of the region where these institutions operate, and those that have sedimented over a period of time so much so that people have internalised these beliefs and practices in their everyday lives.

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[133] No. 3.

[134] Information based on a research report entitled "Are Informal Institutions Good for Local Governance?" It was conducted by the Centre for the Future State, Institute of Development Studies, UK, 2009.

Interaction between the state and traditional institutions has, at times, even led to conflicts between both. In many cases, the former views the latter as reactionary and steeped in the ethos of social orthodoxy and conservatism. Whereas, for the latter, the state is seen as unresponsive and sometimes even beyond the reach of local communities. Despite the ambiguity of the very idea of the "traditional", traditional institutions of a particular community have always been in existence, much before the arrival of formal state institutions. In political sociology and anthropology, the very fact of their survival itself till date is often considered as a proof of their usefulness, legitimacy, and efficiency. Indeed, anthropologists studying non-state societies have always shown interest in locating the incipient structures of decision-making. It has also sometimes happened that because of the inability or reluctance of the formal institutions of the state to deliver, these traditional institutions have intervened and taken appropriate steps to respond to the needs of the local community at the ground level.

Institutions as reflective of Power Relations: An Engagement with the Contours of the 'Law':

The anthropological literature on the intricacies of law has established a coherent link between the law and various social and cultural structures, economic and political organisations, and profession or religion. This helps us unravel the implications of law on different societies and communities at different times and in different contexts. For people who are considered isolated or self-confined and as having institutions that stand independently from other so-called "mainstream" institutions, an anthropological study of the law holds substantive ground.[135] According to the process model, law is not an autonomous domain, and it is power that determines the several layers of day-to-day interactions between different groups of people and the law. As a result, disputants are seen as active participants in the process of law-making, employing their own strategies in the entire legal process. Different issues, and not fixed relationships, determine the strategies that disputants employ in the making of the law.

The study of political economy of the law and the legal process highlights the fact that law is not a neutral domain, but is often created by and for the group in power. It is not static but an always evolving phenomenon. Laura Nader employs the concept of "hegemony" to describe

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[135] Laura Nader, *The Life of the Law: Anthropological Projects* (California: University of California Press, 2005), 43-51.

the directions of change in law and the legal processes of a society. A hegemonic ideology naturalises the working of power relations in a society. Dominant ideologies and belief systems reflect the ideologies of certain classes that attempt to universalise their beliefs and values. It is because they are generated by those involved in the production of culture and dominant cultural frameworks of understanding the society at large. Hence, law is not a neutral category, but essentially a value-laden concept. This is particularly well-understood according to Nader's user theory of law which is based upon the assumption that the user is the primary driving force of law.[136] Law is hence not an abstraction.

Many a times, legal conflicts can be caused by the co-existence of different sources of law at a single point of time. E.g. the main sources of law in India are the Constitution, statutes (legislations), customary laws, case laws, etc. Judicial decisions pronounced by the Supreme Court and the high courts at the state level also constitute important sources of law. Moreover, local customs and conventions which have been in existence for long, are also taken note of by the courts while administering justice in certain spheres. Sometimes, different and potentially conflicting laws can apply within the same area of jurisprudence. There is a general acceptance today that the cultures and customs of different communities need to be protected. However, the right to self-determination for traditional communities provides a fertile ground for some of the most wide-ranging debates and disputes around issues of rights, citizenship and inclusion versus exclusion. For instance, the rights of the Indian tribal communities over their land, forests, and other resources were at first taken away from them by the colonial state and later by the post-Independent Indian state.[137] The process of land alienation that began during the British rule has continued unabated even in the post-Independence period.

In order to safeguard, protect and promote the interests of these tribesand tribal groups as citizens of free India, they were extended civil, political, and social rights in equal measure as others. Civil and political rights have been enshrined within the purview of the fundamental rights of the Indian constitution, whereas social rights have been envisaged in the Directive Principles of State Policy of the constitution. They were also extended certain special rights as being members of a distinct community. These range from the creation of scheduled and

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[136] Ibid, p. 23.

[137] Virginius Xaxa, "Politics of Language, Religion and Identity: Tribes in India," *Economic and Political Weekly* 40, no. 13 (2005): 1363-1370.

tribal areas, to providing representation in the Parliament and state legislatures, including special privileges in the form of reservation of a certain percentage of posts in the government services and seats in educational institutions. However, the laws themselves have been responsible for the continuing marginalisation of the tribes. Article 13(3) (a) of the Indian constitution defines law to include 'custom' so long as it is not inconsistent with or in derogation of the fundamental rights enshrined in the constitution of India. It is a constant process of defining and re-defining the making and interpretation of the law. Herein comes the problem of defining the rule of law that involves mapping the terrain of politics: who defines the laws, who implement them, who contests them and why?[138]

Specific laws meant for protecting tribes are often subjected to general laws such as Land Acquisition Act, Wildlife Sanctuary Act, Forest Acts, etc. It is because of the reason that the latter are worded in a way that seem to be for the benefit of the wider public interest. Moreover, since tribes had no tradition of record-keeping and dealing with the formal laws of the state, the language of the courts and its practices seemed alien to them. This has been taken advantage of especially by the non-tribals, who in a close political nexus with their own kinsmen in the state, has facilitated the process of hassle-free transfer of tribal lands to big business and corporate honchos.[139] Here, Partha Chatterjee's distinction between a rule-bound 'civil society' and a 'political society' thriving on the margins of 'legality' and 'illegality' respectively, translates itself in terms of a conflict between the urban middle classes (a part of the civil society) and the poor and marginalised (a part of the political society). While the former violates laws with impunity, the latter mobilises law as a part of their larger politics. It is in the face of this corporate onslaught on people's lands and territories that the poor have now started to take recourse to past histories, notions of 'custom' enshrined in local tenure laws, besides constitutional principles, court judgements and international conventions on justice and 'natural law'.[140]

Customary law is often not codified, and systems of customary law often vary widely within the same country because different traditional societies have different legal systems.

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[138] Ibid.

[139] Ibid.

[140] Nandini Sundar, ed., *Legal Grounds: Natural Resources, Identity, and the Law in Jharkhand* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009).

Customary law may also not be compatible with the basic principles constituting modern law. It is often the difficulty that is involved in the codification of customary law which does not allow space for a compatible co-existence of traditional and modern state law. Clarification is a necessary requirement as to when and to whom customary law applies and who exercises influence over its functioning – the traditional village leader or the entire village community or specific sections of it. In many instances, the responsibility falls on the courts to decide case by case what law applies in a given situation and how.[141] There is, however, no universal criterion as to which law has precedence. Both national and international law may conflict with traditional law and vice-versa. Governments not only need to accept but also recognise the importance of traditional institutions as legitimate bodies of decision-making. The due recognition of cultural and political rights of communities would further the inclusion of traditional institutions in the overall framework of the state and its political processes.

The direction of law depends mainly upon what people do and how in this process, they are enabled and motivated to make use of the law. It emphasises on the role of the individual in shaping social life and community decisions.[142] It is a sociological underpinning of the law that overturns the picture of the individual as a passive agent at the mercy of the judge or the law-maker and highlights the larger importance of what goes on in society. Process and power thus become the two most indispensable variables in examining the interactions between people in dispute-settings. Law is not merely the complex of judicial and legislative institutions; it very much includes the social and cultural organisation of the society as well.

The notion of community law as an autonomous domain is being put to test in the present context of a globalised world. The emergence of various trading blocs may impinge upon the basic foundations of local and community life in the form of removal of trade barriers and the growing importance of transnational institutions, changed patterns of subsistence, etc. State law, growing industrialisation, and the separation of the spheres of production and consumption have had a far-reaching influence on society and societal practices. According to Nader, in small-scale societies, people share common social and political linkages. Gossip and public opinion help check socially delinquent behaviour and resolve disputes in such

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[141] Washington D.C. World Bank Institute, *Political Challenges of Decentralisation* (U.S.A, Washington D.C.: World Bank, 2002), 5-12.

[142] No. 135.

societies.[143] However, in modern-day nation-states based on governmental control and formal state law, the anthropological study of law is no longer limited to bounded notions of social structure, family, and kinship. It becomes more concerned with the processes of globalisation, a state of hybridity and flux, and the movement of people and commodities across national borders.[144]

Recognition of national law as the only legitimate domain fails to assess the equal degree of legitimacy accorded to other sources of law and also the operation of a multiplicity of legal systems that often compete or overlap with state systems in the present-day globalised world. Legal tradition is constantly in a process of invention and re-invention. This is well illustrated by the role of customary law that holds utmost significance in the lives of traditional societies and communities. India, for instance, has been the best example of legal pluralism *par excellence*. Thus, law has multiple jurisdictions – traditional, colonial, religious, or nation-state law that co-exist symbiotically in diverse spheres of human existence. This acceptance of plurality and diversity as the basic criteria of social existence ensures that different social groups or communities could enjoy, to the maximum possible extent, freedom to nurture diverse methods for organising, sustaining and perpetuating their particular forms of life.[145] Legal pluralism, thus, serves as a general tool to understand the many layers of law in all its complexity.

It is through the instrument of law by which different parties and individuals attempt to gain and maintain control over and secure legitimisation within a given social unit. Law is produced and reproduced within the dynamism of social spaces which are not stationary. Law is thus central to the entire process of civilisation and also acts as an agency for the transmission of culture. The functioning of law through different institutions guides our understanding towards an anthropological study of the law and legal processes over different spaces and time periods. This might bring to our revelation the character of law as both a tool for domination and a means of democratic empowerment.[146]

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[143] Ibid.

[144] Ibid, pp. 36-38.

[145] Christoph Eberhard and Nidhi Gupta, "Legal Pluralism in India: An Introduction," *Indian Socio-Legal Journal XXXI*, no. 7 (2005): 1-10.

[146] Ibid: 40.

Institutions are embedded in different socio-political and historical contexts. There is a very close inter-relationship between laws and institutions – in many cases, laws interact indirectly with the basic social institutions of a society in a manner constituting a direct relationship between law and social change. E.g. a law designed to prohibit polygamy within the institution of marriage. Institutions, in turn, are essential for the establishment of the rule of law. The basic constitutional principles of transparency, accountability, legality, respect for human rights, etc. enshrined in a democratic form of government constitute the rule of law. Thus, the concept of the rule of law is intrinsic to a democracy which, in itself, is composed of a dense network of institutions – both formal and informal – which transmit and reinforce laws having an impact on the divergent structures of power and authority in a society. Through a process of social engineering, modern societies are constantly engaged in devising effective forms of collective agency. The rise and emergence of the modern nation-state was accompanied by the growth of institutions such as a bureaucratic apparatus, a modern army, and a collective consciousness of nationalism. The Foucauldian paradigm to the study of the state makes use of the notion of 'governmentality' to describe this peculiar character of the modern nation-state. In the words of Foucault, "The government is the administrative apparatus of the state and the state is the result of the practices of the government."[147]

Modernity and the emergence of the nation-state brought along with it several measures and procedures for the regulation of human conduct – of the self, the family, institutions, and the body corporal *per se*. According to Foucault, governmentality is a rationale of governing that takes the form of a series of mundane, daily practices of social ordering.[148] While the state continued to perform its pre-modern functions of defence and the maintenance of law and order, its internal functions gradually began to predominate and multiply within its own society. The state, through its numerous institutions, dealing with various functions such as finance, taxation, etc. became the primary agency of social action. This meant the increasing homogenisation and organisation of society in the modern times through a massive bureaucratic apparatus that is based on different ways of classification of people. Thus, daily life is determined by engagements of individuals with the law so much so that it comes to be internalised in due course of time.

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[147]No. 30.

[148] Ibid: 155.

Laws play an important role in any society. This holds true of not only formal state laws but also of community-backed laws. Recent works on the anthropology of the state has shifted our attention away from the technologies of modern state power to a question of the effects of this power on people's everyday lives. Even when people choose to engage with the government through 'pure politics' such as street demonstrations, the law itself forces upon them by criminalising dissent and forcing protesters to deal with issues like bail, release, etc.[149] According to Sundar, laws structure social identities and vice-versa in a dialectical relationship. For instance, laws that govern village administration coexist with the different understandings that villagers and officials have of particular laws. Notions of customary law also feed into these varied understandings and can be used to make political claims.[150]

Therefore, the terrain of 'justice' becomes a contested site for people who struggle in a multiplicity of forums. It is because both the powerful and the powerless negotiate simultaneously in the shadow of the law and also against it. The irony is that it is against the content of these same laws that they protest. However, the over-arching machinery of the state is so all-encompassing that what initially starts off as a protest around the making, or different interpretations of the law, end up taking recourse to the same formal law of the state. This happens albeit in a modified way in order to undo what people see as "injustice". This is especially true in the case of local communities that have a highly limited and mediated access to political and legal structures of the state. It brings to light the conflict between equality and equal rights for all and the particular demands of cultural identity of different groups on the grounds of vulnerability, backwardness, etc. The root of this opposition lies in the transition that modern politics underwent in the 20th century from a conception of democratic politics based on popular sovereignty to one in which democratic politics is shaped by the notions of 'governmentality'.[151]

All laws function within particular contexts and social systems. Complex power politics played out through the institutional mechanism of the state determines the strengths and limits that different parties bring in to the debate on the framing and interpretation of laws. Actual knowledge of, or access to the formal state law, is constrained by poverty and ignorance, illiteracy, and bureaucratic opacity. This is clearly brought to light by the fact that

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[149] No. 123.

[150] No. 140.

[151] No. 90.

despite an emphasis on decentralisation and devolution in natural resource management, in legal terms, there has been a centralisation and standardisation of practices across the country. According to Sundar, 'custom' and laws associated with social mores and norms offer a site for democratic debate than custom as 'tradition' which is opposed to 'modernity'. The appeal of modern law is based upon its rationality, uniformity, and lack of bias.

All laws, irrespective of whether they are being formulated by the state or local institutions, include gaps and ambiguities. These are open to a wide range of interpretations by different actors in their struggle over the mores of social conduct, economic resources and political equality.[152] It remains to be seen however, as to what extent, the notions of 'custom' and 'community' generally associated with local traditional institutions provide people with a platform to resist and challenge the centralising tendencies of the state administration. Dworkin's formulation of community law refers to it as a set of special rules used by the community either directly or indirectly for the purpose of determining which behaviour is to be punished or coerced by the public power.[153] He conceives of law as a system of rules the membership of which is determined by a generally accepted test – an applicable rule is either valid or invalid; if valid, it then comes with a legal obligation, and if invalid, it is irrelevant.

Institutions and their Many Complex Layers

All institutions are a reflection of the constantly changing nature of the society and its various socio-political cleavages which intersect and cross-cut each other at different times and circumstances. As such, the classification of society and state into two watertight compartments does not seem feasible for an understanding of institutions and the role played by them in the formation of identities. It is because such a rigid distinction not only differentiates between the institutions belonging to each particular realm, leaving no room for flexibility, but also places them in a graded hierarchy based on the importance of each such institution in the body politic. All institutions regulate people's social behaviour through norms, laws, rules and conventions. Norms and rules are a set of principles that are associated with a group of people, while conventions are a set of agreed, or generally accepted

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[152] No. 140.

[153] Ronald M. Dworkin. "The Model of Rules," *Faculty Scholarship Series 12*, no. 3609 (1967): 13-25, accessed August 13, 2019, url: http://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/fss (Yale Law School Legal Scholarship Repository).

standards, social norms or criteria that often come in the form of an "unwritten law" of custom, e.g. the *namaskaram* tradition in which people in India generally greet each other.

The laws made by an institution may have different meanings for different people in different contexts. People's social conditioning, their relationship with the state and understanding of power have implications on the ways they conceive of the content and meaning of different laws. No institution is static. All institutions respond to and adapt themselves to the changing socio-political reality. For any democracy to be effective in responding to people's needs and demands, it needs to tame the power of different institutions in all the three different stages of law-making, law-implementation, and law-adjudication. It is only then that the larger dynamics of law can be understood from the point of view of different institutions, their ways of functioning, and implications on people's lives.

The next chapter will seek to explore the linkage between tradition and modernity, by emphasising upon both the salience of the state in matters of policy and decision-making as well as its elusiveness in understanding its relationship with the society and vice-versa. It will also attempt to bring out the pivotal role played by the *Namghar* in Assamese society and the formation of an "Assamese identity" through this institution. It will look into the issues of equality and hierarchy that permeate these institutions and consequently influence the idea of "identity" that evolves from within.

Chapter – 3

THE STATE AND "TRADITIONAL" INSTITUTIONS: A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE VAISHNAVITE MOVEMENT WITH REFERENCE TO THE ROLE OF THE *NAMGHAR* IN ASSAM

This chapter seeks to understand and expand the arguments made in the previous chapter in the light of the continuous process of interaction that takes place between the state and traditional institutions. Such a process leads to the creation and re-creation of new identities, challenging the earlier prevailing notions of identity. As a result, the working of both the state and institutions that constitute a part of it, whether understood as modern or traditional, have continuously evolved. The importance of the state still cannot be undermined in matters of policy and decision-making. However, we also need to consider its role in understanding its relationship with society and vice-versa. It is in this context that this chapter makes a detailed study of an institution called the *Namghar* in Assam (also known as *Harigriha* or *Kirtanghar*) – symbolic of the Assamese Vaishnavite heritage and traditions associated with the same.

The role and functions performed by the *Namghar* have been analysed here by tracing its origins to the Vaishnavite movement in Assam initiated by Srimanta Sankardeva in the 15th century and the subsequent development of the *Namghar* as an institution of community importance It attempts to bring out the pivotal role played by the *Namghar* in Assamese society and the formation and consolidation of an "Assamese identity" through this institution. This also brings into light the issues of equality and hierarchy that permeate these institutions and consequently influence the idea of "identity" that evolves from within.

Understanding the Traditional-Modern Dichotomy

Institutions are generally categorised as formal and informal. Whereas the former are seen as a part and parcel of the administrative machinery of the modern nation-state, the latter are viewed, more or less, as the remains of a past that is embedded in certain beliefs and practices considered to be traditional, conservative, and steeped in orthodoxy. In whatever way it is viewed, it is the past in question that still exercises a tremendous importance and influence in the lives of those people who consider themselves as its descendants and therefore identify themselves with it. Formal institutions are a part of the bureaucratic state machinery

characterised by written rules, precision, impersonality, and neutrality in Weberian terms.[154] This is in contrast to informal institutions which are a part of a community network and function according to rules and norms that the community frames for itself, keeping in mind the changing value-systems of the times and circumstances. Thus, 'modern' and 'traditional' appear to be two different categories based on which institutions are generally classified and their role and functioning understood. It is in this context that the understanding and relationship between both these groups of institutions, formal and informal, become important through a study of the dichotomy between the two categories of the traditional and the modern.

What we need to recognise at the very outset is that both these two categories of the traditional and the modern are not entirely homogenous and both influence, and in turn, is influenced by the other. The modern state, most of the times, is seen as the ultimate authority which stands above society. As such, it is considered as the only agency commanding wide-ranging obedience, conformity, and legitimacy from its subjects/citizens for its policies and actions. Individuals belong to different social, political and economic contexts based on different cultures and practices. Through various symbols and institutions, individuals and social groups constantly engage and re-engage with the state as a means of fulfilling their goals and demands. This engagement between state and society is not static. The encounter of the state with different social forces at different times postulates the idea of the state as a as a process rather than as a structure. It also brings to light the limitations inherent in the functioning of the state structure itself, which downplays the claims of the state as the supreme authority exercising a monopoly of power over all. The organisational structure of the state is "amorphous" which is constantly influenced by and determined by the forces in society.[155] Thus, problematising the state-society relationship requires an understanding beyond the state as an autonomous entity.

The statist approach to the study of the state is based upon an understanding of the state as an organisation with an over-arching unity and omnipotence above all elements in society. This, however, seems to have become a myth in today's era of globalisation and the increasing importance of a global world order. Moreover, the emergence of divisive conflicts along the

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[154] Helen Constas, "Max Weber's Two Conceptions of Bureaucracy," *American Journal of Sociology* 63, no. 4 (1958): 400-409.

[155] No. 40.

lines of culture, ethnicity or religion has challenged the very foundations of the state and its claim as the supreme political authority. New alliances and coalitions based on new ideas and values are created and social boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, division, and fragmentation, are constantly re-drawn. Thus, as a result of the interpenetration of the ideas of both state and society, different narratives, symbols, and metaphors of both are assimilated into a complex political culture. This in itself produces a transformation of the processes of governance. Neither state officials, institutions, laws and policies on the one hand, nor social groups and collectivities on the other can claim a monopoly over the shared rules and norms that people follow.

Much of the social science literature has looked at the traditional-modern dichotomy in terms of a theoretical distinction between society and state respectively. Tradition is imbued with a historical meaning that traces its roots back to the ancient past. On the other hand, the modern is seen as belonging to the present, characteristic of progress and development through which a gradual secularisation of the society takes place.[156] The relationship between tradition and modernity can also be seen as a link between a cultural force on the one hand and an economic force on the other respectively. This asymmetrical relationship between both, does not, however, imply a discussion of the one without understanding the other. This has been clearlybrought to light in Chatterjee's distinction between civil society and political society.

According to Chatterjee, civil society is constituted by the domains of modern associational life, whereas political society represents a domain of institutions that lie outside the framework of civil society. Chatterjee realises that the notion of civil society rests on a normative conception of equal citizens who interact with the state as "rights-bearing citizens". However, Veena Das argues that this form of politics is not an adequate description of how the poor engage with the state. She conceives of the poor as not merely passive recipients of welfare and humanitarian measures by the state, or as simply "populations" made up of the governmental actions of enumeration, classification and other technologies for governing the poor.[157]Civil society is composed of a small section of citizens and is shaped by the normative ideals of western modernity. This is in contrast to political society

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[156] Rajni Kothari, *Politics in India* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 1970), 1-10.

[157] Veena Das, "State, Citizenship and the Urban Poor," *Journal of Citizenship Studies* 15, no. 3-4 (2011): 319-333.

which is composed of the vast mass of population – the target of policy-making of the legal bureaucratic apparatus of the state.[158]

Chatterjee thus distinguishes between civil society and political society in order to explain the fact that the politics of what he calls "the governed" is highly complex, contextual and sporadic. Chatterjee uses the distinction between legality and illegality as if it were a transparent distinction. Whereas, Veena Das, through her ethnography of struggles over securing a dwelling among a group of urban poor in Delhi, argues that the complex practices on the part of the legal and administrative machinery of the state makes the legal itself an unstable category. It is because the divergent notions of people on what is legal and what is illegal are in continuous play, which have an important impact on the state's definition of rights (*haq*) over basic needs of housing, electricity, water, roads, etc.[159] Thus, the manner in which the concepts of civil society and political society, legal and illegal, etc. merge into each other that an understanding can be made of the claims made by the poor on the state as a means of claiming citizenship. This further informs the notion of rights in the sense of *haq*.[160] Thus, all individuals are determined by the nature of social relationships and kinship networks around them and understanding "categories of populations" only by reference to governmentality is too narrow a conception of analysing popular politics.

Democracy provides a ground for a form of mobilisation to emerge in political society that channelizes popular demands on the state. These claims and demands made by different population groups which form a part of the political society, are often seen to violate the institutional norms of liberal civil society. Thus, an understanding of political society as purely traditional or civil society as purely modern stands as an idea rather flawed. Interaction between civil society and political society in Chatterjee's framework thereby transforms tradition into a modern invention, making blurred the divide between both these

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[158] Partha Chatterjee, "On Civil and Political Society in Postcolonial Democracies," in *Civil Society: History and Possibilities*, ed. Sudipta Kaviraj and Sunil Khilnani (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 160-178.

[159] Ibid.

[160] '*Haq*' is a term found in Arabic, Persian, Urdu and Hebrew. The dictionary meaning of *haq* refers to both justice and truth. Veena Das evokes the term primarily in the sense of "standing" as in having the standing to both give and receive. Her argument lies less on expanding on the discursive contexts of the term but more on bringing to light the complex field of legal and political action through which the notions of citizenship were materialised over time.

categories. Taking up certain examples of institutions, it may hence be useful to look at the distinction between formal and informal institutions in terms of the modern-traditional divide.

Formal institutional structures are considered to be directly derived from and a major constituent part of the modern state, while informal institutions determine people's everyday lives and the social, political, and economic interactions between them. As Lutz and Linder argue, it is relatively straightforward to define modern societies as societies that are based on democratic principles, where elected representatives are entrusted with the responsibility of legislation. But, it is much less clear to define traditional societies, which, they say, also refer to indigenous communities.[161] They have often used the term "indigenous" in relation to the indigenous populations in Latin America, whereas traditional communities in Africa are usually referred to as tribes and clans. Thus, the distinction between "indigenous" and "traditional" seems more geographical than theoretical.[162]

The dichotomy between the "modern" and the "traditional" presents a picture of the institutions of the modern state as entrusted with the purposes of ordering, controlling and determining the behaviour of people through established rules and norms. These rules shape social behaviour, which, in turn, influence the working of modern political systems and their institutions. Broadly speaking, institutions that function within the state apparatus are mainly understood as modern and those outside of it are considered as traditional/local. The former includes the formal institutions of the state machinery that are primarily engaged in the processes of law-making, law-implementation, and law-interpretation; whereas, the latter comprise of all such institutions that are community-based or function within its own locality. In this context, Dworkin defines community laws as a set of special rules that can be identified and distinguished by specific criteria. Here, rather than the content of these laws, he talks about the notion of *pedigree* or the manner in which these laws were adopted or developed by a community over time. Dworkin says that this test of *pedigree* can be used to distinguish between valid and spurious legal rules, and also from other social or moral rules followed by a community but which are not enforced through the public power of the state.[163]

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[161]World Bank Community Empowerment and Social Inclusion and Learning Programme (CESI), *Traditional Structures in Local Governance for Local Development* (Switzerland, Institute of Political Studies: University of Berne, 2004), 1-54.

[162] Ibid.

[163] No. 153.

Traditional/local/informal institutions represent the issues and interests of members restricted to the particular community/group in question. Although these community institutions have emerged or emerge in a context which appears to be outside of the state machinery, their overall functioning is, however, determinedby the broader framework of the state. The laws and policies framed by the state and the constantly changing dynamics of societal forces both play an important role in determining the working of these institutions. Tracing the history of the formation of the Indian constitution and the different streaks of ideological trends underneath it, would help us unravel the dichotomy between tradition and modernity in the context of the Indian nation-state.

The Indian Constituent Assembly was set up mainly to put an end to the British rule in India and establish an Independent Republic of India. It was tasked with the formulation of the objectives and the guiding principles which were to form the basis of the constitution of Independent India. For this purpose, members of the Assembly adopted with great effectiveness two wholly Indian concepts – consensus and accommodation. The former was the basis of the decision-making process, whereas the latter was applied to the principles that were to be embodied in the constitution.[164] In order to provide a modern democratic foundation to the Independent Indian state, the goals of national unity, social revolution and democracy had to be pursued simultaneously. Granville Austin calls it a "seamless web". National leaders such as Patel, Azad and Nehru often called these goals the three pillars of secularism, socialism, and democracy, which were to be the national creed.

The establishment of an independent judiciary was largely an extension of socialism or the social revolution, for it upheld the principles of liberty and equality that Indians had long struggled for under the British rule.[165] The constitution of India was also expected to protect the vulnerable and historically marginalised groups and communities, thereby checking the tyranny of the majority. It is because of the fact democracy often tended to assume majoritarian tendencies, much to the neglect of the minorities. The Constituent Assembly debates, too, reflected this tension within. The constitution was eventually the result of this turmoil whereby it tries to reconcile both individual and group rights, in a rather uneasy

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[164] Granville Austin, *The Indian Constitution: Cornerstone of a Nation* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 33.

[165] Ibid: 7-10.

relationship.[166] Numerous institutional mechanisms have also been provided in the constitution for the accommodation of diversity, and as a respect for people's traditions, values and belief-systems. E.g. the structures of asymmetry in the constitution of India provide certain special privileges and powers to some states and other constituent units of the Union of India in relation to the Centre; such as, Articles 371 to 371-J in Part XXI of the constitution which contain special provisions for some states in the country. The intention behind them is to meet the aspirations of the local people of the backward regions of the states and to protect their interests, and also to protect the cultural and economic interests of the tribal people of the states, or to deal with the disturbed law and order condition in some parts of the states.

The roots of the institutions of the post-Independent Indian state can be traced to the nature of the British colonial rule as well as the legacies of the Indian national movement. Some of its institutions such as the army, bureaucracy, police, etc. through which the government exercised its control and repression over the natives were shaped by the requirements of the colonial rule. At the same time, the Indian national movement under the leadership of the Congress was based on a demand for the end of colonialism and transfer of power to the natives through popularly elected bodies and representative institutions. With Independence, and guided by Nehru's vision of a modernised society, economy, and polity, those practices and institutions of society that did not fit into the Nehruvian model of development came to be characterised as 'backward', 'superstitious' or 'irrational'. The projects of modernisation and development that guided the workings of the post-Independent Indian state now came to be seen as the most effective and rational. It came to represent what was supposed to be the most 'progressive' and the 'best' social order, discarding the non-progressive and the non-modern: for example, the introduction of universal adult suffrage and the formal abolition of untouchability in the constitution of the post-Independent Indian state.[167]

The actual historical processes at work, were, however, far too complex. The concept of tradition implied in the Nehruvian model of development soon became a category too static. Its assumption that the traditional practices of a society became repulsive or stagnant over time by their resistance to change and adaptation, lacked a firm ground. In order to have a

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[166] Rajeev Bhargava, ed., *Politics and Ethics of the Indian Constitution* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[167] No. 156.

balanced understanding of the intricacies of tradition and modernity, we need to look at the actual adaptive flexibility of traditions over time. The rhetoric of traditions being change-resistant therefore needs to be examined with respect to the policies and practices of the state machinery. Secondly, the tradition/modern dichotomy which assumes a difference of organisation between state and society, view the basis and functioning of modern, democratic institutions in terms of an individuated society.

In the immediate years after Independence, it was firmly believed that modernisation and capitalist growth would foster development and democracy, which would lead to a gradual process of secularisation of society. This would, in turn, result in the conversion of community-based identities to those based upon the primacy of the individual self. This was in stark contrast to the lives of ordinary Indians whose identities were primarily based upon their membership of particular groups and communities determined by caste, religion, region, or language.[168] One's identity rests upon his/her continuing identification with his/her own group, which can exercise authority over their members. As claimed by the state, this authority can only be exercised within the parameters predetermined and set by the state. The political system and its institutions thus came to be considered as the domain of the elite and the civilised through which the common man was expected to voice his demands and grievances.

It was through the way of colonialism that modernity came to India and the post-colonial state assumed a specific shape. As such, the entire socio-political structure adopted by Independent India's governing elite was based on a specific reading of the history of European modernity. This was transplanted into the Indian context without however, due regard to the heterogeneous and fluid nature of identities in the Indian society.[169] Individuals' personal identities still tend to be located within their own collectivities where they self-consciously find an inexplicable sense of warmth and belongingness. However, dominant western institutions soon became a constant point of reference for evaluation of the institutional standards and performance in the Third World countries, including India. However, parliamentary institutions were introduced in India in a radically different context. In the West, democracy, industrialisation and the destruction of the old feudal order went

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[168] No. 98.

[169] Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 102-121.

simultaneously with the emergence of these institutions. The post-Independent Indian nation-state was weaved out through the historical processes of traditional Indian society and the over-reaching changes brought about by modernity with its associated practices and institutions. This can be understood as the paradox of the modern state, which finds ground in Mitchell's concept of the "limited state".[170]

Modern states have taken recourse to numerous ways of dealing with the complex reality called "society". For instance, the post-Independent Indian state based itself on the ideology of nationalism that seeks a transformation of society through the category of a collective consciousness called the 'nation'. Undoubtedly, the nation-state has become the predominant form of the modern political organisation called the state, which derives its imaginative and moral justification from the idea of a nation. Nationalism is intimately connected with modernity. The advent of British colonialism provided a ground through which previously "fuzzy" identities came to be classified and enumerated through various techniques devised by the state such as the census.[171] Consequently, people's notions of collective identity and their place in the socio-political world underwent a significant change. However, the more dominant and persuasive version of Indian nationalism stood firmly in opposition to any idea/ideas based on homogeneity. It privileged a more pluralist idea of the Indian nation which emphasised upon the principles of diversity and a consensus-based polity based on the ideas of tolerance and accommodation. Eventually, it was this political imagination that got translated into the formation of institutions of the Indian state based on pluralism and diversity. Indianness now came to embody a complex and multi-layered identity which encompassed other identities of individuals as well based on caste, religion, region, ethnicity or language.[172]

Traditional institutions are generally localised, i.e. confined to a single area within a state/region/country, such as *Dorbar Shnong* in parts of Meghalaya[173], and which are

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[170] No. 157.

[171] No. 33.

[172] Ibid.

[173] Patricia Mukhim, "Traditional Institutions: Custodians of Meghalaya Tribals," *The ShillongTimes*, September 26, 2015, 9. The *Dorbar Shnong* is a very important political institution for the Khasi and the Jaintia tribes of Meghalaya. Each Khasi village has its own *Dorbar Shnong* headed by a *Rangbah Shnong* (headman) and his subordinates but he alone has the power to decide on any issue. The administrative system of the *Dorbar Shnong* varies from one village to another. It is entrusted with the

responsible for assisting the Govt. of Meghalaya in conducting the General and Legislative Assembly elections and also the elections of the members of the District Councils. Thus, traditional institutions are largely grassroots' institutions characterised by direct, participatory and deliberative democracy. The basic idea behind arriving at a decision in most of these indigenous democracies is "consensus".[174] In this context, Prof. Udayan Misra, with reference to the traditional institutions of Northeast India, pointed out, "The major difference that marked the traditional 'people's assemblies' presided over by hereditary chiefs and rajas and the district/autonomous councils was that while the former was 'consensual' in character, the latter was a part of the overall process of modern representative democracy."[175]A truly democratic socio-political order is based on a blend of the old and the new, with the fusion of elements from both and combined with the ethos of flexibility, adaptation and accommodation. History stands as a proof of the fact that the in-built flexibility of the Indian federal and political system has made it capable of adapting itself time and again to the various shifts and changes of power that have taken place in the country since Independence.[176]

For any political system to attain a degree of cohesion and stability, its procedures, symbols, and traditions need to be valued and internalised. As argued earlier, all institutional structures are rooted in a specific historical past. Modernity and the rise of modern social and political institutions do not, however, mean the end of tradition and traditional ways of life. With time, institutions and culture blend together to provide order and social stability. It is perhaps the traditionalisation of modernity or the modernisation of tradition or both that takes place simultaneously within institutions. Amalgamation of newly emergent institutions with a past the traces of which still reflect in the present provides a ground which helps to sustain the overall institutional structure despite divisive tendencies that often pose a threat to this stability.

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responsibility of regulating the conduct of the inhabitants and settling of any disputes arising in the village.

[174] Thongkholal Haokip, "Traditional Ideas and Institutions of Democracy in India's North-East," *The Calcutta Journal of Political Studies*II, no. 4 (2018): 2-14.

[175] Udayan Misra, *India's North-East: Identity Movements, State and Civil Society* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014), 48.

[176] Rajni Kothari, ed., *Caste in Indian Politics* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1970).

Sustenance of a democratic form of government and society requires a healthy interdependence among various institutions. No state, irrespective of the degree of formal state institutionalisation, can function entirely on its own without some form of local territorial governance. Most of the institutions recognised as local or traditional often operate parallel to state institutions and at other times, theyalso operate as entirely independent entities, i.e. independent of the formal state apparatus in their functioning. However, their presence and role in decision-making is recognised by the state and many a times, they are also well-integrated into the polity. It is because traditional structures of authority still play a very important role in organising the life and value-systems of people at the local level despite the presence of modern state structures. Traditional authorities perform a myriad functions that range from regulating village life and controlling access to land to settling disputes related to marriage, divorce, property, etc. Lutz and Linder argue that the existence of such authorities means that both the processes of decentralisation and strengthening of local governance are taking place simultaneously.[177]

This means that for decentralisation to be a successful enterprise, the role of traditional structures of governance need to be taken into account. While the standard view has been that these institutions are a historic burden on the road to modernity, the legitimacy that they enjoy in the lives of people at the grassroots is seldom questioned. They sometimes appear more comprehensible and rational to these people who have a general cynicism and dissatisfaction regarding the functioning of the central government. This also holds true for people who are unfamiliar with the legacies of European modernity and its accompanying institutional structures.[178] In all these instances, traditional institutions provide an easy route for people to voice their needs and grievances. Keeping in mind the particular context where these institutions have evolved and flourished, the functions of execution of power and leadership selection procedures in traditional institutions are different from those of modern democratic systems.

Moving beyond the dichotomy of the traditional and the modern, a society based on the principle of accommodation rests on a middle ground. The administrative machinery of the state is run by a dominant elite who represents the more organised sections of society with a common outlook and a secular orientation. Gradually, institutions recognised as local or

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[177]No. 141.

[178] Ibid: 145.

traditional in the administrative parlance of the state acquire a secular form so as to adapt themselves to the organisational framework of the state. They gradually become more flexible in their functioning and the base of institutional organisation is thus widened. Traditional, community-based institutions resort to new forms of articulation, that eventually gives rise to new dynamics of power relations and identities based upon it.[179] As such, the ideas of 'universalism' and 'particularism' associated with the modern and the traditional respectively, no longer enjoy rigid exclusivism.[180] This requires an analysis as to how those components of a society understood and defined as 'traditional' undergo processes of change with respect to the changing times and conditions. Also, how at the same time, certain institutions embedded in a society/community reflect its different characteristics and needs which may not always be in tandem with the modern institutions.

The following parts of the chapter look into the role of an institution called the *Namghar* in the North-eastern state of Assam. An institution that has been traditionally identified with the ethnic "Assamese" community, the *Namghar* has played a multi-dimensional role in the Assamese society since its emergence in the mid-15th century till the present times. It is endowed with sufficient authority and legitimacy, so much so that the decisions upheld by it are being strictly adhered to by the community. In many democratic countries including India, traditional institutions such as the *Namghar* and other customary village councils are generally believed to be the ruins of a pre-democratic and hierarchical socio-political order. While remaining informal in their ways of functioning, in some parts of the country, they have, however, taken upon new roles. This has been mainly in response to the changing nature of the society and the community that they represent. It therefore tries to bring out the usefulness and functionality of traditional institutions, and their co-existence with formally elected state-level bodies. This also provides a ground for a broader understanding of the categories of tradition and modernity, by taking into account the engagement of local communities with the state through institutions like the *Namghar*.

Assam in the Pages of History

The subcontinent of India, criss-crossed with mountains and valleys, is woven with different races and people of varied ethnic and religious affiliations. Assam is its easternmost state separated from the mainland by distant and natural barriers. She is known outside mostly as a

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[179] No. 156.

[180] Ibid.

land of witchcraft and black magic, animism and wild tribes. Here, nature can be experienced at its best characterised by impenetrable hills, rich and luxuriant forests, and innumerable rivers. The history of Assam proper is the history of the Brahmaputra Valley plus the hills that dot and surround it. The hills and the plains of this great valley, although the hills were isolated from the plains as "Excluded Areas" under the British rule, possess an age-old tradition of common contact and history. The district of Cachar and the Lushai Hills are the two southernmost adjuncts of the state of Assam. The district of Cachar was incorporated into it in the year 1832. It was in 1826 that independent Assam passed into the hands of the British from those of the Ahom rulers under the impact of repeated *Maan* (Burmese) invasions and the incredible atrocities suffered by the people as a result the same.[181]

Source: https://asssamgov.org//

In tracing the history of the state, the craft of writing of history itself, which is an ideologically contested terrain, needs to be analysed critically. There are several methodological concerns surrounding the writing of history and therefore, there is a pressing need to expand the horizons of history by approaching it from the point of view of the majority who have, so far, remained excluded from academic constructions of knowledge. Partha Chatterjee says that in the material domain, nationalism began by "inserting itself into a new public sphere constituted by the processes and forms of the modern."[182] It had to overcome the subordination arising out of the strategy of the "rule of colonial difference", i.e. the preservation of the alienness of the ruling group which was pursued by the colonial state. It was in this domain that nationalism had to, ironically, insist on the abolition of this rule of

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[181]Hem Barua, *The Red River and the Blue Hills* (Gauhati: Lawyers' Book Stall, 1956), 25-32.

[182] No. 169.

colonial difference. Over time, the domain had become more extensive and morphed into the post-colonial state which, in India at least, was built upon the idea of the modern liberal-democratic state.[183] Since the late 18th century, the national paradigm has dominated history in almost all modern nation-states, but it has failed to erase the historical memories that give rise to periodic rebellions in historiography.

Social marginality and the popular memory associated with it are central to the process of everyday living in contemporary India.[184] Historiography in India has always developed in response to historiography in Britain, Europe, North America and as well as the former colonies. This response has often been combined with the new historical discourses, such as subaltern historiography, that have been demanded by Indian society over time. It is because of the fact that in the sphere of everyday politics in India, history becomes a battleground between the need to remember and the imperative to forget. The history of a society will remain a history of ideological contest despite the end of ideology thesis proclaimed by globalisation.[185]Right from the very beginning, remembering the past was mostly tied with the communitarian imaginative sensibilities closely linked to the politics of group identity. Hence, since the earliest times, both traditional and modern historians have shared an intimate relationship with orally transmitted and written memories both in order to weave their narratives in the context of class/community/national contests. Thus, history is essentially the art of narration of the past in as interesting and meaningful a manner as possible.

The earliest mention of Assam in the textbooks of history dates back to the 13th century, when a sub-caste of the Mongols – the Ahoms, entered through the Patkai Pass, conquered the region and established their rule in Assam. Whatever we can say about the history of ancient Assam today is based on the prevalent Puranic stories, folk-tales, some dynastic lineage, remains of a few monuments and broken stupas, unearthed by archaeologists over a period of time. The first attempt at a connected history in English is the brief account given by Robinson in his *Descriptive Account of Assam*, published in 1841.[186] Two histories first

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[183] Ibid.

[184] Anirudh Deshpande, "Remaking the Indian historian's Craft: The Past, Present and Future of History as an Academic Discipline," *Economic and Political Weekly* 48, no. 7 (2013): 60-68.

[185] Ibid.

[186]Edward Gait, *A History of Assam* (Gauhati: New Book Stall, 2005), 51-62.

published in the vernacular were the one by Kasinath Tamuli Phukan in 1844 dealing with the period of the Ahom rule in Assam, and the other by the late Gunabhiram Barua Bahadur in 1884 that gives a brief account of the other dynasties which formerly ruled in the Brahmaputra Valley before the coming of the Ahoms.[187]

The word 'Assam' is the English version of the Sanskrit term '*Asam*', which means unique or incomparable. Assam was distinguished as *Pragjyotishpur* or *Prachya Prakash Nagri* well before the Ahoms invaded the state, reorganised its culture, civilisation and the natural surroundings and established their dominion in the region. Renowned historian Dr. Banikanta Kakati believes *Pragjyotishpur* to be a group of Austro-Asian words such as *pagarjoh* (*jo*) *tik* (*ka-cha*) = (*c pagar-juh*) (*jo*)-*Tic* (*c-ch*), which means a state surrounded by gigantic mountains. According to Dr. Kakati, '*Prag Jyotish*' is a Sanskrit word, which has evolved from diverse non-Aryan languages. Following the establishment of Narakasur's regime in Assam, the name *Pragjyotishpur* was changed to *Kamrupa*.[188] Prior to this, Narakasur constructed the famous Kamakhya temple followed by the renovation of the *Kamakhya Saktipeeth*, as a result of which the name of the state was changed to *Kamrupa*. During the medieval period, Assam was known as *Kamrup*. In the *Kalikapurana* and *Yoginitantra*, the name of this state is exclusively cited as *Kamarupa*. The Chinese traveller Huein-Tsang and the Muslim historian Al-beruni have also used the word *Kamrupa* or related terms such as *Kamroo* in their writings.

The period of the 13th century was quite a chaotic phase in the history of Assam. People of the Tai Ahom tribe of a branch of the *Shan* tribe staying in the Prangbhan or Paran kingdom located on the banks of the river Iravati in eastern Burma entered through the passes of the Patkai mountain range. A story goes so that the prince of the *Shan* dynasty, Chukafa, having been dethroned, had taken refuge in the forest in an attempt to save his life. Fortunately enough, he found a way through a pass and reached this state along with his group through that route. On reaching there, he successfully defeated the *Chutia* and *Kachari* tribes who at the time ruled in north-western Assam. This gave them an opportunity to establish their dominance over a huge area, and the history of the Ahom rule in Assam begins hereafter.[189] Chuhungmung became the first Ahom ruler after the murder of Chupimafa in 1479. He was a

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[187] Ibid.

[188] Ibid.

[189] Chandra Bhushan, *Assam: Its Heritage and Culture* (Gauhati: Gyan Books, 2005), 33.

very brave and dynamic ruler who came to be known as *Dihidia*. During his rule, the Ahoms not only learnt the use of explosive weapons and firearms and their methods of utilisation and control, but also their culture and civilisation flourished during this period. Keeping in view the social conditions and needs of the society at the time, the Ahoms took steps for the social and cultural regeneration of the society in Assam. It was during this period that the Vaishnava renaissance began in Assam under the leadership of Srimanta Sankardeva.

Source: https://historicalassam.ac.in//
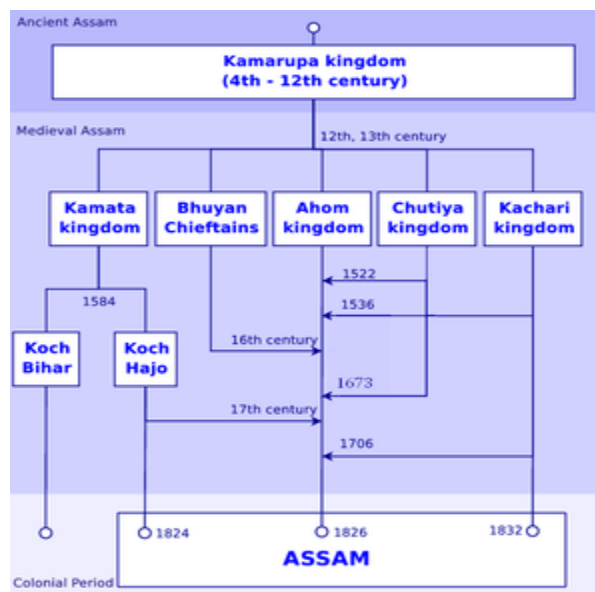
A Brief History on the Emergence of Vaishnavism in Assam

The term 'Hindu' was first used by King Darius-I to refer to the province of Hindukush, i.e. north-western India. The people of India were referred to as *Hinduvan* and *Hindavi* was used as the adjective for Indian in the 8th century text *Chachnama*.[190] Thus, the term 'Hindu' in these ancient records is an ethno-geographical term. The Arabic equivalent *Al-Hind* likewise referred to the subcontinent of India. To describe 'Hindu' as a religion has been a fallacy of academic scholarship both in India and the West. –'Ism' as a suffix came to be used only in the early 19th century by British Indologists. 'Hindu-ism' thus seems to be a politically imposed ideology of the West.[191] 'Hindu' or 'Bharatiya' practice is not confined to any unidirectional act. Unlike the Abrahamic faiths like Islam and Christianity, there is neither a

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[190] David Frawley, *What is Hinduism? A Guide for the Global Mind* (Bloomsbury India: Bloomsbury, 2018), 134.

[191] Ibid.

single doctrine nor one guiding book of the idea of the Hindu. The beauty of being a Hindu (equated not with religion, but Sanatan Dharma) lies in its pluralityand respect towards every Dharmic way of life.[192] In this context, David Frawley argues that enriched with a profound pluralistic view, the idea of the 'Hindu' emphasises that the *Truth is One* but has many paths to achieve that Truth. Whereas, religion is an established institution based on a certain pre-defined code of either/or, Dharma is to strive to be right that upholds behaviours in accordance with the "right way of living". E.g. *Rajadharma* means the king's duty and not religion. Thus, Shaivism, Vaishnavism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, etc. can be understood as various *Panths* (denominations) or multiple ideas of practising life.

The extreme violence and brutality associated with the Islamic invasions shook the foundations of the age-old Vedic civilisation and the associated beliefs, practices and rituals of Sanatan Dharma, especially idol worship. The abhorrence of the invaders towards idol worship led to the massive destruction of temples and the idols housed inside their *garbhagrihas* throughout the country, and Hindus were labelled as *kafirs* (non-believers).This impelled the thinkers and reformers of Hindu society to evolve a much simpler and liberal faith that would be easily acceptable to all amidst the wrath of the violent invasions. The Vaishnava-Bhakti movement (12th-15th century A.D.) was originally started by the Alvar and the Nayannar saints of South India from where it spread to the northern and eastern regions of the country. It propounded that divine grace could be achieved by people of all castes and classes merely through faith and devotion (*bhakti*). It therefore dispensed with the earlier principles of heredity and birth and brought about a renaissance in the socio-cultural life of the people of the country. The Vaishnava-Bhakti movement thus initiated widespread structural changes in the socio-religious sphere of the Hindu society and consequential changes in its value systems. It preached a simple religion based on love and devotion which was open to all irrespective of caste or creed. It was also devoid of excessive religious ritualism and not much emphasis was laid on idol worship. The movement thus had a deep impact on the lower castes and classes of society, women and other deprived sections. Some of the prominent Vaishnava saints of the South were Nathmuni, Yamunacharya, Shankaracharya, and Ramanuja. In the north, Ramananda, Vallabhacharya, Namdev, and Chaitanya in Bengal, were some of the leading saint-poets.

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[192] Ibid.

Evidences from ancient history confirm the fact that Assam had been under the influence of the Gupta culture since the 4th century A.D. When the Guptas ruled over Madhya Pradesh, the kingdom of Kamrup was in the hands of Pushya-Burman, who had named his son Samudra-Burman and daughter Dutta after emperor Samudragupta and the empress Dutta Devi of the Gupta dynasty respectively. During the period of Gupta rule, both Shaiva and Vaishnava sects flourished on equal grounds and received equal support both in Assam and the larger context of India as a whole.[193] The twelve to thirteen hundred year old Vishnu idols found in the region further confirm this assumption. The idol of Shukleshwar discovered at Guwahati, the Haigreev Madhav idol at Hajo, and the statues of Vishnu from Gosain-Guri belong to this period. The stone inscription of Bhuti Barman found at Barganga has the idols of Shiva and Sakti together along with the image of Vasudev carved on it.

Vaishnavism in Assam commenced from the time of Ramanujacharya. The Vaishnava resurgence was based on the reorganisation of a society that was trapped in a state of sorcery, superstition, and black magic. It also ushered in a period of flourishing of literature and fine arts like music and painting. Assam now re-discovered herself as an integral part the land of *Bharatvarsa*. As in the past, the holy books in Sanskrit, the *litterae humaniores* of India, could no longer be kept out of the reach of the common man by a rigid oligarchy.[194] In this context, the use of local languages in the expositions of theology and religion marked a significant departure from the past. The use of Assamese, an Indo-Aryan language, as a medium for the propagation of the Vaishnava faith gradually led to its emergence as the language of the common masses.

The ancient kingdom of Kamrupa was slowly undergoing a process of disintegration since the beginning of the 13th century. Constant friction and conflict for supremacy among various powers was the order of the day, which resulted in severe political instability. People belonging to different races and tribal groups, and their belief systems and cults were absorbed into the prevailing Hindu system of rituals and practices of the day, which popularly came to be known as *Tantricism* and those who adhered to it were called *Aghoris*. *Tantricism* is an all-embracing system of faith comprising of elaborate esoteric rituals, magical rites, worship of the dead, sorcery, and the like. *Aghoris* treat food and their excrement in the same way, and the dead and the living alike, so as to attain the absolute standards of life without

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[193] No. 190: 20-26.

[194] Maheswar Neog, *Cultural Heritage of Assam* (New Delhi: Omsons Publications, 2008), 68-82.

getting trapped in the psychological fear of death. However, Dr. Banikanta Kakati argues that a few itinerant teachers of the *Vamacara* Tantric schools who dominated the order of the day during this period in Assam, had misinterpreted the philosophy of the *Tantric* rituals and used these for satisfying their carnal instincts of sex and worldly pleasure.[195] The economically backward classes and the socially downtrodden became their easy prey. At the other end were the indigenous tribal people who were mostly the followers of animistic faiths. It was against this backdrop that the Vaishnavite movement under the leadership of Srimanta Sankardeva emerged in Assam which led to a process of regeneration and cultural resurgence. It thereby paved the way for the emergence of a unified and modern Assam for the first time in the pages of history.

The Vaishnavite movement in Assam was initiated by Sankardeva in the latter half of the 15th century. The fundamental tenet of the Vaishnavite philosophy was enlightenment of the human conscience through universal love. Unlike other contemporary Vaishnavite cults in the rest of India, Sankardeva's Vaishnavism rested not on a philosophy of abstract or other-worldly thinking. Instead, it focussed more on ethnic integration, social reforms, and spiritual uplift through a code of conduct based on certain indigenous elements of the region.[196] The patronage received from some of the rulers of the time greatly advanced the cause of this new faith. For instance, the Koch rulers of western Assam patronised scholars to translate the Mahabharata and the Puranas into Assamese. The Ahom rulers of the Brahmaputra Valley also encouraged literary activities and created a new type of historical prose known as *Buranjis*.[197]

Srimanta Sankardeva and the Emergence of the *Sattra* and the *Namghar*

Sankardeva brought people into the fold of monotheism preached by Vaishnavism – a break away from the *Sakta tantricism* that had been the prevailing order of the day. He was born in the mid-15th century to Kusumbara Bhuyan and Satyasandhya, in a very rich and prosperous Samanta family at a village called Alipukhuri near Bardowa in the district of Nowgong (present-day Nagaon) on the south bank of the river Brahmaputra in Assam. Born into the

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[195] Banikanta Kakati, ed., *Aspects of Early Assamese Literature* (Gauhati: Gauhati University, 1953).

[196] Abhijit Bhuyan, *Socio-Cultural and Political Role of the Namghar in Assam: A Comparative Study of the Namghars of Borbhogia Village and Bordowa Than/Sattra* (Kolkata: Maulana Abul Kalam Institute of Asian Studies, 2007), 23-34.

[197] No. 189: 36-40.

Kayastha community, his ancestors were the natives of Kannauj in Uttar Pradesh till the 13ᵗʰ century, who became Samantas under the Kamata Empire in the 14ᵗʰ century. In those days, Kayasthas were known as *Bhuyan* whose responsibility was to look after the security of the border areas of the kingdom. Sankardeva's mother died within three days of his birth and he was brought up by his grandmother Khersuti. At the age of twelve years, he was admitted to a village school under Mahendra Kandali, an erudite Sanskrit scholar who later became his guru.

Sankardeva's scholarship in Sanskrit and vast knowledge of the scriptures was well revealed in a number of translations and adaptations that he made in Assamese in the later years of his life. He completed his education at the age of twenty-two years and came out a finished scholar. He married Suryavati, a Kayastha girl, who died four years after their marriage leaving behind a girl named Haripriya. Sankardeva also lost his father around the same time. After giving his daughter in marriage to a young Kayastha man named Hari and handing over the administrative responsibilities to Jayanta-dalai and Madhav-dalai, Sankardeva set out on a long and extensive pilgrimagethroughout the country. He was accompanied by about seventeen companions including his former guru Mahendra Kandali. For around twelve years, Sankardeva visited most of the sacred places and temples of northern and southern India, including the ones at Gaya, Puri, Vrindavan, Mathura, Dvaraka, Kasi, Prayaga, Sitakunda, Varahakunda, Ayodhya, and Vadarikasrama. It was here for the first time that Sankardeva came into contact with Vaishnavite saints from all over the country, and entered into religious and theological debates and discussions with them. After twelve long years of such wandering through many sacred places of learning and spirituality, Sankardeva returned home acquiring first-hand knowledge of Vaishnavite theology, texts, mode of worship and management of institutions.[198]

Soon after his return to Assam, Sankardeva married again and shifted his residence from Alipukhuri to a nearby village called Bardowa in Nagaon itself, where he started his religious movement with a new fervour. He gave sermons on Vaishnavism as a philosophy and a way of life and also established the first Vaishnava *math* known as *Sattra* (monastery) on the lines of the Buddhist *viharas*at Bardowa. In order to deal with the lawlessness and chaotic situation of the time that had emerged as a result of certain misinterpreted religious beliefs and

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[198] Birinchi Kumar Barua, "Sankardeva: A Vaishnavite Saint of Assam," in *Sattra Jyoti*, ed. Girikanta Goswami (Golaghat: Axom Sattra Mahasabha, 2010), 54.

practices of the people of Kamrupa, Sankardeva made the *Bhagavata Purana* the main canon of his Vaishnavism. His works mostly include a creative translation of a large part of this text.[199] He advocated new principles of spirituality and ways of understanding life through the medium of the *Bhagavata Purana* based on the Vedanta and Samkhya philosophies. He gave lectures on the Gita, the Brahmasutras and the Upanishads on the same lines as that of Ramanujacharya and other Vaishnavite saints. It was first at Bardowa that he erected the *Namghar* as a village-hall for daily devotion and also to serve as a place for community meetings. The *Namghar* soon became the nucleus of the Vaishnava organisation. It later spread throughout the three states of Assam, Kamrupa, and Cooch Behar in the form of an institution that deeply influenced the social and community life of the Vaishnavites.

At the age of sixty-seven years (1516 A.D.), Sankardeva was forced to leave his ancestral residence at Bardowa owing to the occasional disturbances fuelled by the neighbouring Kachari king and his subjects. He first moved to a place called Gangmau and then to Dhuwahata, a place situated on the Majuli island in the river Brahmaputra. His stay at Dhuwahata for about fourteen years was marked by two significant events: firstly, his path-breaking religious debate with the famous *Sakta* scholar Madhavdeva and the latter's immediate conversion to Vaishnavism. Madhavdeva later became the foremost upholder of Sankardeva's philosophy; second, Sankardeva's encounter with the Ahom king Chuhungmung (1497-1539). The priestly class (brahmanas) accused Sankardeva of preaching a religion which was unorthodox in character and also that was not sanctioned by the Vedas. They realised that their age-old brahmanical authority was being challenged with the growing popularity of Sankardeva and his creed. This was because of the fact that the new creed placed everybody on an equal pedestal, made accessible the portals of sacred knowledge to the common man by translation of religious texts into the local language, and also discarded excessive religious ritualism in favour of a monotheistic way of life. The Ahom king thus summoned Sankardeva to argue with the brahmanas of his court. Sankardeva, however, immediately defeated them and got off from the trial with credit.[200]

Increasing hostility, however, finally compelled Sankardeva to leave the Ahom kingdom and seek refuge in Kamrupa. He later sought refuge in the kingdom of Cooch Behar in western Assam under king Naranarayana. He settled at a place called Patbausi near present-day

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[199] Ibid, p. 67.

[200] Ibid: 136-138.

Barpeta district in Lower Assam, where Sankardeva established a *Sattra* with a *Namghar* along with several dwelling huts for his followers within the premises itself. Here he held regular religious discourses, recitations of the sacred texts, congregational prayers and dramatic performances called *bhaona* to spread the message of Vaishnavism. The major portions of Sankardeva's religious writings, i.e. songs (*bargeets*), dramas (*bhaona*), and *kavyas* were composed here. Also, it was here at Patbausi that Sankardeva converted three of his brahmana disciples – Damodardeva, Harideva, and Ananta Kandali into the Vaishnavite fold. Damodardeva and Harideva later set up special sects after their own names.[201] After a few years of his stay at Barpeta, Sankardeva, accompanied by about one hundred and twenty devotees, again set out on his second pilgrimage to Puri in Odisha around 1550 A.D. After his return, Sankardeva resumed his customary works of prayer, meditation, and *naam-kirtan*, and gave religious instructions and initiation to a large number of people.

The brahmana pundits at king Naranarayan's court, however, did not like the growing popularity of Sankardeva's activities which they considered to be non-Vedic. King Naranarayana thus summoned Sankardeva, who, through his scholarship and erudite knowledge, defeated the brahmanas in a religious debate. Sankardeva then expounded before the king the main principles of *Bhakti-Dharma*, with relevant citations from the *Bhagavata-Purana* and other Vaishnava texts. Deeply moved, the king honoured the saint by assuring him of royal patronage towards the propagation of the Vaishnava faith in his kingdom. Sankardeva came back to Barpeta, although both the king and his brother Cilarai invited him on several occasions to Cooch Behar for holding religious discussions. Cilarai even built for him a *Sattra* near the capital, known as *Bheladanga Sattra*, where Sankardeva passed away in 1569 A.D. Before his death, Sankardeva nominated his devout disciple Madhavdeva as his successor, to undertake the Vaishnava mission forward. Madhavdeva had set up his *Sattra* at Sundaridiya in Barpeta district, where he wrote his chief work, the *Naamghosha*, among other compositions.[202]

The Diverse Aspects of Sankardeva's Philosophy of Vaishnavism

The Vaishnavite movement of Srimanta Sankardeva in Assam was solely based on the tenets of the*Bhagavata Purana*. Amidst the widespread prevalence of *tantricism* and *Sakta* (energy) worship in a large part of Assam during this period, the worship of Lord Krishna came to be

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[201] Ibid.
[202] Ibid: 141-146.

considered supreme in Sankardeva's philosophy of Vaishnavism. This new system of prayer and meditation came to be known as *Mahapurusiya Dharma* or *Ekasarana Naam Dharma*. According to Dimbeswar Neog, *Mahapurusiya Dharma* is not the name of a religion like Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Christianity or Islam. Neither was the epithet *Mahapurusa* applied to Sankardeva or his disciples. It is only in comparatively recent times that the epithet came to be secondarily applied to them. However, there are still no authentic evidences and records as to when this practice first came into vogue. Neog argues that the term *Mahapurusism* is used for the faith of devotion to *Mahapurusa* (God) signifying the trinity Narayana-Vishnu-Krishna in Assam. It is not only a challenge to the *Prakriti-Purusism* of the Samkhya system of Hindu philosophy but also immediately stamps the mark of originality to the philosophy of the faith propounded by Sankardeva.[203]*Mahapurusism* is also called *Naam-Dharma* because it stresses upon the constant recitation of *naam* (name) of God in prayer. In his *Prahlad Charitra*, Sankardeva enumerates nine different methods of *bhakti – srawan* (hearing), *kirtan* (singing), *smaran Visnur* (thinking), *arcan* (worshipping), *pada-sewan* (prostrating), *dasya-sakhitva* (behaving as a slave or a friend), *vandan Vishnu* (invocation), and *kariba deha arpan* (dedication of the body). Out of these, he extols *Kirtan* (singing) as the most suitable because in it, all the other eight methods are combined in a greater or lesser degree.

Source: https://www.ekasaranadharma.org//

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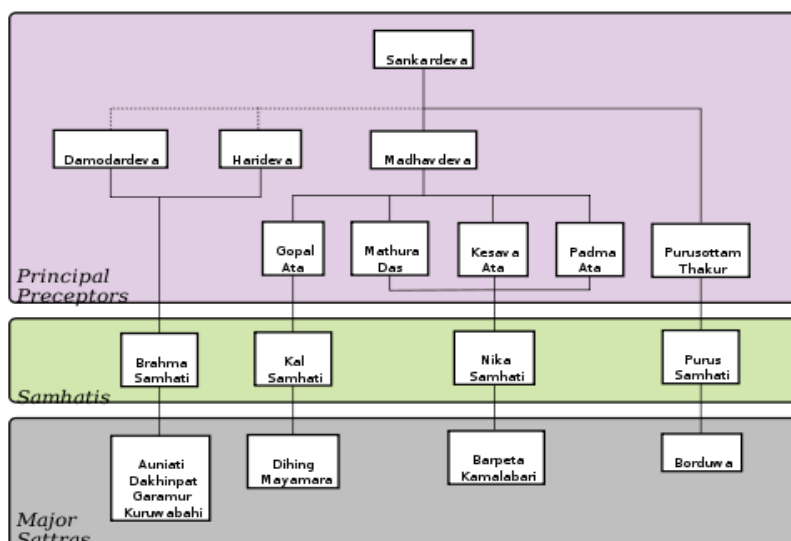
[203] Dimbeswar Neog, *Jagat-Guru Sankardev: The Founder of Mahapurusism* (Nagaon: Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha, 1998), 24-28.

Ekasarana means supreme surrender to the one God, i.e. Vishnu, who is to be worshipped in the *avatar* (reincarnation) of Lord Krishna. For an *Ekasaraniya* (follower of the *Ekasarana Naam Dharma*), Shri Krishna is considered *Param Brahma* who is to be worshipped not through elaborate religious rituals, but solely by uttering his various names (*Naam*) which are easily accessible to all, irrespective of birth, social status, caste or gender. Sankardeva considered *naam-kirtan* or chanting of devotional songs as a better form of worship than meditation. The practice of idol worship does not feature in Sankardeva's Vaishnavism and no rigid theocratic laws are to be followed by the devotee. Neither the *Radha-Krishna* cult nor any form of worship of *Sakti* is recognised within this system, although they were equally respected. Sankardeva considered *sravana* and *kirtana* modes of *bhakti* or devotion as prescribed in the *Bhagavata Purana* to be sufficient in order for man to attain the highest levels of spiritual endeavour. Thus, the four fundamental tenets of Vaishnavism are – *Naam* (uttering God's name), *Dev* (God), *Guru* (religious preceptor), *Bhakat* (devotee). Sankardeva advocated *dasya* or servitude to God among the different forms of *bhakti*,[204] although he was not in favour of asceticism or adoption of an ascetic way of life by the common man for attaining spiritualism. The ideal *bhakat* (devotee) is no aspirant to the release of his soul (*muktito nispriho*).

Sankardeva himself was a householder and therefore, he was not in favour of worldly renunciation. It was probably the ideal of Madhavdeva's celibate life that brought into being an order of ascetics (*kevaliya bhakats*), who formed the innermost circle within the *Sattras*. Also, married persons and monks could also stay in the *Sattras* as divines or ordinary residents. Although in the Vaishnava congregation all members of the fraternity were considered equal from brahmanas to shudras, there was however no order of nuns, and women in general are not welcome at par with men in the religious congregations even today. The offerings to the deity could also be distributed only by men within the circle of *bhakats*. This point is to be explored later in detail. However, Sankardeva's grand-daughter-in-law, Ai Kanaklata, made a significant contribution to the growth of the *Sattra* system and the *Namghars* and appointed twelve deputies (all men), as the heads of *Sattras*.

Ever since the day of receiving initiation into the Vaishnavite fold, the life of a *bhakta* (disciple) becomes one of whole-hearted dedication to the Supreme Being. Once after being initiated, the *bhakta* is to strictly observe the ways of a 'clean' life, to which he has to adhere

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[204] Maheswar Neog, *Sankardeva* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 2000), 55-72.

to with the greatest possible care. Cleaning of the bowels early morning and thorough cleansing of the body before meals was an indispensable part of the *bhakta's* daily routine. After his initiation into the faith, a person had to give up the consumption of intoxicants, keeping of unclean animals and birds at home, and the cultivation of poppy for opium.[205] However, the monks as well as lay disciples were allowed to take fish and meat. It may be mentioned here that women are allowed to have initiation and can enter the monastic *Sattras* at any time. But, they are never allowed to stay at night and at the time of initiation also, the celibate heads of the *Sattras* are not allowed by custom to look at the face of a woman. The process of initiation is generally conducted from behind a screen. In semi-monastic or *grhasti Sattras*, a separate exit and entrance for women exist and they cannot equally take part in religious functions at par with men. This point is to be elaborated later in the context of the claims to equality and inclusiveness of the *Namghar*.

A very important and significant factor for the extensive spread of the Vaishnavite movement in Assam under Sankardeva was the role of literary compositions and dramatic performances that attracted people to its fold. It ushered in an era of socio-cultural renaissance in Assam. It led to the development of a new genre of philosophy, art, literature, and music in the form of *Borgeets* (devotional songs), *Ankiya Nats* (one-act plays) or *Bhaonas* (dramatic performances) as well as the *Sattriya* dance as different modes of conveying the principles of *Ekasarana Naam Dharma*. All these found concrete manifestation in the institution of the *Namghar*. The medieval biographies contain innumerable instances where people attracted to and fascinated by melodious songs and verses, were seen to lend their sympathy to the new faith and soon became its ardent followers. Sankardeva also developed a new genre of painting popularly known as the *Sankari* school of painting. It started with his epochal drama – *Cihna Yatra* – first enacted in 1468 A.D. at Tembuwani in Bardowa. Here he depicted seven *Vaikunthas* (the celestial abode of Lord Vishnu) in scrolls that were used as the background. It brought about a new era in the cultural history of medieval Assam. Culturologist Ratna Ojah is of the opinion that it was for the first time that Sankardeva used the elevated stage and drop-scenes in this play. The performance of the play was significant in breaking age-old caste barriers as people from various backgrounds, from high-caste Brahmanas to low-caste *kaibarttas* (people from the fishermen community in Eastern India) participated together.

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[205] Maheswar Neog, *Sankardeva And His Times: Early History of the Vaishnava Faith and Movement in Assam* (Gauhati: Gauhati University, 1965), 121.

Almost all of Sankardeva's plays were inspired from the *Bhagavata Purana*, except for his last play, *Ram Bijoy*, whose theme was drawn from the Ramayana. In most of his works, Sankardeva used the Assamese language of the period in order to make it real and comprehensible to any ordinary person. However, to render a dramatic effect to most of his songs and dramas, Sankardeva used *Brajavali*, an artificial mixture of Maithili and Assamese languages. His magnum opus is the *Kirtanghosha* containing narrative verses in praise of Lord Krishna and meant for community singing. Sankardeva and his disciples used many instruments in their songs and dramas, which were developed indigenously. Two of the most important of these instruments are the *Khol* (a form of drum with a unique acoustic property) and the *Bhortal* (big cymbals). A distinguished European scholar of Assamese, Dusan Zbavitel, has observed that innumerable successors were directly influenced by Sankardeva's ideas and poetic style, characterised by novelty of expression.

Srimanta Sankardeva is credited with the creation of an overarching Assamese identity encompassing all ethnic and tribal groups within the Brahmaputra and Barak Valleys both. For instance, although fundamental modifications were later made into the structure and design of the *Namghar*, originally it was inspired from the *Murang Ghar* of the Mising tribe, a plains tribe of Assam. Cultural elements of the Tai-Ahom community of Assam can also be noticed in the main pillar of the *Namghar* known as the *laai-khoota*, which itself is a Tai-Ahom word. Again, the costumes of the dancers in the *Sattriya* dance and actors of the *Ankiya* plays were inspired by the dressing sense of the Tiwa tribe, also called Lalungs, another plains tribe of Assam. Some postures of the *Sattriya* dance were also derived from the *Bagrumba* dance of the Bodos. The use of indigenous clothes, utensils, architecture, flora and fauna in the *Sankari* school of manuscript painting is another proof of the recognition of ethnic indigenous traditions in Sankardeva's *Ekasarana Naam Dharma*.[206]
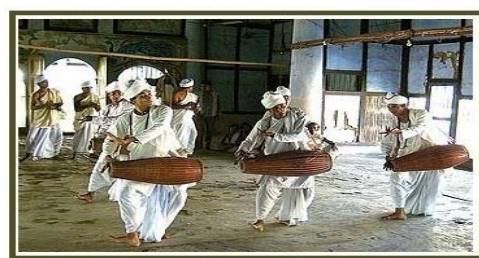
***Bagrumba* Dance of the Bodos*Sattriya* Dance of Assam**
Source: http://www.iitg.ac.in[207]

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[206] No. 196: 66-74.

[207] The pictures were accessed on 19.10.2017.

Origin and Functions of the *Namghar*

The hallmark of the Vaishnavite movement of Srimanta Sankardeva is reflected in two distinctively unique institutions – the *Sattra* and the *Namghar* – both of which are intimately associated with the social, cultural, and religious life of the Assamese society. They are devoted to the discussion and dissemination of the philosophy of Vaishnavism and also function as interactive community spaces for important social and political issues of the day. The *Sattras* have been playing a vital role in the socio-cultural and political life of Assam through their indigenous legal, cultural, economic and peacebuilding mechanisms. *Namghars* as extended wings of these *Sattras* are primarily village-centric institutions sharing the same goals and objectives as their parent institution. The *Namghar* thus evolved as an offshoot, or a miniature replica of its parent institution – the *Sattra*. Though born in the 16th century, the *Sattras* are a part of the living cultural heritage of Assam, carrying forward the religious and cultural traditions initiated by Sankardeva.

Stemming as an offshoot of the *Sattra*, the institution of the *Namghar* can today be seen in almost every Assamese village. Its establishment came about with the idea of popularising the Vaishnavite creed among the masses. The foundation of the *Namghar* was based upon an egalitarian spirit which is said to permeate all its functional spheres – religious, cultural, awareness-raising, decision-making, citizen participation, etc. The idea was to establish a new democratic order in Assam through the *Namghar*, which later proved instrumental in providing a solid base for the evolution of an Assamese identity. With its dynamic philosophy of inclusiveness, Sankardeva's Vaishnavism had given birth to a new cultural nationalism focussed on a national identity but shaped by local cultural traditions and language, which was not based on a common ancestry or race. This cultural nationalism was brought forward to the people of Assam through the *Sattras* and the *Namghars*, both of which have played a major role in the preservation and development of the indigenous culture of the region. The multi-faceted role of the *Namghar* as a cultural centre, a proto-type Panchayat, and a forum for decentralised planning and decision-making, has significantly contributed to the evolution of an over-arching Assamese identity at different stages of history.

The entrance leading to the *Namghar*

Source:https://tourism.assam.gov.in//

Although the first stage of the evolution of the *Sattra* began with Srimanta Sankardeva, it, however, did not take the shape of a permanent, regular institution during his lifetime. It was only later during the period of his successors, primarily Madhavdeva and Damodardeva, that the *Sattra* institution entered into the second phase of its growth. It was during this period that the structural features of the *Sattra*achieved their final shape. The *Namghar* functioned as the chief prayer hall and the *Manikut* or central shrine was attached with the *Singhasana* or pyramidical wooden thronewhich was decorated with roaring lions on each side,and which contained the sacred scripture. The *manikut* is considered the most sacred place of the *Namghar* as it houses precious items such as rare manuscripts (*puthis*), antiques and royal offerings, including the *doba*, *kah*_(bell), *tau* (brass utensil), and other valuables. In some *Sattras*, relics of the early saint-reformers are also preserved in the form of *pada-sila* (foot impression) – a wooden plank containing the foot impressions or footwear of the saints.[208] Most of the rituals in the *Namghar* are conducted facing the *manikut*. The *Sattra* was firmly established by the mid-17th century receiving recognition and patronage from the then ruling Ahom dynasty. The Assamese Hindus were now bound by two unavoidable affiliations – temporal allegiance to the state and the king, and spiritual submssion to the *Satradhikar* or superior of a *Sattra*. As argued by Dr. Maheswar Neog, *rajar khajana gurur kar* (rent for the

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[208] In the Bardowa *Sattra* at Bardowa, Nagaon, the foot impressions of Srimanta Sankardeva are still well-preserved in a stone near a place where the *Silikha* (*Terminalia chebula*) tree believed to be planted by Sankardeva himself still stands today.

lands to the king, and holy tax to the Guru) is symbolic of the double allegiance binding people's lives.[209]

The period between 1650-1800 has been categorised as the era of growth of the *Sakha* (branch)-*Sattra*.[210] During this period, numerous branches of the *Sattras* were set up by the family members and disciples of the principal Vaishnavite proselytizers. In the words of S.N. Sharma, "Every Assamese village gradually came under the religious hold of one *Sattra* or the other and each now built its own respective *Namghars*. Its influence even penetrated into the neighbouring tribal areas of Assam. The growing popularity of the institution of the *Sattra* in terms of religion, culture, and literature, gradually led to the emergence of the *Namghar* as the nerve-centre of all important village activities."Of late, divisions within the Assamese Vaishnavite community along the lines of caste has resulted in the emergence of different sects such as *Krishnaguru*, *Sankar-Sangha*, etc. As a result, many *Namghars* have now been set up in a single village. Today, the *Namghar*functions as an autonomous institution in almost all its daily affairs. As a decision-making authority, decisions are generally being taken in the *Namghar* by the village elders under the guidance of the agents of its affiliated *Sattras*; however. in matters related to religion and religious issues, the final appeal lies with the *Sattradhikar*, i.e. thehead of the *Sattra*.

A Centre for the Celebration of Community Festivals

The birth and death anniversaries (known as *Janmotsav* and *Tithi* respectively) of the Vaishnavite saints which fall during the Assamese month of *Bhadon* (coinciding with August and September in the Julian and Gregorian calendars), are considered auspicious and celebrated with much fanfare in the *Namghar*. The celebration of Sankardeva's birth anniversary popularly known as *Sankar-Janmotsav* lasts for two to three days and has almost become a major state festival. *Naam-prasanga* begins in the early hours of dawn and continues almost without interruption till the day the festival ends. This is called *Akhondo-Bhagavata-paath*. Not only the local people, but also outsiders from far-flung areas contribute in cash and kind for the celebration of *Sankar-Janmotsav* in the *Namghar*.

Festivals such as *Janmashtami*, *Raaspurnima*, *Doljatra* (Holi) are celebrated in the *Namghar* every year. During *Doljatra*, a procession of the *Bhagavata* takes place by a group of men led

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[209]No. 205: 175-177.

[210] Ibid.

by an elderly man of the village/locality. The latter carries the *Bhagavata* beautifully draped in a *gamosa* (Assamese towel) on his head, starting from the *Namghar* premises and moving towards every household in the locality, where its members kneel down on the floor and pay their obeisance to the Guru (Srimanta Sankardeva) signified in the *Bhagavata*. This practice is called *aathu kadhi xewa lua* in Assamese. This procession during *Doljatra* takes place not only in the villages but also in the towns and cities of Assam, including Guwahati.[211] The *Namghar* is also a place for the celebration of the three *Bihus* of Assam – *Rongali Bihu* (the main festival which signifies the advent of the Assamese New Year), *Magh Bihu* (harvest festival of Assam celebrated at the time of *Makar Sakranti* in mid-January), and *Kati Bihu* (celebrated during September-October when cultivators are faced with empty granaries and they offer their prayers by lighting lamps near the *tulsi* plant).

Picture from the field clicked on 21.03.2019. *Bhakats* performing *naam* in the *Namghar* on the occasion of *Doljatra* after *Bhagavata* procession. Kailash Nagar *Namghar*, Beltola, Guwahati.

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[211] During the field survey, it was noted that such *Doljatra* processions take place annually in the Kailash Nagar *Namghar* in Beltola area of Guwahati city which also has a temple dedicated to Lord Shiva in the same premises. A resident informed that during the year 2011 since this procession had not taken place, there were numerous untoward incidents of thefts and robberies, accidental deaths in families, and calling off of marriages in the locality.

Pictures from the field clicked on 21.03.2019, Kailash Nagar, Beltola, Guwahati. An elderly *bhakat* carrying the *Bhagavata* draped in a *gamosa* before the start of the procession (*Bhagavata Bhromon*) during the festival of *Doljatra*, while younger men of the locality join in together.

Pictures clicked on 21.03.2019, Kailash Nagar, Beltola, Guwahati. Local people of the area paying their obeisance and respects before *Param Brahma* (signified in the *Bhagavata*) during the *Bhagavata Bhromon* as a part of the *Doljatra* celebrations.

Special functions are held in the *Namghar* on the occasion of *Bihu*. Almost every household in the locality takes part in these celebrations as great importance is attached to the blessings of the congregation (*raij*). If someone has an unfulfilled wish, he offers *tamol-paan* (areca-nut with betel leaves) and some amount of money called *orihona* on a *xorai* (a bell-metal

tray) to the *raij* and bows down to seek their blessings. The main leader of the congregation called *naam-loguwa* pronounces a prayer of blessing while the congregation endorses the blessing with the customary chanting of *O Hari, O Ram* towards the end. During *Rongali Bihu*, many *Namghars* organise a *husori* – a dance performed by young men to the accompaniment of songs and beats of the *dhol* (drum), *taal* (cymbals), and *pepa* (a flute-like musical instrument made of bamboo/cane/reed and buffalo horn). The *husori* initially starts in the house of a respected man in the village, after which it visits every other household situated around the *Namghar*. People make offerings of money, food and clothes to the troop of dancers of the *husori*. They then go around the adjoining areas to collect money, which may later be spent on a feast called *husori-sabah* or used for buying salt for the *Namghar*. The money is also sometimes saved in the *Namghar's* collective fund which is later used to finance construction and welfare activities. During *Magh Bihu*, many *Namghars* erect a number of tall ricks in the fields by a river or a pool, which is called a *meji*. A small *meji* house of paddy stubble is constructed as a temporary kitchen around the *Namghar* premises. This is called a *bhelaghor*, where a sumptuous meal is cooked after dusk on the night of *uruka* (eve of Bihu) and people sit round a fire near the *meji* while enjoying their meal. On *Kati Bihu*, *naam-prasanga* is held in the *Namghar* to seek blessings for a good harvest.

Architectural Design and Structure of the *Namghar*: A Space for Inclusion

User-functionality or utility in architectural design has always been a prime area of concern for architects and it still continues to be so.[212] The concept of an all-inclusive and human-centric design of buildings was formulated several thousands of years ago as revealed in the historic structures and monuments spread across the world, both in India and elsewhere. Towards the late 1960s, architects and social scientists again began advancing the idea that designs of buildings need to be human-centred so that they are truly dedicated to ample usability and easy accessibility by the public. There were several similar parallel threads of environmental design movements during this period which intersected with barrier free and civil rights movements of the 1950s and 1960s. These groups consisted of practitioners and researchers of various disciplines like environmental design, community design, sociology, anthropology, environmental behaviour studies, etc.[213] Later, these threads converged in

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[212] Benjamin Clavan, "Design for a New Age: Teaching the *Social Art of Architecture*," in *The Work of the BERKELEY PRIZE Teaching Fellows*, 2013-2015, Manuscript – Draft 1: 15, October 2015.

[213] Ibid.

order to achieve the larger goals of sustainability, community health and overall well-being of citizens promoted by human-centred architectural design. Today, issues related with usability, inclusiveness, health and wellness, user participation, etc. are globally becoming very important in both design research and development.

Considering the physical terrain and climatic conditions of the region, the *Namghars* were constructed in a way so as to be able to withstand natural calamities such as heavy rainfall and earthquakes, which are quite frequent in the region. They were earlier characterised by sloping thatched roofs resting on timber trusses and rafters. These have now been mostly substituted by C.I. sheets as quality thatch is no longer available.[214] Usually the posts, rather the timber pillars, were of *Nahor* trees (*Mesua ferra*), named ironwood by the Britishers. These are huge and majestic trees, the girth often exceeeding three metres or so. This type of construction in the *Namghars* has now been replaced by R.C.C. or brick pillars as trees so huge are no longer available, mainly due to the shrinkage of forested areas in Assam as elsewhere. Efforts need to be made in order to preserve these wooden pillars, not necessarily as a way of supporting the roof, but as relics of Assam's forestry heritage.[215]

The construction and architecture of the *Namghar* reflects its usage patterns, Assam's climatic conditions, and as well as the importance of indigenous building materials. The direction of the principal axis of the *Namghar* is always in the East-West direction. Its all-inclusive architecture and design has been quite prominent since the days of Srimanta Sankardeva. Even today, it is generally constructed as an open, wall-less space, or if at all, only half walls with two rows of pillars. This is supposedly said to symbolise equality and all-inclusivness. These walls and pillars of the *Namghar* constitute the major areas for the display of paintings and beautiful wooden carvings with floral and geometrical designs. Most of these wood carvings represent anecdotes from Krishna's life, and the walls of several *Namghars* are painted with scenes from various Hindu mythological texts such as the Bhagavata Gita, Mahabharata and Ramayana. The wooden pillars are adorned with patterns made of *khari-mati* (chalk) and other earthen and eco-friendly colours. *Batsora* (a small, ridged-roof hut) situated at the entrance of the *Namghar*, is often used to deliver important lessons and provide instructions to apprentices. It also serves as a space for the local villagers

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[214] Pramod Goswami, "Forestry and Wildlife Heritage of Assam," in *Man and Environment in NE India*, ed. Dilip K. Medhi (Guwahati, Eastern Book Publishers, 2008), 83-99.

[215] Ibid: 96.

to stand and witness the proceedings of the *Namghar* from religious to political and judicial. Another small room called *cho-ghar*, situated on one side of the *Namghar*, serves as a dressing-cum-changing room for various occasions and festive performances like *ankiya-nat* (one-act plays), *bhaona* (dance-drama performances), *Sattriya* dances, etc. The main storehouse in most of the *Sattras* and *Namghars* called *bharal*, preserves *dhaan* (paddy) and other food items, as a safety cushion for ensuring supplies especially in the face of critical natural calamities like floods. Most of the *Sattras* in Majuli have their own agricultural fields that help them self-sustain.

The construction of the *Namghar* itself symbolises community participation and belongingness. Earlier, due to the paucity of funds, the size of the *Namghar* was small. It was constructed of bamboo, thatch, reed, wood and other locally available materials so that people of all sections, rich and poor alike, could easily identify themselves with its modest physical structure. The use of local ingredients kept the construction of the *Namghar* within the reach of the common people and hence, it did not require royal patronage. As time passed and people's material needs and aspirations changed, the size of the *Namghar*too, gradually expanded. Materials such as bricks, cement, tiles, plywood, and tin were now being used on a large scale for its construction. The architecture of the *Namghar* has thus, now undergone a sea-change with the handing over of the construction of the building itself to professional carpenters and masons. As a result, traditional artisanal and wood-carving activities have now almost completely disappeared from the *Namghar*, barring a few instances such as the Barpeta *Namghar*. The walls of the latter are amply decorated with objects of wood in continuation with the traditions of the past.[216]

Today, *Namghars* operate through both local community funds including donations by wealthy families and individuals, and government grants. Funds are also obtained through means such as collective farming on the common land of the *Namghar* and token amounts of money called *orihona* contributed by the locals during daily *naam-prasangas* and other festivals. It is stored in the *Daan-Patro* (any box or earthen pot with a small hole in it that is kept in the premises of the *Namghar* for people/devotees to contribute any amount of money they want). It may be mentioned here that as a part of the initiatives of the Government of

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[216] Dr. Naren Kalita, "Wood Carvings of Sattras and Namghars in Assam: With Special Reference to the Bardowa Than,"*Journal of the Srimanta Sankardeva Research Institute*, September 6, 2006, http://www.atributetosankardeva.org/.

Assam to propagate the philosophy and teachings of Srimanta Sankardeva both at the national and international fora, it provides grants for the setting up of *Namghars* not only within the state but also outside of it.[217]Clause 6 of the historic Assam Accord of 1985 titled "Constitutional, Legislative and Administrative Safeguards" specifically talks about protecting, preserving and promoting the cultural, social and linguistic identity and heritage of the people of Assam.[218]Government funding to these *Namghars* further legitimises their existence as cultural and socio-political institutions. In 2018, Finance Minister Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma, while speaking to the various Deputy Commissioners (DCs) and MLAs of Assam through a video conference had announced that both the *Sattras* and the *Namghars* would henceforth be considered as cultural establishments and not religious establishments for fund allocation and usage. This was done with a view to help in the allocation and usage of funds for the *Namghars* and the *Sattras* of Assam so as to conribute to their overall growth and development as culturally and politically vibrant institutions of the Assamese Hindus.

Ceiling fans, hand pumps, tubewells, restrooms for both men and women, storerooms, kitchens, etc. can now be seen in the premises of almost all *Namghars* in Assam, both in the village and the city. Thus, the architecture of buildings is indeed a very important source of power and authority because contemporary *Namghars*, in their structure and construction, not only reflect the needs of the inhabitants of a locality but also represent a fine emulation of various modern architectural concepts and designs. The idea is not only to make the *Namghar* structurally strong, but also an all-inclusive space that is reflective of its historic importance both as a social and political institution. The gradual transfer of power from architects and

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[217] In the Assam State Government Budget Document for the Financial Year 2017-18, a grant of Rs. 50 lakh was announced to set up a *Namghar* in the city of Bengaluru. Chief Minister Sarbananda Sonowal had announced the aid to Bengaluru-based *Srimanta Sankardeva Sanskritik Samaj*. It was mentioned in the Budget document that the cash assistance had been doled out in view of the fulfilment of the cultural and spiritual needs of the Assamese people living in the capital of Karnataka and also to spread the teachings of the Vaishnavite saint in this Southern Indian state. Earlier, in the year 2016, Govt. of Assam had initiated the step of setting up of a *Namghar* in the capital city of New Delhi and also directed the then Resident Commissioner of Assam Bhawan, New Delhi, to look for a suitable plot of land for the purpose.

[218]In this context, the *Srimanta Sankardeva Kalakshetra Society* was established in the Panjabari area of Guwahati, Assam in November, 1988 for the preservation, promotion and upliftment of the culture of the Assamese people. Under this Clause, several thousands of crores of money have also been granted to various *Satras* and *Namghars* spread across the state (Source: assamaccord.assam.gov.in).

designers to all stakeholders over time exponentially elevates the level of indeterminacy of the spatial systems.[219] In a way, it empowers the common man to interfere with shaping their living environment and also determine the scope of the future changes that they would desire to bring about. Today, roads leading to a number of well-known *Namghars*, even *Namghars* situated in far-flung villages in the towns of both Upper and Lower Assam, have been made pucca. Proper parking space has also been made available for devotees who come from faraway places to park their vehicles. All these have been the result of both community efforts and timely intervention by local MLAs and PWD officials through local-self government institutions in villages and towns so as to make the space of the *Namghar* an easily accessible one.[220]

Many *Namghars*, such as the *Dhekiakhowa Bornamghar* (*Bornamghar* because of its large area association with one of the Vaishnavite saints and the successor of Srimanta Sankardeva, Madhavdeva) in Upper Assam's Jorhat district, have preserved several valuable *puthis* (manuscripts) of the ancient times. These include even some *puthis* written by Srimanta Sankardeva himself on the leaves of the bark of the *sanchi* tree called *sanchi paat*, with the help of an indigenous dye called *hengul-haital* made from the myrobalan tree. Many such *puthis* are also well illustrated with miniature paintings. The Srimanta Sankareva Research Center in the vicinity of the *Bardowa Sattra* in Nagaon district of Assam, boasts a collection of some 1200 old manuscripts preserved there. The *Namghars* have also functioned as centers of education. Students who came to study here under the guidance of a *bhakat* (*guru*), were provided with materials such as *sanchi paat*, *tula-paat* (paper made of cotton), indigenous pen and ink, etc. for the purposes of reading and writing. Through this, the Assamese language soon became a popular medium of instruction. The *kewaliya* (young) bakats residing on campus were taught to be self-dependent by producing *sanchi paat*, *tula-paat*, brass and bell-metal utensils, wood craft, ivory craft, masks, sculptures, etc. Many of these items are still well-preserved in several *Sattras* and *Namghars* of Assam, although clicking of pictures is not allowed here including for purposes of research. The *Auniati Sattra* of Majuli

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[219] Ruzica Bozovic-Stamenovic, "Transferring Power in the Design Process" in Benjamin Clavan (ed.), *Design for a New Age: Teaching the Social Art of Architecture*, op. cit., pp. 56-97.

[220] Mentioned in "*A History and Functioning of the Dhekiakhowa Bornamghar founded by Sri Sri Madhavdeva*", published by the Management Committee of the *Dhekiakhowa Bornamghar*, *Dhekiakhowa*, Jorhat, Assam, 2015.

has preserved an ivory comb and a mat made by a freedom fighter Bahadur Gaonburha who belonged to the Akhorkatia clan.[221]

Entrance leading to the *Dhekiakhowa Bornamghar*, Jorhat.

Source: https://tourism.assam.gov.in//

A page of an Assamese manuscript written on *sanchi paat* and illustrated with miniature paintings

Source: http://www.demotix.com[222]

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[221] Mahmood Hassan, "Role of the *Sattras* in the Preservation of Assamese Culture," *The Assam Tribune*, August 22, 2009, 10.

[222] The picture was accessed on 21.10.2017.

Management of the *Namghar*

In a majority of the *Namghars* in Assam, the day-to-day affairs are taken care of by a management committee headed by a president and an executive president, besides other members who are elected unanimously by the *raij*, i.e. common people of the village/town where the *Namghar* is situated, for a period of 3-5 years. In *Bornamghars*, the management committee generally consists of only *bhakats* (disciples of the Vaishnava order), both married and celibate, who permanently reside within the *Namghar* premises. Whereas, in other *Namghars* or *Namghars*situated in cities, along with the *bhakats* who reside in the *Namghar*, the social profile of the mangement committee is a diverse mix of people practising different occupations and occupying different ranks in the social strata by virtue of income.[223]Most of these people in charge of the day-to-day responsibilities for the maintenance and upkeep of the *Namghar* are also politically influential people. They have not only played an important role in organising meetings of prominent political leaders in the *Namghar* premises especially before the elections, but have also established links with several socially active groups and associations working in the area. The common people of the area also first approach them to seek benefits for the community as awhole with respect to the provision of necessary services, such as construction of roads, parks and playgrounds, safe drinking water supply, etc.

It may be mentioned here that there is a tradition popularly known as the *musti bhikha* centering around the *Namghar* in certain villages of Assam even today, in which each of the village households is responsible for storing a little amount of rice from their monthly quota so as to ensure food security in the area during any unexpected natural calamity.The management committee of the *Namghar* is responsible for ensuring that the money collected in the form of donations, *orihona*, and government grants is effectively utilised forreconstruction and welfare activities of the *Namghar* at regular intervals. The *orihona*is given as a part of the offering to the Guru in the *Xorai* (a bell-metal tray with a stand underneath) along with the *maah-prasad* (a mixture of pulses and fruits with a pinch of salt and ginger, offered to the Guru). The President and the Secretary of the *Namghar*are

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[223] A field survey of five *Namghars* carried out in South Guwahati from April-May 2017 (Dispur Main *Namghar*, Kailash Nagar *Namghar*-cum-*Shiv Mandir*, Zoo Road *Rajoxuwa Namghar*, Rupnagar *Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha Namghar*, and Hatigaon *Namghar*) and interaction with the management committee of these *Namghars* had brought to light this fact.

responsible for maintainingthe records of accounts which need to be transparent and made available to the *raij* whenever the latter so demands. However, cases of financial anomalies and embezzlement of funds have regularly been reported from several *Namghars* across the state.[224]

Senior and influential men of the area usually take a leading part in any discussion/meeting/decision-making affair in the *Namghar*. However, all decisions made in the *Namghar* are viewed as unanimous decisions arrived at by the body of the *raij*. Various issues ranging from land disputes, marriage and divorce, infidelity, polygamy, cases of elopement and pre-marriage pregnancies, besides political issues like spreading mass awareness related to the upcoming National Register of Citizens (NRC) in Assam and verification of family-tree documents, etc. have come up for deliberation and decision-making in the *Namghar*.[225]The mangement committee also organises various cultural and religious programmes in the *Namghar*. Some of the officials of the *Namghar* are known as *Majumdar* (registrar), *Deuri* or *Bilonia* (one who distributes the sacred food called

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[224]One such recent case that led to massive media sensationalisation was reported from the Athkhelia *Namghar* in Golaghat district of Upper Assam in April, 2018. It was registered with the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) and upon investigation, it was revealed that such misappropriation of money took place during the period 2013-14. The then Deputy Commissioner (DC) of the district, three Additional Deputy Commissioners (ADCs) and then Golaghat Municipal Board Chairman were allegedly involved in the scam. Funds worth Rs. 2.02 crore were sanctioned for the reconstruction and development of the Athkhelia *Namghar* in different phases. But, the money was allegedly misused by the construction committee in close nexus with the contractors. Moreover, an amount of Rs. 75 lakh was also released for constructing a community prayer hall and a tourist facilitation centre within the *Namghar* premises but no such structure was found. As had been reported in the Assam Tribune dated 17.04.2018, during interrogation, members of the construction committee confessed that the said funds were used for renovating the *Namghar* building only. The first police case in this regard was filed by one Tankeswar Saikia and another Noren Bora of the locality against members of the construction committee alleging misappropriation of government funds worth Rs. 53 lakh. In October, 2016 clashes were also reported from the *Namghar* premises, leaving many people injured for raising similar allegations. Later, the police had to resort to lathicharge so as to bring the situation under control.

[225] Information obtained from interaction with the chief priest (*guxai*) of the Dhekiakhowa *Bornamghar* in Dhekiakhowa village, Jorhat district of Upper Assam.

*prasad*among devotees), *Bharali* (store-keepers), *Paladhariya* (watchemen), *Dvari* (gate-keeper), etc.[226]

There are *Namghars* even in the neighbouring Christian-dominated states of the Northeast like Meghalaya, where worshippers still continue to worship, albeit in different forms.[227]Vaishnavism had also influenced the socio-cultural and religious lives of various tribal groups such as *Noctes*, *Tangsas*, and *Tutsas* in the easternmost state of Arunachal Pradesh in North-eastern India. Chiefly because of the contributions made by Lord Narottama, the *Mahapurusiya Dharma* tradition was largely accepted by the *Nocte* community residing in different towns and villages of the state.[228] Earlier, *Sattradhikars* frequently visited *Nocte* villages of Tirapdistrict and performed *bhaona* (plays) related to various themes of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata on a regular basis in the *Namghars* of Namsang, Bordoria, Khonsa, and Laptang. A number of disciples of the Mayamara *Sattra* of Majuli also migrated to the *Nocte* hills towards the latter phase of the Ahom rule in Assam, mingled with the tribal communities and gradually assimilated with the local people there.[229]*Mahapurusiya Dharma* is still surviving among the*Noctes* of Arunachal and *Nocte* disciples of Shri Ramadeva, a Vaishnavite saint-reformer, of Bareghar *Sattra* are continuing their religious activities in the *Namghars* even today.

Organisational Aspects

All religious activities of the *Namghar* are directed towards the *Singhasana*, a throne adorned with beautiful wooden work with lion motifs on its sides. The symbolism of the lion corresponds to God in His omnipotent name (*naam*). Not all *Namghars* have the *Singhasana*, but a smaller version of the same called the *Guru-aakhon* or the *thapana* can be seen in most *Namghars* and even those in individual households. *Thapana* literally means 'placing', and

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[226] No. 204: 20-22.

[227] There are two main *Namghars* in Shillong, the capital of Meghalaya – one is the Kristi Kendra *Namghar*, and another is the Laban *Namghar*. There are also two Vaishnava temples in Shillong chiefly dedicated to fulfilling the religious and spiritual needs of the community of Assamese Hindus residing there.

[228] Narayan Singh Rao, "Impact of Srimanta Sankardeva's Neo-Vaishnavite Movement on the Tribes of North-East India: A Case Study of East Arunachal Pradesh," in *Religious History of Arunachal Pradesh*, ed. Dr. B. Tripathy and Prof. S. Dutta (New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2008), 58.

[229] Ibid.

refers to the placing or invocation of Lord Krishna into a sacred book. Thus, in the *thapana*, either the *Kirtanghosha* or the *Gunamala* composed by Srimanta Sankardeva or Madhavdeva's *Naamghosha*or both are generally kept. Along with it, the *Dasham-skanda* (10thpart) of the *Bhagavata Purana* and the *Bhakti Ratnavali* of Sankardeva are also kept. Unlike the *thapana* or *Guru-aakhon* which may be three or five-storeyed, the *Singhasana* is seven-storied. A white coloured canopy with a red border and a red flower at the center is placed over the *Singhasana* or the *thapana*, whichever is there in the *Namghar*. It is known as the *Chandrataap* in Assamese.

SinghasanaThapana

Source: http://en.wikipedia.org[230]

The *Manikut*or the sanctum sanctorum of the *Namghar* is adorned with beautifully-woven, long, red-white bordered *phulam gamochas* (a form of traditional local towel of Assam used for a variety of purposes). These *gamochas* can be seen to be decorated with several star-shaped flowers made of silver, which are generally contributed by the local people and devotees upon any fulfillment of their wish/wishes. A *mati-saki* (earthen lamp) is kept in front of the shrine well-lit, although its size may vary from one *Namghar* to another. In order to avoid contact with the earth, the *saki*is sometimes placed on a section of a banana leaf called *agloti kolpaat*, or on a brass/bell-metal stand specifically designed for the purpose. It is called the *Akhyoy Bonti* (lamp which never extinguishes). As a matter of significance, it may be mentioned here that a 15th century-old lamp has been kept burning till date in the

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[230] The picture was accessed on 21.10.2017

Dhekiakhowa Bornamghar in Jorhat. The *Sattradhikar* of the Kamalabari *Sattra* in Majuli island, in one of his works, mentions the lamp as being lit by Madhavdeva. Every *Namghar* also has a fixed oval-shaped drum called the *doba* in Assamese. It is mounted on a bamboo or wooden frame and generally sounded twice everyday by the *Namghoria*, once in the morning after sunrise and again in the evening after sunset.

The *Manikut* of Batadrawa (Bardowa) *Namghar* in Nagaon district, Assam

Picture clicked at Batadrawa (Bardowa) *Namghar*, Nagaon, Assam on January 18, 2017.

The *Namghoria* is entrusted with various duties related to the regular cleanliness, maintenance and upkeep of the *Namghar* premises. He performs a role almost similar to that of a priest in a temple – cleaning the *Namghar* every morning and evening and lighting the *saki* and incense before the *thapana* containing the sacred scripture. Mostly a middle-aged male and someone constantly associated with the pursuance of spiritual and religious activities, the *Namghoria* is unanimously elected by the *raij* with the consent of the management committee. His monthly salary is being paid from the collective fund of the *Namghar*, which he is supposed to make use of in buying the basic daily necessary items that are required in the *Namghar*. He generally stays with his family, if he has one, in a single-room accomodation being allotted to him within the *Namghar* premises itself. Depending upon his convenience, he might also choose to live outside and come to the *Namghar* at stipulated timings. It is his duty to bring to the immediate notice of the mangement committee any cases of misappropriation of funds or theft of *Namghar* property. In the observance of his duties, the *Namghoria* is strictly required to follow the sacred tenets associated with the

Vaishnava faith such as eating food cooked only by a fellow Vaishnava, abstaining from meat and liquor, etc. During the absence of the *Namghoria* due to illness or any other reason, his duties are performed by any single member of every household in the locality on the basis of rotation. Male and female members are assigned separate duties, such as beating of the *doba* only by a man, whereas cleaning and sweeping of the floors by women, although it can be performed by men as well. In some *Namghars*, however, there is no *Namghoria* at all. In such cases also, those duties are performed by each household of the locality by rotation.

The *Namghar* as a Village Court

No wonder, both Birinchi Kr. Barua and Surya Kr. Bhuyan considered *Namghars* as *Little Parliaments*.[231]The *Namghar* provides a space for the locals to sit together and resolve their disputes through the application of traditionally-accepted conflict-resolution methods and judicial procedures. Difficult cases are, however, referred to the superior of the *Sattra*. Thus, it was initially the *Namghar* which served as the pioneer of the Panchayati Raj system of local-self government in Assam, although in a quite rudimentary manner. Land disputes, caste-related conflicts, cases of theft and robbery, etc. besides issues related to area development, are discussed exhaustively in the *Namghar* by the *raij*. After such detailed discussions, ways and means of conflict-resolution are worked out through laws and regulations based on the local customs and traditions of the village/locality; e.g. every person should cultivate a bigha of land, every household should pay a minimal tax from their monthly earnings for the maintenance of the *Namghar* in cash or kind, etc. are some of the rules made at the *Namghar* so as to maintain peace and tranquility among the people.[232]

However, unlike the Gram Sabha, the institution of the *Namghar*is not recognised in state law as a formal institution of decision-making. Through several programmes of community awareness and citizen participation in decision-making, the *Namghar* facilitates socio-political mobilisation creating a shared community space. Abhijit Bhuyan writes, "The *Namghar*promotes 'social capital' through the mechanism of participatory governance which facilitates responsibility and inter-personal cooperation."[233] Dr. Maheswar Neog thus refers to the *Namghar* as the 'Village Parliament' – an assembly of the *raij* to try minor civil and criminal caseson the part of any villager accused of violating the standard ethical and moral

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[231]No. 198: 45-48.

[232] Ibid.

[233] No. 205: 62.

norms of the society.[234]For any socially forbidden act committed by any individual, e.g. marrying outside of one's religion, he/she is declared to be a social outcaste by the village elders in the *Namghar*. As a symbolism of the same, a bamboo pole is erected in front of the house of that particular family to which the person belongs. Although such practices may actually be socially oppressive in reality, they have emerged as an outcome of extensive deliberations and discussions in the *Namghar* of localjudicial procedures since the ages. In the words of Audrey Cantlie, "Even the police are seen to respect the verdict of the *raij* as it is backed by the sanction of the entire village community."[235] This has been one of the most important factors behind the legitimacy and sanction that informs the decision-making procedure of traditional institutions such as the *Namghar*, and which has remained unchallenged despite the 'enchantment of the state', as Kaviraj says.

Legitimacy is a general social process and there are competing forms of legitimation practices. The *Namghar* stands out as a very good example of deference legitimation, which is a form of traditional legitimacy and is based upon respect for long-held traditions and customs of a particular community.[236]The police officials, a part of the formal state machinery, are also equally the products of the same process of socialisation as any other local villager that instills a sense of respect in the human mind for age-old beliefs and practices but at the same time, also cultivates fear in the name of religion.[237]With respect to the traditional forms of justice delivery systems, whether restorative or retributive, the role of the *Namghar* can be seen as substituting rather than supplementing the Gram Panchayats in certain matters – both social and civil.Abhijit Bhuyan's detailed ethnographic and historical

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[234] Ibid: 65.

[235]No. 19: 128-130.

[236] Max Weber distinguished between three different types of authority – traditional, charismatic, and rational-legal. Traditional authority exists because of historical and cultural reasons, e.g. the authority vested in tribal chiefs and religious leaders. Charismatic authority exists because of some remarkable personal qualities possessed by an individual who may not have either modern official status or traditional authority (e.g. Gandhi). Rational-legal authority is characteristic of the modern industrial bureaucratic state.

[237] There is a popular belief among the Assamese community even today that disrespecting anything associated with the *Namghar* will wreak havoc on entire families and future generations too. This, however,can also be understood as another way in which these institutions have stood the test of time and still continues to be so.

study of the Borbhogia *Namghar* and the Bardowa *Sattra* brings out the role and functions of the *Namghar*as an institution that follows a process of reformative justice. In matters of social and moral delinquency that are brought before it, fines are imposed which are usually trifle ranging from a few annas to a few rupees along with *tamol-paan*.[238] It ensures that disputes are settled in an amicable manner without unnecessary social conflicts. It takes cognisance of ritual offences and of actions involving ritual impurity. For instance, if a man is seen ploughing on the eleventh day of the bright lunar fortnight or on the three days of *Ambubachi* when Mother Earth is considered to be menstruating, and on all festival days, it is considered a ritual offence.[239] He is summoned and is required to offer *tamol-paan*along with a token amount (*orihona*) by bowing down before the *raij* in the *Namghar* and accepting his guilt.

Women's Participation in the *Namghar*

The role that women play in the *Namghar* may not always be at par with men; nevertheless, their presence is of utmost importance in the various religious rituals and functions that take place in the *Namghar* on a regular basis. In many places, both villages and cities, women collectively organise afternoon prayers called *diha-naam* in the *Namghar* quite regularly. It is to be noted here that these are segregated spaces of only women in which men generally do not take part. Power relations can be visibly noticed in such spaces because it is generally the older women (post-menopausal, and who are supposed to have discarded all carnal pleasures of life) who take the lead and younger or unmarried women are supposed to obey them.[240]At the same time, it also allows for a sense of sisterhood to grow among women and emotional bonds become prominent while preparing the *maah-prasad*and even during *naam-prasanga* competitions.[241] However, these factors cannot be divorced from the larger dynamics of social relations.

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[238] No. 205: 190.

[239] Ibid.

[240] Information obtained from personal visits to several *Namghars* in South Guwahati during the period April-May, 2017.

[241] Ibid. Many *Namghars* have internal lobbies of women differentiated by caste and age. During *naam-prasanga* competitions or other religious activities involving only women, these lobbies become more vocal and even those women who are not regular visitors to the *Namghar* can be seen to be a part of these groups at such times.

In the main *naam-prasangas*which are regularly held in the *Namghar*, the established convention has been that women are supposed to sit behind men. This holds true even for elderly women who exercise their authority of age and experience amidst only women. Women are also conventionally not allowed to take part in the core activites of these *naam-prasangas*, which include making the offering to the Guru called *xorai hojua* in the *manikut* before the beginning of *naam* or the distribution of *maah-prasad* after the end of *naam*.This is indeed a blatant form of discrimination, but not related to the do's and dont's associated with menstruation. It is in this context that the binary categories of purity versus pollution that have determined issues concerning access to space, equality and religious practices with special reference to menstruating womenbecomes insufficient.[242]It would be wrong to say that menstrual seclusions are confined only to Hindu women, because these are certain traditions and belief systems which are practised in many other religions and sects as well across the world, e.g. in tribal Africa, Japanese Buddhists, Balinese Hindus, Judists' Niddah ceremony, etc.[243]

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[242] Such questions recently came into the limelight especially with the recent Supreme Court verdict on the entry of women into the Sabarimala Temple in Kerala. However, noted jurist J. Sai Deepak clearly explains that among the Hindus, there are various schools of renunciation, acceptance, emptiness, wholesomeness, etc. At Sabarimala, training is being given in the school of renunciation so as to achieve self-realisation and reject the elements of *grihastha-ashrama*. Thus, when a man and a woman together leave their home to reach the hill shrine of Lord Ayyappa at Sabarimala, it is difficult to observe *brahmacharya* then in the real sense of the term. In order to overcome this, an age limit has been prescribed which starts from before the onset of adolescence till right before the age of *vanaprastha*. There are also several temples among the Hindus in Kerala itself where men are not allowed and temples in the Bali island of Indonesia where the officiating priest is a woman. Certain age-old customs and belief systems cannot always be understood by dividing them into binaries like purity versus pollution or pure versus impure. With reference to the *Namghars* too and women's participation in it, discriminatory practices certainly need to end but they need not always be understood from the perspective of menstruation and the binaries that have informed it in the Western liberal academic discourse.

[243] Nithin Sridhar, *The Sabarimala Confusion: Menstruation Across Cultures – A Historical Perspective* (New Delhi: Vitasta Publishing House, 2018), 102-131.

Gopini (all-women) *naam-prasanga* being held on the occasion of the Tithi of Sri Sri Madhavdeva at a *Namghar* in Guwahati. Picture accessed from https://assamtribune.com// on 23.08.2018

One of the most important committees among others in almost all *Namghars* today is the *Gopini* Committee which is an all-women committee, that specifically takes up women's issues at the higher levels of the district panchayats and as well as the state government. Monisha Behal writes, "Traditional religious groups of women in the *Namghar* called *namoti dol* often take up social issues exclusively concerning women. These groups work closely with the members of the *mahila samitis*, which can be both political party-affiliated groups or autonomous civil society groups."[244]While the former have greater and also easy access to funds and the corridors of power, the latter are more akin to pressure groups operating independently of government influence but at the same time, maintaining close contacts with prominent political figures of the state, e.g. the *Sadou Axom Mahila Samiti* with its branches spread all over Assam. The membership of these *mahila samitis* extends to the neighbouring towns and villages as well, and they work together on issues of immediate concern to women, e.g. undertaking various women-centric socio-economic and development programmes. As a result of their persistent efforts, separate toilets for men and women have now been

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[244] Monisha Behal, "Women's Collectives in Assam: A Short History of their Status and Present-Day Realities," in *Changing Women's Status in India: Focus on the Northeast*, ed. Walter Fernandes and Sanjoy Barbora (Guwahati: North Eastern Social Research Centre, 2002), 83.

constructed in several *Namghar* premises, which were earlier non-existent.[245] Also, decisions have been taken with regard to the proper implementation of various maternity and child welfare schemes of the government at the ground level, besides the disbursal of bank loans exclusively for undertaking women-related projects under various government-sponsored schemes.[246]To quote Dr. Pradip Jyoti Mahanta, "valuable healthcare advice relating to important schemes of the government such as family planning, vaccination and innoculation programmes, and mother and child-health are also dispensed by experts and knowledgeable persons within the *Namghar* premises.[247]

Role of the *Namghar* in Decision-Making and People's Participation

Srimanta Sankardeva in medieval Assam conceived the idea of community development and Panchayati Raj through the institution of the *Namghar* that represents the idea of decentralised participatory planning at the grassroot level. It was established with a view to provide a platform to facilitate people's participation in village development through local community activities. It served as a refuge for many freedom fighters to seek shelter so as to escape from being caught by the police both during the Indian freedom struggle and the crucial years of the Assam agitation (1979-85) against the issue of illegal, undocumented immigrants residing in the state of Assam. At this time, meetings called *mel* were regularly held in the *Namghars* of both Upper and Lower Assam which helped to mobilise public opinion in favour of protecting the indigenous "Assamese" identity from outside threat.[248]

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[245] Till very recently, no separate toilets existed for men in many *Namghars*. For women, however, a secluded space in the backyard of the *Namghar* that was hidden from public view by a piece of cloth strung across served as the restroom for women. It has been through the persistent efforts of the *namoti dols* and their forging of links with the local *mahila samitis* that separate toilets for both men and women can now be found in almost every *Namghar* of Assam, although exceptions exist such as the Kailash Nagar *Namghar* in Beltola area of Guwahati.

[246] No. 244: 140-144.

[247] This was mentioned by noted scholar Dr. Pradip Jyoti Mahanta in his speech "Role of the *Namghar* in the Conservation and Propagation of Cultural, Educational and Social values". The speech was a part of the *Sanskritik Anveshak* Programme organised by the Vivekananda Kendra Institute of Culture (VKIC) at Uzan Bazar, Guwahati, on December 20, 2013.

[248] No. 207: 51-53.

As a matter of significace, it may be mentioned here that the *Sattras* too, played a very significant role during the national struggle for freedom. For instance, as a result of the constant efforts of Pitambar Dev Goswami, the *Sattradhikar* of *Garmur Sattra* in Majuli island of Upper Assam's Jorhat district, the anti-opium and boycott programmes became popular slogans in the island. This was much before the Indian National Congress under Mahatma Gandhi formally adopted them.[249] Even in the post-Independence era, the *Namghar* continued to play an important role in socio-political matters. In his study of the Borbhogia *Namghar* situated at *Borbhogia* village of Sonitpur district in Assam, Abhijit Bhuyan mentions that in 1947, the *Assam Rashtriya Sanmilan Samiti* organised many meetings in the precincts of the *Namghar* on various issues of national and regional significance. These were attended by many prominent Assam Pradesh Congress leaders besides the local villagers. A local volunteer group of both men and women was formed which extended their help and cooperation in making these meetings a success. Also, during Acharya Vinoba Bhave's Bhoodan Andolan, many activists associated with the movement visited different villages and towns all over Assam and used the institution of the *Namghar* as a platform to address the needs of the community.[250]

At present, it is especially during the time of elections that the *Namghar* becomes the nerve center of any political activity, whether in the village, town or city. It is more so in the villages where issues affecting the daily lives of the common village-folk such as rural banking and timely disbursal of agricultural loans, grants for specific rural development projects, etc. are discussed with much vigour and enthusiasm during the time of panchayat elections. In this way, the *Namghar* helps to promote overall village development and people's welfare by spreading mass awareness about the different socio-political issues of the day. From time to time, different political parties have utilised the space of the *Namghar* in order to inform the common masses about their party's election agenda and reforms to be undertaken in the area after coming to power.

Bhuyan, in his study of the *Borbhogia Namghar*, refers to its welfare and developmental functions which are conducted through a general committee known as the *Gaon Unnayan Samiti* (Village Development Committee). It is composed of the *raij* and constituted for a

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[249] Dambarudhar Nath, "A Sattradhikar's Role in National Awakening," in *Nationalist Upsurge in Assam*, ed. Arun Bhuyan (Guwahati: Govt. of Assam, 2008), 67.

[250] No. 207: p. 54.

period of three years. In a general meeting of the committee, the *raij* elects the Executive Committee which functions under the General Committee. The Executive Committee consists of 15-20 persons elected on the basis of their abilities to discharge their functions judiciously and responsibly. A President and a Secretary are elected by the members of the Executive Committee from among themselves. Bhuyan talks in detail about the constitution called *Nyamaval* of the *Borbhogia Namghar* which directs the conduct of the members of the village. The constitution also gives an outline of the local judicial procedures to be followed when the *Namghar* sits as a court.[251]To quote Bhuyan, "In many *Namghars*, it is the *Gaon Unnayan Samiti* which takes all the major decisions relating to the construction of roads, bridges, wells, schools, etc. in the village with the consent of the *raij*. Any expenditure is incurred with the permission of the management committee of the *Namghar*. However, on substantial issues of wider importance involving heavy expenditure, a general meeting of the *Gaon Unnayan Samiti* composed of the *raij* is called."

Traditional Institutions and the Clash of Ideologies

Primarily owing to the conflict of ideas and dissemination of contesting ideologies, several changes occurred in Vaishnavism which eventually led to the gradual disintegration of the Vaishnava sect into several sub-sects. These transformations and changes thus need to be contextualised within a historical period so as to critically analyse the changing nature of religiosity and perpetuation of conflicts among these sects in the early 20th century and its overall impact on the politics of the state. The emergence of the *Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha* as an independent Vaishnavite institution propagating the ideals and principles of Srimanta Sankardeva has not only brought about a major shift within Vaishnavism, but has also led to the re-organisation of *Namghars* and questioning of the traditional belief systems of the "Assamese" Vaishnavas. Uptil now, the *Sattras* and the *Namghars* were the sole custodians of Vaishnavism. But, the emergence of the *Sangha* and its extensive spread all over Assam, has gradually led to the proliferation of *Namghars* across the state. This event thus, in a way, represents a watershed moment in the history of the modern times when the Vaishnava ideology was taken out of the control of the *Sattras* and its several tenets that had been Brahmanised over time came to be questioned and resisted by the non-Brahmanas. These issues and their implications for the socio-political situation of Assam will be examined in the next two chapters, based on specific field-based ethnographic information.

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[251] Ibid: 25-41.

Chaper – 4

DISSENSIONS AND SPLITS IN THE VAISHNAVITE MOVEMENT IN ASSAM: A CASE STUDY OF THE *SRIMANTA SANKARDEVA SANGHA*

This chapter first looks into the various contradictory tendencies that have emerged around Vaishnavism and the organisation of the *Namghar* – contradictions that were either inherent since the time of its formation, or contradictions that came about later as a response to widespread social and economic changes. Viewed from the perspective of a social scientist, it can be safely saidthat any institution that commands legitimacy in society is itself based on several problematic strands that need to be analysed in depth so as to have a broader understanding of the various aspects of its functioning and its relationship with the people. As discussed in the previous chapter, the institution of the *Namghar* encompasses several aspects of the socio-cultural and political lives of the Assamese. It provides a base for the Assamese Vaishnavite identity to flourish and also serves as an institution for the very process of socialisation and community-building to take place. However, the very foundation of the identity of the Vaishnavas whom the *Namghar* seeks to represent, has now come to be challenged. It is because of the fact that several groups have splintered and formed new groups and sub-groups within Vaishnavism, some even going to the extent of forming their own *Namghars*so as to promote their ideology.

Despite the social fissures constantly at work in a diverse socio-political reality, this chapter is an analysis of the continuing existence of traditional institutions like the *Namghar* and the absence of other viable alternatives in their place. Based on various inputs gathered during the field visits undertaken specifically as a part of this chapter, it tries to examine the changing role of the *Namghar* and its survival through different phases of history since the time of its emergence right upto the present day. The various reasons behind the utility and continuing viability of the *Namghar* as a community institution have been discussed in detail and also the challenges to the ideology of Vaishnavism that have come about with the emergence of new Vaishnava sects and sub-sects. This also explains in part the socio-anthropological differences existing within the community of the Vaishnavas and the challenge that it poses to a singular, homogeneous notion of an Assamese identity.

The consensus that originally bound the community of the Assamese Vaishnavas into one coherent group has now fragmented. As such, the organisation and functioning of the *Namghar*, based on both consensus and contestation from various quarters, has now come to

be questioned in several aspects. Nevertheless, no other institution to replace it completely has emerged till date in the Assamese society. As an institution of community decision-making, the *Namghar* continues to be vocal in matters that are of immediate importance to the community, thereby persuading the state to look into areas which might not initially have evoked much response on its part. In the long-term, the tradition-modern dichotomy becomes less significant in understanding different institutions and their myriad aspects within a heterogeneous social and political order. Although, however, in terms of reference of the study of different institutions, the dichotomy still remains entrenched, making visible the role of different institutions through this division in different ways.

The *Namghar* as a community institution is based upon the support and legitimacy it commands in the Assamese society among the followers of Vaishnavism, including the non-Assamese Bengali, Sikh, and Marwari communities residing in Assam, besides a few tribal groups. It performs functions almost similar to that of any other civil society organisation. In popular parlance, the *Namghar* as an institution, however, mostly continues to be identified solely on the basis of religion. Based on decentralisation of power, formal institutions of local self-government at the village level such as the Gram Sabha and the Gram Panchayat, are endowed with the responsibility of executing community development programmes, rural development schemes and other related works sponsored by funds released from the coffers of the state. Political influence in these bodies becomes prominent during elections which are held periodically and they are thus used as conduits for executing the state's welfare functions. However, so firm has been the foundation of institutions such as the *Namghar* that they continue to enjoy a following of considerable importance at the village level, so much so that their opinion on different socio-political issues is being heard with utmost respect at the policy-making spheres of the state even today.

A gradual process of identity formation encompassing diverse tribes and communities of the region took place through the *Namghar* in medieval Assam. Decisions arrived at through community consensus in the *Namghar* are communicated to the higher levels of the state government which facilitates the process of policy-making in the general interest of the community. Similarly, various rural development schemes and policies of the government are communicated to the villagers at the local level through *gaonburhas* (village headmen), NGOs, and other people associated with local community activities. No institution, however, remains free of certain inherent contradictions that eventually come to question the very basis of the institution itself and its ideologies. As mentioned earlier, the paradoxes inherent in any

institution come to the surface when we analyse and study its relationship with respect to other institutions and laws. The *Namghar* too, which is popularly understood as a traditional institution, is not entirely free from contradictory tendencies. It needs to be assessed in terms of how and in what ways these tendencies facilitate or inhibit community participation, which puts to test the claims of democratic credentials of such an institution.

The 'Tradition' in a Traditional Institution and the Tensions of it

The role of the *Namghar* as a community institution and the various functions it performs brings to light the tensions of an institution which, although not being a part of the state machinery in the formal sense of the term, plays a role that the state cannot overlook or ignore. As explained in the earlier chapter, with reference to various studies done by scholars on the meaning of tradition and traditional institutions, the role of the *Namghar* can mainly be understood as a multi-dimensional traditional institution which performs various roles such as a place of religious worship, community gathering, and also an institution of conflict-resolution.

Historically speaking, although such institutions have emerged in a context outside the boundaries of the state, they, however, cannot be studied as an isolated entity existing exclusively outside the purview of the state. No institution, howsoever its role may be perceived, functions entirely independently of the particular socio-political context of which it is a part. The *Namghar* is no exception. Here comes the distinction between the traditional and the modern, given the role of the *Namghar* as an institution whose importance and role as an agency of decision-making is experienced at the ground level of a community. This tradition-modern dichotomy, as seen in the previous chapter, however, should not lead us to an exclusive understanding of the state and society in terms of different institutions that are a part of either one or the other. Institutions such as the *Namghar* therefore need to be analysed and studied from a perspective which do not neatly fit into the categories of the traditional or the modern, but still have retained their contemporary relevance in their relationship with the state.

Hence, this chapter tries to look into the various fissures and social tensions existing in an already fragmented society and the different ways through which they are being reflected in the evolution of the *Namghar* as an institution over time. A multifaceted institution, the legitimacy of the *Namghar* as the upholder of a single unified Assamese identity has, of late, come to be questioned in the face of various divisive tendencies that have emerged around

this institution. This shall be explored through a detailed study of the *Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha* and a few important field visits in different places across both Upper and Lower Assam. The aim is to bring to light the fact that the consensus that forms the foundation of the emergence and continuation of such institutions throughout history is, in itself, a fractured consensus, i.e. a consensus underlain by several contradictions within the same society, and which have become sharper and more visible with the changing needs and demands of the people.

Role of the *Namghar* as a Socio-Cultural Institution

The *Namghar* performs an important socio-cultural and educational role as the central religious institution of the village/town/locality coordinating diverse aspects of the social, economic, intellectual, political and cultural life of the Assamese people. Musical dance-drama performances such as *bhaonas* (based on a specific theme from the Hindu epics), *Ankiya-Nats* (one-act plays), *borgeets* (musical recitals), and *putola naach* (puppet dances) are enacted and performed in the *Namghar* on several occasions. These are an integral part of the socio-cultural and religious lives of the Assamese society which also helps foster a bond of fraternity and common brotherhood among the people by ensuring their participation, whether direct or indirect, in these events. Every *Namghar* convenes an annual assembly called the *bar sabah*, which is usually followed by the performance of a *bhaona* at night, to which members of other nearby *Namghars* are also invited as special guests. If there are several *Namghars* in the same village, their relative standing largely depends upon the extent to which the members of its management committee are able to forge links with the top political leadership of the state, including the local MLAs and MPs of the region.[252] The existence of several *Namghars* today in the same village in place of one that used to exist earlier, has mainly come about as a result of various fissiparous tendencies and splits that have taken place among the community of the Assamese Vaishnavas. This has resulted in the formation of diverse sects, each professing its own supremacy over the legacy of Srimanta Sankardeva. The inter-village standing of different *Namghars* is also determined by their stronghold in the politics of the state, besides their spiritual significance.[253]

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[252] No. 207: 65-73.

[253] The Bharali *Namghar* in Nagaon has not only been politically vocal in several issues concerning the welfare of the villagers, especially women and children of the area, but it is also an important place of worship for the devotees historically. A popular belief that prevails here is that by donating

It may be mentioned here that the *bhaonas* performed in the *Namghars* on festive occasions have greatly contributed to the gradual evolution of the *Sattriya-Nritya* – the classical dance form from Assam recognised by the Sangeet Natak Akademi – through the ages. It is thereby important to understand in detail about the cultural significance of these *bhaonas* and *Ankiya-Nats* (referred to as "audio-visual means of communication" by Abhijit Bhuyan), and the role and importance of the *Namghar* in promoting them. The plays composed by Srimanta Sankardeva are mostly based on the *Bhagavata Purana* and the *Ramayana*, popularly known as *Ankiya-Nats* or *Anka* (*Ankiya* meaning "one" and *Nat* meaning "drama"). *Ankiya-Nat* is a traditional theatre form of Assam introduced for the first time by Srimanta Sankardeva and which soon became immensely popular among the masses. The enactment of these plays in a distinctive style nd note, including the plays composed by Sankardeva's followers, is known as *bhaona*. However, the term *Ankiya-Nat* specifically refers only to the plays of Srimanta Sankardeva such as *Koliya-Daman*, *Rukminiharan*, *Parijatharan*, etc. The plays composed by Madhavdeva are known as *Jhumura*. Lord Krishna is the principal character in most of these plays and some of the leading female characters include *Rukmini*, *Satyabhama*, *Yashoda*, and *Sita*.

Picture from the field clicked on 04.04.2017. A *bhaona* performance inside the premises of a *Namghar* at Bongalpukhuri, Jorhat.

The *bhaona* begins with a prelude popularly known as *dhemali* in Assamese. It consists of a highly rhythmic orchestral musical performance called *Gayan-Bayan* (*Gayan* meaning singers and *Bayan* meaning musicians who play the musical instruments), primarily involving

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any object made of metallic iron in the *manikut* of the Bharali *Namghar*, one's long-held wishes can be fulfilled. Hence, most of the visitors to the Bardowa *Sattra* in Nagaon also throng to visit the Bharali *Namghar* as a mark of respect and also to attain spiritual peace.

the playing of the *khol* and the *bhortal*. The movement of the players is determined by the tempo of the *khol*. After the *dhemali*, the *sutradhara* (compere) introduces the drama after his preliminary dance performance is over. He recites the *nandi* (a verse) while interpreting the story and then introduces the characters of the play by reciting *shlokas* and *bhatimas* (Assamese devotional songs). He directs the performance of the *bhaona*, providing its links and explaining the same to the audience. Actors who take part in the *bhaona* performances are called *bhawariya*, or the one who produces *bhava* or emotion in the minds of the audience.[254]*Bhawariyas* are generally chosen from among the villagers. The dancers who perform in the *bhaona* are called *natuwa*. Dialogues in a lyrical form in *Brajavali* have now been replaced by the spoken Assamese language in most of the *bhaona* performances.

The pursuit of religious activities in the *Namghar* is closely associated with the promotion of the crafts and skills of the local population, which also explains the emergence of an entire handicrafts-based cottage industry in the villages. A specific class of artisans in the village popularly known as *khanikars* specialise in preparing decorative costumes and traditional Assamese ornaments and accessories, which exclusively cater to the needs of the *bhaona* performers in the *Namghar*. The *Namghar* has thus become the chief source of livelihood for these *khanikars* who also specialise in works of sculpture and stone carving such as designing of the *thapana* and the *Guru-aakhon* which adorn the *manikut*. Besides these *khanikars*, carpenters called *barhoi*, blacksmiths and potters are also associated with the *Namghar*. Many *Namghars* in Assam, especially in Nagaon and Jorhat, patronise traditional vocations which include handicrafts like wood-carving, cane and bamboo works, preparation of *sanchi-paat*, mask-making, and illustration of manuscripts. The expertise of these vocations has traditionally been passed on from one generation to the next, and training is generally being imparted by the older members of the *Sattra* to which the *Namghar* is affiliated. This has led to the formation of various self-help groups centering around these traditional arts and crafts in the villages, including several small-scale industries like weaving units mostly dominated by local women. This has also helped to lay the foundation of banking and micro-financing at the village level in Assam.

A few *Sattras* in Assam, such as the Samaguri *Sattra* in Majuli and the Khatpar *Sattra* in Sivasagar district of Upper Assam, are well-known for *mukha-xilpa*, i.e. the tradition of mask-making. These masks are made of either animal skin or cloth over bamboo/cane

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[254] No. 207: 49.

structures or any other mechanical devices. They are made from a local variety of wooden bamboo splits called *jatibanh* (*Bambusa tulda Roxb*), covered with cotton cloth and clay, so that they remain light in weight relative to their size. The morphological features of these masks are derived from natural forms. Masks which possess human features are called anthropomorphic and those with animal features are known as theriomorphic.[255] But, nowadays, the mask-maker earns nominal money for his skill which is not even sufficient to maintain his bare minimum livelihood. He earns money by doing other odd jobs and makes masks only to satisfy his aesthetic urge. The religious significance of these masks is that before the *bhaona* starts, they are taken to the *Namghar* and placed in the *manikut* in front of a well-lit earthen lamp, with *naam* playing in the background to the tunes of the *khol* and the *bhortal*. After the *bhaona* is over, these masks are kept in a clean place in the *Namghar* where an earthen lamp is lit and incense burnt every dusk.

The entire *bhaona* takes place in an open space in the middle of the *Namghar*, surrounded by audience on three sides who sit on mats called *kath* (a mat made from the fibre of the stalk of plantain leaves and used by devotees in the *Namghar* to squat on the ground). The rest of the space in the *Namghar* is used by the *Gayan-Bayan* for performing devotional songs throughout the play. The side leading to the *manikut* is kept open and people do not sit facing their back towards it. As a result of modernisation and other related changes, *bhaonas* nowadays are also performed in the open on raised stages especially erected for the purpose. *Bhaona* performances take place in the *Namghar* on ceremonial occasions such as *Janmashtami*, *Maaghi-Purnima*, etc. They are also performed on full-moon nights, during the harvest season, or whenever the villagers are free from agriculture-related work. *Bhaona* performances mostly take place in the evening and continue throughout the night till the beginning of dawn. Sometimes, it also starts in the afternoon and continues late till night. It mainly depends upon the length of the play; for instance, the performance of small-duration plays like Madhavdeva's *Cordhara*, *Pimpara*, *Gucuwa*, etc. ends before nightfall. *Bhaonas* do not take place in the wee hours of the morning and this is a rule that is strictly followed by all.

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[255] Birinchi Kumar Medhi and ArifurZaman, "Tradition of Mask-Making in a Vaishnavite Monastery of Assam, India," *Bulletin of the Department of Anthropology* 8, no. 3 (2008): 20-31.

Masks made of bamboo and clay used in the *bhaona* performances. The art of mask-making is popularly known as *mukha-xilpo* in Assam.

Source: http://bijitdutta.wordpress.com[256]

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[256] The picture was accessed on 07.11.2017.

The feature that stands out most prominently in a *bhaona* performance is the coordination of body movements complemented by harmony of song, dance, melody, and dialogue. As argued by Dr. S.N. Sharma, while providing general entertainment to the village folk, *bhaonas*also teach people to elevate the standards of their moral and social lives in consonance with the messages conveyed by the epics and the Puranas, on which most of the bhaona performances are based.[257] It is through the *Namghar*as an agency for the spread of non-formal education among the masses that the *bhaonas* spread the message of solidarity and also promotes the spirit of goodwill and cooperation among the people. According to Abhijit Bhuyan, the *Ankiya Nats* and *bhaonas* staged in the *Namghar* have an intense communication potential among the common masses and render contemporary relevance to the traditional themes of *Dharma* and righteousness. It is because the *bhaona* makes use of the sound and visual elements very prominently, making the performance a forceful and an effective audio-visual treat for the audience. Actions and deeds of morality and immorality, honesty or deceit, courage or cowardice committed by the human or demi-god characters of these dramatic performances teach the spectators to react appropriately in real-life situations.[258] According to Dr. Pradip Jyoti Mahanta, the role of the *Namghar* could be seen as an instrumental one in spreading literacy in Assam mainly through the enactment of these *bhaonas*, much before the spread of formal education among the masses. Many illiterate people became acquainted with the spiritual aspects of *Dharma*by attending these plays held in the *Namghar*.

The *Axom Sattra Mahasabha* is an organisation established under the initiative of a few visionary *Sattradhikars* of places like Jorhat, Sivasagar, Majuli, Nagaon, Kaliabor, and Tezpur in Assam. It aims to bring about coordination in the religious and cultural activities of the *Sattras* and *Namghars*spread all over Assam. It has been organising the *bhaona* festival called *Setubandha*, periodically since 2003. Originally launched as *Sattra Sanmilan* in 1915, it subsequently came to be known as *Sattra Sangha* and finally in 1990, it was renamed as the *Axom Sattra Mahasabha*. The organisation has taken a number of commendable steps to its credit in order toestablish peace and harmony in the extremely diverse socio-cultural fabric of Assam. As a part of its efforts, it organised a massive peace rally in the state on October 31, 1999 from Sadiya to Dhubri in which people from different social and ethnic backgrounds

[257]Satyendranath Sharma, *The Neo-Vaishnavite Movement and the Sattra Institution of Assam* (Gauhati: Gauhati University, 1966), 78-92.

[258] No. 207: 51-63.

took part. *Setubandha*, however, has been the most notable step taken by the organisation till date. Literally, *Setubandha* means "building bridges" that aims at achieving cultural integration in the otherwise diverse Assamese society. The most outstanding feature of *Setubandha* is the equal participation of people belonging to the vraious ethnic tribes and communities of Assam such as the Mising, Sonowal, Kacahari, Karbi, Bodo, and other tea-tribe communities spread across different geographical regions of the state.[259] They are selected and imparted training by the *Axom Sattra Mahasabha* itself. The first such festival was held in Guwahati in 2003 and the *Mahasabha*, together with the Srimanta Sankardeva Foundation, has since been instrumental in organising the festival at regular intervals.

Association of the *Namghar* with the Community

As a traditional institution, the *Namghar* has created an arena for social discourse based on active people's participation and community decision-making, although the relative strengths and weaknesses of these claims about and on behalf of the *Namghars* have been examined later on the basis of field information. It is also the source of livelihood for many who earn their living by selling earthen lamps, incense sticks, candles, fruits, pulses, and flowers to the devotees who come to visit the *Namghar*. The size of the *Namghar* varies from place to place depending upon the population of the village/locality. Although it is not always the case with *Namghars* in cities, but the corporate life of a village centers around the *Namghar*.[260] It is constructed by the joint labour of the villagers. Every household is considered as a single unit and thus, each is required to contribute the service of at least one member of the family in the construction and maintenance of the *Namghar*, although this is voluntary. Moreover, every household is expected to voluntarily contribute towards the maintenance of the *Namghar* depending on the number of its members in either cash or kind. Those who are, however, not in a position to contribute, are required to put additional labour in the cause of the *Namghar*. Contributions in cash or kind for the celebration of festivals in the *Namghar* are assessed per household irrespective of their social standing. A sense of community, cooperation and social solidarity is promoted by the daily religious functions held in the *Namghar*. The *Namghar* building is thus owned in common by all its members, although this has now come to be challenged by the emergence of various sects and sub-sects within the Vaishnavite community of Assam. If a group later secedes, it has a claim on a share of the materials of the

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[259] Ibid: 64.
[260] No. 258.

Namghar and quarrels often arise over property issues such as corrugated iron sheets used in the roof of the *Namghar*.[261]

A specific aspect of community life is the creation of a traditional knowledge system that has developed over the years depending upon the cultural values of the people inhabiting a place since generations. In the context of community management of resources, Indira Barua in her paper on the various conservation processes developed by certain indigenous communities of Northeast India, talks about the *Noctes* (a branch of the Naga tribes spread primarily over Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, and Nagaland), and their use of the *Namghar* as a community resource. She mentions about a *Namghar* situated in the middle of a village called the *Dehing Kinare Nocte* which is inhabited by the *Noctes*. The *Noctes*, as mentioned earlier, are the followers of Vaishnavism, and every Thursday, the elderly people of the village assemble in the *Namghar* to recite the *Bhagavata*. Besides the *Namghar*, they have another institution called the *Thaan*, which is almost a replica of the former. In it, people not only worship Krishna but also different religious rituals are being performed. Besides the *Noctes*, other tribes of the Northeast such as the *Tiwas*, *Deoris*, and *Dibangias*, also consider the *Namghar* and the *Thaan*as important places fulfilling the religious and community needs of the people.

As argued by Indira Barua, these places also play a significant role in the protection of the environment.[262] Since they are considered sacred and auspicious, an aura of other-worldliness has always been associated with their surroundings. Thus, on certain particular days, for instance, when a woman is menstruating, she is strictly prohibited from entering the *Namghar*. In some cases, she can enter on the fourth or fifth day, but cannot sit inside and take part in the rituals. Moreover, on these days, she is not allowed to go near or walk under certain big trees and sacred groves present in the *Namghar* premises. If she has no choice and has to do so, it is advised that she keeps with her a small knife (metallic object) and some black mustard seeds (the colour black associated with keeping in check the adverse effects of the planet Saturn or *Shani* in Ayurveda) so as to wean away evil spirits.[263] The common people

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[261] No. 17: 165.

[262] Indira Barua, "Conservation and Management of Community and Natural Resources: A Case Study from Northeast India," in *Tribal Studies* 7, no. 1 (2009): 39-46.

[263] Not all such rituals and beliefs associated with the female menstrual cycle can be outrightly rejected as superstition. Ayurveda, the ancient Indian system of medicine, is based upon the principles of three primary life-forces in the human body, i.e. *Vata* (air), *Pitta* (fire), and *Kapha* (water) which

of the locality also do not cut wood or make any other uses of these trees, which has thereby preserved a vast tract of land from environmental destruction. The basic philosophy behind the preservation and conservation of these groves among the communities is to maintain community control over patches of land, termed as "social fencing" by ecologists. It is this collective community effort to keep such areas free from destruction, by primarily associating it with something sacred and dedicating it to a deity. Social scientists have opined that in the absence of written laws, religious beliefs played a vital role in protecting these vast patches of forest land in wilderness.

A sense of community belongingness develops among people by regularly taking part in the activities concerning the *Namghar*. Besides his relatives and other close aides, a man invites all the members of the *Namghar* in person with *tamol-paan* to weddings, the first *shraddha* ceremony after the conclusion of mortuary rites, *ghar-luwa* or house-warming ceremony, *tolani-biya* or the marriage ceremony celebrating a girl's first menstruation, etc. *Naam-prasanga* is performed at the particular household by the members of the *Namghar* on all these occasions. Depending upon the financial status of the family, along with tea, the invited guests are given a *jalpan* (feast) of *kumol-saul*/*sira* (soft, flattened rice), *hurum* (pounded and dehusked rice fried in hot sand), *doi* (curd), and *gur* (jaggery), or only *tamol-paan* and *maah-prasad*.

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are called *Doshas*. Menstruation is closely linked to the functions of these *doshas*. *Vata* is the predominant *dosha* during this period which is responsible for the downward flow of menstrual blood and the energy (*urja*) thus goes downwards into the earth. But, in places like *Namghars* where religious rituals take place on a daily basis, the energy travels upwards which can interfere with the cycle and cause discomfort in the body such as menstrual cramps. The belief is that the energy of the presiding deity (Krishna) which is there in the *Thapana* kept in the *manikut* of the *Namghar* will move over to the menstruating woman and in that case, the deity becomes lifeless while the menstruating woman is life. It is also said that reciting hymns (*naam*) by a menstruating female that take place in the *Namghar* can cause disturbances in her hormonal levels, leading to adverse repercussions on her fertility in the long run. Moreover, many objects used in the *Namghar* for purposes of worship are made from metals such as brass and copper which conduct energy and magnetism and coming into contact with these can also cause an imbalance of the *Vata dosha*.

Assamese *jalpan* of *kumol-saul* and *hurum* mixed with curd and jaggery.

Source: https://tourism.assam.gov.in//

Emergence of Sects and sub-Sects within Vaishnavism

The proliferation of *Namghars* all over Assam as a result of the splintering apart of the Vaishnava community into many smaller sects and sub-sects but their legacy ofco-existence at the same time, is primarily attributed to the inherent nature of *Sanatan Dharma* based on acceptance and its respect for the pluralism of diverse faiths. It is also a part of the process of gradual democratisation of the state-society structure that has come about with people's upward mobility in the socio-economic hierarchy of the varna system. Each such sect/group which has deviated from the original community of the Assamese Vaishnavas, tries to make the claim that it is their ideology that represents the true spirit of Srimanta Sankardeva. This they try to promote through the *Namghars* established by them. Many well-to-do families too, now have their own *Namghars*. Thus, many *Namghars* have today come up in one locality/area unlike earlierwhen a single *Namghar* in a village represented the entire village community. As a result, most of the times, members associated with one *Namghar* are generally not seen to be attending or being a part of the activities of other *Namghars* in the same village, unlike earlier.

No institution can be strictly categorised as traditional or modern as has been described earlier. In the case of the *Namghar*, an internal conflict became visible since the early 20th century to its professed ideology of monotheism or *Eka Sarana Naam Dharma*based on the recitation of God's name (*naam*)and the prohibition of idol worship. Some *Namghars*, in

their premises nowadays, also house temples dedicated to the worship of different Hindu gods and goddesses such as Shiva, Hanuman, etc. where idol worship is almost regularly performed.[264]For instance, the *Namghar* situated in the Kailash Nagar area of Beltola, Guwahati, houses a *Shiv Mandir* (temple) within the same premises, the *Namghar*facing towards the east and the temple towards the south. This has exacerbated the already existing internal divisions within the community between idol worshippers (primarily adhering to the *Sakta*form of worship), but still performing *naam-prasanga* and non-idol worshippers who believe only in the divine powers of *naam-prasanga* instead of *Sakta* worship. Most of the people in the former category belong to districts from Lower Assam, while the latter comprise of mostly people from Upper Assam.

This division has further replicated itself in the way decisions regarding the functioning of the *Namghar* are taken, to be elaborated later. The study corroborated the hypothesis that both these groups of idol and non-idol worshippers differ widely in their social and religious outlook. This could be attributed to the already existing caste divisions between the Brahmins and the non-Brahmins that to a large extent, in this particular area, have determined what festivals are celebrated in the *Namghar* premises and who attends the same. The divide has been so sharp that it becomes clearly manifest during many important religious celebrations in the *Namghar*. For instance, during the occasion of *Sivaratri* in the Kailash Nagar *Namghar* of Beltola, Guwahati, some people who actively take part remain absent during the *Doljatra*celebrations in the same *Namghar*.[265] The reason might be attributed to the fact that both these festivals are associated with the worship of different gods in the Hindu religious belief system, the former with *Shiva* and the latter with *Krishna*.Among the majority of the followers of *Sanatan Dharma*, those who strictly adhere to the worship of*Shiva* do not seem to attach equal importance to the worship of *Krishna* or other gods and goddesses.

In the Hindu pantheon, *Brahma* (the Creator), *Vishnu* (the Preserver), and *Shiva* (the Destroyer) together consist of the Holy Trinity. While *Vishnu* worships *Shiva* in all his incarnations, *Shiva*, the Destroyer, does not worship anyone. According to the *Bhagavat Purana*, *Vishnu* is the one who is supreme; however, according to the *Shiva Purana*, both

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[264]The survey, largely ethnographic, for the purpose of this research was undertaken during the period August-September, 2017.

[265] This was revealed during an interaction with some local residents of the Kailash Nagar area of Beltola, Guwahati on 25.08.2017.

Vishnu and *Brahma* were created from the *Aadi Anant Jyotir Stambha* of *Shiva*, hence making *Shiva* more powerful than the two. This has been popularly understood as one of the reasons behind *Shiva* not worshipping anyone. *Krishna*, avatar of *Vishnu* in the *Dwapar Yuga*, is the primary god associated with the teachings of Srimanta Sankardeva and *Eka Sarana Naam Dharma* advocated by Vaishnavism (This point has been further explored in detail in a later part of this chapter in terms of the caste divide that has taken place among the Assamese Vaishnavas and their fragmentation into various sects and sub-sects). Moreover, in the Vedic understanding, *Shiva* is considered as the only supreme *Parmatma* as he is *Ajanma* (unborn), *Akarta* (formless), and *Abhokta*/*Vairagi* (recluse). In the *Bhagavat Gita* too, the concept of God has been understood as *Ajanma*, *Akarta*, and *Abhokta*.[266] It is *niraakar* (shapeless and formless) and the *Shiva Linga* is the perfect manifestation of this *niraakar* form of *Shiva*. *Vishnu* also advised other deities (Kartikeya, Indra, Parvati, etc.) to worship only *Shiva* if they have mistakenly committed sins.

Rama, another incarnation of *Vishnu* in the *Treta Yuga*, established a *Shiva Linga* when he was marching towards Lanka, then known as *Rameshwara Mahadeva*, meaning *Isvara* (God) of *Rama*. In the context of the Ramayana, when Lord *Rama* wanted to do a *Praschatap* (penance) for the sin of killing a Brahmana, i.e. Ravana, he asked Hanuman to establish a *Shiva Linga* so as to seek mercy from Shiva. The *Krishna* avatar of *Vishnu* in the Mahabharata also worshipped *Shiva* in order to seek his blessings for bringing the *Kalpavriksha* tree from Indra. In Mathura and Vrindavan in present-day Uttar Pradesh (Mathura considered to be the birthplace of *Krishna*), this event is known as *Gopeswara Mahadeva*, meaning *Isvara* (God) of *Gopal* (*Krishna*). Moreover, when *Krishna* wanted to have a son, he prayed to *Shiva* on the advice of the sages and seers. This was when he said *Shive Sarvadhi Sadhike*, which means that nothing on this earth can happen without the will of *Shiva*.[267] Even during the Mahabharata war between the Kauravas and the Pandavas, *Krishna* asked the Pandavas to first seek the blessings of *Shiva* by worshipping the *Shiva Linga*. In the *Bhagavata Purana* too, there is a story about Lakshmi's unhappiness with her husband *Vishnu* who told her that half of his mind and body is solely dedicated to *Shiva* and in the other half, all the creatures of the world, both big and small, and all deities including his wife Lakshmi lived.

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[266] G.P. Bhatt and J.L. Shastri, ed., *The Bhagavata Purana: 5 Volumes* (Gorakhpur: Gita Press, 2002).
[267] Ibid.

Hence, in the Hindu Vedic Sanatan Dharma tradition, it is believed that while *Vishnu* represents *Rajas* nature, *Shiva* is the representative of *Sattva*. Since *Rajas* is full of desires and action, *Vishnu* worships *Shiva* in order to fulfill those desires because *Shiva* is *sattvik*, i.e. self-realised and self-sufficient who does not need to worship anyone else externally. In this way, *Vishnu*, in his varied *avatars* (incarnations), shows how to worship the Supreme Being not only to attain worldly pleasures but also *moksha* (freedom from the cycle of birth, death and rebirth). Although *Shiva* is considered to be the ultimate of ascetics, it is often seen that his devotees are blessed with immense wealth and the enjoyment of all pleasures. On the contrary, those who worship *Vishnu* (even though he is the Lord of *Lakshmi*, the goddess of wealth) are often seen to be bereft of wealth and the material enjoyments of life. The reason behind this situation and hence the popularity of *Sakta* worship of *Shiva* among the Hindus has been beautifully answered by *Krishna* in the *Srimad Bhagavat Gita* during a conversation with *Yudhisthira*. Krishna himself says that since his *bhakti* is very difficult and testing for the common man, many people leave it aside to worship other deities, especially in the *Kaliyuga*. *Shiva* is *Ashutosh*, i.e. someone whose heart melts easily and he who gives his *bhaktas* the greatest of all riches. The Trinity of *Brahma*, *Vishnu*, and *Shiva* are all capable of bestowing boons and curses alike on their followers. But, out of the three, *Shiva* and *Brahma* get pleased or angry very easily and therefore, are also able to bless or curse instantaneously. However, it takes a very long time to please *Vishnu*.[268]

The *Namghar* is understood as a place where everyone is considered equal in the eyes of the Lord (*Vishnu*/*Krishna*), irrespective of their social background or caste affiliations. However, through the surveys undertaken as a part of this research work and a closer look at the different practices and customs followed by people living in the vicinity of a *Namghar*, raise certain fundamental questions about the very foundation of equality and inclusiveness which the *Namghar* claims to stand for. With reference to certain minute details, the Upper Assam-Lower Assam divide that came to light during the course of the study has revealed the differences in the ways people from both the regions conduct *naam-prasangas*in the *Namghars*, with each trying to claim superiority in its own sphere. For instance, the mixture of the ingredients used in the *maah-prasad* (holy offering to the *Guru*) varies between people from both the regions. People from Lower Assam prepare the *prasad*with more amount of

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[268] Swami Akhandananda Saraswati, ed., *Srimad Bhagavata Purana: 2 Volumes* (Gorakhpur: Gita Press, 2004).

chickpeas and less of split yellow-green gram or *moong* in it, which is however the opposite in the case of people from Upper Assam.[269]

Assamese *maah-prasad* served on banana leaves.

Source: https://tourism.assam.gov.in//

The emergence of traditional institutions like the *Namghar* has been explained in the academic literature on political science and political anthropology mainly in terms of the failure of the state machinery and state institutions to respond to people's needs effectively. These people, then, take recourse to certain indigenous mechanisms of law-making that become an expression of both unity and resistance – unity of the community in question and resistance against the state. However, the unity that seems to be the basis of the foundation of such institutions is in itself fraught with certain dissensions that get magnified in due course of time. Decisions are collectively taken in the *Namghar*premises in meetings that are conducted at regular intervals, involving all the elders and a few younger members too, in the particular locality. For instance, in *Namghars* where there is no person serving as the *Namghoria*, the daily rituals of cleansing the *Namghar* and lighting of the lamp are done by people chosen unanimously by all residents of the locality.However, it may be mentioned

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[269] No. 265.

here that not all the residents voice their dissatisfaction publicly during these meetings in the *Namghar* regarding who should be assigned to perform such duties. These same people later create a fuss about the issue which sow the seeds of conflict in the locality. These conflicts may be along the lines of caste, religion or any such parochial tendency.[270]

An important dimension of social recognition in the villages of Assam, caste determines the nature of inter-individual relations to a large extent. The *Namghar* provides the focal point of cohesive social interactions on a neighbourhood basis and people from different castes participate in these *Namghars* on different occasions in myriad ways. However, the *Gosains* and the *Brahmanas* enjoy a superior status conferred on them by the system of hierarchy that was gradually deepened within Vaishnavism as a result of the royal patronage that was bestowed on them by the then ruling Ahom dynasty. But, differences of caste do not always assume the character of different communities because political, social and religious activities in the *Namghar* are most often organised on the basis of intercaste groups called *khels*, i.e. a well-knit and cohesive social unit. Such *khels* present in *Namghars* in Assam provide a healthy enough space for close inter-caste interactions.[271]In the local context, the pattern of social interactions among people from different castes provides important insights into the nature of the society under consideration, which can be utilised in order to understand the multifaceted nature of caste and its implications on the day-to-day functioning of the *Namghar*, including decision-making.

Like in other parts of India, the caste system in Assam too, can be conceived in terms of four broad groups, i.e. Brahmanas (*Gosains*/*Mahantas*), Daibagyas, Kayasthas (*Kalitas*), and Shudras (*Dom*/*Sudir*), etc. which are hierarchically organised.Each of these groups is internally differentiated into castes of approximately equal status. These castes within a group thus constitute a horizontal block, and commensal restrictions are not strictly observed between castes within the same horizontal block. People of all castes can take *maah-prasad* together in the *Namghar* because it is raw and uncooked. But, the *deuri* (the one who distributes the *prasad*) is generally a person from the upper caste in the hierarchy of the varna system. Hence, the Vaishnava ideology of Srimanta Sankardeva has not been completely able

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[270] Information gathered during the course of an ethnographic field study carried out in the central *Namghar* situated in the capital of Guwahati, i.e. Dispur, and the Kailash Nagar *Namghar*, Beltola, Guwahati from 17.09.2019-03.10.2019.

[271] Ibid.

to do away with commensal restrictions in practice. Thus, in principle, each caste constitutes a commensal unit and individuals belonging to a particular caste, e.g. *Mahanta*/*Gosain*are not supposed to eat rice and other cooked food at the households of other individuals belonging to castes that occupy lower positions in the social strata, e.g. *Kaibarttas* (fishermen caste). Food restrictions are primarily connected with the ideas of purity and pollution.[272]This rule is, however, relaxed between different sets of caste groups. E.g. *Gosains* and *Brahmanas* in Assam together constitute one commensal group; *Kalitas*, *Koches*, and *Keots* constitute another while *Misings*, *Mataks*, and *Kaibarttas* constitute still another commensal group with respect to cooked food.

It is in this respect that when a non-brahmin is entrusted with the responsibility of carrying out the daily rituals in the *Namghar*, some upper caste people, especially Brahmanas in the locality, try to bring in the issue of caste. Even though they might themselves be non-vegetarians, however, they argue that people who take meat or deal with any kind of non-vegetarian food should not be entitled to take up such a responsibility in the *Namghar*; in reality, meaning, only upper caste peopleand preferably non meat-eaters are fit for the roles and responsibilities of the *Namghoria*. They also try to influence the members of the *Namghar* committee holding important positions of the President and the Secretary concerning such matters. Hence, although the ideological framework of Vaishnavism does not approve of caste rankings, the purity versus pollution divide still continues to exist within the hierarchical idiom of the Vaishnava system. The Vaishnava ideological structure based on the ideals of egalitarianism and inclusion might have, to a certain extent, weakened the institution of caste in Assam, but could not completely obliterate the distinctions based on caste and the ritualistic features associated with the same. It only changed the ranking order of different castes in the hierarchy and the patterns of their social interactions.

Upward social mobility as a result of widespread changes brought about by the forces of modernisation and urbanisation posed a challenge to the rigidity of occupational structures associated with the caste system. Lower-caste people, especially tribals, no longer continued to identify themselves as a part of the *Sattra* system controlled by the *Sattradhikars* (mostly upper-caste). Resentment has come in various forms, whether by means of conversion to

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[272] Louis Dumont, in his famous work, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implications*, conceptualised the structure of the caste system in India in terms of the purity-pollution divide between upper castes and lower castes in the ritual hierarchy.

Christianity[273] or by establishing *Namghars* of their own that do not abide by the Brahmanical graded relationship of hierarchy and authority between the *bhakta* and the *bhakat* existing in other *Namghars*.[274] Since the last quarter of the 20th century beginning with one conversion from the Jengraimukh area in Upper Majuli, Christianity today has spread among a good number of the *Mising* tribes of Majuli Island – the abode of Vaishnava culture and traditions in Assam. It began with a voice of protest raised by the Christian missionaries against the exclusive and secluded social policy pursued until now by the large and state-sponsored *Sattras* of Majuli. In the garb of providing social service, the missionaries have established several schools and charitable institutions for spreading education among the poor tribals of the area, which was, for long, ignored by the *Sattradhikars*. They also provide free healthcare, monetary and material gifts, including petty jobs, etc. to these tribals. This has been a major area where the Vaishnavite creed and ideology propagated by Srimanta Sankardeva has failed the most.

Hierarchies of Gender

Divisions existing along the line of gender also question the claim to inclusiveness of traditional institutions such as the *Namghar*. People turn to these institutions so as to redress their grievances that the paternal attitude of the state do not or has failed to address. However, these institutions harbour certain deeply entrenched notions about the respective roles that men and women are supposed to play in society, which, at times,represents a blatant form of discrimination against women. This gender divide clearly comes into prominence through different activities that take place in the *Namghar* at different times. Except in *gopini naam-prasangas*, women, including the elderly ones too, are not allowed to take the lead part in community *naam-prasangas* where only men read the *Bhagavata* and distribute the *maah-prasad* as well. Also, most of the key positions in the management of the *Namghar* such as

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[273] Religious conversion is a national issue in India today. The Constitution of India does not allow religious preceptors to engage in proselytisation activities by inducing or forcing the poor and the illiterate into the trap of a new religion.

[274] An important finding of this study has been that the Christian missionaries in Majuli have adopted a very clever strategy whereby they allow the converts to celebrate their own festivals, apply teeka (for males) and sindoor (for married women), and also attend their own places of worship (here, the *Namghar*) but swear only by the name of Jesus Christ.

that of the*Namghoria*, are by convention, held by men.[275] As a matter of fact, mention may here be made of the Barpeta *Namghar* in Barpeta district of Lower Assam where all girls and women are strictly forbidden from entering the *Namghar* premises.[276]

Several field studies conducted by the Women's Studies Research Center of Gauhati University on the participation of women in *Namghars*, have concluded the fact that women are not an integral part of decision-making in many *Namghars*, especially in Lower Assam.Such restrictions are however, almost non-existent in the society in Upper Assam, where women play a vital role in the various religious functions held in the *Namghar* from time to time. However, it needs to be mentioned here that the nature of the work that women are assigned to perform in the *Namghar* are also what they are socially expected to do in a society that is still divided blatantly along the lines of gender. Hence, in the *Namghars* in Upper Assam, women are at best assigned menial tasks like cleaning of the floors, lighting the lamps and washing the *maah-prasad*before the *naam-prasanga*. They do not play any substantial role in decision-making on major issues in the management committee of the *Namghars* in the *bar sabah*. Moreover, the all-women *namoti dol* or the *Gopini* Committee has very meagre or almost no representation in the management committee, comprising mostly of men and which is entrusted with the responsibility of looking after the overall functioning of the *Namghar*.[277]

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[275] This is a generally accepted convention that has been continuing in *Namghars* even today. Since the duties of the *Namghoria* have to be performed on a regular basis, it may not be physically feasible for women to engage in activities like cleaning or sweeping the floor of the *Namghar* during the 5-7 days of their menstrual cycle every month. Scientifically too, it is unadvisable for women to enter the *manikut* (main shrine) of the *Namghar* during this period because the energy in the body of the menstruating woman that flows downward has the maximum possibility of being transmitted to the energy of the living deity in the *manikut* represented in the *Bhagavat*/*Gunmala* that flows upward.

[276] Unlike Sabarimala where an entire belief system based on *Ayyappa tatwam* that celebrates the celibate (*Brahmachari*) status of the Lord prohibiting the entry of women between 10-50 years of age, there is no such belief system and tradition associated with the bar on the entry of women inside the Barpeta *Namghar*. The popular saying in the area goes so that once a woman on her menstrual cycle entered the main shrine here, hence committing a *mahapaap* (grave sin). Since then, except young girls upto the age of 5-6 years, no other woman is allowed to enter the main shrine of the Barpeta *Sattra* cum *Namghar*.

[277]Guwahati University, *Women's Participation in Decision-Making in the Village Institution of the Namghar* (Guwahati, Guwahati University: Women's Studies Research Center, 2013), 3-18.

Moreover, women are strictly not allowed to be a part of certain important religious activities in the *Namghar*. These are, in a way, indirectly related to the question of access to space with respect to menstrual seclusion practices. Some of these activities include beating of the *doba* every morning and evening, playing of musical instruments such as *khol* and *taal* during any event, procession of the *Bhagavata* by carrying it on the head during *Doljatra*, distribution of the *maah-prasad* after *naam-prasangas*, etc. Although these are gradually changing with women beginning to mark their presenceeven in areas previously not meant for them, e.g. playing of the *khol* and the *taal* by women during *naam-prasangas*[278]; however, overall, they largely remain male-dominated bastions. Moreover, in a number of instances, women themselves prefer to stay aloof and not be a part of these "holy" activities. The sole reason that is cited for the same is that 'women have never done it and so it is not correct to do it.'[279]It is in this way that a slow process of internalisation of the age-old social norms and entrenchment of certain codes of conduct takes place among a section of the people in society. A medieval orthodox hierarchical attitude still persists against women in some *Sattras* and *Namghars* of Lower Assam. Such instances have been heart-wrenchingly portrayed by Dr. Indira Goswami in her highly-acclaimed and award-winning novel, *Dotal Haati'r Uiye Khuwa Howdah* ('The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker'). The story is set amidst the backdrop of one of the *Sattras* of Assam where a widow's spirit is humiliated by the patriarchal world-views associated with widowhood such as shunning of all forms of non-vegetarian food by a widow. She finally embraces death because of the feudal economic order underpinning the religious conservatism prevalent in the society of the time.[280]

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[278] Personal observation made during the course of attending several *naam-prasangas* in the Kailash Nagar *Namghar* of Beltola, Guwahati on various occasions such as the *tithis* of both Sankardeva and Madhavdeva, *Janmashtami*, etc. during the month of *Bhadrapada* (August-September). However, these were all-women *naam-prasangas* (*gopini naam*) where men, by convention, do not take part.

[279] Information obtained through an informal discussion with a few local women associated with the Kailash Nagar *Namghar*, Beltola and the Dispur Central *Namghar*, Dispur, both situated in Guwahati, Assam.

[280] Padmakshi Kakoti, "Understanding Women in the Religious Institutions: A Study with Reference to the *Sattras* of Assam," *International Research Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 1, no. 5 (2012): 19-22.

The *Namghar* as a Mechanism of Dispute Resolution

It can be inferred from our previous discussion on the ideology and organisation of the *Namghar* that it is primarily an institution based upon the fundamental tenets of the Hindu social order and Hindu religious texts. A certain mode of behaviour that is in accordance with the spirit of the *Bhagavata Purana* is considered 'right' or 'good' for the upkeep of the *Namghar* as a traditional institution and also for the dissemination of the ideals of the order of Vaishnavism established by Srimanta Sankardeva. Any deviation from this standard mode of behaviour is neither permissible nor encouraged. Being an institution that has carved out a space over the years for the community to raise its voice, the *Namghar*also performs the functions of a village court dispensing justice on vital issues affecting the community. With the growing importance of the modern civil and criminal justice systems, however, the *Namghar* has gradually ceased to play as active a role as it did earlier in its capacities as a democratic public forum and a village court. Meetings (*mel*) on diverse issues are regularly held in the villages even today, but the premises of the *Namghar* have no longer remained the only place where these *mels* are being conducted unlike earlier. Instead, they have shifted to different venues such as school buildings, playgrounds, open fields, etc.[281]

The *mel* is an open forum for villagers to discuss conflicts and disputes of a varied nature such as land-related disputes, issues related to marriage and divorce, local disputes over the use and management of public property, religious clashes, sexual harassment, etc. in the presence of both the offender and the victim within the premises of the *Namghar*. It is organised in response to the appeal of any one of the conflicting parties and the *Namghar* provides a space for arriving at compatible, viable and mutual solutions to the problems. Although there is no legal compulsion to follow the verdict of the *Namghar*, it is, however, not usually violated by the *raij*, primarily on the grounds of faith and loyalty. In minor cases such as theft, violation of the boundaries of grazing lands, etc. compromise is the most desired outcome, wherein the parties concerned are counselled, reconciled and requested to both forgive and forget. The public shaming of the offender and a public appeal for forgiveness are the two most common methods resorted to in such cases.[282]Sometimes, oath-taking is also practised in front of the *Bhagavat*in which the offender promises never to commit such offences again in the presence of a mass gathering of the villagers. While

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[281]No. 196: 59-60.

[282] Melvil Pereira, Bitopi Dutta and Binita Kakati, ed., *Legal Pluralism and Indian Democracy: Tribal Conflict Resolution Systems in Northeast India* (South Asia Edition: Taylor and Francis, 2017), 56-85.

dealing with caste disputes or marriage-related issues, most of the offenders are socially boycotted (*eghariya kora*) and not allowed to take part in any activity of the *Namghar*, but for a temporary period of time. This tradition of *eghariya kora* is based on age-old social norms of what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is bad, etc. Hence, the emphasis of these *mels* is on restorative justice, i.e. not outright punishment of the offenders, but the restoration of goodwill and social harmony within and between communities and also the restoration of the relationships between the offender and the victim based on trust and mutual cooperation. Measures like *eghariya kora*, *aathu luwa*, *shram daan*, feeding the public and open confession, etc. are tactics that are used to make the offenders self-realise his/her wrongdoings and the obligations that he/she needs to carry out in the future.

The paradox here has been the continued existence of the *Namghar* and the increasing importance of formal state law at the same time. It is ultimately the nature of the dispute that determines whom do people approach first for a settlement of the case. Incidents related to dowry deaths and witch-hunting were earlier not as widespread as they are in present-day Assam. In such a changing context, it is the courts and other organs of the state which are increasingly called into action for a quick and effective redressal of the issue.[283] However, the*Namghar* still continues to enjoy legitimacy and faithful support for its decisions on diverse matters impacting not only the followers of Vaishnavism but also others who are neither Vaishnavites nor Hindus. In this context, Audrey Cantlie explores the attitude of the *Namghar* to inter-caste unions with reference to the Panbari *Namghar* situated at Panbari village in Lakhimpur district of Upper Assam. The Panbari village is divided into several castes and sub-castes, both upper and lower. If the members of castes placed at the same social strata eat together in the *Namghar*, their ritual status is not affected. But, in the case of a liaison with a member of a caste which is generally not allowed by the upper castes, i.e. Brahmanas, to take part in the core rituals of the *Namghar*, the offender is expelled.[284] Cantlie gives the example of a large *Chaodung* village south of Panbari where four cases of relationship between Chaodung boys and Panbari girls were reported. They were boycotted by their families and also expelled from the *Namghar* with the consent of the*raij*. A few other similar cases were also reported in the same place concerning Ahoms and tea-garden labourers.

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[283] Valuable inputs in this context were provided by Abhijit Bhuyan during an interaction at the Krishna Kanta Handique State Open University, Guwahati on 01.09.2017.

[284]No. 17: 129.

Incest also leads to expulsion from the *Namghar*. If the families concerned have eaten cooked food with the offender since the affair started, they are required to undergo *prayascitta* (penance). A public feast or *uddharani* also needs to be organised for the entire community of villagers in the *Namghar* before re-admission into it. If a man impregnates a girl outside of wedlock, he is expected to marry her. If he denies paternity, he is required to take an oath (*xopot*) on the *Bhagavata* in the *Namghar* which goes as "If I swear falsely, may I die within one month, or in a year"; or, "If I swear falsely, may my body become white (affected by vitiligo)." In the Panbari village, three cases of white leprosy were attributed to a false oath in a pregnancy case.[285] This also brings to light certain beliefs, although sometimes downplayed as false and superstitious, that are a part and parcel of these traditional institutions, in order to uphold the basic moral and ethical codes of conduct among people. The community, too, strongly adheres to these beliefs despite occupational diversification in the villages and their increasing contacts with the outside world.

It may be mentioned here that the prevalence of these beliefs and practices does not merely hold true in the case of *Namghars* in villages alone. In cities also, such practices prevail in the *Namghars* of particular localities called *suburis*. As a matter of fact, conducting any religious ritual is considered a bad omen during *Ambubachi*. The *Ambubachimela* is a four-day affair that marks the celebration of the annual menstruation of the Goddess at the Kamakhya temple, situated atop the Nilachal hills in Guwahati.[286] In the words of some common people of Kailash Nagar, Beltola "the doors of our temple and *Namghar* remain closed during this time of the year and even entering its premises, including for the purposes of brooming or cleaning, is strictly prohibited. If someone does so, it is a sin and he/she has to pay for it." This conversation during the course of the study brought to light an instance that happened few years back in the same area. Some people were performing *naam-prasanga* in the evening during *Ambubachi* in the Kailash Nagar *Namghar* which was met with vehement opposition from others in the *suburi* (locality) who interrupted the session and asked them to leave the *Namghar* premises immediately. As a result of this incident, relationships among

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[285] Ibid: 129-131.

[286] The Kamakhya temple is one of the 51 *Saktipeeths* or seat of the followers of the *Sakta* tradition among the Hindus, each representing a body part of Goddess *Sati*, companion of *Shiva*. The sanctum-sanctorum of the *Kamakhya Peetham* houses the *yoni* (female genital organ) of Sati, which is symbolised by a rock.

some members of these two groups of people at the personal level have remained hostile even to this day.[287]

Devotees throng the *Kamakhya Saktipeeth* on the occasion of *Ambubachi mela*.
Source: https://tourism.assam.gov.in//

Fissures in the Vaishnavite Movement – Causes and its Impact

Vaishnavism in Assam under the leadership of Srimanta Sankardeva contributed to the growth of an umbrella social formation in the region encompassing diverse castes, races and tribes. However, as a result of royal patronage bestowed on the *Sattras*, the power and influence of the *Sattradhikars* who mostly came from the upper strata of the society in terms of their caste positions, gradually increased. Hence, towards the latter period of the Ahom rule in Assam, Vaishnavism became a tool of social exploitation and domination in the hands of the ruling elites in a heterogeneous Assamese society. The *Sattras* were blessed with massive land endowments, manpower, and other gifts by the ruling class, which transformed them into powerful feudal institutions. Their entire organisational structure (from the *Sattradhikar* or abbot at the top to the *logua/pasoni* or servant/attendant at the bottom) became a mere replica of the hierarchical bureaucratic structure of the then ruling Ahom state. In Upper Assam, the royalist status of the four big *Sattras* (Auniati, Dakshinpat, Garmur, Kuruabahi) became almost institutionalised and the *Sattradhikars* came to enjoy all

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[287] Due permission was taken from the *Namghar* Committee members to incorporate this particular incident that came to light during the conversation with them as a part of the study.

the royal privileges and prerogatives.[288] With such developments, most of the *Sattras*, especially those with brahmin abbots, lost their earlier progressive thrust based on bringing about overarching socio-economic reforms. Thus, Vaishnavism no longer remained a people's religion that initially aimed at eliminating social hierarchies of caste, tribe, gender, etc.

The colonial era overhauled the erstwhile social and politico-economic structures of the Assamese society. It also created a class of native English-speaking dependents which relied heavily on the colonial dispensation for its sustenance.[289] Described loosely as the middle class, with strong agrarian links notwithstanding, its members were educated in the colonial education system introduced by Macaulay and the majority of them held petty and middle level offices under the colonial administrative regime. With the rising Sanskritising tendencies among the Assamese middle class mainly because of the spread of education and occupational diversification,[290] the *Sattras* too gradually moved towards stricter religious orthodoxy. Blatant forms of caste discrimination and untouchability came to sway the Assamese society like never before. The *Sattras* were supposed to work towards the welfare of their followers, especially those belonging to the tribal and marginalised castes. But, their role now merely came to be confined to that of the annual tithe (*guru kar*) collector. This attitude of the *Sattras* naturally had a very adverse socio-economic impact on the margnalised communities of the state.

The British generally pursued a *Sattra*-friendly policy. The bigger, state-patronised *Sattras*were not impacted adversely even by the colonial land revenue policy. However, the massive property and wealth amassed by these *Sattras* now became a source of bitter legal turmoil. Many *Sattradhikars* who led extravagant lives were now embroiled in tedious legal

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[288]A. Raychoudhury, "Navavaishnav Sattrar Artha-samajik Dixh: Eta Sameeksha," in *Oitijyo Aru Itihaash*, ed. S. Barman et al., (Nalbari: Journal Emporium, 2005), 43-48.

[289] C.K. Sharma, "Religion and Social Change," in *Religion and Society in Northeast India*, ed. Dambarudhar Nath (Guwahati: DVS Publishers, 2011), 120-125.

[290] C.K. Sharma cites an example of the newly emerging Assamese middle class elites, including several doyens of the Assamese society and culture like Gunabhiram Barooah, who exhibited a new Puritanism by their adherence to Sanskritic values and disdain towards the traditional folk culture. Sharma talks about how these intellectuals even went to the extent of describing even the Bihu performances as a licentious dance performed by the wild, uncivilised people, and therefore pleaded for the early banishment of this 'embarrassing' custom.

battles. In such a situation, the earlier perception of the common masses about the institution of the *Sattra* with a reformist orientation no longer held ground. The inroad of caste ideology including the practice of untouchability had become so deep that the *kaibarttas* or fishermen caste, including many other lower castes and tribal groups, were no longer allowed to enter into the *Namghars* (the main prayer hall) of the *Sattras*.[291] This discriminatory attitude of the *Sattras* also enraged the *Morans*, the *Suts* and other such communities.[292]

Since many *Sattradhikars* explicitly professed their loyalty to the British Raj,they were vehemently opposed to the national freedom movement. In turn, the bigger *Sattras* received numerous gifts and offerings of both property and money from the senior British officials and administrators. All these factors had gradually led to the transformation of the *Sattras*into bastions of orthodoxy and infighting, which implied that the potential of the *Sattra* as an institution of emancipation and social change was almost exhausted. Their catholic and humanistic outlook was lost which made them lose their earlier mass appeal. The teachings of the gurus continued to hold sway only at the liturgical level, but were weakened at the level of application.By the late 18th century, the Vaishnavite movement had branched off into numerous sub-sects, one of which called the *Moamoria* (corrupt form of *Mayamara*) became prominent mainly due to its enthusiastic admission of tribals, *kaibarttas*, and other lower-caste groups into its fold. The entry of fierce and hardy tribes such as the *Mataks* and the *Morans* into the *Moamoria* sect of the Vaishnavites soon transformed the very nature of the *Moamorias*. The increasing popularity of such unorthodox *Sattras* like the *Moamoria* had siphoned off the power of not only the orthodox Hindu upper caste *Sattradhikars* but also posed a formidable challenge to the *Sakta* worship cult supported by the Ahoms.[293] Moreover, these *Sattras* also provided refuge to those seeking to escape the *Paik* system of state-sponsored unpaid, forced labour, that formed the backbone of the Ahom state. Under the *Paik* system of the Ahoms, any able-bodied person, who was not a Brahmin or a nobleman could be employed in any form of labour, services or even conscripted into the army, without a choice of his own.

The rapid mushrooming of *Sattras*all over Assam belonging to the *Moamoria* sect thus led to the flight of thousands of subjects, including *Brahmanas* and *Gosains*, into their fold and

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[291] D. Sharma, *Axomiya Jatigathan Prakriya Aru Jatiya Janagosthigata Anusthan Samuh* (Jorhat: Ekalavya Prakashan, 2006), 63-64.

[292] Ibid: 64-65.

[293] No. 289.

away from the exploitative *Paik* system of labour. Thus, the state-patronised powerful *Sattras* and the*Sattradhikars* in charge of them, including the supporters of the *Sakta* order of the Ahoms, launched vehement theological attacks by encouraging pliant kings to either curtail or destroy the heretic *Sattras* of the *Moamaria* sect.[294] Periodic campaigns were launched in which many of these *Sattras* were destroyed and their leading priests and followers killed. However, the rising dominance of the *Morans* and similar such groups in the *Moamaria Sattra* challenging caste-based oppression and the *Paik* system of labour, could no longer be suppressed. It finally erupted in the *Moamaria* rebellion (1769 C.E.) when the *Moamaria* Guru and a few of his key disciples belonging to the *Moran* tribe were publicly humiliated and beaten by royal officials of the Ahom kingdom.

The *Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha*: Its Emergence and Objectives

The *Moamaria* rebellion is a significant event in the history of Assam which not only resulted in a gradual economic and political weakening of the then ruling Ahom dynasty, but also called for an overhaul in the way of functioning of the *Sattras* and their attitude towards the socially marginalised sections of the society. The transformation of the *Sattras* into an instrument of domination in the hands of the Assamese upper caste elite under the Ahoms was accompanied by a gross dilution of the core teachings of Sankardeva's philosophy of Vaishnavism. The vicious forms of casteism that had come to inflict these institutions threatened to tear apart the very fabric of the Assamese society. During this period, as in other parts of India, so also in Assam, several socially conscious individuals and groups came together, formed organisations and thereby embarked on a programme of reform. Literary stalwarts like Lakshminath Bezbaroah fought against various social evils such as caste and gender discrimination through the pen on the intellectual front, whereas, at the grass-roots level, numerous organizations like the Prarthana Sabha, Jnanamalini Sabha etc. held study circles, *Kirtana-Ghosha* reading sessions, religious seminars, etc. across the state.[295] These organisations sought to abolish caste and introduce widespread social reforms encompassing diverse sections of the society. However, the necessity of an umbrella organisation that could collectively voice the need for reforms within Vaishnavism was now increasingly felt.

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[294] Ibid.

[295] Bina Gupta, "Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha Over the Years," *A Tribute to Srimanta Sankardeva*, May 18, 2012, http://atributetosankaradeva.org/Sangha.com.

The *Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha*, the first such partisan neo-Vaishnavite organisation which came into existence in early 1931, has been a very strong critic of the upper caste ideology propagated by the *Sattras* and the discrimnatory attitude of the *Sattradhikas* of such *Sattras* towards the lower castes and the tribals, specifically. The origins of the *Sangha* can be traced back to the late 19th and the early 20th centuries in the district of Nagaon as a result of the sincere initiative undertaken by two men, Haladhar Bhuyan, the then President of the Nagaon District Congress and Ramakanta Atoi, a celibate devotee of the Kamalabari *Sattra* in Majuli who was then staying at the Bardowa *Sattra* in Nagaon. In the year 1928, they formed a small 'publicity centre' at Palasoni near Nagaon with the active support of the Jnanamalini Sabha. This centre was named as *Sankara Sangha* in 1930. Attracted by its emancipatory ideology, various reform organisations which had been actively engaged in reform activities since 1909-10 now came together under its fold[296] and as a result of this, the reform activity gained momentum. In its initial years, the *Sangha* was led by eminent scholars and intellectuals of the period such as Gopika Ballabh Goswami, Dambarudhar Baruah, Bhuban Chandra Bhuyan, Rameswar Barooah, et al.

Logo of the *Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha*. The centre represents the embodiment of Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankardeva himself. On the above is written 'Joy Guru Sankar', meaning, Long Live our Sankar (Sankardeva). On the bottom is written the name of the organisation itself, i.e. *Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha*.

The primary unit of association of the *Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha* is a branch (*sakha*) with a minimal membership fee of Rs. 25. The members need to pay a subscription fee annually, one-third of which is retained by the branch, with the rest being divided between the district

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[296] Ibid.

and the state funds. The President is addressed as the *Padadhikar*, who is the highest office-bearer as per the constitution of the *Sangha*. He is the official spokesperson of the organisation and presides over all its meetings. At present, he holds office for a period of two years.Since its inception, the *Sangha*has been the victim of vehement opposition from the protagonists of orthodoxy. Many public debates on matters of spirituality, theology and religion, besides development issues, etc. were organized across different places of Assam in which the *Sangha* registered impressive victories. Much of the credit behind the success of the *Sangha* during those early years can be attributed to Haladhar Bhuyan who was an excellent organizer and strategist.

As a result of all these factors, the credibility and popularity of the *Sangha* increased remarkably in due course of time. The first ever state-level committee of the *Sangha* was formed on February 4, 1934 in the *Sankaradeva Mandir* premises of Nagaon town. In the fourth conference (*adhibesan*), held in 1935 and presided over by the great litterateur Nilamani Phukan as the *Padadhikar*, the name of the organization was changed into *Sri Sri Sankaradeva Sangha*. This name was changed yet again in the North Lakhimpur session of the *Sangha* (1970), when it finally became known as the *Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha*. Its headquarters were established at Kalongpar in Nagaon district in July, 1969. Its cultural wing was started in 1957 followed by the formation of a literary wing. The latter has, over the years, brought out many important publications of books, journals, and monographs, chief among which are the complete works of Srimanta Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva, the 12 Cantos of the *Srimad-Bhagavata Gita*and the English translation of the *Kirttana*. Every annual session of the *Sangha* brings out the publication of a voluminous multi-lingual souvenir containing in-depth articles related to the socio-economic situation of Assam, including matters of religious interest to the masses. Certainly, the rise of the *Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha* has stimulated the growth of intellectual and literary activities in the state.

The *Sangha*has received the support and goodwill of a wide cross-section of the Assamese society from the very beginning. Enlightened *Sattradhikars* like Pitambar Deva Goswami of Auniati *Sattra*, Majuli, Tirthanath Goswami of Dhalar *Sattra*, Jorhat and others have presided over its annual sessions from time to time. On the suggestion made by Sahityarathi Lakshminath Bezbaroah, the new monthly journal of the *Sangha* was named as *Nama*

Dharma.[297] Except for a temporary break during the height of the freedom struggle, this journal has been regularly published and it is one of the oldest journals being published in India. The other journals published by the *Sangha* include *Mahapurusa Jyoti*, *Sankari Sanskritir Xubash*, and *Mahiyashi*. Many other intellectual stalwarts of Assam such as Dimbeswar Neog joined the *Sangha* in due course of time. The emphasis now was on the establishment of separate wings for the growth and nourishment of *Sankari* literature, heritage and culture.

Aims and Activities of the *Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha*

According to its constitution, the main objectives of the *SrimantaSankardeva Sangha* are as follows[298]:

➢ Correct interpretation of the tenets of the universal religion of Srimanta Sankardeva with the aim of contributing to the spiritual and social development of humankind, irrespective of race and caste.

➢ To keep intact the spirit of Sankardeva's *naam-kirtan,* dance, music and cultural traditions.

➢ To publish books, journals and booklets with the aim of spreading Sankardeva's literary, cultural and religious teachings and writings to the masses.

➢ To strive to create an integrated and unified society by spreading Sankardeva's *Mahapurushiya* ideals of religion, art and culture among different races and tribes of the plains and hills of the Northeast.

➢ To educate the common masses through competent people who are well-versed in the *Nama-Dharma* system of Sankardeva.

➢ To collect and publish the already published and unpublished Vaishnaviteworks and to edit these texts based on a correct and appropriate analysis of the major themes.

➢ To make people aware of the scientific dimensions of the religious, artistic and cultural ideals of Sankardeva, by bringing to light the false propaganda and distortions made by the *Sattradhikars*in the later stages that led to communal and racial animosity in the Assamese society.

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[297] Ibid.

[298] The Constitution of the *Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha* (2009), published for and on behalf of the *Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha* by the General Secretary, Nagaon, Assam: 1-3.

- ➤ To eradicate untouchability from the society through Sankardeva's teachings.
- ➤ To solemnize weddings as per the norms and rituals inspired by Sankardeva, without engaging Brahmin priests as the chief solemnisers.
- ➤ To undertake projects for the overall socio-economic upliftment of the common people, such as the setting up of educational institutions from schools to universities and research institutes in the name of Srimanta Sankardeva, aimed at the physical, moral, and spiritual development of the younger generation by providing them with value-based education.
- ➤ To take steps for safeguarding the national interest and ensuring the overall development of the society in cooperation with other social organisations with the approval of the Central executive committee of the *Sangha*.

As an institution, the *Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha* is organised on the basis of village, *mouza*, district, and Central level.[299] Its organisational structure consists of *prathamik sakhas* (primary units) at the grassroots' level. Above the *prathamik sakhas* there are *anchalik sakhas* which are constituted in a *mouza* at the intermediate level between a village and a district. The *zila sakhas* above the *anchalik sakhas* are constituted in the administrative sub-divisions of the Govt. of Assam. The central executive committee of the *Sangha* at its apex is known as the *Mul*. It consists of the *Padadhikar*, an *Upa-Padadhikar*, a *pradhan-sampadak* (chief secretary) and two joint secretaries.[300] Normally, the meetings of the central executive committee are held in its head office at Kalongpar, Nagaon. The *prathamik sakha*, generally centering around a *Namghar*, is the primary organ of the *Sangha*. It can also be constituted in a village, part of a village or in a well-organised area. Every *prathamik sakha* so organised is named unanimously by the members of the concerned *sakha*; as for example, *Sankari Sakha*, *Madhupur Sakha*, etc. A *prathamik sakha* convenes at least one general meeting in a year, commonly in the *Namghar*. Decisions are arrived at unanimously but in case of differences of opinion, the matter is decided by a majority vote.[301]

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[299] Ibid.

[300] Ibid.

[301] Information collected from interaction with a few office bearers of the *Sangha* of Jorhat *zila sakha* on October 28, 2017.

The *Sangha* consists of a total of nine *sakhas*, each comprising of a committee (*samiti*) composed of a varied number of members. They look after different aspects of the organisation. These are as follows[302]:

- *Saran* (Initiation) *sakha samiti* – it is entrusted with the responsibility of conducting the rituals of *saran* and *bhajan* for the initiates who enter the organisation for the first time.

- *Sahitya* (Literature) *sakha samiti* – its function is to constitute an editorial board to publish books, magazines, journals, and souvenirs of the *Sangha*. The *Sahitya Gabeshana Parishad* (Literature Research Council) of the *samiti* can appoint researchers for carrying out research work in the field of *Sankari* literature and culture.

- *Sanskriti* (Culture) *sakha samiti* – its function is to prepare a plan for the development, research and preservation of *Mahapurusiya kristi and sanskriti*, subject to the approval of the central executive committee of the *Sangha*. The *Sankari Sanaskriti Gobeshana Parishad* (Sankari Culture Research Council) of the *samiti* can not only appoint researchers but also edit research journals and books of art and culture.

- *Prachar* (Publicity) *sakha samiti* – its primary task is to supervise and publish the ideals and views of the organisation through various forms of mass media. It publishes handbills, posters and banners, with the approval of the central executive committee of the *Sangha*.

- *Grantha Bipanan* (Book-selling) *sakha samiti* – it makes necessary arrangements for the sale of books published by the *Sangha* on different occasions such as annual conferences, etc. The secretary of the *samiti* deposits the money collected from the sale of books every month into the account of the chief secretary of the *Sangha*.

- *Bartalochani Prakashan* (Newspaper publishing) *sakha samiti* – it is responsible for the publication of *Monikanchan*, the *Sangha*'s monthly mouthpiece. The chief secretary of the *Sangha* has been made in-charge of the publication.

- *Siksha* (Education) *sakha samiti* – its function is to open and manage schools in different places across Assam, especially economically backward areas.

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[302] No. 298: 5-8

- *Sewa Bahini Sanchalan* (Volunteer Work) *samiti* – it is constituted with a view to implement the programmes and policies of the *Sangha* for ensuring the welfare of various sections of the society.
- *Ai-Matri aru Shishu Kalyan* (Women and Child Welfare) *sakha samiti* – it implements programmes aimed at the welfare of women and children.

The *Sangha* has indeed come a long way since its birth way back in 1930. At present, it has evolved into one mighty organization comprising of about 7,000 *prathamik sakhas* which itself is a kind of record for any reformist organization in Assam. It plays an active role in checking various forms of proselytising activities undertaken by Christian missionaries all over Assam. It is the largest neo-Vaishnavite organisation in Assam today with a huge following especially among the lower castes. A number of workers and organisers from every branch of the *Sangha* go from house to house and arrange public meetings in likely areas. They have also actively worked for the social and economic upliftment of tea-garden labourers and tribal people spread across the state. In other words, because the *Sangha* is backed by a very strong organisational structure since its inception, this has largely been responsible for it being able to build an 'urban' base across the state which has helped in the spread of its ideas among all sections of the society, both rich and poor and upper and lower castes alike.

The *Sangha* has introduced a number of social welfare schemes, the most notable of which has been the setting up of a university, *Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankaradeva Viswavidyalaya*,a self-sustained venture which emphasises on moral and ethical education of the students in addition to the prescribed university curricula. It has also operationalized a bank in the interests of the poor and the deprived so as to implement the concept of micro-credit at the ground level. The youth wing of the *Sangha* which is based upon the notions of promoting the ideals ofnon-violence, fraternity and universal brotherhood, is engaged in youth empowerment activities through self-employment avenues in different parts of the state.[303] The *Sangha* has also set up schools by the name of *Srimanta Sankardeva Vidyalaya* in different parts of the state, which have made their mark as centres of both educational and cultural excellence. Besides, it has set up separate schools for the propagation of music and dance, both within and outside the state. As per data available in its website, the *Sangha*has provided more than Rs. 5 crore to its members for the setting up of small businesses and

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[303] For more information, visit www.attributetosankardeva.org/Sangha.com

conducting weddings of girls from poor families, and as well as educational loans and medical assistance to the economically backward sections. The *Sangha* has now expanded its sphere of influence to the Barak Valley too (considered to be the major bastion of Bengali Hindu migrants in Assam),and even outside Assam in places like Puri, Odisha.

The annual conference (*baarxik adhibesan*) of the *Sangha* which attracts people from different walks of life is held during the month of *Magh* or *Falgun* (January-February) every year, unless any unavoidable circumstances arise. People from nearby states and regions have also started taking part in the conferences of the *Sangha* of late. An important event during the annual *adhibesan* is the installation of the *Lai-Khuta* (main pillar) by the *Padadhikar* along with other office bearers of the organisation. It is accompanied by the beatings of *khol*, *taal* (cymbals), *doba* (drum), and *sankha* (conch-shells). Members of the respective *zila sakhas* themselves arrange the pandals for the conference; whereas, members of all the *prathamik sakhas* and the *anchalik sakhas*in places where the conference is organised donate bamboos and other articles of necessity for the construction of pandals and temporary huts for the delegates coming from different parts of the state to grace the occasion.[304] A cultural procession representing the regional spirit of both the plains and the hills people of Assam is also organised on the first day of the *baarxik adhibesan*. The *Bhagavata Gita* is carried out as a part of this procession which is accompanied by people performing *naam-kirtan* in chorus.[305] The discipline maintained by the delegates and the spectators alike during the *adhibesan* is remarkable. Food is cooked and distributed in a huge hall by the *Deoris* and *Bilonias* belonging to the respective *zila sakhas*.[306] The male members are addressed as *Bap* and the females as *Ai*.However, the *Sangha* as an institution has not been able to completely break apart the stronghold of caste, whether in its selection of key members or in the sphere of decision-making.[307]

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[304] Information obtained from a news article titled '*Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha'r Baarxik Adhibesan*' published in the *Dainik Asom* dated 28.01.2017.

[305] Information collected from attending the 81st and 87th annual conferences of the *Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha* at Kaliabor (Nagaon), 2012 and at Dergaon, 2016.

[306] Every *prathamik sakha* has its own *Deori* (cook) and *Bilonia* (distributor) who prepare the food and serve it among the guests. In the case of selection of these two persons, the required condition is that he must be an initiated member of the *Sangha*.

[307] Informal interaction with a few active members of the *prathamik* and *zila sakhas* of the *Sangha* in Nagaon, Jorhat, and Golaghat districts brought to light the fact that the post of the *Padadhikar* in the

As a result of the spread and extension of the activities of the *Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha* in different places all over Assam, simultaneously, the institution of the *Namghar* has also witnessed a phase of urban transformation in its growth and evolution with the times. This has heralded an era of change in some of its core belief systems and practices traditionally associated with its functioning. As an institution fulfilling the diverse social and cultural requirements of the society at large, the *Namghar* has been deeply influenced by the forces of modernisation and globalisation. However, an important finding of this research is the fact that the impact of modernisation and its associated social and economic changes has been felt more in the urban areas of Assam compared to the rural. Hence, it can be said that the rural and semi-urban Vaishnava population has still retained some of their age-old traditions and practices centering around the *Namghar*, although the same might not be said for the population in the cities and urban areas. For instance, traditionally speaking, in the month of *Bhadrapada* (August-September) considered as sacred among the Vaishnavas, *naam-prasangas* are still held everyday in the afternoon, but this rule is no longer strictly followed in the *Namghars* situated in cities because of various factors such as occupational demands of both men and women. Moreover, the emergence of the *Sangha*in the socio-political arena of the state has posed a challenge to the authority and legitimacy previously enjoyed by the *Sattras* and their affiliated *Namghars*.

Towards a Comprehensive Understanding of the Ideology of the *Sangha*

The primary concern of the *Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha* is to put an end to all forms of class and caste distinctions among people, besides other practices that have crept into the Vaishnava faith in the later stages and which earlier were not a part of it, e.g. idol worship, animal sacrifice, etc. which originally did not find a place in the Vaishnava philosophy of Srimanta Sankardeva. The teachings of the *Sangha*are based upon the primary texts of the founders of *Mahapurusiya Naam-Dharma*, i.e. Sankardeva's *Gunamala* and Madhavdeva's

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Sangha has traditionally been held by a member of the upper caste, chiefly *Gosains* and *Mahantas*; and the posts of the *Deoris* and *Bilonias* have largely went to the lower castes and tribes. Moreover, on many occasions, the *Sangha* has taken a rigid stance on matters such as the rearing of poultry for meat, pigs and ducks, etc. by the unemployed youth, sometimes even adopting extreme measures such as social boycott of such people and their entire families. This has also alientated the tribal population of the state to a large extent, who are mostly meat-eaters, and also raised several questions regarding the ideology of the *Sangha* and whether it has been able to provide a viable alternative to the *Sattra* system and the *Namghars*.

Naam-Ghosha. The *Sangha* has re-interpreted these original texts mainly with the aim of challenging the mis-interpretations of the *Sattradhikars*, and thereby provide a fresh image of the past that is in consonance with their aspirations for bringing about radical social change in the present context. They make appeals to the universalism and humanist outlook of the *Bhagavata Purana* with its emphasis on salvation for all, irrespective of caste or tribe. According to the *Sangha*, the fundamental principles of the Vaishnava faith as enunciated by Srimanta Sankardeva have become distorted over time under the *Sattradhikars*, and people should be made aware about it so that the long-held influence and control of the *Sattras* over the Vaishnavite way of life and religious practices is eventually brought to an end.

The traditional institution of the *Namghar*, however, has still remained intact despite the emergence of the *Sangha* as a reformist organisation in Assam and the challenge that it poses to the authority and legitimacy of the *Sattra* system and the *Namghars* associated with them. Members of the *Sangha* generally have their own *Namghars*, both in the villages and cities. They are strictly against the worship of other gods and goddesses (primarily those associated with the *Sakta*/*Sakti* cult of the Hindus) other than Vishnu or Krishna, which was orginally endorsed by Sankardeva. Hence, they do not participate in the festivities of Durga Puja or Kali Puja because it represents the worship of *Sakti*, i.e. force or energy, which, they argue,is not a part of pure Vaishnavism. If any family/individual belonging to the *Sangha*practices idol worship or any other gods/goddesses other than Vishnu or Krishna, they might face social ostracism along with the payment of fine.[308] For this purpose, *mels*are called in the *Namghar* affiliated to the *Sangha* in the respective place where these violations take place. All members belonging to the *Sangha* in the locality are a part of these *mels*and a few influential and learned members from distant places are also informed to attend them. Decisions are arrived at collectively through consensus. Moreover, followers of the *Sangha* are strictly not permitted to partake of the *prasad* or offerings from temples dedicated to the worship of other gods and goddesses, even though they can enter the temple premises. For them, it is only in the *Namghar* where the Supreme Being symbolised by the *Bhagavata Purana*resides and no other religious place can therefore be equalled in status with it.

Talking about the worship of *Sakti*, mention here may be made of the festival of *Ambubachi* which is celebrated annually during the Assamese month of *Ahaad* around mid-June. Associated with the Tantric *Sakta* cult and the worship of the female menstrual cycle, it is one of the most awaited fairs in the *KamakhyaSaktipeeth* of Assam. It is widely believed that

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[308] No. 15.

the menstrual bleeding of Mother Earth (symbolised in the *yoni* or female genital organ of *Ma Kamakhya*) at this time is endowed with a unique creative and nurturing power which becomes accessible to the devotees who throng this fair. The doors of the *Kamakhya*temple and all other religious places of worship in Assam including *Namghars* remain closed for three days during *Ambubachi* as Mother Earth is considered to be menstruating. The analogy here is made with a woman who is restricted from entering any religious place of worship while she is on her menstrual cycle every month.[309] However, the *Sangha* does not follow these rituals related to menstrual seclusion associated with *Ambubachi*; their *Namghars* remain open as usual with no restrictions on performing *naam-prasanga* as well. They argue that if Mother Earth is compared with a woman, then the question arises as to how menstruation can take place in a woman/Goddess after a gap of a period of one year, since menstruation is a natural monthly process. Hence, all those activites which are otherwise not undertaken during *Ambubachi* by other Vaishnavas such as religious worship, ploughing, etc. are performed by the *Sangha* without any fear of social sanction.

Aghoris and the Tantric *Sakta* cult of worship at *Kamakhya Saktipeeth* on the occasion of *Ambubachi mela*, Guwahati.
Source: https://tourism.assam.gov.in//

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[309] During several interactions with women across both rural and urban Assam, an interesting fact that came to light was that most of these women who still religiously follow the various rituals associated with menstruation, are not concerned about patriarchy or what modern science has to say about the same. For most women, it is primarily their reverence to an age-old belief system that they want to keep intact. According to Ayurveda, women are more likely to absorb other energies (*urja*) in their nearby environment during their menstrual period, and this forms the basis of most of the cultural practices associated with menstruation in India. It is believed that women who are menstruating should not be disturbed, so that her natural cleansing and downward flow of energy can freely happen, before her next fertile reproductive phase begins.

In the Hindu Sanatan Dharmic framework of understanding, something which is pure is not to be touched so as to preserve its purity and cleanliness. Viewed from this perspective, a menstruating woman is a symbol of purity and hence, she is worshipped as a living goddess in this culture during that time of the month. If analysed merely from the binary viewpoint of purity versus pollution, something which cannot be touched is automatically categorised as a taboo. However, the reason for not permitting a woman on her menstrual cycle to visit a temple is precisely that since she is a living goddess, the energy of the God/Goddess which has been present in the *murthi* (idol) or the *Bhagavata Purana* in the case of Namghars, since the time of its *pran-pratishtha*, will move over to the woman. In such a case, the idol or the sacred book that is the personification of God himself becomes lifeless while the menstruating woman is life. In its opposition to everything that is in some way or the other related with *Sakta* traditions, the *Sangha* has overlooked some of these basic belief systems and the practices associated with them. The latter have helped a community (here, the Vaishnavas) to not only establish an identity of their own through institutions like the *Namghar* which are very much a part of these Indic values and the Hindu system of thought, but also gain a presence for themselves in the socio-political affairs of the state through the *Namghar*.

Moreover, the most commonly prevailing notion about the impurity of menstrual blood which is thought to make a woman "impure" during that time can be questioned on the ground that in some Indian cultures, even today, the menstrual blood is deeply revered because it is believed to be bestowed with the potent power to heal.[310] For instance, in the Northeast Indian state of Manipur, the cloth into which a girl first bleeds is safely kept aside by her mother to be later gifted back to her at the time of her marriage. This cloth is believed to be immensely powerful, so much so that it is capable of protecting the girl and her husband's family from poor health and financial problems. In the *Kamakhya Saktipeeth* in Assam and also in the *Bhagawathi* temple at Chengannur in Kerala, a piece of red cloth is distributed among the devotees, both men and women alike, after the end of three days when the mesntrual process of the Goddess ends and the temple doors are opened again. In popular belief, this particular red cloth is considered to be the cloth into which the Goddess

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[310] No. 242: 68-75.

menstruates and a long queue of devotees gather on the very first day of reopening of the temple to collect this cloth as it is believed to be highly auspicious.

Since fire (*Agni*) is considered both the creator and the destroyer of life, it plays a very important role in various aspects of the Hindu tradition, including cremation of the dead, worship of important deities through sacrifices and offerings, etc. Fire is one the most traditional forms of producing heat because of which Hindus started to worship fire as a means of conveying their respect for the varied powers that it grants. In Hindu marriages too, the *Saptapadi* (Sanskrit term for seven steps/feet) is the most important ritual which is known as *Vivaha-homa*. The couple takes seven rounds of the holy fire, which is considered a witness to the vows that they make to each other. However, the *Srimanta SankardevaSangha* is firmly opposed to this traditional Hindu wedding ritual of *homa* before *Agni* because it is conducted by brahmana priests. In fact, they are opposed to any form of worship involving tree, stone, plant or fire. It is precisely because of this reason that no such ritual involving fire called *homa*, takes place during their marriage ceremonies; instead, only *naam-prasanga* along with the reading of *shlokas* from the *Bhagavata* takes place and the bride and the groom seek blessings in front of the same. Some staunch Vaishnavas who are members of the *Sangha* even go to the extent of not attending those marriage ceremonies conducted through *homa*, including those of their near and dear ones. Even if they attend, they are not supposed to eat the food served in the marriage.[311] A book titled *Bibah-paddhati* published by the literary wing of the *Sangha* and authored by Gopika Ballabh Goswami and Bhuban Chandra Bhuyan, describes in detail the ways of conducting a Hindu wedding through *naam-prasanga* alone. Such a marriage ceremony is conducted by the *Acharya*, as per the *bibah-bidhi* prepared by the *Sangha*, in which the chanting of Vedic mantras is strictly prohibited.

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[311] This came to light during the course of a detailed conversation with a few members of the *Sangha* at Rajamaidam in Jorhat on 17.12.2017. Pabitra Baruah, an employee of Lakhimi Gaonlia Bank, Jorhat Branch, and an active member of the *Sangha*, had attended the marriage of his niece but left before the main *homa* ceremony was conducted by brahmana priests. Healso said that he and hisfamily, by virtue of the only reason of attending the marriage conducted through *homa*, later underwent *prayascitta* (penance) before the members of the *Sangha* through *naam-prasanga* at his home. He further said, "If any of my own daughters gets married to a boy whose parents are not members of the *Sangha*, I cannot give them in *kanyadaan* myself, and somebody else from among my nearest relatives will have to do it. I will consider it as my destiny." Due permission has been taken from Mr. Pabitra Baruah to incorporate this particular incident that came to light during the conversation as a part of the study.

Any function such as *Bibah-Paddhati*, *Prasanga-Pranali*, *Aasouch-Paddhati* performed other than the rules and norms prescribed by the *Sangha* is punishable and its membership is automatically lost in such a case.[312]All the members of a *prathamik sakha* of the *Sangha* togetherundertake the responsibility of arranging any social function, e.g. marriage ceremony, death ceremony, or annual *naam-prasanga*that is held in a *Sangha*household. The *prathamik sakha* trains its members for performing *naam-kirtan* and other religious activities. The *Patheki* who reads the *Bhagavata* or *Naam-Ghosha* does not wear any cloth in the upper portion of his body except a *seleng-saador* (a form of traditional Assamese attire worn over a *suria* or dhoti) while performing *naam*.[313] All the *prathamik sakha*members actively participate in any function organized by any household in the area. It is compulsory for every such *sakha* to organize and celebrate the birth anniversaries of both Sankardeva and Madhavdeva in the month of *ahin* (September-October) and in the month of *jaishtha*(May-June) respectively. Unlike other Vaishnavas, the *Sangha* does not celebrate the *tithis* (death anniversaries) of the Vaishnava saints because in their opinion, their Gurus have never died and still continue to live as Supreme Beings on this earth.

The emergence of the *Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha* has, in several ways, further intensified the already existing divisions among the community of the Assamese Vaishnava Hindus. For instance, during *naam-prasangas*held in a household belonging to the *Sangha*, only thosewho are members of the organisation are supposed to be involved in the cooking of food and also the distribution of the *maah-prasad* (ritual offering to the deity consisting of raw pulse mixed with ginger, coconut and a pinch of salt). It is because they believe that only those who have taken *saran* (initiation) before the guru (head of the *Sangha*) are entitled to take part in such activities. The *orihona* (offering to the guru mainly in the form of cash) is not made in the name of the *Patheki* who performs the *naam*. Instead, it goes to the collective community fund of the *Sangha* which is later utilised for the purpose of various welfare activities.[314] This stands in sharp contrast to *naam-prasangas* held in other Vaishnava households which are not

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[312] Ibid.

[313] Information obtained after attending a *naam-prasanga* in the house of a member of Dhekiyal Gaon *prathamik sakha* under the Dergaon *zila sakha* of the *Sangha* held on the *doha* (10th day of the deceased) on April 18, 2017.

[314] Information obtained in the course of an interaction with a few members during an annual *naam-prasanga* conducted in a household professing their allegiance to the *Sangha*, at Beltola, Guwahati on May 5, 2017.

a part of the *Sangha*. There is no such concept of a community fund among them and the chief *bhakat* who performs the *naam* is sometimes given more of the amount of *orihona* as a gesture of special respect. This practice is vehemently opposed by the *Sangha* who argues that in the garb of honour and respect, the *Sattradhikars* in charge of the *Sattras* and the *bhakats* in charge of the *Namghars* have been primarily responsible for the perpetuation of brahmanical orthodoxy. According to them, both the *bhakat* (guru) and the *bhakta* (disciple) are equal in the eyes of *Param Brahma* (the Supreme Lord), and hence both deserve equal treatment.[315] This they have done by not only making references to the teachings of Sankardeva but also by quoting different passages from the *Bhagavata Purana* in order to assert the authenticity of their claim. All these activities, through which the Assamese Vaishnavas identify themselves as a close-knit community distinguished by one common faith, are central to the functioning of the *Sangha* and both the *Sattras* and the *Namghars*.

As the primary center of worship for the Assamese Vaishnavas, the *Namghar* acts as the central unifying force for the *Sangha*. However, certain minute but very important details in the way the *Namghars* of the *Sangha* are organised need to be taken note of in this respect. For instance, the *gamochas* adorning the *thapana* placed in the *manikut* (sanctum-sanctorum) of their *Namghars* are devoid of the star-shaped flowers made of silver which are a common feature in any other *Namghar*. The *Sangha* believes that these silver flowers on the *gamochas* signify a mark of luxury and wealth which defies the ideals of simplicity and austerity propagated by the Vaishnava faith of Srimanta Sankardeva. Hence, the donations of these flowers in the *Namghars* of the *Sangha* are strictly prohibited.[316] On the other hand, in the case of other *Namghars*, these flowers are generally donated by devotees as a gift to their God either before undertaking any important task in life or upon the fulfillment of their any special wish.

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[315]No. 17: 129.

[316] Valuable information provided in this regard by Mr. Pabitra Baruah and Mrs. Anjali Baruah of Rajamaidam, Jorhat. Both are active members of the *Sangha*.

Silver flowers adorning the *thapana* of the *manikut* of the *Dhekiakhowa Bornamghar*, Jorhat. Vaishnava devotees who are a part of the *Sangha* and those who are not a part of it too, visit this historic *Namghar* as a mark of utmost devotion and respect.

Source: https://tourism.assam.gov.in//

Hence, as can be discerned from the discussion above, the *Sangha* religiously adheres to the principle of monotheism in all forms of worship and religious rituals conducted in their *Namghars*. In order to establish the veracity of their claim that Srimanta Sankardeva was firmly against polytheism, especially idol worship, they make the following references from the *Bhagavata Purana*:

"Do not bow down before other gods and goddesses;

Partake not of their offerings;

Look not upon their images, enter not their temples;

Lest thy faith be vitiated.[317]

Although those who are not members of the *Sangha* do not deny the authenticity of these verses from the *Bhagavata*, they, however, are of the opinion that Sankardeva himself was married as per the Hindu ceremony of *Vivaha-hom* and also offered *pinda* on the death of

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[317] Srimanta Sankardeva, *Bhagavata Purana* II (Nagaon: Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha, 2001), V. 545.

both his parents.[318] Hence, this version does not correspond with the one provided by the *Sangha*. Members of the *Sangha* perform the ceremony of *Shraddha* on the death of their parents only through *naam-prasanga*, and hence do not make any other offerings (*dakshina*) to brahmana priests, which, in their opinion, further legitimises the hierarchical social order of the caste system. The male members (sons) also do not shave off their head, as is customarily done by Hindus upon their parents' death.[319]Hair signifies the *tamasik* tendency in humans and its removal symbolically frees them of the inherent ignorance and thereby prepares them for taking up the responsibilities left behind by the deceased ones. But, the *Sangha* rejects all these arguments put forward by other Vaishnavas as dubious claims and spurious additions later interpolated by the brahmanas and especially the *Sattradhikars*for the fulfillment of their own selfish interests.[320] They thus prefer to rely mostly upon the writings of Sankardeva himself rather than his biographies or hagiographies that were written several years after his death.

Therefore, in an attempt to undermine the supremacy of authority exercised by the *Sattradhikars* and *gosains* over the basic tenets of the Vaishnava philosophy and ideology, the esoteric *mantras* used by them for the purpose of initiation or *saran* into Vaishnavism has been described by the *Sangha* as '*fake things introduced by the Sattradhikars for saving their*

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[318] In order to pave the way for the dead/departed souls attain salvation (*moksha*), *Pind-daan* is mandatory for all Hindus, for it is believed to help help the living to attain the goodwill of their dead forefathers before undertaking any important project. Performing of *Pind-daan* as per the specific Vedic rituals at Gaya, Haridwar, Badrinath, and Triveni Sangam at Allahabad (now Prayagraj) are considered as auspicious among the Hindus.

[319]*Mundan* (hair removal) is a sign of purification observance that the male family members in a Hindu household especially those performing the last rites are expected to undergo. It is believed that this act of tonsuring prepares them to both physically and mentally perform the customary last rites of death of their near and dear ones. When an elderly member is dead, the gap created by their absence in the family might make the younger members arrogant. But, *mundan* reminds them of the fact that they ought to exhibit their obedience by shedding off of all their ego and arrogance. Moreover, it is also a non-verbal way of communicating to others that the concerned members in the family are in a state of mourning because of some untoward incident that happened in their family. The *Sangha*, however, argues that if hair is to be shaved, then bits of hair present in each and every body part needs to be shaved and not just that of the head.

[320] No. 35: 124.

own power.'[321] As a counter-measure, the *Sangha* has introduced in each district of Assam an Initiation Committee. Three to seven members of this Committee are required to be present during the initiation (*saran lua*) ceremony. In the form of *saran* adopted by the *Sangha*, Sankardeva and Madhavdeva are presented to the initiate as the sole gurus of Vaishnavism and not those who give initiation. However, the significance of the ritual of *saran lua* or initiation is no longer attached much importance nowadays by the *Sangha* primarily on the ground that if a man reads the *Bhagavata Purana* everyday, initiation becomes unnecessary.[322] In order to bring about unity and solidarity among the followers of *Eka Saran Naam Dharma*, the *Sangha* has made it compulsory for its devotees and followers to keep the sacred *Gunamala* authored by Sankardeva himself at the altar of the *manikut* and no idol or image of any god/goddess should be substituted in its place.

The most significant contribution of the *Sangha* has been that it has redefined the concept of untouchability. Members of the *Sangha* sit together and eat with all those who have joined their organisation, including shudras and other castes formerly considered as 'untouchable'. However, the *Sangha* has also faced several internal splits in its organisation when a majority of its *kaibartta* followers came out of it and founded the *Ekasaran Bhagabati Samaj* – a meeting ground of indigenous Assamese communties and various tribal groups including tea-garden workers – under the able leadership of Acharya Ilaram Das, a devout votary of *Mahapurusiya Dharma*. Besides, a section of the lower caste followers have also left their former membership of the *Sangha*.[323] To cite as an example, a follower of the *Sangha* belonging to the *Mising* community (a plains tribe of Assam)had to abandon its membership on the issue of rearing of pigs. From instances like these, an inference can be made here that while in the past the *Sattras* had been largely negligent in bringing about reforms in the social life of the tribals and lower castes of Assam, these new neo-Vaishnavite outfits like the *Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha* have often become insensitively over-zealous in implementing their agenda of social reform among these groups.

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[321] Tirthanath Goswami, *Guru-Shishya'r Prosnottor*, incorporated in *Naam Dharma*, Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha, 1969.

[322] No. 35: 127-130.

[323] No. 5: 125.

Way Forward for the *Sangha*

Despite all the schisms, Vaishnavism still wields considerable influence among a sizeable section of the backward and lower caste people in the state of Assam. Even in the contemporary times, the importance and role of Vaishnavite institutions like the *Sattras* and the *Namghars* cannot be downplayed in the social and political affairs of the state. Breakaway neo-Vaishnavite factions such as the *Sangha* need to adopt a more liberal and people-sensitive approach based on an agenda aimed at the socio-economic upliftment and empowerment of the socially marginalised and deprived sections of the society. Such an approach becomes all the more urgent considering various discouraging trends as mentioned above that have emerged of late within neo-Vaishnavism.

Although the *Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha* as an organisation has a largely urban base, it has its own affiliated *Namghars* in the villages too, which has led to several rifts within the community that play out in the village among the *Sattras* and the *Namghars* in diverse ways.*Namghars* which are a part of the *Sangha* oppose the entire structure and ways of functioning of other *Namghars*, including their membership,on the ground that under the powerful influence of the *Sattradhikars*, the latter have become a mere replica of the hierarchical order of the *Sattras*. This has perpetuated the already existing divisions of caste in the Assamese society. In a new trend, Sankardeva as an icon in the cultural history of the state is now being gradually appropriated by political parties in the name of garnering votes of the large community of the Assamese Vaishnavas. For instance, the *Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha* invited Prime Minister Narendra Modi to speak on 'Nationalism and Cultural Identity' at its 85th*barxik adhibexan* (annual conference), 2016 where an estimated 1.5 million people visited the four-day event in which Rs. 1 crore was collected in the form of public donations alone.[324]

Recently, Assamese Vaishnavas have been reorganising to create a new space for themselves in the politics of the state. Under the leadership of the *Sangha* and a few *Sattradhikars* of Majuli, they have partnered with the current dispensation at the Centre which explicitly espouses the ideal of *rashtravaad* (nationalism). They have vehemently criticised the proselytising activities of the Christian missionaries in Majuli island, where the phenomenon of increasing incidences of conversion into Christianity among the *Misings* has generated heated discussions in the media and among social activists as well as the academia.The

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[324] Website of the Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha (atributetosankardeva.org/Sangha.html)

proselytisers have been carrying out a vicious campaign against Vaishnavism and the traditional belief-systems of the *Misings*, urging them againt worshipping "heathen gods" and promising deliverance if they convert. Christian converts aside, the issue of illegal immigration from neighbouring Bangladesh has created much furore among the "Assamese" as a community.[325]The 2001 Census of the Government of India revealed that there were three million Muslims living in the country who were born in Bangladesh. Issues of land encroachment and the worsening man-to-land ratio in a primarily agriculture-based economy like that of Assam have been largely attributed to the increasing influx of migrants from neighbouring Bangladesh both through the porous land border and riverine routes. This has assumed a religious dimension, leading to an outburst of anger and despair in the Assamese public discourse for quite sometime. Some accuse the Congress party, which had ruled the state for nearly 15 years, as being complicit in this influx, since it made significant gains from 'bogus' voters. As a result, the issue of illegal immigration has become one of the chief themes in the politics of the state and it is also closely linked with the politics of the *Sattras*.

According to a recent publication of the *Axom Sattra Mahasabha*, 7,000 bighas of land belonging to the *Sattras* alone have been encroached by illegal immigrants, amounting to almost 85% of the total land area of 39 *Sattras* in Assam combined.As a response to the same, former Chief Minister of Assam Tarun Gogoi claimed that land-grabbing of the *Sattras* is nothing but a myth that has been widely circulated in the public domain so as to create space enough for faciliating the politics of identity in the state and also to retain the material benefits, special powers and privileges enjoyed by the *Sattradhikars* for long. According to Mayur Bora, Assamese author and political columnist, "*Sattra* land encroachment is a 'politics of convenience' that has always been a mainstay of the *Sattras* which practice the

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[325] "Assamese" here specifically refers to the Hindus. It is because several field-based interactions with the common people across Upper Assam as well as Lower Assam, spanning rural and urban areas both, have lent credence to the popular opinion that the immediate threat and public enemy of the native Assamese Hindus are the Muslims. A *Sangha* worker (X) in Majuli, said, "All the Muslims residing here are presumed to be Bangladeshi until proven innocent. If the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill, 2016 paves the way for an increase in the population of the Hindus, even though Bangladeshi Hindus, we have no problem with that because by any means, the ever-increasing population of these Muslims need to be checked." He also attributed the increasing rate of crimes like rape, child molestation, etc. in Assam to the expanding Muslim population.

politics of status-quo."[326]The current BJP government's co-optation of Sankardeva's call for achieving a common brotherhood, unity and solidarity of the "Assamese" people under one *Bharatvarsha* is rather an implicit move to check all forms of foreign threats to the state and its culture. With this motive in mind, the *Sangha* has closely aligned its ideology with the *Akhand-Bharat* ideal of the BJP-RSS by rallying its active Vaishnava members in favour of the BJP for electoral gains, thereby giving rise to a 'politics of convenience' that is gradually emerging in the socio-political discourse of the state.

The solution to the problems facing the *Sattras* today lies in reforming their own weaknesses that have crept into their organisation over time. Their long-held legitimacy among the community of the followers of *Mahapurusiya Naam-Dharma* in Assam has been challenged by the emergence and rising popularity of neo-Vaishnavite organisations like the *Sangha*. It has contributed in various ways to make the common people of Assam aware about the deeply discrimnatory practices of the *Sattras* and the attitudes of the upper-caste *Sattradhikars* towards other lower-caste groups and tribes. However, the manner in which organisations such as the *Sangha* responds to the numerous socio-political and economic problems and challenges affecting the state will eventually determine its role and position in the larger political discourse of contemporary Assam. It seems that many a times, while addressing the issue of alienation of the lower castes and backward communities in the hands of the *Sattras*, the *Sangha* has adopted an immature and insensitive approach in the garb of social reform, as seen in the example cited above regarding the issue of rearing of pigs. It needs to strike at the very roots of the problems that are a part of thesocio-economic fabric of the present-day society in Assam so that it can offer a viable solution to the real ground-level problemsimpacting the *Sattras*, both within and outside. The strict monotheism professed by the *Sangha*is a negation of people's diverse religious beliefs and practices that are a part of their own individual freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution of India.

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[326] Interview with Mayur Bora in Guwahati on 27.10.2017.

Chapter – 5

EXPLORING THE MULTIDIMENSIONAL ROLE OF THE *SATTRA &* THE*NAMGHAR*VIS-À-VIS THE *SRIMANTA SANKARDEVA SANGHA*: A FIELD STUDY

In order to understand the role of traditional institutions in decision-making in matters impacting the community, they need to be understood as structures that are deeply embedded within the context from which they have emerged. *Namghars* of the *Sangha* are historically located in a distinct socio-political context, which, in turn, is reflected in their functioning and the way decisions are being arrived at. The *Sangha* does not permit its members to partake of the *prasad* or offerings made in temples dedicated to various gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon and where idol worship is performed, even though they can enter the temple. For them, it is only in the *Namghar* where the formless (*niraakar*)Supreme Being resides symbolised in the *Bhagavata Purana*and no other religious place of worship can thus be equated in status with it.As a challenge to the hierarchy of the caste system, it has been mentioned earlier that members of the *Sangha* eat with shudras and other lower castes who have joined their organisation. However, interestingly, they refuse to eat with other Vaishnavas who are not members of the *Sangha* and who observe Vedic rituals that are opposed by the *Sangha*.[327] Thus, in this sense, in their opposition to caste and the most degrading forms of untouchability that had been practised by the *Sattradhikars* for long against the tribals and other lower castes, the *Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha* has entrenched the already existing divisions and given rise to new parochial differences of religious practices and ways of lives of the people, instead of eliminating the same.

Historically speaking, at the local level of the community, the state and its maze of bureaucratic procedures seemed to be a distant entity for the expression and redressal of people's demands and grievances. This, combined with the existing socio-economic and political conditions of the times when the state, as understood in the modern formal sense of the term,did not exist, gave rise to community institutions such as the *Namghar*. These institutions provided a platform for people at the grassroots to raise their voices and also get them heard at the higher level of decision-making of the state. It is in this and numerous other

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[327]Information provided in this regard by a couple from Rajamaidam, Jorhat. Both husband and wife are active members of the *Sangha*. Names not cited here on condition of anonymity.

ways that the linkage between the traditional and the modern and the inherent ambiguity associated with both these concepts has been explored in the theoretical part of this research. With reference to the *Namghar* as a traditional institution in Assam, it has been argued earlier that since no society and its people are immune to change, the same holds true for institutions as well, both modern and traditional or those in transition from the modern to the traditional and vice-versa.

Traditional institutions too, experience change in their ethos and value-systems with the changing times and circumstances. The *Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha*, a neo-Vaishnavite outfit, was initially formed with the assistance of a number of *Sattradhikars* of different *Sattras* and poor *Gosains* of many *Namghars* spread across the state. They were opposed to the discriminatory practices adopted by the *Sattras* towards lower castes and tribal groups of the state as a result of the impact of Brahmanism towards the latter period of the Ahom rule. These *Sattradhikars* and *Gosains*, however, later withdrew when the *Sangha*began to take an extreme position on certain socio-cultural issues, e.g. pig-rearing.[328]By undertaking such measures without due consensus, the *Sangha* has further created new divisions and dissensions among people in terms of their food habits and religious practices, or even in some cases, reinforced the already existing divisions. During field-level interaction with a few workers of the *Sangha* in Jorhat, it was revealed that the *Sangha*strictly prohibits the consumption of pork or bacon among its members, including the rearing of pigs. Violation of this norm can lead to their expulsion from the organisation.[329] However, it may be mentioned

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[328] The *Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha* is touted as the largest socio-religious organisation in the state of Assam. Recently, one of its units (*prathamik sakhas*) socially boycotted a family from Biswanath Chariali, Tezpur belonging to the 'Nath' community from associating with it, primarily because of the reason of starting a pig farm in their home as a means of earning their livelihood. The ground that was cited by the *Sangha* workers behind such a step was that the rearing of pigs is not a tradition among the non-tribal Assamese unlike the tribals. However, it needs to be mentioned here that although pork was relished only among some communities of Assam till a few decades ago, pork meat is today fast gaining in popularity in the state, especiallyamong the youth, both tribals and non-tribals. As per data available in the website of the Department of Agriculture, Cooperation and Farmers' Welfare, Govt. of India, two-thirds of India's annual pork production is consumed in North-eastern India alone.

[329] On this issue, Manoj Kumar Basumatary, President of the North-East Progressive Pig Farmers' Association (NEPPFA), said, "If the *Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha* has taken such an ill-informed decision, it must also equally have better ideas to implement on the ground for encouraging self-employment opportunities among the unemployed youth of the state. Or else it should just stop

here that the top-level office bearers of the *Sangha* have staunchly denied the existence of any such rules within their organisation.[330]Those associated with the *Sangha* right from the initial days of its formation, have openly voiced their resistance against the institution of the *Sattra* and its unquestionable hold over the Assamese society. They have vociferously protested against the partisan role of the*Sattradhikars* associated with these *Sattras*for corrupting the spiritual aspect of the faith promulgated by Sankardeva and thereby robbing it of its original mass appeal. However, how far the *Sangha* itself has been successful in carving out a new "identity" of the Assamese community and along what lines as a whole still remains a matter of debate.

Majuli – A Brief Introduction of its History, Geography, and Culture

The word 'Majuli', also known as *Majali* or *Mojali*, stands for a piece of land encircled by river water. *Maj* in Assamese implies the one which is in between or central. Literally, the word 'Majuli' in Assamese language means "island in between"; hence, Majuli has supposedly derived its name from its location between two streams – Lohit and Kherkutia. Majuli has been formed by the river Brahmaputra in the south and the Kherkutia Xuti, a branch of the Brahmaputra that is joined by the Subansiri river in the north. Thus, Majuli is surrounded by three rivers – the Brahmaputra to the south and the Subansiri and the Kherkutia in the north bank. The only river that flows inside Majuli is the Tuni. Majuli also has a large number of dead river channels, which have now been converted into either ponds or *beels* that form the breeding grounds of rich flora and fauna unique to this region.E.g. *Chakoli beel* located 1.5km west of *Kamalabari Sattra*, is famous as a nesting and breeding ground for migratory birds during the winter season. Majuli is a river island, a water-locked inhabited zone that was formally declared as the first island district of India on September 8, 2016. Majuli is situated at 85 metres above the sea level and is at a distance of about 40 kilometres from Jorhat town. It is accessible by ferries from nearby Neematighat area, which is situated at a distance of around 15 kilometres from Jorhat town. The other mainland towns in proximity to Majuli on the north bank are North Lakhimpur and Dhakuwakhana.To its

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interfering unnecessarily and let the youth take up whatever helps them to be financially secure." NEPPFA was set up in the year 2018 and it comprises of more than 200 members spanning over the states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, and Nagaland.

[330] Babul Bora, *Padadhikar* of the *Sangha* said, "Our organisation does not have any rule against members starting pig or chicken farms. The local unit may have taken such a step based on certain specific issues concerning that particular village."

southeast and southwest are situated the towns of Sivasagar and Golaghat, and on its extreme east is Dibrugarh district.

The history of the island of Majuli begins in the 7th century A.D. when it was for the first time, explored as a habitable place. During the 10th-13th centuries, the surrounding areas of Majuli soon came to be inhabited by diverse groups of people. Majuli was formed due to course changes that occurred in the river Brahmaputra and some of its major its tributaries, especially the Lohit. Originally, the island was a long, narrow piece of land called *Majoli*, meaning, land in the middle of two parallel rivers, that had the Brahmaputra flowing in the north and the Burhidihing in the south until they met at a place called Lakhu.[331] It was once known as Ratnapur and served as the capital of the powerful Chutia kingdom.[332] Frequent earthquakes that took place during the period 1661-1696 had set the stage for a catastrophic flood in 1750 that continued at length for 15 days, which is mentioned in various historical texts and also referred to in local folklore. As a result of this devastating flood, a part of the Brahmaputra river discharged southward into what was then the Burhidihing's lower channel leading to the eventual formation of the present-day island of Majuli.[333] All these factors – the Brahmaputra river and its tributaries, the wetlands and the *char-chaporis* (numerous small islets formed through different water channels) that dot the landscape of Majuli – have made it the largest delta system in the world situated mid-river.

Majuli is situated at about a distance of 300-400 kilometres (186-249 mi) eastwards from Guwahati – the largest city of the state of Assam. The total area of Majuli at present is 515.38 square kilometres as per the 2011 Census Report of the Government of India. Its geographical area was nearly 1256 square kilometres as per Government Survey record data of 1891. However, much of it has been washed away by the river Brahmaputra because of annual floods and erosional activities in the area, chiefly owing to the unique location of Majuli amidst the active floodplains of the Brahmaputra. Hence, Majuli gets inundated by flood waters not only during severe floods but also in normal floods. However, erosion has been a natural phenomenon on every river bank of Assam because of its peculiar topography, and also due to the presence of sandy soil and evolutionary geological conditions in the area.

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[331] Manogya Loiwal, "Majuli: The World's Largest River Island is Shrinking and Sinking," *India Today*, February 18, 2014, 16.

[332] Information obtained from the website of Majuli Cultural Landscape Management Authority (majulilandscape.gov.in)

[333] Ibid.

However, erosion on the southern side of Majuli has been rapidly increasing since the 1950s which has constantly reduced the land area of the island, eroding many villages and *Sattras* too. This has also severely affected the entire ecosystem of the area, including demographic patterns, social structure and economic development of Majuli. Since 1991, over 35 villages have been washed away in Majuli.[334] Various surveys of the Department of Geology and Mining, Govt. of Assam, have shown that in 15-20 years from now, Majuli would cease to exist.

It may be mentioned here that in order to save the island of Majuli, a nomination has been sent to the UNESCO for the declaration of Majuli as a World Heritage Site. Local environmental activist, popularly called the 'Forest Man of India', Jadav Payeng, has planted a 550-hectare forested area known as Molai forest, in order to combat erosion on the island. Prior to this effort of Jadav Payeng, much of Majuli was barren sandbars that were extremely vulnerable to erosion. However, after his afforestation scheme, the area has turned into a lush green forest, providing habitat for diverse species of animals including elephants, tigers, deer and spoonbilled vultures. On the part of the Government, the State Water Resources Department and the Brahmaputra Board both, are struggling to solve the problem of erosion in Majuli for the last three decades or so but without much success. Recently, it was suggested that a four-lane highway protected by a mat of concrete along the southern boundary of Majuli can only solve the erosion problem, besides excavating the river bed of the Brahmaputra. This project also includes the construction of two flood gates for the *Kherkutia Xuti* – a tributary of the Brahmaputra. However, the Brahmaputra River Restoration Project is yet to be fully implemented by the government.

Majuli is situated on an isolated block with Mikir hills on the one side and Dafla hills on the other.[335] Majuli almost touches the district of North Lakhimpur on its northern side.The Majuli Assembly constituency was included under the Jorhat Parliamentary constituency till 1971. Majuli is today reserved as a tribal constituency and it is one of the nine assembly segments of the Lakhimpur Lok Sabha constituency. Garamur is the sub-divisional headquarter of Majuli. The Sub-Divisional Officer (SDO), Civil is the administrative head of Majuli. Majuli is divided into two development blocks – *Ujani* or Upper Majuli Development

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[334] Ibid.

[335] Mikir Hills belong to the present-day Karbi Anglong plateau of Assam. Dafla Hills fall under the territory of present-day Arunachal Pradesh.

Block and Majuli Development Block – under which, there are 20 village panchayats. There are three revenue blocks (*mouza*) in Majuli – Ahatguri, Kamalabari, and Salmara. According to the 2011 Census data, the literacy rate of Majuli is 79%, out of which 86% of the males and 71% of the females are literate.[336]*Tols* established within the premises of the *Sattra* were the primary centres of education in Majuli until the colonial period. The *pathshalas*, primarily run by Sanskrit experts, also imparted education on Sanskrit and religious issues. Majuli College, established in the year 1962, is the oldest higher educational institution in the island.[337] Most of the government and administrative offices are situated in Garmur and Kamalabari, which are emerging as small townships in the recent times.

There are 248 villages in Majuli district at present, with a population of over 150,000 and a density of around 300 individuals per sq. kilometre.[338] Their structure somewhat differs from a traditional Assamese village. It is primarily because of the reason that flood and erosional activities are prominent in Majuli, which have turned most of the villages here into migratory settlements. These are mostly inhabited by people who have been displaced from their original habitations. Moreover, an interesting finding of this study has been that most of these migratory settlements are scattered and therefore lack a permanent traditional village structure. Hence, the villages of Majuli vary in the number of their households. Sometimes, only eight to ten households have also been seen to exist in a village. The demographic pattern of the settlements situated along the embankments varies from time to time. However, a majority of the population of Majuli comprises of the tribals, non-tribals, and scheduled castes. The major tribal communities residing here include the *Misings* (comprising of the largest population in the island who immigrated from Arunachal Pradesh to Majuli centuries ago), the *Deoris*, and the *Sonowal-Kacharis*. The scheduled castes include the *Kaibarttas*, the *Brittial Banias*, etc. The non-tribal communities include *Koch*, *Kalitas*, *Ahoms*, *Chutiyas*, *Keots*, *Nath-Yogis*, etc.

Agriculture is the primary source of livelihood of the people of Majuli, with paddy being the chief crop cultivated here. The agricultural tradition of Majuli is extremely rich and diverse, with as many as 100 varieties of rice grown all over the island. Fishing is also one of the major occupations of the people here after agriculture. Hence, rice with fish curry is the

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[336] Census Report, 2011.

[337] Ibid.

[338] Ibid.

staple diet of the locals in Majuli. Among the different varieties of rice produced in Majuli, the most well-known are the *komal saul*, *bora-saul*, and *bao-dhan*.[339] Dairying, pottery, handloom and handicrafts, and boat-making are some of the other important economic activities popular among the common people of Majuli. In November 2017, Assam Chief Minister Sarbananda Sonowal launched a total of 647 schemes with a total financial outlay of Rs. 24.57 crore in order to boost the overall socio-economic development of Majuli. Majuli is also well-known for its rich biodiversity that hosts several rare and endangered species of birds, mammals, amphibians, a variety of reptiles, wild and medicinal plants, etc. besides being home to a diverse paradise of migratory birds that arrive in the winter season, such as the greater adjutant stork, pelican, Siberian crane and the whistling teal.[340]

Majuli – The Abode of Vaishnavism and Vaishnava Traditions

Majuli in Assam is termed as the paradise where *Mahapurusiya Dharma* as enunciated by Srimanta Sankardeva can be seen at its best. Since the 17th century, when the Vaishnavite *Sattras* were established, the island has maintained its distinct religious as well as cultural identity of its own. It was here that Sankardeva, the chief Vaishnava preacher and social reformer of Assam in the 15th-16th centuries, first established a *Sattra* on the lines of a Buddhist monastery at a place called Belaguri Dhuwahat (1520-1546). Sankardeva, at this time, took refuge in Majuli, and had spent a couple of months at Belaguri in West Majuli. This was a place of grandeur well-known for the historic and auspicious *Manikanchan Sanyog* when Sankardeva is said to have met his foremost disciple and apostolic successor, Madhavdeva for the very first time in the mid-16th century. This meeting, referred to as *Manikanchan Sanyog* (meaning, 'The Union of Gem with Gold') is indeed the most epoch-making event in the history of the Vaishnavite movement and as well as in the annals of Assam history.[341] It was after this meeting that the Vaishnavite movement gained momentum and the medieval *carit-puthis* (biographies of the Vaishnavite saints) are replete with references to Dhuwahat and Belaguri. This soon led to a surge of devotional fervour in the

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[339]*Komal-saul* is a unique variety of rice produced in Assam that is mostly eaten as a breakfast cereal after immersing its grains in warm water for around 15-20 minutes. *Bora-saul* is a sticky variety of brown rice used to make the traditional delicacy of Assam called *pitha*. *Bao-dhan* grows underwater and is harvested after a period of 10 months.

[340]Information collected from the report by the Assam Agriculture University on Majuli Island, 2015.

[341] Information obtained from *Pavitra Asam: An Encyclopaedia of Holy Places and Sacred Spots of Assam*.

state which led to the setting up of almost 65 *Sattras* thereafter, out of which only 22 are operational today. 65 out of the 665 original *Sattras* in Assam were situated in Majuli.

The word *Sattra* has been derived from the Sanskrit term *Sallra*, meaning a sacrificial session of longer duration that also serves as a centre for the distribution of rice and water (*Anna Sallra* and *Jala Sallra*).*Yajnas* (sacrifices) that are performed and completed within a day are mentioned as *Ekaha-Yajnas* in Vedic literature, while those performed for beyond one but less than 12 days are referred to as *Ahin Yajnas*, and those which extend far beyond a period of 12 days are known as *Sallra Yajnas*.[342] The *Bhagavata-Purana*is the supreme book for the Vaishnavites of Assam, which was, for the first time, recited by sage *Suka* before king Parikshit near the latter's death-bed. Subsequently, when sage *Suta Ugrasaba* arrived at a forest where other sages had been performing a *Sallra* over a thousand long years, they requested sage *Suta* to recite the *Bhagavata* which he obliged after the sacrificial session was over. Since the *Bhagavata* was recited on the occasion of performing a *Sallra* (sacrifice) where the greatness of the Supreme Being had been discussed and glorified at length, the Assamese Vaishnavas, from now on, began to use the word *Satra* in order to identify the place as a centre for preaching and meditation and also for interacting with the devotees. In due course of time, the term*Sattra* emerged in its place. Despite its Vedic origins, the word *Sattra* has now become an integral part of Assamese Vaishnavism and the socio-cultural life of Assam, where it has been adopted as an original Assamese word with a special significance.[343] Hence, it is precisely because of this reason that it denotes a vastly different meaning in Assam from what it implies in Sanskrit or any other modern Indian language(s). In the *Rig Veda*, the word *Sattra* is mentioned as below:

Sattrehajatariyata Namobhi Kumbheretah Siyichatuh Samanam

Meaning, being pleased by the prayer offered in the *Sattra*, *Surya* (Sun) and *Varun* (water) *Devtas* both inserted their semen into a jar from which sage *Vasistha* was born. Here, *Sattra* denotes a *Yajna*. The same meaning is to be found in the *Yajur Veda*, *Brahmanas*, and *Upanishads* too.

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[342] Information obtained from the website of the *Axom Sattra Mahasabha* (www.asomsattramahasabha.org)

[343] Ibid.

The present-day institution of the *Sattra* is only a later development and hence the *Sattra* at Belaguri Dhuwahat can at best be regarded as a congregational gathering. It is said that Sankardeva had established the first *Sattra* here by planting a Bilva (*Bel*) tree and thus naming the place Belaguri. It was here that Sankardeva's son-in-law and the political leader of the Bhuyans, Hari, was executed under royal orders. Sankardeva stayed at Dhuwahat for 14 years before moving towards Western Assam towards Barpeta and seeking refuge in the Koch kingdom there. The *Sattra* as a traditional institution along with the *Namghar* later developed with its complex hierarchical structure under Madhavdeva and Damodardeva. In the post Sankardeva-Madhavdeva period, i.e. 17th century onwards, Majuli once again became the primary centre for the propagation of the Vaishnava faith, primarily due to the pioneering efforts of Vamsigopaldeva, Badula Padma Ata, and their successors as well. The main surviving *Sattras* in Majuli today include the following:

- *Dakshinpat Sattra* – founded by Banamalideva, *Krishna Raasleela* is observed here as one of the national festivals of Assam. Virtually every person residing in Majuli, irrespective of religion, is involved in the three-day long *Raas* festival celebrated here, depicting the life of Krishna. People from near and far come to grace this festival including also a number of expatriate members of the community.

- *Garamur Sattra* – founded by Lakshmikantadeva, the traditional *Raasleela* is enacted here annually during the end of autumn with much pomp and fanfare. Ancient Ahom-era weapons called *Bartop* or cannons are still preserved here.

- *Auniati Sattra* – initially founded by Niranjan Pathakdeva and later given form by the Ahom ruler Jayadhvaj Singha, it is famous for its annual *Paalnaam*(incessant congregational prayers/*naam* held by the inmates of the *Sattra*/*Namghar* in group and in rotation) and *Apsara Nritya* (taught by Damodardeva, and practised and ritualistically performed by young Vaishnava boys in the *Sattra* to the beats of *dholaks*), besides its exclusive assortment of ancient Assamese artefacts, including utensils, handicrafts and jewellery.

- *Kamalabari Sattra* – founded by Badula Padma Ata in the orange-garden of a devotee, Purusottama Baruwa; hence the name *kamala*=orange; *bari*=garden. It is well-known for the craft of boat-making and is also a centre for the study of ancient art and architecture, culture and literature in Majuli.

- *Samaguri Sattra* – it is famous for the tradition of mask-making throughout the country.

- *Bengenaati Sattra* – founded by Muraridev, the grandson of Sankardeva's stepmother, it is an advanced centre for performing arts and a repository of several age-old antiques of cultural importance, e.g. the royal umbrella made of gold and used by the Ahom king Swargadeo Gadadhar Singha has been preserved here.

- *Sri Sri Alengi Narasingha Sattra* – founded by Ahom king Pramatta Singha in the year 1746.

- *Bihimpur Sattra* – it is a treasure-house of *borgeet* (Vaishnava devotional hymns), *maati-aakhora* (also known as *Karan* in Bharata's *Natyashastra* and usually performed by young boys, it is a preparatory stage for making the body flexible enough for dance with yogic postures that are particularly matched with the dances), *Sattriya* dances, etc. all promulgated by Srimanta Sankardeva. It has become the primary centre for *shuddhi* in the North-eastern region of India, primarily due to the efforts of Pitambar Deva Goswami.

The *Sattras* in Majuli can broadly be divided into two different categories – monastic with its celibate pontiff (*udasin adhikara*) and celibate inmates (*kewalia bhakat*), and householder inmates (*vishayee bhakat*) and householder pontiff (*grihasthi adhikara*). Some of the large and influential *Sattras* in Majuli such as *Dakshinpat*, *Auniati*, *Garmur*, *Kamalabari*, etc. belong to the former. They were, from the very beginning, state-centric and were actively supported and used by the then ruling Ahom state. As a matter of fact, the Auniati *Sattra* was established by the Ahom king Jayadhvaj Singha in 1653-54 A.D.[344] Thus, extension of state patronage helped the monastic *Sattras* accumulate a huge amount of wealth, social status and power. At the same time, most of these *Sattras* maintained their own distinct identity and functioned as a state within the state, much more akin to a feudal authoritarian structure rather than the egalitarian ideals espoused by Sankardeva. It may be mentioned here that although the structure and functioning of the *Sattras* has underwent a gradual change from the British colonial period till the present times, its caste-Hindu and Brahmanical identity still retains a strong hold over the larger Assamesesociety. This is precisely what has been vehemently opposed by the *Sangha* since its formation.

Namoni Majuli or Lower Majuli is the primary area that comprises of a majority of the *Sattras.* It consists of a mixed population of different communities. *Ujani* or Upper Majuli is

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[344] Dambarudhar Nath, *The Majuli Island: Society, Economy and Culture* (New Delhi: Anshah Publishing House, 2009), 168-170.

dominated mainlyby the *Mising* population and also by the other two dominant tribes of the region, i.e. the *Deoris* andthe *Sonowal Kacharis*. As mentioned above, *Misings* are one of the major tribes of Majuli with a total population of 64,984.[345]*Misings* are one of the offshoots of the Mongoloid stock. Linguistically, however, they belong to the Tibeto-Burman group. They are divided into eight sub-ethnic and social divisions. Agriculture is the major source of livelihood of the *Misings*. The *Misings* are found scattered almost all over the island, although they are mostly concentrated in the Northern belt, Jengraimukh village being the epicentre of a majority of the Christians belonging to the Mising tribe. The festival of *Ali-Aye-Ligang* is celebrated by the non-Christian Misings in the island during mid-February for a period of five days at a stretch, with great pomp and show. The *Deoris* are another major tribe residing in Majuli. The other castes found in Majuli such as Brahmanas, Nath Yogis, Koch, Kalitas, Keots, Ahoms, etc. follow Hinduism, while a few Muslim, Nepali, and Marwari families have also been settled in the Notun Kamalabari area of *Namoni* Majuli in the recent years. Based on data from the field-visit, it may be mentioned here that the Assamese *Goriya* Muslims[346] form a small hamlet in the heart of Majuli adjacent to the newly emerging township of Kamalabari. It is called *Borholla Musalman Gaon*, although it is not known how and when these Muslim families came to Majuli and gradually formed a settlement there. It seems that they are still alien to the local cultural landscape of Majuli, which is reflected in the nature of their settlements that are primarily confined to a low-lying swampy area, owning no cultivable land and also their use of a mode of speech that is different from the native Assamese language.

The only means of transportation to Majuli is water transportation including ferries, small steamers and country boats, all of which run from Neematighat. Bus services under Assam

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[345] Ibid.

[346] The Muslim community of Assam is a diverse category consisting of largely four different groups – Muslim-Axomia (also known by the names of *Goriya*, *Tholua*, or *Khilonjia*), Bengali-speaking or *Bhotia*, up-country or *Juluha* (from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar), and immigrant Muslims, commonly referred to as *Miya*. Their history is important to know in order to understand the diversity of the culture of the state of Assam created by Hindu, Muslim, Ahom, and many other groups who identify themselves as 'Axomia'. In the Assamese *buranjis* (historical texts), Muslims are called *Bongals* or *Goriya* who lived in the midst of other groups in the Ahom kingdom.

State Transport Corporation (ASTC) were introduced in Majuli in 1986.[347] Majuli has been a favourite destination for tourists, both national and international. Of late, the tourism industry in Majuli has witnessed a phenomenal growth in the form of resorts, lodges, home-stays, etc. Today, Majuli has a large number of government and private guest houses and lodges to accommodate the very large number of tourists who come to visit the island almost every year.As per data available in the website of the *Axom Sattra Mahasabha*, at present, there are around 1200 big and small *Sattras* in different parts of the state including Madhupur *Sattra* in the district of Cooch Behar, West Bengal.[348] With proper planning and policy implementation in place, these traditional institutions can serve as the hotspots of indigenous knowledge, biodiversity conservation and cultural awareness for both pilgrims and tourists alike. In order to realise these goals, the hindrances that have so far stood in the way of the *Sattras* transforming into institutions of revenue generation and tourist attraction need to be appropriately discussed so that timely solutions can be implemented in the right earnest.

Even today, the *Sattras* in Majuli continue to exert an influential position in the socio-cultural and religious lives of the people, both inside and outside of Majuli. Their dominance in Majuli, particularly, is so overwhelming that, almost every aspect of the day-to-day lives of the inhabitants there is, in one way or the other, controlled or influenced by it. It is because the *Sattras* are the nerve-centre of various forms of activities ranging from music and dance to art and crafts. Their almost hegemonic role over the common people of Majuli has remained unchallenged for the last 350 years, although this has somehow been shaken of late, by the growing popularity of neo-Vaishnava organisations like the *Sangha* and the increasing proselytisation activities led by Christian missionaries in the island. The compact social structure of Majuli and its unique geographical location in the midst of the mighty Brahmaputra, has also been responsible for the continuation of the legitimacy and authority enjoyed by these *Sattras*. Over the years, the *Sattras* have been raising their voice not only against issues affecting the island in particular, like floods and ersosion, deforestation, etc. but also against socio-political affecting the state such as corruption and mis-utilisation of public funds. However, how far the *Sattra* and the *Namghar* are well-equipped to effectively deal with the political conflicts of the region in the given socio-cultural context remains to be

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[347] Information collected from the District Office of the Assam State Transport Corporation (ASTC), Baruah Chariali, Jorhat.

[348] "List of Sattras," Axomsattramahasabha.org, Last modified June, 2018, https://www.axomsattramahasabha.org//

seen. But, the practices followed by them in resolving local conflicts are very simple and comprehensible for the local populace which ensures their active participation in grassroots'-level decision-making. The use of social capital such as loyalty, trust, a culture of teamwork and participatory ideals, etc. by these institutions have the ability to mobilise people for conflict-resolution and peace-building in Assam.[349]

The study of the Vaishnavitemonasteries – the *Sattras* – has attracted a great number of scholars in Assam. The early history of the *Sattras*, their origin, growth and nature have been studied by a few scholars of eminence such as Dr. Maheswar Neog and Dr. Satyendra Nath Sharma who have thus been able to draw the attention of other scholars at the national level. The *Sattra* institution of Assam is functioning as a living organization for propagating and spreading Vaishnavite ideals in the state of Assam as well as outside. It was brought into existence by the Vaishnava leaders of the medieval times, initially to serve as a centre of religious propagation, literary creativity and the promotion of performing arts. Right from its inception till date, the *Sattras* and their sister-institutions, the *Namghars*, have played a pioneering role in bringing about social changes in the society. They have made a notable and significant impact on the social, political, religious and literary fields of the state, bypropagating the doctrines of Vaishnavismand enriching the socio-cultural life of the Assamese society which, in itself, is a conglomeration of different cultural, linguistic, and ethnic groups of people.For the purpose of the present study, major information have been gathered from literature that has been produced both inside and outside the four major *Sattras* of Majuli called *cari-Sattras* (*Auniati*, *Dakshinpat*, *Garamur*, and *Kamalabari*), the *Charit-Puthi*s (biographical works), documents preserved in the *Sattras,* newspapers and journals, material remains of the *Sattras* and informal discussions conducted with the *Sattradhikars* and a few other inmates of the *Sattra*.

Identity through Caste and Religion in the Social Structure of Majuli

Talking about the societal structure of Majuli, it is based on a somewhat rigid compartmentalisation consisting of various castes and tribes as has been brought to light in the earlier section. In the hierarchical order of the caste system, Majuli has always been dominated by the Assamese Brahmins followed by the Kalitas. Based upon data obtained

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[349]Jayanta Madhab Tamuli, "Role of Traditional Institutions in Peace-Building: A Case Study of the *Sattras* and the *Namghars* in Assam" (PhD thesis, Department of Peace and Conflict Studies and Management, Sikkim University, Sikkim, 2016), 148.

from the field survey conducted as a part of this thesis, besides the Brahmins and the Kalitas, other communities such as Bengalis, Biharis, Nepalis, Telis, and Marwaris too, constitute various castes or sub-castes (*jatis*) in the socio-cultural ecosystem of Majuli. On the other hand, tribes such as *Misings*, *Deoris*, and *Kacharis* have always been treated as outsiders into the fold of the caste system and this is precisely the reason behind their relative marginalisation and social backwardness when compared to the rest of the castes and classes constitutive of the "Assamese" society in general. This caste-based hierarchical system is also reflected in the social composition and demographic distribution of the villages of Majuli. For instance, there are some villages here which are inhabited by the tribals alone, some by the *Kaibarttas*, or a few by the *Nath-Yogis* or *Katanis*. There are also a few mixed villages inhabited mainly by the *Kalitas*, the *Koches*, and the *Keots*.

Brahmins generally reside in the *Sattras* or in and around the newly emerging town areas. Although they constitute a minor group in Majuli, they have occupied the highest social and economic positions in the social structure of Majuli for quite a long time. They are a very early group of settlers considered as the pioneers of Brahmanism in this part of the Brahmaputra Valley. The *Kalitas* were another early group of settlers who enjoy the highest socio-economic status in the hierarchy immediately next to the Brahmanas. A majority of the businessmen, contractors, and service persons belong to this community and they hold key positions in most of the monastic *Sattras*.[350] The *Koches* constitute the next socially and economically advanced group of people among the various castes in Majuli, considered to be eligible for membership of the monastic *Sattras* just like the *Kalitas*. They were one of the aboriginal tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley who came to Majuli in the mid-16th century A.D., and were Brahmanised during the late 17th and early 18th centuries when Sankardeva's Vaishnavism was flourishing in the region at its peak. The *Naths* (*Katanis*) occupy the next category in the social ladder of Majuli, and they are spread over 20 villages in the middle and the south-western part of Majuli. As per the Anthropological Survey of India, it is the 'least known community' of the state.[351] From the economic point of view, the *Naths* are not rich when compared to the *Brahmins* or the *Kalitas*, but in the educational and cultural domains, they have made significant advancements over the years. Other notable castes like the

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[350] M. Dutta, "Bhakti Movement: A Socio-Religious Struggle of the Marginalised Society," *Indian Journal of Applied Research* 13, no. 4 (2014): 685-687.

[351] Anthropological Survey of India, *People of India* (Kolkata, Ministry of Culture: Govt. of India, 2003), 55.

Chutiyas, descendants of the Greater Mongolian tribe, are mostly found in the northernmost part of Majuli island belonging to the erstwhile *Chutiya* kingdom. They were the earliest of the tribes to have converted into Brahmanism.[352] Thus, the structure and composition of the villages in Majuli and as well as the inter-village relationships are, to a large extent, dependent upon caste. However, despite the various differences in caste-tribe compositions, the people of Majuli belong to a culture that is distinguished by the popular notion of being a *Majulial* – simplicity in behaviour and spirituality of living.

Until recently, inter-caste marriage was a taboo in Majuli that was dealt with sternly by the *Namghar*, although the situation has now improved to a great extent with the impact of modernisation on people's lifestyles and changing value systems. However, those who are still strictly governed by the ethical norms and religious/spiritual teachings of the *Sattras* generally avoid inter-caste marriages. The field survey has clearly brought to light the fact that barring a very few, most of the *Sattras* in Majuli have not undertaken any serious and systematic attempt at accommodating the tribal groups and other socially backward sections of people residing in the island. This void has partly been filled in by the *Sangha's* activities aimed at overall social inclusion, and as well as by the Christian missionaries. The latter have, of late, carved out a niche for themselves in the socio-political landscape of the island. However, the sinister designs of the Christian missionary activities to wipe out the unique Hindu way of life of Majuli and Christianise the lower caste groups and tribes in the name of charity has come to be severely questioned of late among the common public.[353]

Based on this field study, an attempt has been made here to study the latent but still very powerful role of caste in the *Sattras*, the earlier significance and importance of which have drastically declined in the recent times, and the work of the *Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha* among the various lower castes and tribes of Majuli and the nearby areas. As mentioned above, Majuli is an island with a cosmopolitan demographic structure. Just like the population distribution, the economic status of each caste group too, varies within the hierarchy. In general, it was observed that the Hindu upper-caste population is economically more advanced than the other social groups, for instance, the tribals. Since the majority of the population in Majuli are Hindus, the *Sattras* exercise a much greater authority over diverse

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[352] No. 350.

[353] The field study was conducted as a part of this work during the period of February-March, 2018 in Majuli.

aspects of their lives. Their multi-dimensional role as a socio-cultural and religious institution has ensured ther widespread dominance in not only Majuli, but also outside of it. Along with the *bhakats* or inmates, the *Sattradhikar* (head of the *Sattra*) is regarded as the repository of all powers and authority in the traditional social structure of Majuli.

Although the caste-based varna system is now regarded by the *Sattradhikars* as an obsolete system of the past,[354] it still finds its way, even if in a disguised form, in the name of maintaining the status-quo and providing legitimacy to the existing power relationships. To cite as an example, in the Auniati *Sattra*, the executive body consisting of seven officials called *Satmanbhogia*, has, for long, been held by persons all belonging to the Brahmin caste. Similarly, in an interaction with a celibate inmate of the same *Sattra*, a revelation was made that under normal circumstances, people from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes cannot even become a *bhakat*, leave alone a *Sattradhikar*.[355]These and various other factors have gradually led to the alienation of the lower castes and tribal people from the *Sattra* system. Their world-views are now shaped by the assumption that they are a separate entity, distinct from the mainland society of the island. This assumption has also been strengthened by the fact that now the *Sattras* too,have abandoned their earlier missionary zeal of bringing about socio- cultural reforms, which was a distinguishing hallmark of their functioning previously, and spend their entire time and energy on religious activity alone.[356] This, in turn, has also helped the tribal people to preserve their own ethnic and religious beliefs and customs. It is to be noted here that despite being a land of the *Sattras*, few Misings are the disciples of any *Sattra* in the island.

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[354] During an interaction with the *Sattradhikars* of *GaramurSattra*, *Notun KamalabariSattra* and with the *Deka Sattradhikar* of *DakshinpatSattra*, each of them categorically rejected the working of the caste system in any form, and recalled the ideals and principles of Srimanta Sankardeva. Names not cited here on condition of anonymity.

[355]Information obtained after interaction with a *bhakat* of the *Notun KamalabariSattra*, Majuli on February 9, 2018.

[356] During an informal chat with the *Deka Sattradhikar*(deputy of the *Sattradhikar*) of *Dakshinpat Sattra*, he said that he had recently visited the tribal villages in the Ledo-Margherita region of Upper Assam. But, his visit was outside the tribal area of Majuli where a majority of the Christian conversions have taken place lately, and secondly, it was a part of the traditional practice of annual visits of *Sattradhikars* to nearby and faraway areas rather than any missionary activity.

As pointed out by the principal of Jengraimukh College during a conversation with him on the changing role and nature of the *Sattras*,he said that till the recent years, the *Sattradhikars* did not pay enough attention to Vaishnavise the lower castes and tribes and make them an integral part of the *Sattras* and the *Namghars*. This has been primarily attributed to the deep and overwhelming influence of the caste system in which the tribes, as a whole, are considered as *Kiratas* and untouchables or outsiders.[357] However, it will not be correct to assume that the socio-economic marginalisation of the tribal people has been the outcome of the policies of the *Sattras* alone. The geographical location of the tribes characterised by isolation and remoteness from the mainland, coupled with the various animist tribal beliefs and practices, which were never whole-heartedly accommodated by the *Sattras*, have also contributed to their alienation from the institutions of the *Sattra* and the *Namghar*. The tribal people of Majuli, generally residing in the periphery and riverside and practising their own customary laws and practices, are economically the poorest sections of the society. The places of their residence in the island have made them more vulnerable to floods and erosion over the years. All these factors, along with the incapability on the part of the *Sattras* to accommodate these people and their belief systems and practices into the larger Hindu society, have created a viable enough space in the island where Christian proselytisers supported by the Church have slowly and steadily made a foothold for themselves over the years. It is in this context that the role of the *Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha* in Majuli has been understood and analysed later in this chapter.

The advent of the British rule in Assam was by far the most decisive historical event in the modern times. British rule with its imperial mechanisms of law-making and administration, had a long-lasting impact on every aspect of the Assamese society. In its quest to extract the maximum amount of wealth from Assam, certain strategies were adopted and a new set of institutions introduced, among which, the introduction of a modern western education system based on an over-glorification of Western civilisational values, was by far the most important. This development was in fact, the primary factor behind the gradual emergence of a class of western-educated Assamese intelligentsia from the latter period of the 19th century onwards. In the subsequent periods, their numbers had increased to a large extent. This phenomenon, in due course of time, led to the emergence of a modern western educated elite class among the tribal population too. Since the education system was rooted in the ideals of

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[357] Information obtained during the course of an interaction with Dr. Naba Kumar Pegu, Principal, Jengraimukh College, Majuli.

enlightenment, rationality, logic and reason, the western educated elites began to question and challenge the existing social hierarchies and inequalities.

As a result, the historical marginalisation of the tribes from the mainland Assamese society on the basis of eating habits, or socio-cultural and religious practices came to be perceived as the most irrational and intolerant. They had, by now, started envisioning themselves and their identity as a binary opposite to that of the caste-Hindu society. Moreover, it was at this time that the census reports of the British government had firmly established and consolidated the distinction between the tribal and the non-tribal societies. During the post-colonial period, this distinction has further been strengthened by the creation of the constitutional categories of different castes and tribes and the system of reservation of seats in legislatures, educational institutions and government jobs that is in place in the country. Similarly, in the contemporary socio-economic relationships among people in the era of globalisation, religion and religious identities have ceased to play as significant a role as it used to in the past, and in its place, the individual as a secular entity has become the most important and decisive factor. Hence, this will in part, help to explain why the *Sattras* in Majuli and their extended institution, the *Namghar*, have lost their earlier status of dominance among its followers.

The *Sattra* as an Institution of Socio-Religious Reform

The religious-cum-social reform agenda propagated by the Vaishnavite movement under the leadership of Srimanta Sankardeva, of which the institution of the *Sattra* stands today as the most prominent legacy, involved the ideal of caste equality in the religious plane and was in strict opposition of untouchability.[358] Naturally, the society in Assam as a land of heterogeneous tribes and castes had served as a fertile ground for the early Vaishnava reformers to work upon and materialise their ideals. Records, however, point to the fact that caste was, and still is, a significant aspect of consideration in almost all *Sattras*, in varied degrees however, depending upon their sectarian affiliations. According to Cantlie, "the

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[358] In the system of *varnashrama dharma*, rights and attributes are distinctly prescribed for different *varnas* based on birth, and one cannot encroach upon the other. But, in the religion of *harinam-kirtan* as advocated by Srimanta Sankardeva, there is no such specification; and this was indeed its most distinguishing feature. Sankardeva opined that *harinam* is the king of all religions, and all beings (or creatures) have the right to sing *harinam* which is the purest form of all religions.

degree of Brahmanisation is greatest among the *Sattras* of *Brahma-Sanghati*[359] where the proportion of Brahmana disciples is the largest." Here, the *Adhikaras* also, only with a few exceptions, are by and large, Brahmanas. Caste distinctions among the disciples in respect of seating arrangements and commensality restrictions too, are carefully maintained in the *Namghar* situated within the *Sattra* premises.[360]

In this context, Cantlie says that caste distinctions have been very carefully maintained in the *Sattras* with respect to their organisational and ritual aspects, and this holds true right from their emergence till the present times. In most of the *Sattras* in Majuli, the *Sattradhikars* have been mostly *Goswami* (*Brahman*) or *Mahanta* (*Kayastha*), i.e. upper caste.[361] Mention may here be made of the *Kaibarttas* (fishermen) who form a significant group among the inhabitants of Assam, but were historically treated with contempt in the *Sattra* by the *Sattradhikars* and the *bhakats*. It was possibly due to such an outlook on the part of the *Sattras* and of the people associated with these institutions that the *Kaibarttas* rose in revolt against the Ahom monarchy (mid-18th century A.D.)during the Mayamara uprising (1769-1805) as described earlier. They also led a similar movement against caste-based

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[359] Several ideological dissensions that took place among the disciples of Srimanta Sankardeva after his death led to the division of the institution of the *Sattra* into four independent sectarian divisions, also known as the four *Sanghatis* (sub-sects) – *Brahma*, *Purusa*, *Nika*, and *Kala Sanghatis*. Before his death, Sankardeva handed over the leadership of the Vaishnava movement to Madhavdeva, whose leadership was however, not accepted by the followers of Damodardeva and Harideva and they formed their own group called *Brahma Sanghati*. After the death of Madhavdeva, three leaders formed their own denominations – Bhabanipuria Gopal Ata (*Kala Sanghati*), Purushottam Thakur Ata (*Purusa Sanghati*), and Mathuradas Burhagopal Ata (*Nika Sanghati*). They differ mostly in their emphasis of the *cari-vastus* (four fundamental principles of Vaishnavism). While the *Brahma Sanghati* emphasised on *deva* (worshipping the image of the chief incarnation), the *Purusa Sanghati* emphasised on *naam* (chanting of devotional songs of prayer). The *Nika Sanghati* emphasised on *sat-sanga* (relationship with the wise) and the *Kala Sanghati* emphasised on the importance of the guru (teacher or leader).

[360]No. 17: 175.

[361] It was noted during a visit to several *Sattras* in Majuli, including *Auniati*, *Garmur*, and *Dakshinpat*, in February 2018. Names of the former *Sattradhikars* were written on a display board in front of the premises of each *Sattra*.

discrimination and oppression in the early 20th century.[362] The book called *Ripunjoy Smriti* published from Jorhat in the year 1934 provides ample evidence of the view of the *Sattras* towards the question of caste.

Caste as a category was, and still is, effectively maintained in the *Sattras*. Thiscan also be explained in the light of the strenuous battle fought by the *Sut* or *Sutkuilyas*, often called *Bariyas*. As per available records, the *Suts* prayed for an uplift of their social status in response to which the *Sattradhikar* of the *Auniati Sattra* had imposed on them certain conditions of penance if he was to accede to their demand, thereby indicating that he was not in favour of such an upward social mobility of the *Suts* in the caste hierarchy.[363] During the national struggle for freedom led by Mahatma Gandhi for the abolition of untouchability, a public demand was vociferously made from all over Assam requesting the then *Sattradhikar* of the *Auniati Sattra* Hemchandradeva Deva-Goswami (1926-1983) for his stand on the issue of the maintenance and perpetuation of the degrading practice of untouchability. In response to this demand, as Tirthanath Sarma, the revered historian of the *Sattra* had remarked, Hemchandra Deva Goswami published and circulated a leaflet titled *Hindu Samajoloi Gohari* (an appeal to the Hindu Society) wherein he emphatically stated that "he cannot reject the conventional rituals and customs sanctioned by the *Smritis* and the *Srutis*. *Sattradhikars* like him have come to conduct the affairs of a *Sattra* for some time as a matter of rule. They have no right whatsoever to break the rules and regulations observed by the *Sattras* since their inception."[364] The *Sattradhikar* therefore rejected the basic essence of the movement for the eradication of unouchability led by Gandhi.

Even in the present times, the attitude of most of the *Sattras* regarding the matter of caste has not changed much. In fact, it has become much more rigid with time. However, there is not an iota of doubt about the fact that the nature of caste prejudices which was much more stringent a few decades back, and more than that before a century, have been relaxed to a large extent in the present times. As a matter of fact, protesting and raising one's voice against such a social outlook was very difficult earlier, particularly on the part of those who had, for long, enjoyed a higher socio-economic status in the hierarchy of castes. Under such

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[362] Bimal J. Dev and Dilip Kumar Lahiri, *Cosmogony of Caste and Social Mobility in Assam* (Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1985), 28-39.

[363] Ibid: 32.

[364] Ibid.

circumstances, Pitambardeva Goswami of the *Garamur Sattra* who believed in the Gandhian ideals of *satyagraha* (passive political resistance) and *ahimsa* (non-violence), acceded to the demandsof the lower-caste groups and tribes, and also certified and approved their social uplift. However, his approval did not automatically bestow upon the *Suts* a higher social status. A *bhakat* in the same *Sattra* himself said, "Even after the penance, the upper caste Hindus never looked up to the *Suts*….Some of the *Gosains* and the *Mahantas* of *Ahatguri mouja*even came forward to physically harm the *Sattradhikar* because he preformed that penance ceremony for the *Suts*."[365] Despite such vehement opposition, Pitambardeva Goswami opened the doors of his *Namghar* to the *Suts* and thereby paved the way for their assimilation into his *Sattra* together with the other members of caste Hindu groups. He also threw open the premises of his *Sattra* to the *Kaibarttas*, the *Misings*, and other such communities inhabiting the neighbourhood.

For Pitambardeva Goswami of the *Garamur Sattra*, it was, however, not so easy a task to openly challenge the existing caste prejudices and hierarchies of men based on the same. It once so happened that he had to seek the due permission from the disciples of his *Sattra*so as to allow him to proselytise different tribal and backward communities of Assam like the *Kacharis*, *Lalungs*, and *Mikirs*.[366] But, the *Sattra* community as a whole, did not approve of his plea on the ground that for doing such an ardous job, the *Sattradhikar* would have to lose his dignity while moving from place to place like an ordinary man. Thus, many communities such as the tea-garden tribes and the *Nagas* still remained outside the fold of the *Sattras*. Hence, the root of untouchability could not be removed from the *Sattras* completely, its manifestation only became more subtle with the gradual passage of time. It is therefore evident that barring a very few such as the *Garamur Sattra*, most of the *Sattras*and their *Sattradhikars*did not bother to undertake any serious and systematic attempt to sanskritise the tribes and other backward communities of Assam. Thus, thishelped pave the way for neo-Vaishnavite organisations such as the *Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha* to make impressive footholds in various nook and corners of Assam in the recent decades, including Majuli. However, the work of the *Sangha* needs to be critically analysed in the backdrop of the proselytising activities of the Christian missionaries in Majuli, especially among the *Misings*.

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[365] During the field survey, the *bhakat* informed that even Pitambardeva Goswami had enjoined some ritual procedures which the person from the lower caste had to pass through in order to obtain a touchable status.

[366] Ibid.

Caste considerations are also a distinctive feature that characterise the internal atmosphere of a majority of the *Sattras* in matters related to dining and social relationships. As known from several *Sattra* sources, a Brahmana inmate does not take food cooked and served by a Shudra inmate; and a Shudra of higher socio-economic ranking also does not take food from the hands of a fellow *bhakat* if the latter belongs to a caste lower in the ritual hierarchy than the former.[367] Inmates of the *Sattras* are recruited from the families of only certain castes which enjoy ritual superiority in the caste hierarchy. Dr. Pitambardeva Goswami himself writes that since the head of a *baha* normally selects a boy of his choice to be his junior and bestows upon him the responsibility of performing his mortuary rights after his death, he normally selects a near relation of his; and this fact eventually leads to the concentration of *bhakats* in a particular *Sattra* of certain castes only."[368] While his statement cannot be refuted, it is, at the same time, seen that even in those *bahas* where *bhakats* of different castes reside, and therefore its head has the option to recruit a boy from any caste, he always selects one only from among the castes of his choices, i.e. generally from among the *Brahmana*, *Kayastha*, *Kalita*, *Keot*, or *Koch* castes. This has only helped to further entrench and reinforce the already existent rigid unwritten norms of caste segregation followed by the *Sattras* since their inception.

This is exactly what is happening today in the *Sattras* of not only Majuli but in other places of Assam as well. *Sattras* are therefore alleged to have been able to unify only certain sections of the Assamese society, in order to justify its credit of being considered as a symbol of Assamese identity, unity and nationality.[369] Thus, the caste factor which was earlier questioned and rejected during the days of Sankardeva, became a quite important and vocal element in the later periods in the organisation, functioning, and membership of the *Sattras* and also in determining the social relationships of people within these institutions. It is perhaps because of such aspects that there are myriad conflicting opinions with regard to the nature of the role played by the *Sattras* in the formation of an Assamese identity – understood as both linguistic (*Axomia*) and religious (Hindu) in the overall socio-political narrative of the state. According to a recent research, the assertion that the *Sattras* have helped in the

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[367] Information obtained from the field study.

[368] Dr. Pitambardeva Goswami, *Satriya Utsavar Paricoy aru Tatparyya* (Dibrugarh: Dibrugarh University Press, 2002), 51-54.

[369] Devabrat Sharma, *Non-State Literary and Cultural Organisations in the Construction of the Assamese National Identity and Ethos* (Guwahati: Guwahati University Press, 1992), 73-75.

emergence of an Assamese middle class,[370] which acted as the agent of nationality/identity formation, is very insignificant.

Internal Changes in *Sattras* – An Analysis

The traditional institution of the *Sattra*and its close affiliate – the *Namghar* – has undergone significant changes during the last few decades, more especially in the post-eighties of the last century. *Sattras* in present-day Assam are in the midst of a competition among themselves, with an aim to attain more power and publicity so as to exercise more influence in the political affairs of the state of Assam. While during the medieval times and the colonial period too, *Sattras* with learned pontiffs were responsible for looking after the matter of social reforms, at present, it is seen that the common people of the locality have a greater scientific temper rather than the Guru/*Sattradhikar* of a *Sattra*. The *Sattras* have, by and large, remained stagnant institutions, confined to their narrow and orthodox worldviews in initiating widespread social reforms, which does not resonate with the trends of modernity and changes brought about by globalisation that have affected almost every nook and corner of this country, including Majuli. A special fact that was noted during the field survey was that earlier, parents used to offer their sons to the *Sattras* as monks considering it to be a pious gift; but, these same parents are now unwilling to send their sons to the *Sattra* to become celibate inmates. This may be attributed to reasons not specific to the inability of the *Sattras* alone to introduce long-term social changes, but also the demands of occupational diversification and the increasing need to cut off links with the *Sattra* system, especially of the lower caste groups and tribals.

Pitambardeva Goswami of the *Garamur Sattra*, in one of his confession papers, had himself noted his experience as an apprentice to the *Sattradhikar* of the *Bar Garamur Sattra* who was his own uncle, to where he was inducted at the early age of only 5 years. Remembering his experience of those days, he has simply commented that he had lost all his creativity and talent during this period of apprenticeship in the *Sattra*, and that had he not been brought to the *Sattra*, he would have been certainly a gifted man of much higher ability than what he had now become.[371] Unlike earlier, parents nowadays have fewer children, thanks to the growing trend of nuclear households, and hence give more importance to their education rather than send their sons to live the life of a celibate monk in a *Sattra* by learning traditional arts and

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[370]Ibid: 129.

[371] No. 370: 60.

dances which possess comparatively less market value when compared to a regular salaried job. It may be mentioned here that performing arts as practiced and taught in a *Sattra* can now be purchased as a commercial product, or can be cultivated and taught in professional schools or teaching centres too. All these have contributed to the diminishing popularity and importance of the *Sattras* among a class of the public over time. Even those who were once its ardent supporters and followers, are now looking elsewhere for the teaching and upbringing of their children.

Earlier, economic vulnerability of the parents was one of the most important reasons for sending their sons to the *Sattras* to become celibate inmates where some form of a guarantee of their maintenance, in terms of food and shelter, was assured. The increasing scientific temper among the general public has also played a significant role in this regard. No parent today attributes the reasons for the early death of their child, or for their being unable to bear a child to any unknown cause or curse unlike earlier when superstitious beliefs and practices were the prevailing norm of the day. Hence, in those days, people wanted to make themselves free from such misfortunes by dedicating one of their sons, especially the eldest one, to the *Sattra*. Embracing the winds of change, rather hesitatingly, many *Sattradhikars* have now allowed the young inmates of the *Sattras* to access modern education and at the same time, practice various traditional performing arts outside the *Sattra*. This has proved to be a turning point in the history of the *Sattra* system and its gradual transformation with respect to the demands of the changing times and circumstances. For instance, *Adhyatmik Yuva Sanmilan* (AYUS) has been regularly organised since April 2010 by the *Sattradhikar* of *Dakshinpat Sattra* with the objective of initiating the youth, between 18 and 45 years of age, into spiritual education and making them aware of the basic tenets of *Sanatan Dharma* as per the *Shastras*. This has been done through workshops, training camps, discussions and seminars, without any restrictions of caste, creed or religion.[372] AYUS is being managed by a central committee at the state level and several hundreds of branch committees have been formed at the lower levels in order to ensure annual continuity of the process. Programmes have been organised

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[372] S. Gurumurthy and Sujatha Nayak, *Development Through Culture: Concept, Dynamics and the Road Ahead* (Guwahati: Vivekananda Kendra Institute of Culture, 2014), 48.

over the years not only in Majuli, but also outside of it, including the districts of Darrang, Sonitpur, Golaghat, Jorhat, and Sivasagar, besides Lohit district of Arunachal Pradesh.[373]

The overarching impact of the modern education system in place of the earlier *gurukul* system of which the *Sattras* bore a close resemblance, can be gauged from the fact that the preference today of many *Sattradhikars* is to attain educational degrees, including a PhD from reputed universities, e.g. the case of Dr. Pitambardeva Goswami and many other *Sattradhikars*. They have also participated in various national and international seminars and conferences, both within India and outside. Presuming perhaps the possibility of such changes in the *Sattra* system in the near future, Pitambardeva Goswami had advocated the life of a householder for the inmates, way back in the early twenties of the last century. However, his permission to the *bhakats* to marry at that time was looked down upon by his contemporaries; but the gradual attachment of the *Sattras* and their inmates to the material luxuries of life soon became apparent. A survey conducted as a part of this field study in the *Auniati Sattra* of Majuli has shown that as many as hundred disciples of that *Sattra*, having had a taste of modern education and service, have left the *Sattra* and took to the life of a householder. Hence, Pitambardeva's decision acted as a safety valve to give vent to the situation of desire that had for so long been either latent or suppressed among the inmates of the *Sattra*.[374]

Till the recent decades, maintenance of Sanskrit *tols* inside the *Sattras* for education in Sanskrit exclusively for the Brahmana inmates (another blatant example of caste discrimination) was the most conventional way of maintaining an educational system in these institutions. Establishment of schools and colleges near some of the *Sattras* in the post-Independence period, however, brought the *bhakats* closer to the modern education system.[375] Here, it is quite interesting to note that almost all the younger generation *bhakats* of the *Auniati* and *Dakshinpat Sattras*, not to speak of the *Garamur Sattra*consisting mostly of married *bhakats*, are now school, college and university goers. A survey undertaken in the

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[373] Such affirmative activities have also attracted the attention of the Government of India, which has given funds through the state governments to select *Sattras* for their overall infrastructure development. This has also fulfilled a long-standing need of the *Sattras*. Srimanta Sankardeva's vision of traditional institutions as one of conflict resolution, sustainable development, and community empowerment has come to be increasingly appreciated in the public and academic domains of late.

[374] No. 346: 155-163.

[375] Ibid: 165-170.

Auniati Sattra in February 2018 shows that out of a total of 234 *bhakats* including both old and adult, more than 50% were educated in the modern English education system. The growth and popularity of modern education among the *bhakats* and the *Sattradhikars*has introduced them to all the modern amenities of life, including regular jobs, which have made their lives comparatively easier than earlier. During a conversation with the *Sattradhikar* of the *Dakshinpat Sattra*, he replied in favour of modernisation of the value systems and beliefs associated with the rigidity of caste, that underlay the functioning and organisation of most of the *Sattras*. To him, certain old ideals would not be able to stand for long against the far and wide changes that have been unleashed by the forces of a global capitalist economy and the ICT revolution.

It may be mentioned here that the *Sattras* initiate only male children as monks and not females. Hence, women as a social group are completely excluded from the institution of the *Sattra*, which in a way, also helps explain the somewhat marginal role played by women in the *Namghars*. Kakati and Mahanta have argued that despite the significant contributions made by Sankardeva's grand daughter-in-law, *Ai Kanaklata*, towards spreading the ideals of Vaishnavism throughout the length and breadth of Assam, the role played by women in the two most important and flagship institutions of Assamese Vaishnavism – the *Sattra* and the *Namghar* – have remained rather negligible. No single woman has been inducted into the priestly role of a *bhakat*/*Sattradhikar* after *Ai Kanaklata*. In his article on the *Mahapurusiyas*, Dalton clearly mentioned that women were earlier only allowed to sit in the veranda/courtyard of the *Namghar* from where they joined with the men in conducting *naam*.[376] As mentioned earlier, today, women can enter the *Namghar*, yet are excluded from the performance of major religious practices inside the *manikut* of the *Namghar*.

Thus, critics of traditional institutions have argued that the traditional communitarian practice of excluding women and other groups (both tribals and non-tribals) stands against the modern liberal democratic ethos of equality and equal rights for all.[377] In the words of Patricia Mukhim, "Village republics represented by traditional institutions have always frozen women in a time warp and clearly demarcated their gender roles. Women's role in all tribal societies

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[376] E.T. Dalton, "Mahapurusiyas," *TheJournal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* VIII, no. 3 (1851): 1-11.

[377] Apurba K. Baruah, "Ethnic Conflicts and Traditional Self-Governing Institutions: A Study of Laitumkhrah Dorbar," *Crisis States Programme Working Papers* 3, no. 1 (2004): 1-22.

are therefore clearly but surely circumscribed. Any attempt to get out of that role is viewed as a transgression."[378] However, to argue that traditional political institutions are always undemocratic seems rather too much of a generalised statement. These institutions ensure local-level popular participation of people and also help in the resolution of local problems through collective action. Verrier Elwin, in his study on the tribes of NEFA (North-East Frontier Agency, now the present-day state of Arunachal Pradesh) way back in 1965, found various indigenous democratic elements in the working of traditional institutions, which in the last few decades have undergone numerous reforms. While there are clearly several potentials and advantages of traditional institutions of governance, there are also serious limitations to their organisation and ways of functioning. Traditions need a thorough re-examination from time to time primarily with a view to modernise and refine them so as to make them adaptable to the changing times and conditions. Institutions in all cultures and traditions are supposed to evolve over time as a result of the lessons accumulated through experience and interactions with other cultures.

The *Sattra* and the "Assamese": Identity and Identity Crisis of the "Assamese"

The mainstream society of Majuli consisting of both the higher and lower echelons of society is both directly and indirectly associated with the *Sattras* in their organisation and functioning. As stated before, the *Sattras* are usually headed by the Brahmana or Kayastha *Adhikaras*, followed by members of the upper-caste Hindus who also include the highly Brahmanised ethnic communities like the *Koches* and the *Keots*. Even today, the *Sattras* constitute the nerve-centres of religious and cultural activities including music and dance. Hence, it is no wonder that till a few decades ago when performing art was not much commercialised, it was purely confined to the high caste populace alone. It has been a few decades since then that the *Sattra* has begun to spread into the peripheral villages too, particularly since the days of Krishnakantadeva Goswami of the *Kamalabari Sattra*, Kamaldeva Goswami of the *Auniati Sattra*, and Pitambardeva Goswami of the *Garamur Sattra*. Hence, it appears that so far as art and culture is concerned, higher the caste, higher was the extent of learning and association with the *Sattras*.[379]

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[378] Patricia Mukhim, "Tradition, Democracy and Gender," *The Hindu*, February 10, 2017, 12. Accessed on March 13, 2018 at: http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/Tradition-democracy-and-gender/article17282384.ece

[379] Ibid.

As far as people's social outlook and their behavioural pattern are concerned, the impact of the *Sattras* is clearly discernible on almost everyone in the island, irrespective of caste or religion. Even a Muslim hamlet comprising of a small settlement area in the heart of the Kamalabari township, reported that they visit the *Sattra* on almost every socio-religious occasion, and offer prayers along with others. They have no mosque in the area, not because they are not allowed to have it, but because they themselves do not like to have one in the midst of the *Sattras*.[380] In the Jengraimukh area of Majuli, *ras lila* is still performed by people belonging to the *Mising* community, including the recent converts to Christianity as well. The impact of the *Sattras* is also felt in the overall lifestyles of the people, their food habits and sense of dressing, in their speech and behaviour, and above all, in their moral and spiritual lives. A person from Majuli (*Majulial*) is still easily distinguishable from others by virtue of his/her distinct way of living.

In the village society of Majuli, even today, poverty is not only habitually attributed to fate, but also internalised by people as a gift of God in line with the *kaivalyavadi* ideals of the *Sattras*. Not a single morsel of food goes to the stomach unless it is first offered to the unseen (the Supreme Being), nor a living creature is habitually harmed for the purpose of food except, of course, fish which forms the staple food of a majority of the Assamese along with rice. Neither anyone dares to consume intoxicating liquor in the public barring the tribal society for whom the production and consumption of *sulai* (a local wine) is a part of their culture. However, when in an inebriated state, they stay away from visiting the premises of the *Sattra* and the *Namghar* both, even though both these institutions are an intrinsic part of their living cultural heritage. In this context, an interesting finding of the study has been the general perception of the villagers in general, towards *sulai*. Women, in particular, seemed more concerned about the health and moral effects of liquor on their husbands and the family as a whole.[381]

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[380] No. 357. This is primarily about respecting the cultural sentiments and traditions of the majority community, i.e. the Hindus. As an example, the Parsis took an oath to not eat the cow when they took asylum in India in the 8th century A.D.

[381] A few female respondents in the field said that *sulai* has destroyed entire families and taken away the lives of many men including their own husbands too. In a few instances, the widows were forced to remarry their brother-in-laws after the death of their husbands. However, the brother-in-law too, in one of the instances, turned out to be an alcoholic, which left her finally at the mercy of her in-laws. Although they were not too keen to share personal details during the conversation, their main concern

The *Namghar* is the life-breath of a *Sattra*. Every *Sattra* has a *Namghar* attached to it within the same premises. As mentioned in an earlier chapter, the *Namghar* along with the *manikut* (sanctum-sanctorum) has served as the chief village court where judgements are pronounced by the community for the community. Till a few decades ago, no one dared to tell a lie in front of the sacred *sastra* (the *Bhagavata Purana*) placed in the *manikut*. Moreover, it is to be seen that no person drives any vehicle in high speed while passing by a *Namghar*, or an assembly of the *raij* sitting in the *Namghar*. Listening to the sound of the *khol* and the *doba* from a distant village in the morning and evening of the spring season amidst a serene atmosphere of lush green paddy fields and the chirping of little birds is an entirely unique experience in Majuli. The entire year is lined up with a plethora of festivals and cultural activities for the villagers, centering around the *Namghar*. An annual *bhaona* performance is an integral aspect of their cultural heritage and civilisational values, and the attendance of the *Sattradhikar/gosain* in the *bar-sabah* preceding it is a must.

In numerous ways, both the *Sattra* and the *Namghar* have been immensely contributing towards strengthening the Assamese identity and as well as the socio-cultural foundational values of the state of Assam. To quote Abhijit Bhuyan, "…it can be concluded that the Vaishnavite tradition initiated by Srimanta Sankardeva, in terms of its humanistic philosophy, art, literature, music and institutions stands at the very core of the Assamese cultural identity even as it contributes immensely to the process of socialisation in Assam."[382] The day-to-day life of an Assamese person, especially in the villages and more so in Majuli, is inseparably associated with these two institutions. An age-old belief system centering around these traditional institutions has prevailed since the ages, that is still accepted unquestioningly by the general public. This can be understood from the fact that before any important event in a person's life, e.g. before joining a new job, before any examination, marriage, etc. one is expected to visit the *Namghar* for offering prayers and seek the blessings of the *Sattradhikar* in case of the *Sattra* or the main *bhakat* in the *Namghar*.

Experience of the field suggests that the *Namghar* is the most suitable venue for any public activity at the village level. Most of the village-based cultural organisations like literary

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above all other issues was that a strong measure needs to be put in place so as to check the supply of *sulai* which, they said, takes place clandestinely.

[382] No. 196: 112.

forums, music schools, dance academy, youth clubs, children's organisations, etc. function from the *Namghar* or *Sattra* premises. Almost all the villages in Majuli covered under this research have their own cultural training centres within the *Namghar* premises itself. Two very important socio-cultural organisations of Assam, i.e. *Sadou Axom Moina Parijat* (a state-level forum for ensuring the overall development of children and adolescents) and *Sadou Axom Mahila Samiti* (a state-level women's organisation) have been functioning from within the *Namghar* premises itself since decades. Regular meetings and various other activities such as the opening of bank accounts of most of the women-led Self-Help Groups (SHGs) of Majuli take place in the *Namghar* situated within the *Sattra*. Besides this, most of the schools, healthcare institutions, libraries, roads, cultural or social organisations, and public/community halls in Majuli have been named either after the *Sattras* or the different *Sattradhikars* associated with these *Sattras*.[383] In the eastern part of Majuli, there are almost seventy schools named after the *Sattradhikars* of different *Sattras*.[384] However, a very curious finding that came to light in the course of this study is that the educational institutions run by the *Sangha* in Majuli and elsewhere in Assam, teach varied subjects including Yoga and Naturopathy, apart from the standard curricula. This is however, not the case with the

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[383] Sri Sri Bishnu Chandra Deva Goswami Middle English School, Bormukoli; Harideva Science Laboratory; J.B. College, Jorhat; Sri Sri Kamalabari *Sattra* Girls' High School, Kamalabari; Ramakanta Deva Goswami High School, Bengenaati; Auniati Bishnudev Middle English School, etc. are some of the educational institutions that have been named after the *Sattradhikars* of different *Sattras* of Majuli. The *Sattradhikars* of several *Sattras* are also associated with the executive and management bodies of various educational and socio-cultural institutions in Majuli. On many occasions, they have visited the social, cultural, and religious gatherings organised in different parts of Majuli at different times, offered their suggestions and also actively taken part in any initiative concerning the socio-economic development of the place.

[384] Respondents in the field said that although there are several community halls in Majuli established under different schemes of the Central or State Government, they still prefer to visit the *Namghar* because of their familiarity and hereditary acquaintance with its surroundings. They were also of the opinion that discussions in the *Namghar* never turned violent and the locales, including the police, hardly dare to violate the judgement of the *Namghar* or the *Sattradhikar* on any issue. To quote, "*Iswarar kripa-drishti't lua xidhanto motei aami kaam kori jam*" (the decision taken in front of the *Namghar* is sacred and we will all abide by the same). It is a value-based judgement of the common people towards the *Sattra/Namghar* that is also a suggestive factor of its age-old influence over the area.

other schools and colleges associated with the *Sattras*. The infrastructural facilities of the latter are also not very impressive to attract students.

The sacredness surrounding both these institutions is based upon the values of trust, loyalty and cooperation among the local people of the particular area. Moreover, the usage of public spaces is also determined by the presence of a *Sattra* or *Namghar* in the area; for instance, a car slows down its speed while passing by a *Namghar*, one is not supposed to ride a bicycle or any other vehicle inside the *Sattra* or *Namghar* premises.[385] In many cases, the identity of being an Assamese in itself, is put to question if one does not visit the *Namghar* or disrespects its verdicts. An Assamese, by birth, is a naturally considered a member of the *Namghar*. While asking about his idea on the role and importance of the *Sattra* and the *Namghar* in their social and community lives, a respondent simply reframed the question and said, "What can I say about our *Namghar* and the *Sattra*; we cannot even imagine our daily lives without the presence of both these institutions; we are nothing without their presence." This simple statement speaks aloud about the significance of the *Sattra* and the *Namghar* in the day-to-day livesand society of the people of Assam.[386]Even today, the common people of Majuli in particular and Assam in general start every important endeavour in their lives by bowing down before the *manikut* of the *Namghar* and seeking the blessings of the eldest *gosain* or lighting a *mati-saki* (earthen lamp) before the shrine. More than an institution, the*Sattra* is a moral and encouraging force in the psyche of the people of not only Majuli but also entire Assam. During the field visit, respondents shared their own stories of how their relatives or children studying or working in different parts of the country request them to light a *saki* before undertaking any new initiative in their lives.

Like in most other Assamese households, in Majuli too, every family has its own prayer house called *gosain-ghar*, where the head of the family recites the *Bhagavata* or the *Kirtan Ghosha* of Srimanta Sankardeva placed in the *thapana* and performs *naam-prasanga* every morning and evening. It is their age-old tradition to pray in the family prayer house and make offerings for the propitiation of the Supreme Being personified in the *Bhagavata* itself, when

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[385] Riding a vehicle in front of the *Namghar* is considered as a sign of disrespect. It has been an age-old traditional practice not to ride any vehicle in high speed while crossing the premises of the *Namghar* or the *Sattra*. People irrespective of caste or religion still follow this practice.

[386] Response of a local villager from Rangasahi village, during the field visit undertaken in Rangasahi village of Garamur Gaon Panchayat.

some new projects are to be undertaken, or in the event of certain calamities, both natural and human-induced. Holding an annual *naam* in each of the families by inviting the elderly members of the village is a part and parcel of their culture. Even the Assamese festival of Bihu here is accompanied by *naam* called *husori-kirtan*. It is interesting to note that the lifestyle of a celibate inmate was once considered an ideal aspect of emulation for any gentleman of the society; and in Majuli, one would still come across persons in the attire of a celibate inmate dressed in *dhoti*, *chadar* (scarf), *gamocha* (Assamese traditional towel), *chandan* (vermillion) and long twisted hair. A person born and brought up in Majuli is therefore naturally distinguished, and is psycho-socially different from any other person.

Experiences of the field brought to light the fact that local conflicts including disputes related to the common ownership of land or private property, cases of elopement, and issues of marriage and divorce, etc. are most often settled in the premises of the *Sattra* and the *Namghar*. Not many such cases have been reported by the locales of Majuli in the office of the *Sangha* situated in Notun Kamalabari area. It may be mentioned here that disputes over land ownership are both inter-village and intra-village. Land-related disputes may be a case of illegal occupation of a family's agricultural land by another, or clash over inherited land between siblings related to the ownership rights of cultivable or residential land. Illegal expansion and occupation of residential/grazing land and boundary issues are also frequentoccurrences. Many a times, land under the *Adhi* system is found to be illegally occupied by the *Adhiyar*.[387] Cases in which the *Adhiyar* has failed to return the adequate amount of produce to the land-owner have also been reported to the *Sattra*. Moreover, instances of beating and stabbing, and even murder in a few cases have been reported. Since 2003, forty-three cases of sibling rivalry over land use have been reported in the *Dakshinpat Sattra*.[388]

Inter-village disputes over land and land ownership mainly arise from issues like the construction of a road, use of grazing lands, plying of vehicles on village roads near a *Sattra*

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[387]*Adhi* is a common crop sharing system prevailing in certain parts of Assam, including Majuli. It is a system of tenancy where the land owner provides the land, seeds and agricultural equipments to another person to carry out the cultivation of crops. The crop so produced is shared in the ratio of 50:50 between the two parties under this tenurial agreement. In some cases, however, the land owner only provides the land for cultivation, but harvesting of the crop is done by the land owner himself. In this system, the *Adhiyar* is the leaseholder or lesee.

[388] Information provided by the then *Kakati* of the Dakshinpat *Sattra*.

or *Namghar*, etc. Since a majority of the villages in Majuli rear domesticated cows, conflict over grazing lands is a common issue. Villagers often create furore over the grazing rights of a grazing site and the cutting of grass that is grown over it. In many cases, instances of attacking the animals of the other villages were also reported to the researcher during the course of the field study. There were eight cases where conflict occurred due to the running of heavy vehicles on the village roads. In one instance, in Mudoichuk village, under Dakshinpat block, villagers complained of the running of tractors and sand-carrying trucks responsible for the deplorable condition of the village road. In Dhapkota Mising village, the local youth of the village had attacked the contractor for damaging the village road by running heavily loaded sand and stone carrying trucks. This road was constructed by the local Mising people of the village out of their own funds after it was heavily damaged by floods. Conflicts over the use of public land concerning the entire village community are also quite common. For instance, a complaint was reported in the *Natun KamalabariSattra* by the people of the neighbouring villages when a wealthy businessman tried to establish a confectionary shop in one of the places which they considered as 'sacred'. The issue was finally resolved at the behest of the *Sattradhikar*. This case also delineated the importance of public spaces considered as 'sacred' based upon the distinction between the sacred and the profane in academic discourse.[389]

Of late, several demographic changes have taken place in and around the lands of the *Sattras*. Illegal influx of immigrants from the nearby porous border with Bangladesh has been an unresolved problem for the state of Assam, since the time of its annexation into the British Empire. Continuous migration of people, assisted by the blessings of political leaders, has, over the years, led to a shift in the demographic composition of several districts in both Upper and Lower Assam.[390]An important finding that came to light during the course of this

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[389]Emile Durkheim defined religion as "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart from and forbidden." In Durkheim's theory, the 'sacred' refers to things that are set apart as extraordinary, inspiring awe and reverence among a community of people. The 'profane', on the contrary, involves mundane individual concerns and the routine aspects of our day-to-day existence. Durkheim clearly stated that the sacred-profane dichotomy was not equivalent to good/evil.

[390] Illegal immigration into Assam was one of the core issues behind the Assam Students' Movement (1979-1985). As per the Report on "Illegal Immigration Into Assam", submitted to the President of India by the then Governor of Assam Lt. Gen (Retd.) S.K. Sinha in November 1998, the unabated

field study is that the very existence and survival of the *Sattras*in Assam is now being threatened by the issue of illegal immigration and land encroachment by the immigrants, whichhas now started to adversely affect the demographic structure of the surrounding areas. As a result, the indigenous properties of the *Sattras*including its lands are at stake at present. In most cases, indigenous inhabitants near the *DakshinpatSattra* and the *Natun KamalabariSattra* have sold their ancestral land holdings and migrated to nearby cities and towns in the hope of better prospects. Hence, in the present times, most of the *Sattras*are no longer in possession of their original landed properties,without, however, any substitution of regular revenue yield.[391] This has led to a demographic and socio-cultural and economic crisis engulfing the *Sattras* of Assam. The rate of influx has been so high over the years that the migrants have, in fact, occupied most of the barren lands available in the neighbourhood of the *Sattras*. Also, the economic survival of the illegal immigrants over the years has been dependent upon their political capture of power at the village level in the form of regular voters with the help of forged documents such as Voter ID cards, ration cards, etc.

As per a newspaper report published in the Deccan Herald way back in September 2010, more than 7,000 bighas of land belonging to 39 *Sattras*of Assam are in the grip of encroachers with at least 85% of the encroached land being occupied by illegal immigrants from neighbouring Bangladesh. This was the opinion that was put forward by the then advisor of the *Axom Sattra Mahasabha*, Bhadrakrishna Goswami. It was during this time that the Gauhati High Court had also directed the state government to free *Sattra* lands from encroachment and the Deputy Commissioners and the Superintendents of Police of the districts under which these *Sattras* fell, had been asked to evict the encroachers at the earliest. Among the worst-affected of the *Sattras*are the *Ram Rai Kuti Sattrasal Sattra* in Dhubri

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influx of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh into Assam and the consequent perceptible change in the demographic pattern of the state, has been a matter of grave concern. It poses a serious threat to the indigenous identity of the Assamese people and as well as the country's national security.

[391] Interaction with a few locals in the area around *Dakshinpat Sattra* revealed the gravity of the problem. The locals in Majuli and elsewhere in Assam refer to these illegal immigrants as 'Mia' and their children as 'Mia Puali'. One of the ladies in the group the researcher interacted with responded by saying "Amar maati mone mone dokhol kori loi lole Mia'e" (Our lands have been silently encroached upon by these immigrants). They are looked upon by the native Assamese as demographic invaders and infiltrators patronised largely by the Congress Party in Assam since a long time as vote-banks.

district, *Rampur Sattra* in Nagaon, *Adi-Alengi Sattra*, *Barpeta Sattra*, *Kobaikata* and *Alipukhuri Sattras* in Morigaon district, besides the *cari-Sattras* situated in Majuli.[392] For instance, the *Ram Rai Kuti Sattra* in Dhubri has almost 1,000 bighas of its land occupied by Bangladeshi immigrants of which around 500 bighas are located in the 'No Man's Land' on the Indo-Bangladesh border.[393] Chief Minister Sarbananda Sonowal, while visiting the *Bardowa Sattra* in Nagaon district in September 2016, after it was freed from encroachers, had said that the eviction process will continue till all the 700 *Sattras* across the state are made free from illegal occupants.[394] The *Axom Sattra Mahasabha* has for long, been demanding a separate directorate for the *Sattras* in order to ensure their proper management, preservation and development.

The *Sattras* own huge areas of lands, both agricultural and non-agricultural,and as such, the search for a cheap workforce has become one of the major concerns of the locals during the present times. Agriculture itself is a labour-intensive sector in which most of the labour today is derived from the migrant population,chiefly attributed to the lack of proficiency of the indigenous groups in agricultural techniques and also their out-migration to the cities and towns in search of better prospects. Nevertheless, the *Sattra* as an important socio-cultural institution of the Assamese society has still managed to survive the ravages of time. Its day-to-day functioning is now dependent mostly upon the regular donations contributed by the locals and as well as the vistors from both nearby and far-flung areas. Many a times, the *bhakats* and the disciples of the *Sattras* themselves have undertaken the financial burden of

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[392] Information obtained from the website of the *Axom Sattra Mahasabha* (www.asomsattramahasabha.org)

[393] Assam Government Survey Report, 2010, Department of Land & Revenue.

[394] Despite tall claims made by the current BJP-led state government in Assam of freeing *Sattra* lands from illegal encroachment, much remains to be accomplished and implemented on this front. Immediately after assuming office, the Chief Minister himself was quite vociferous on this issue. Quite a number of surveys were carried out subsequently and raids were also undertaken at certain specific locations of the *Sattra* lands spread across the state. However, the entire exercise lost its pace soon after. A proposed joint survey to be carried out by the representatives of the Axom *Sattra Mahasabha* together with the officials of the Revenue Department,Govt. of Assam, in order to ascertain the exact area of *Sattra* lands under illegal occupation, has still remained a pipe dream.Though the *Mahasabha* claims that thousands of bighas of *Sattra* lands are under illegal occupation, the Government Survey Report contradicts that stand and it cites just an area of 176 bighas of *Sattra* lands under illegal occupation.

carrying out the renovation and repair works. This constitutes a major source of revenue for these institutions, considering the not-so-impressive socio-economic status of many of the *Sattras* at present. Lands are also being donated by the wealthy and the influential to the *Sattras*. Some of these lands which are not being utilised for cultivation could be used for other allied and value-added activities such as animal husbandry which are far more profitable and fetch more market value than agriculture.

Mass immigration and the illegal occupation of lands in the vicinity of the *Sattras*by the immigrants who are mostly cultivators,has become a serious problem in many places of Assam, besides Majuli. Nevertheless, infringement of the land rights of the indigenous population of Assam has continued unabated since the days of the British colonial rule. Immigration that was facilitated under the colonial land-revenue policy was purely economic. It needs to be mentioned here that the indigenous Assamese population owned huge amounts of land which they themselves cultivated. However, they cultivated their lands for a maximum period of three to four years and then left them fallow for several years at a stretch. A majority of the Assamese people have now abandoned their ancestral lands on the ground that they have lost their fertility due to continuous use and re-use. Moreover, migration on economic grounds is also a quite natural and common phenomenon, and this holds especially true for the members of the *Sattras* since many of them in the area under study are *grhasthi* (household) *Sattras*. They have settled down mostly in various towns and cities across the state after being employed in lucrative professions, thereby leaving behind their original land holdings.

Under such circumstances, the immigrants have found it quite easy to first occupy the fallow lands and then start cultivation. After some period of regular usage and cultivation of these abandoned lands, they acquire their legal *pattas*by utilising to their utmost favour the existing political loopholes in the system, and sometimes even pay good prices to legally purchase these lands. In this way, they continue to cultivate these lands for years and finally settle down in these same places with their extended families. This has resulted in a sharp fall in the number of indigenous Assamese population enagaged in agriculture.[395]Moreover, landless labourers who work on hire in the fields of the indigenous Assamese cultivators, often encroach upon the nearby lands and declare themselves as permanent settlers in due course of

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[395]As per data obtained from the Census Report, 2011.

time.[396]Due to all such reasons, the properties of the various Sattras are now at stake. In this context, the worst-affected ones are those families which possess unused lands under a *Sattra*, and such developments are quite common in the *Sattras* situated in the vicinity of Boraligaon-Samaguri area of the district of Majuli.

A curious observation that came to light during the field study was that many females (most of them being migrants) are employed as domestic helps in several residential *Sattras* of Majuli. The role of religion is interesting in this context. Muslim women apply *kumkum*/*sindoor* on their foreheads so as to conceal their religious identity.[397] In one of the instances, when the locals came to know of their Muslim identity, they were thrashed and beaten and thrown out of work. Hence, it has now become all the more urgent to differentiate between people, irrespective of their religion, as to who are illegal immigrants, and the ones who are the natives of the *char-chapori* areas of Majuli.[398] Religion here, acts as the cultural marker for preserving the socio-cultural heritage of an institution like the *Sattra*. Interestingly, it is only one religion here, i.e. Islam, which is the primary bone of contention between the locals and the infiltrators, which can, in part, be attributed to the cultural memory associated with the extremely violent nature of the Islamic invasions and its transmission through generations.[399]

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[396] Information obtained from the field investigation.

[397] Information obtained here from an informal conversation with a school teacher in the Auniati Bishnudev Middle English School, Auniati, Majuli. Name not disclosed here on condition of anonymity.

[398]*Char-chapori* is an area formed by the course of the river Brahmaputra and its tributaries in the state of Assam, constituted by the sediments of the floodplains. According to the records of the Government of Assam, the *char-chapori* areas cover almost 3,608 sq. km of the Brahmaputra basin, or 4.6% of the area of Assam. People of the *char-chapori* areas face numerous problems including soil erosion, illiteracy, high population growth rates, and organised hate crime against their religious identity.

[399] People in Assam distinguish between two different categories of Muslims – *Axomia* Muslims and *Mia* Muslims. The latter are seen as the illegal infiltrators from neighbouring Bangladesh who have encroached upon the ancestral lands of the *Sattras*and the *Namghars*, as well as led to massive demographic and linguistic changes in the population composition of the state over the years.

The entire controversy around the Citizenship Amendment Bill, 2016[400] in Assam and the response of the *Axom Sattra Mahasabha* (nodal organisation of all the *Sattras* of Assam and one of the largest socio-cultural organisations in the state) can be understood in this context. Kusum Kumar Mahanta, former general secretary of the *Mahasabha*, had explicitly stated that they do not support the Bill and all the illegal immigrants who came to Assam after 1971 should be deported at the earliest.[401] He further added that by no means Assam shall shoulder any additional burden of foreigners; and, even if the government wants to grant citizenship to the 'Hindu Bangladeshis', it should happen only after the due completion of the National Register of Citizens (NRC), and the migrants should be distributed among other states of the country too, instead of "dumping" them all in Assam. However, at the same time, he also argued that one of the main concerns at present is the need for safeguarding the lands of the *Sattras*.[402] In this context, it may be mentioned here that the Assam Government had recently in July, 2019 introduced a bill in the State Legislative Assembly that empowers the state to remove illegal encroachments from those lands belonging to cultural-cum-religious institutions like the *Sattras* and the *Namghars* – another aspect of the co-existence between the state and traditional institutions. According to the Bill, the existing law, i.e. the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation, 1886, empowers the deputy commissioners of the districts to remove unauthorised encroachments only from government land and lands falling within the

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[400] The Citizenship Amendment Bill (CAB) was proposed in the Lok Sabha on July 19, 2016 amending the Citizenship Amendment Act of 1955. With the passage of this Bill in the Parliament, from now onwards, illegal migrants from six minority communities – Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi, and Christian – coming from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, will become eligible for Indian citizenship. The Bill relaxes the requirement of residence in India from 11 years to 6 years for these migrants. The main reason behind vehement opposition against the Bill in the Northeast, especially Assam, is the concern that the demography of North-eastern India will change with the passage of this Bill, because it will facilitate the easy influx of migrants from neighbouring Bangladesh. It is also argued that the Bill goes against the updation process of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and discriminates among people on religious lines.

[401] Information obtained during an informal conversation with Kusum Mahanta, 63, former general secretary of the *Axom Sattra Mahasabha*.

[402] Ibid. Mahanta said "Amar *Sattra'r* maati Bangladeshi'e bohut dokhol korilei. Kiba eta xiddhanto nolole aami Axomia manuh Axom'ote bidexi hoi rom edin." ("Much of our *Sattra* lands have been illegally encroached by the Bangladeshis already. It is time now to take a strong decision. Or else, the day is not very far when we Assamese people will become foreigners in our own homeland.")

protected belts and blocks. However, the newly introduced Bill would now extend similar powers to the deputy commissioners to remove illegal encroachments of lands belonging to the *Sattras*/*Namghars* and other historical monuments across the state of Assam.

This now brings us to the pertinent question raised earlier – "Who is an Assamese?" or "What defines Assamese identity?" The answer to this question has been beautifully captured in the lyrics of most of the songs composed and sung by the Bard of the Brahmaputra, Dr. Bhupen Hazarika. Assamese sub-nationalism reached its zenith through the medium of his songs and gave a fresh lease of life to the people of the state at a time when they were struggling against the foreigners' issue. Hazarika's songs have long provided sustenance to sub-national politics in Assam and almost the entire North-Eastern region. The values and reference points which he espoused in his songs encouraged Indian nationalists not only during the wars with China and Pakistan, but also many current and former rebels of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) whose entire agenda is based on violence and the secession of Assam from India, have drawn inspiration from his songs. They reflected a sense of frustration and helplessness over the problems faced by Assam both during the pre-Independence and the post-Independence periods. Assam's troubled history of illegal immigration and its impact on the socio-economic structure of the state, finds a rich and resounding reflection in Hazarika's songs, most of whose lyrics he himself wrote, composed and sang.

The subtext of the political narrative of the state which is largely based on the anti-foreigner rhetoric and the debate around the issue of the *Khilonjia Axomia* (native Assamese) versus the *Bangladeshi* (foreigner) is clearly woven into the songs of Dr. Bhupen Hazarika. In a perceptive analysis tracing the historical development of the contemporary political situation in the state through Hazarika's songs, academician Sanjib Baruah writes that given his pan-Indian stature, it is significant that Hazarika's lyrics are very much inter-textual with the mainstream Assamese social discourse underlying various sub-national themes. Through his lyrics, one can construct an unofficial history of the Assamese identity and nationality, its hopes, aspirations and disappointments. One of Hazarika's inspirational songs that he composed in 1968, which anticipated the Assam movement against foreign nationals, also echoed the recent protests against the Citizenship Amendment Bill, 2016. In the song, Hazarika laments that "we no longer have an Ambikagiri (Ambikagiri Roychaudhuri was a firebrand nationalist leader who was jailed during the Indian freedom movement) to remind us day and night that our land has gone to the "other".

The meaning of what constitutes "Assamese" identity and the definition of a native Assamese continues to be debatable in the public domain, including the academia and the media. Since the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985, the question hasremained a vexed one and an acceptable answer still seems elusive for both the state and its people. The Accord, signed after six years of the anti-foreigners' agitation, has a clause that explicitly seeks constitutional and other safeguards for protecting the Assamese cultural, linguistic and social identities.[403] Hence, determining what constitutes the 'Assamese' identity has now become all the more imperative. The *Axom Sahitya Sabha* recently adopted a resolution which says that communities, irrespective of their ethnic and religious affiliations, that have accepted Assamese as their mother tongue, should be considered as Assamese.[404] However, the mere speaking of Assamese as a language does not suffice to qualify one to be an Assamese. The *Bodo Sahitya Sabha*, the apex literary organisation of the Bodos, has also refused to accept its counterpart's definition. It has stated that different races and groups of people have historically migrated to Assam in different phases of history and in their own ways, have contributed to the formation of an all-encompassing Assamese culture. Even tea-garden labourers, whose ancestors were brought by the British planters from the central and easternregions of India to work here in the tea plantations, are considered as Assamese since they have fully assimilated with the culture, society and language of the state. The same holds true for the Marwari Baniyas, Sikhs, and *Goriya/Axomia* Muslims[405] (derived from *Goriya/Gaur*, and found in the Basti division of Eastern Uttar Pradesh, they have now converted into Islam, and form a distinct community that is separate from the Hindu *Goriyas*)

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[403] Clause 6 of the Assam Accord (1985) talks about constitutional, legislative and administrative safeguards, as may be appropriate, that shall be provided to protect, preserve and promote the cultural, social, linguistic identity, and heritage of the Assamese people. Under this Clause, the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) has taken up the tasks of the protection, preservation, and development of various monuments across the state of Assam, besides various other works related to the providing of grants for pursuing research in the area of development of indigenous languages.

[404] Resolution No. XXVIII, Axom Sahitya Sabha Proceedings, September 2018.

[405]*Goriya* and *Moriya* are the two important social sects of the Assamese Muslims. The phrase 'Assamese Muslim' means a social group of people, who include the descendants of Muslim/Pathan/Mughal soldiers left behind as prisoners of war and those who decided to stay back in Assam after the wars were over; including technicians and artisans brought by the Ahom kings, preachers of Islam and local converts during the period of rule of the Ahoms. They are largely concentrated in the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam and Assamese is their mother tongue.

who are considered to be as "Assamese" as the native Assamese speaking population, who are largely Hindus.It may be mentioned here that the Assamese Muslims are called "Assamese" because they have integrated and co-opted themselves with the Assamese identity and nationality on the basis of their language, and not religion.

The *Sattra*versus the *Sangha* in Majuli with Reference to Christian Conversions

To say that the *Sattras* have revolutionised men's life-styles, beliefs and customs, is too over-stretched an argument that in some way, also glorifies these institutions without a critical analysis of their strengths and weaknesses. Despite their long-lasting impacts, as discussed above, people of the island in particular, and the state as a whole still believe in *tantra-mantra* (incantations), *jara-phuka* (trying to recover a diseased person through the application of *mantra*), *bhut-pret* (spirits), *buradangariya* (village god), *jal devtar dosh* (displeasure of the water god) and so forth.[406] The *Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha* has been playing a prominent role in spreading awareness about health and disease-prevention in Majuli among the local population there. In this context, a worker of the *Sangha* in Notun Kamalabari area had informed the researcher about awoman from the *Mising* tribe who had suffered from jaundice a few years back. But, instead of visiting the doctor in the nearby primary health centre, she preferred to visit the local healer who suggested her to donate to a Brahman a black goat and a hen that never laid eggs, because a tree had grown inside her stomach due to the influence of some evil spirit (which they call '*baba lombhise*' in Assamese). The woman died within a month because of being prey to such baseless myths which still prevail and due to the lack of timely medical treatment.[407]

Hence, it seems that in the tribal societies, the *Sattra* systems have not had much of a significant impact, in terms of bringing about far-reaching changes in certain primitive beliefs, customs and rituals held so strongly by these people even today. While Vaishnavism of Srimanta Sankardeva did not approve the worship of and belief in different gods and goddesses other than Vishnu or Krishna, the common people in Majuli even today believe in numerous gods and goddesses and worship them in myriad forms. For instance, in most schools in Majuli, goddess Saraswati is worshipped with or without any image on the occasion of Saraswati Puja. The *Dakshinpat Sattra* performs the *ras-lila* as a kind of *puja*

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[406] Information obtained from the field investigation in the Notun Kamalabari area of Majuli.

[407]Response of a local villager from the Notun Kamalabari area, during the field visit in Kamalabari *Sattra*, Majuli.

(ritual worship involving brahmana priests), whereas the *Auniati Sattra* observes the *kati bihu* in the same way, and the *Bengenati Sattra* the *dol yatra* (Holi) in much the same manner.[408] The only significant legacy of Sankardeva is that nowhere in the island Durga Puja (a part of *Sakti* worship) with its indispensable accompaniments is celebrated till this day unlike in other places of Assam.

The outlook of the monastic *Sattras* towards women had been extremely rigid and derogatory since the time of their inception. For instance, till the recent decades, the *Auniati Sattra* did not allow women visitors inside its premises, leave alone the fact of them staying there. However, such rigid norms and codes of conduct have now been relaxed to a large extent. Willing women are now not only initiated by the *Sattradhikar* into the fold of Vaishnavism and allowed entrance inside the *Sattra*, but they can now also stay there during crucial hours of need, such as in the event of any natural calamity or some family-related dispute.[409] In the *Garamur Sattra*, women play an important role along with the men in various socio-religious matters, including decision-making. This has happened since its conversion into a semi-monastic system in the early 1920s. Thus, Pitambardeva Goswami's policy of encouraging women to take part in the stage theatre and *ras-lila* performed in the *Sattra*, was indeed one of the pivotal factors in uplifting the status and position of women in the *Sattra*.

It may be mentioned here that marriage-related disputes are frequently reported in the *Sattra*. "We have a large number of issues related with marriage and violation of the associated social norms for both the genders. However, they have never till date assumed the proportions of a serious or violent crime. They are actually a manifestation of the underlying socio-economic realities that characterise the social structure of Majuli."[410] The *Sattradhikar* of the *Garamur Sattra* also agreed to the point and said that such issues have never been intentional as a result of which, they have not escalated into acts of violence. Only if someone gets publicly convicted for pre-marital sex that subsequently results in a pregnancy, it may become a reason for societal hostility. Pre-marital sex is still considered as a major taboo in the society of Majuli which is by and large, steeped in orthodoxy and social conservatism. Marriage by elopement (quite common among the *Misings* and other tribals) has also, at times, become a cause of conflict when the parents are not ready to accept the relationship. However, an important observation that was noted in the course of this informal discussion

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[408] Ibid.

[409] Ibid.

[410] As informed by Narayan Chandra Devagoswami, the then *Sattradhikar* of Dakshinpat *Sattra*.

was that the *Sattradhikars* were found to be quite sensitive and conscious while talking about issues related to marriage and divorce, considering them to be basically private affairs. It was found that hostility born out of marriage-related issues, both inter-village and intra-village,eventually affects the relationship dynamics among the family members for many generations.

Issues pertaining to inter-caste marriage and inter-religion marriage are considered grievous sins (*mahapaap*). If any individual member of a family commits such "crimes", the entire family is socially boycotted by the village *raij* at the behest of the *Sattradhikars*, until they undergo a purification ceremony (*prayschitta*). Although such a "crime" is generally committed by a single member of the family, the entire family is considered to be equally responsible for the *paap* (sin). As per the experience of the researcher, even educated members of the society consider such marriages as a violation of the established social norm that disturbs the overall fabric of unity and harmony in the society. This proves that caste and religion are integral components of the Indian society in general and Majuli in particular since time immemorial. They have created watertight compartments between different communities which have led to unnecessary hatred and tension among various social groups at different times. In this context, it can be said with clarity that the *Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha* too, maintains the same rigidity when it comes to the issue of the marriages of their sons but not daughters. A field worker of the *Sangha* in Majuli said, "Our boys cannot marry a girl from a different caste or religion. If it so happens, he is boycotted by the family. But our girls can marry outside caste and community."[411] When asked about the reason for the same, he was however, not very clear and simply said, "This is the conventional practice because the sons are the ones who will light our funeral pyre and hence, we have been continuing with the same since the time of inception of our organisation."[412] In Max Weber's study on the Indian society, caste represented an important illustration of social ranking by prestige and formed part of a wider interest in pariah groups.

It is a fact that societies everywhere have undergone tremendous changes in the 20th century, influenced by the forces of modernisation and globalisation, and this holds true for Assam as well. The inevitable impact of these changes on people's lifestyles, food habits, dressing sense, etc. has been so far-reaching and all-encompassing that even medieval-era traditional

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[411] As informed by X, a member of the *Sangha* and a retired doctor by profession practising in Chowkidinghee area, Dibrugarh. Name not disclosed here on condition of anonymity.

[412] Ibid.

institutions like the *Sattras* have been swayed by the new ideas of societal reform that accompanied these changes. Towards the latter part of the 18th century when the British colonial rule began in Assam after the signing of the Treaty of Yandaboo (1826), Majuli, theoriginal homeland of the *Sattras*, presented an 'old-world air' pervading its atmosphere. This was despite the fact that there were already existing innumerable *Sattras* in Majuli at this time, including the state-sponsored ones of the kind for about two hundred years; and for about three hundred years after Sankardeva and Madhavdeva had opened their 'market of religion' (*dharmar beha*) here and embarked on a programme of religious and social reform.[413]

It is therefore understandable that Pitambardeva Goswami's (*Garamur Sattra*) reform programmes that brought about many significant changes to a part of the society in the island and which rejected the 'old air', was inspired not by his *Sattra*, but by the air of change which then pervaded the progressive minds of the country as a result of the impact of modern western education and subsequently, the social reform movement. Goswami himself reiterated the deep impact of the events in Bengal on his mind, consequent to the great Partition (1905) as published in the contemporary newspapers and periodicals. It inspired him to undertake reform measures that advocated the equality of men and upliftment of the poor and the downtrodden.[414]Hence, the forces of liberty, equality, and fraternity that came about as a result of the spread of modern education and science were much more powerful than the theocratic ideals that were so strongly advocated by the *Sattras* even then. Therefore, the latter had to fight for their survival and thus ensure the continuation of their long-held legitimacy among people by embracing, rather hesitatingly, modern thoughts and ideas. It can therefore be said that it is not the *Sattras* alone that have brought about changes in the "Assamese" society, but the society has also equally contributed to bringing about changes in the structure and functioning of such traditional institutions like the *Sattras*, for they are very much a part of the same society. It is indeed a matter of significance that the *Sattras* as a preserver of the most blatant forms of caste-based discrimination and Brahmanical orthodoxy themselves contributed to a great extent to minimise their own spheres of influence in the coming times. The manner in which Sankardeva initially started accommodating the local cultural and tribal elements into his creed became completely obsolete a few decades after his death; and more particularly during the colonial times.

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[413] No. 346.

[414] Ibid.

This inability to adapt themselves to the changing value-systems of society and embrace the diversity of socio-cultural beliefs and ways of lives of the *Sanatan Dharma*/*Vedic* tradition,[415]consequently opened the way for splits and the emergence of several factions within Vaishnavism in Assam, besides the growing popularity of Christianity especially among the *Misings* of Majuli in the present times. Much more than the problem of erosion induced by the Brahmaputra which has washed away a major part of the Majuli island, Christian proselytisers are a far more silent and insidious threat to the unique culture and civilisation of this place. Even today, the island and its *Sattras* and *Namghars* are deeply revered by the people of Assam who consider it as their primary pilgrimage spot. The remoteness of Majuli is compounded by the fact that it can only be reached by a ferry ride of almost 1.5 hours, or even 2.5 hours at certain times, because of which this place has not witnessed significant economic development compared to other places/districts of Assam.Chiefly taking advantage of such a remote geographical location and its economic backwardness, Christian missionaries started their proselytisation activities in the name of "charity" since the late 1980s. This has been one of the major areas where the *Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha* has utterly failed in its initial mission of unifying all the people of the state, especially lower-castes and tribes, into one common denomination of the "Assamese".

The *Mising* tribal community, which today constitutes about 48% of Majuli's total population of 2.2 lakh has been their foremost target.[416] The *Misings* had been practising certain age-old rituals in the garb of religion, common among which were witchcraft and sorcery. Such factors were greatly in favour of the evangelists who went about their task of convincing the community that it is only Christianity which could drive them out of the tunnel of darkness into a new world of light, hope, and development. In this respect, the missionaries were greatly helped by the narrow orthodoxy prevailing in the *Sattras* among the upper-caste *Sattradhikars* and the *bhakats* (monks) and their lack of contact with the common people. An interesting aspect of the conversion activities by the missionaries has been that the converts,

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[415] A bench led by Justice J.S. Verma in Ramesh Yeshwant Prabhoo case [1996 SCC (1) 130] had clearly stated that the words 'Hinduism' or 'Hindutva' may not be "understood and construed narrowly", in relation to strict Hindu religious practices outside of "the culture and ethos of the people of India", relating to the "way of life of the Indian people." It also said that considering the terms to indicate "hostility, enmity or intolerance" towards other faiths or to profess communalism, is the result of "an improper appreciation and perception" of the true meaning of these terms.

[416] As per data obtained from the Census Report, 2011.

largely Hindu, are allowed to carry on with their cultural markers, such as the wearing of *sindoor* and conch-shell bangles among the converted women and the wearing of *dhoti-seleng saador* among the converted men. It is because the symbolism associated with a particular culture and its rituals (not necessarily religious) is so powerful that it is able to generate a significant amount of memory among its followers, who eventually cannot forego the distinctive traits of that culture which have been passed on to them over several generations. The Christian missionaries have very well understood this fact and utilised to their maximum benefit the economic and social vulnerability of the poorest sections of the society in order to suit their agenda, which is not only religious but also political. In this way, Christianity has also indigenised itself in the tribal-dominated areas by literally borrowing certain cultural aspects from the local Hindu traditions.[417]

Richard M. Eaton has commented that "Viewed historically, religious systems are created cultural artefacts, and not timeless structures lying beyond human societies."[418] As such, they are continuously re-interpreted and re-adapted to a particular socio-cultural environment. Yet, even while this happens, religious traditions transform those environments in creative ways. Herein lies perhaps the secret of the successful world religions, for when they are not flexible or adaptable enough, they tend to ossify into hollow shells and eventually survive only in museums or forgotten texts.[419] He further adds, "Christianity would never have flourished – and perhaps not even have survived – had it not absorbed a great part of both the imperial culture and the Germanic popular culture of the Roman Empire. This is no less true of Islam and the Bengal frontier. In the success stories of world religions, and the story of Islam in Bengal is surely among these, the norms of religion and the realities of local social systems ultimately accommodate one another. Although theorists, theologians, or reformers may

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[417] While studying the process of Christianisation in the tribal societies of Jharkhand at the inter-generational level, K.N. Sahat, in his article, *A Theoretical Model for the Study of the Christianisation Process among the Tribals of Chotanagpur*, has brought to light the processes of combination, retroversion, and indigenisation at work but he avoids to describe the situation from the vantage point of syncretism (based on an admixture with beliefs and practices from other religions) which is inherent in the indigenisation process. Some sections of the Christians seem to be apprehensive as they see a loss of the vital elements of the Christian tradition in the process of indigenisation.

[418] Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier (1204-1760)* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), 314.

[419] Ibid.

resist this point, it seems nonetheless to be intuitively grasped by the common folk.[420] Vaishnava traditions in Assam today have restructured themselves to a large extent, although it is too early to comment if this restructuring is going to be really creative in the long run.

The proselytisation activities of the missionaries in Majuli seem tohave posed a grave existential threat to the traditional Vaishnavite way of living of the people here, which is very much a part of the overall Hindu Vedic thought and system of belief as explained earlier.Realising this, the *Sattradhikar*, Sri Sri Janarddan Dev Goswami,[421] of one of the most prominent *Sattras* in Majuli – the *Uttar Kamalabari Sattra* – several years ago, took it upon himself to undertake a mass outreach programme, especially among the *Misings*, the chief target of the conversion programme of the Christian missionaries. Hence, the claim of the *Sangha* that the *Sattras*under the control of the *Sattradhikars*have been reduced to entirely redundant institutions with no objective of promoting the general welfare of the common populace does not hold firm ground. It has largely been discredited by the sincere endeavours of Janarddan Dev Goswami to re-establish contact with the masses and thereby save an entire civilisation and its belief systems and practices from usurpation by an Abrahamic faith. This is also how traditional institutions keep reinventing themselves, reorienting their ideals and values to the changing societal dynamics and forces of change so as to legitimise their existence in the face of numerous challenges.

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[420] Ibid.

[421] Janarddan Dev Goswami, a graduate in philosophy, took over as the *Sattradhikar* of the *Uttar Kamalabari Sattra* inMarch, 2002 at the young age of only 28 years. During an interaction with him in the *Namghar* of the *Sattra* itself, Goswami said, "Having been born and brought up in the Vaishnavite way of life from an early age, I have extensively studied the socio-economic conditions of the Majuli island and the ways of living of its people, including the geographical and economic problems that they have faced since a long time and to which the state has turned a blind eye. The devastating annual floods and the resultant loss of crops and the spread of water-borne diseases thereafter, coupled with the problems of erosion of our land, poverty, and underdevelopment, lack of adequate educational facilities, deplorable conditions of the roads here, and poor health infrastructure, are the most pressing problems of this place that demand a solution at the earliest. Since the *Sattras* and the *Sattradhikars* have remained a disconnected lot from the masses (by disconnect here I mean both physical and psychological disconnect), I set about changing that by establishing close relationships with the common people and interacting with them in order to know about their basic problems."

The targets of Goswami's outreach programme have largely been the social sectors of education, healthcare and sanitation, among others. His efforts have borne fruit over the years, and this can be said with certainty because not only has the rate of Christian conversions significantly declined of late,[422] but many of the former converts have also returned into the fold of Vaishnavism through *shuddhi* and *smaran*.[423]The irony here has been that most of the converts strongly continue to consider themselves and their identity as "Assamese" (not in a religious way though, but culturally and linguistically) even after their conversion into a faith that is supposedly identified with the "modern" progressive ethos of the Western civilisation. But, many of the upper-caste *Sattradhikars* and *gosains*, including a few members of the *Sangha*, still treat them as social outcastes, more so the ones who initially converted into Christianity but are now Vaishnavites.

The primary focus of Goswami has consistently been the *Mising* community, among whom the rate of Christian conversions has been the highest.[424] The geographical location of Majuli makes it a favourable hotspot for the Christian missionaries from Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh. They have established their repute here by holding several medical camps, especially after the yearly floods and also opened many informal schools in the *Mising*-inhabited areas of the island so as to spread English education among them in order to prepare them for the job market. In the guise of providing social service, the missionaries have doled out several enticements to the poor tribals, such as free education, including free textbooks and uniform exclusively for the *Misings*admitted into the Christian

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[422] Information obtained from the population data available in the local Gaon Panchayat office at Kamalabari Gaon Panchayat.

[423] A small religious ceremony called *smaran* (sometimes also known as *shuddhi*) is held at the *Namghar*presided over by the *Sattradhikar*through which earlier Christian converts return to the Hindu way of life.

[424] Raidangani Banshichuk village under Fulani area of Lower Majuli is dominated by the *Mising* tribals who had accepted Christianity a few years back and erected a Church in the same place. In October, 2018 it was reported that a group of about 100 miscreants shouting slogans in favour of the *Sattradhikar* Janarddan Dev Goswami, had reached this village and attacked the Church in a heated moment of passion. The media later reported that the people who accompanied the *Sattradhikar* issued open threats to the poor people of the village saying that "we will demolish all Churches in Majuli as Christianity is unsuited to Indian culture and traditions." An FIR was later filed at the nearest police station by the locales but the police department failed to take any action against the group of miscreants.

missionary/convent schools not only in Majuli, but also in other parts of the state (which, in part, explains the gradual expansion of the Christian missionaries to other areas of Assam, besides Majuli), free healthcare (e.g. as a result of the successful penetration of the Christian missionaries in Majuli, most of the primary and community health centres operating here provide free-of-cost health-related treatment, including medicines, to the tribals, especially the *Misings*), monetary and material gifts, etc. to the poor tribals.[425]*Sattradhikars* like Janarddan Dev Goswami have argued that in an indirect way, it represents an attack on the Hindu (Vaishnavite) way of life because the proselytisers have long been carrying out a vicious campaign against the *Sattras* and the *Namghars* and the traditional belief-systems of the *Misings*. In their zeal to Christianise the tribals en-masse, the missionaries have been urging them against the worshipping of "heathen gods"[426] and promising deliverance if they convert.

An important point to be noted here is that most of the Christian missionaries who are active in proselytisation activities in Majuli are Catholics.[427] In order to tackle the Christian missionaries without the use of force or violence, Janarddan Dev Goswami has been at the forefront of activities related to flood relief in Majuli since 2003, personally visiting the flood-affected lot, especially the rural poor, and helping them by all possible means in their hour of relief. This is another significant area where the *Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha's* accomplishments have still remained far behind the *Sattras* so as to give them due credit. Its uncalled for interference in petty issues of people's food habits or the way of conducting a Hindu marriage have drifted its attention away from the real problems affecting the common

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[425] Information obtained from the field visit.

[426] The dictionary meaning of "heathen" refers to people or nations that do not acknowledge the God or the Bible. In historical and cultural contexts, it means any person who is neither a Jew, Christian, nor a Muslim, and hence is often used to mean irreligiousor uncultured.

[427] A senior police officer who was serving in Majuli in 2006 had recalled, "An evangelical camp was planned by Catholic missionaries from Nagaland to convert the local people of Majuli, mostly the poor and the deprived. Many priests and even some Naga politicians had come down to Majuli which led some *Sattradhikars* to petition the district administration. As a result, the then Deputy Commissioner of Majuli disallowed the camp. But, the Catholics tried to hold it forcibly, following which there was a mild lathi-charge on them. However, the district administration held firm on its ground, despite political pressure to grant permission to hold the camp, and the missionaries packed their bags and left Majuli eventually." Name of the police officer not revealed here on condition of anonymity.

people at the grassroots' level. Together with a few other *Sattradhikars* and *Gosains*, Janarddan Dev Goswami has undertaken the leadership of coordinating the relief efforts of the Government of Assam in order to properly streamline them and also to check the leakages of funds. In order to tackle the serious problem of the spread of diseases after the flood waters recede, they now organise medical camps in all the flood-affected areas of Majuli and other nearby areas too, besides providing RO (Reverse Osmosis) water purifiers, ORS (Oral Rehydration Solution) packets, first-aid kits, and food items. They have also held several awareness camps on issues related to health, nutrition and hygiene so as to prevent the outbreak of communicable diseases after the floods. Mainly because of such dedication and hard work together with the efforts of the village panchayats, it is indeed a matter of victory and pride that over the last decade, no post-flood outbreak of diseases in Majuli has been reported.[428]

Unlike the *Sangha* which has failed to look beyond the frontiers of religion and theological debates, leave alone create a unified "Assamese" society and identity, the *Sattradhikars* under the able leadership of Goswami, have made one of the most basic issues concerning people belonging to all strata of the society, i.e. healthcare, their topmost priority. This has been done as a counter-measure to check the activities of the Christian missionaries in Majuli. Several doctors who are Vaishnavites and ardent disciples of his *Sattra*, have formed a team who regularly visit the island to conduct free medical camps among the tribals in the remote villages. Goswami has also roped in several big pharmaceutical companies to distribute free medicines, and also tied up with renowned oncologists and other specialists for ensuring free-of-cost consultations for the people,[429] given the increasing rate of incidences of cancer in the state as a whole. Patients who are in their last stage or require advanced level of treatment are sent to these doctors settled elsewhere in the state, in several batches every month. They have also tied up with top healthcare institutions and hospitals of the state to provide healthcare at subsidised rates, or even at times, free-of-cost to the extremely poor and the needy who are referred to the doctors by the *Sattradhikars* themselves. This also brings to light the authority

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[428] Data obtained from the website of the Directorate of Health Services, Health & Family Welfare Department, Govt. of Assam (www.dhs.assam.gov.in)

[429] Information obtained from the field work in *Natun Kamalabari* area where several local villagers suffering from various health complications have visited doctors, including renowned gastroenterologists and oncologists, based in the Guwahati Medical College and Hospital (GMCH), on the recommendation and reference provided by the *Sattradhikars*.

exercised by the *Sattras* over the Assamese society at large, which looks at its decisions and verdicts with the utmost reverence and respect even today. The services of three ambulances has also been launched for the benefit of both the local population of Majuli and visitors who come here as tourists, both Indians and foreigners. A few years back, in order to sensitise the indigenous population against the harmful effects of chewing and smoking tobacco, the historic *Uttar Kamalabari Sattra* under the leadership of Janarddan Dev Goswami had started an anti-tobacco campaign and trained hundreds of volunteers to advise the devotees and other visitors on the island not to consume narcotic substances.[430] Such initiatives taken by the *Sattra* have been considered as a historic milestone with respect to the anti-tobacco movement in the future. Steps have also been taken to put an end to the illegal sale and distribution of both domestic and foreign liquor, which is rampant in Majuli.

The *Sattras* have also established ties with higher educational institutions, both inside and outside the state. They provide free education, including free-of-cost coaching for competitive examinations, to meritorious students from Majuli after the completion of their schooling, which has helped them secure well-paying jobs both in the government and the private sectors.[431] This has been another major area where the *Sattras* have very tactfully attacked the Christian missionaries whose religious proselytisation agenda is based on promising petty jobs to the tribals and then bringing them into their fold later in the name of Lord Jesus. As a counter-measure, the *Sattras* have launched various livelihood promotion programmes in Majuli under the Government of India's Skill India Programme. This they have done by not only establishing contacts with employers from the rest of the state to provide jobs to the poor tribals but also by encouraging women to form local Self-Help Groups (SHGs) under the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM) that are provided loans from the coffers of the state through the *Sattras* to start their own small businesses in areas as diverse as mat-making, manufacturing of pickles, bamboo and cane jewellery, basket-making, etc. This can be understood as another aspect of the co-existence between the

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[430] In 2015, during the annual *Raas-Mahotsav* in Majuli, a few officials of the Jorhat District Tobacco Control Cell (DTCC) had trained several volunteers of different organising committees of the *Raas* festival in the cultural auditorium of the *Uttar Kamalabari Sattra*. Along with the nodal officer of the DTCC, other officials and resource persons advised all the volunteers to alert people, both young and adults, on the various diseases caused by tobacco.

[431] Information obtained after interaction with a few *Gosains* and *Bhakats* of the *Auniati Sattra* and the *Kamalabari Sattra*.

state and traditional institutions, which have evolved at different phases of the growth and development of society in a way that has helped establish the relevance of both, albeit in different ways, in the overall institutional framework of the political system of the state.

A very important aspect of Goswami's multi-pronged approach to check further Christian conversions in Majuli has been to inculcate a sense of pride in the cultural ethos of the Vedic civilisation and *Bharatiya Sanskriti* (as they call it) among the people, especially the youth. The idea is also to make them aware of the basic aspects of the *Vedic*/*Sanatan Dharma* tradition and how, over the years, it has been able to survive the civilisational onslaughts of the Islamic invasions of the medieval era or the proselytisation activities of the Christian missionaries since the colonial times. In 2006, Janarddan Dev Goswami launched *Shishu Sanskar Shibirs*, which are 15-day residential camps held within the *Sattra* itself exclusively for children (consisting of as many as 400 per batch) aged 5-16 years who are taught in depth about Vaishnavism and the diverse cultural and spiritual aspects associated with it.[432] In the recent times, these camps have become very popular and there is also an increasing demand from parents to somehow accommodate their children in them. In order to carry forward his work, Goswami has also joined hands with organisations like the *Seva Bharati*[433] that provides education, healthcare, and vocational training to the poor and the marginalised sections of the society. As a result of such untiring efforts that have been ongoing for several years now, *Ekal Vidyalayas* have now come up in different places across Majuli. In these *Ekal Vidyalayas*, children are provided free education upto the 12th standard, and are taught in depth about Dharma, Vedic science, and Indic values which constitute an inalienable aspect of the Indian cultural heritage.[434] However, the same cannot be said of the schools and

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[432]Jaideep Mazumdar, "The Monk who is Saving Majuli from Christian Proselytisers." *Swarajya*, October 09, 2017, accessed August 5, 2018, http://www.swarajyamag.com/magazine/opinion/2017/0522/4537893423709.html.

[433] Founded in the year 1979 by Balasaheb Deoras, *Seva Bharati* is a non-governmental organisation working among the economically weaker sections of the Indian society, including tribal and indigenous communities with the aim of making them self-reliant in all aspects of their lives. It also works among urban slum dwellers and resettlement colonies by introducing various welfare and social service programmes, such as free medical assistance, free education and vocational training, free drinking water supply in remote areas facing water scarcity, free food distribution in hospitals for ailing patients, etc.

[434] The current BJP-led government in the state has sanctioned for the coming up of more such schools not only in Majuli but elsewhere too, especially in areas where Christian missionaries are

universities run by the *Sangha* where only the *Sangha's* own narrow perspective on Sankardeva's Vaishnavite philosophy is being taught as the absolute truth.

All these steps undertaken at the behest of the *Sattras* have resulted in a complete stop to fresh Christian conversions in Majuli.[435]As per data, there are barely 1,000 Christians in Majuli today as against a few thousand a few years ago.[436] There are only three small churches with small congregations on the island. It may be mentioned here that the efforts of the *Sattradhikars* under the leadership of Goswami to check the intrusion by the Christian missionaries and put an end to their proselytisation activities are being supplemented in a huge way by the current BJP-led dispensation at the state. It has not only declared Majuli the first river island district of the world, but has also implemented a slew of development measures to tackle the major problems of floods and erosion, of which the missionaries have taken the maximum advantage to pursue their agenda. Moreover, Chief Minister Sarbananda Sonowal, who represents Majuli in the state legislature, has promised the development of infrastructure in the *Sattras*and *Namghars*and their modernisation, besides providing easy access to education and healthcare facilities on the island.

The issue of Christian conversions has been vehemently criticised by not only the *Sattras* but also the local people which they say has been done primarily through deceit and exploiting the economic vulnerability of the poor and the deprived. It remains to be seen whether the efforts of the *Sattradhikars* to arrest fresh Christian conversions in Majuli and elsewhere, would eventually result in the creation of aunified "Assamese" society and identity encompassing diverse castes, tribes and races, or become a new form of exploitation and oppression of the lower castes in the hands of the *Sattras* headed mostly by upper-caste *Sattradhikars*. The question of identity here seems a rather complex one, because there are

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active. Based upon information obtained from the field and personal interaction with Janarddan Dev Goswami, it can be said that parents are quite happy sending their children to these schools, rather than the convent ones run by the Christian missionaries where they feel, alien cultural values are inculcated from a very young age in order to capture young minds. For instance, a parent, X, who had admitted his only son in one of the *Ekal Vidyalayas* in the Notun Kamalabari area of Majuli, said that the schools that are run by the missionaries punish children if they play with colours in the school a day before Holi, and even strictly prohibit boys from wearing *tilak* and girls from wearing the bindi, which are deeply hurting to a community's sentiments.

[435] Personal interaction with a few *Gosains* of the *Dakshinpat Sattra* and the local people of the area.

[436] No. 423

many ways in which identity has been understood in the social sciences – religious, linguistic, historical, social, economic and of course, the political. With reference to the "Assamese" as a category, there is a certain section of people who consider their Assamese identity to be both linguistic and religious at the same time. It depends upon the situation and the particular socio-political context at a certain period of time that determines which form of identity is embraced as prior by the people and how. The several layers within which an individual's identity is located are exploited by the politicians to the hilt so as to attain their own vested interests in the name of welfare and development. It has been a long-held tradition, a certain kind of unwritten convention that has now been almost thoroughly established, that the *Sattradhikars* and the chief *Gosains* of a majority of the *Sattras* and *Namghars* spread across the state are upper-caste men – Goswami, Mahanta, Sarmah, and Kalita. One of the major grievances of a majority of the *Mising* population in Majuliwho are Christian converts, besides several lower castes and OBCs such as the *Nath-Yogis*, is the ill-treatment that they have been meted out for long by these *Sattradhikars* and *Gosains*. Christianity came as a ray of hope in their otherwise socially degrading existence. They saw in it a positive change to give their lives a new meaning, a new vision.

According to Article 25 of the Constitution of India "all persons are equally entitled to the freedom of conscience and the right to freely profess, practise and propagate any religion." Understood in this light, the lower caste groups and tribals have the freedom to declare their religious beliefs and faiths openly and freely, and also to perform religious worship, rituals, ceremonies, and exhibit their beliefs and ideas. Although at the same time, the Constitution also declares that the 'Right to Propagate' one's religion does not include the right to convert another person into one's own religion. It is because forcible conversions impinge upon the 'freedom of conscience' guaranteed to all persons alike, i.e. the inner freedom of an individual to mould his/her relationship with God or other creatures in whatever way he/she desires. However, what is 'forcible' or what constitutes 'voluntary' is a rather shady area that is very much dependent on people's subjective feelings and emotions with regard to a matter as sensitive as religion. 'Forcible' relates to against one's own will, while 'voluntary' comes closer to individual choice.With regard to the matter of Christian conversions in Majuli and the reasons behind the same, it remains debatable as to how and in what ways the dynamics of power relations play out between two groups of people, the upper-castes on the one hand, and the lower castes and tribals on the other. It is more about the question of survival for the latter and less about holding on to a particular religious faith. Neo-Vaishnavite organisations

like the *Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha* and their conception of an overarching "Assamese" identity stands challenged in the face of newly emerging demands and challenges of the society. Thus, the role of traditional institutions like the *Sattra* and the *Namghar* in identity formation not only needs to located in the context of the rise of parallel organisations like the *Sangha* but also the varying conceptions of identity understood within the narrative of the state.

Chapter – 6

THE ASSAMESE – AN IDENTITY IN FLUX: A SOCIO-POLITICAL ANALYSIS

Understood in different political contexts, a traditional institution undergoes the same transformations and changes that determine the different phases of societal evolution and a community's relationship with that institution at different stages of history. The existence of indigenous democratic institutions is of utmost importance for the deepening and strengthening, as well as for enhancing the richness of democracy, especially in the world's largest democracy, i.e. India.[437] Hence, indigenous democratic practices need to be continued and preserved for their simplicity, efficiency, effectiveness, and familiarity with the local conditions. Contestations over Assamese identity become politically important especially in the contemporary context of the debate between citizens versus foreigners, and the fine line that exists between these two categories has been interpreted by both the state and traditional institutions in terms of their relationship with them. The importance and relevance of both the traditional systems of governance and law-making such as the *Sattras* and the *Namghars* and the modern democratic system of the state cannot be undermined. People identify themselves as belonging to a certain community, whether defined by caste, tribe, language or religion, with respect to the relationship they share with both. Thus, people's identification of themselves as belonging to "this" rather than "that" depends upon a healthy integration and coordination of the values and principles that underlie both these institutions.

The attitude of Srimanta Sankardeva towards the various communities of Assam, upper-castes and lower-castes or tribals and non-tribals, is not sufficiently known, as the specific mention of different groups of people is quite rare in his writings. In fact, in the entire massive literary output of Sankardeva, we find only once a single and clear mention of them in the Book II of his own rendering of the *Srimadbhagavata* (v. 4746) where he talks about the *Kiratas*, *Khasis*, and *Garos* among others (*Kirata Kachari/Khasi Garo Miri/Yavana Kanaka Gowala/Asama muluka/dhoba ye Turuka/Kubacha MlecchaChandala*).[438] Whatever may have been the attitude of Sankardeva and his successors towards different sections of people, Vaishnavism in Assam did not come into direct confrontation with the diversity of

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[437] No. 174.

[438] Sankardeva, *Sachitra Srimadbhagavata* (*Pancham Skandha*). In one of the popular Assamese Vaishnava traditional folk stories, a *Garo* disciple of Madhavdeva, Govinda, was censured by the others, but Madhavdeva had treated him with immense love, consideration, and affection.

beliefs and religious practices of the people who became its followers in due course of time. It rather helped in the formation of a broad and diverse religious spectrum primarily through the amalgamation and exchange of elements from each other. Sankardeva was firm in his belief that virtue is not merely a prerogative of the Brahmanas or other 'high-born' people (the so-called *dwija* castes); he believed that a lower-caste person could equally be the possessor of virtue if he or she remained steadfast in his/her adherence to righteousness/duty (*Dharma*).[439]It may be mentioned here that although neither Sankardeva nor his successors made any conscious or planned attempt at integrating the different social groups to form an umbrella society and identity of the 'Assamese', the process of fusion of divergent cultural elements lay at the very heart of the Vaishnavite movement.

It is in this context that the political dimensions of the cultural manifestations of state forms become important to understand that dimension of the Vaishnavite movement which gave rise to a newly emergent society – a society that represented the accommodation and fusion of the diverse cultural and ethnic elements of the society into a unified whole symbolised in the domain of the state. The movement had multiple ramifications – spiritual, social, cultural, literary, artistic, and the political – and Sankardeva became the harbinger of an extraordinary resurgence in the religious and cultural lives of the people of this region, which eventually marked its impact, both positive and negative, on the organisation and functioning of the state. Here, the state may be understood as a special, separate, and autonomous entity whose power and presence is omnipresent in all aspects of our lives, so much so that it has almost become an inherent ability of this institution to defy all scholarly efforts to unmask its power and thereby prevent an adequate study of its numerous manifestations in society.[440] This constitutes the state-society paradox that had been discussed at length in the theoretical part of this work. Abrams says that the state is the hidden reality of politics which is constitutive of society; it represents the backstage translation of political power behind the on-stage agencies of the government. It is this power which resists discovery and is not only understood with reference to the state but also very closely identified with it. In other words, the state itself is the ideological instrument in terms of which the political institutionalisation of power is legitimated. It emerges as a form of structuration within political practice, as an

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[439] Birendranath Datta, *Cultural Contours of North-East India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012), 119-129.

[440] Philip Abrams, "Difficulty of Studying the State," *The Journal of Historical Sociology*1, no. 4 (1988): 58-89.

implicit construct, which eventually acquires an overt symbolic identity that is divorced from the reality.[441]

Hence, Mitchell talks about the state as both a 'real' and an 'illusory' institution – a paradox that thwarts any attempt to construct a definite theory of the state. It is because the state has been formed as a result of the networking of several forms of institutional arrangements and political practices that constitute the material aspect of the state which in itself, is quite ambiguously defined. On the contrary, the public imagery of the state as an ideological construct seems rather coherent and systematic.[442] It is in this context that Abrams has argued that we should distinguish between two different objects of analysis – the state as a system and the state as an idea. The former refers to the state as a system of institutionalised practice, while the latter refers to the reification of this system that assumes an overtly symbolic identity to itself that is nowhere remotely related to an illusory account of practice. Mitchell views the twin concepts of the state-idea and the state-system as two different aspects of the same process that is a part of society. Thus, the phenomenon of the state arises from techniques that enable mundane material practices of our day-to-day lives to appear as an abstract, non-material form. In the words of Mitchell, "A construct such as the state occurs not merely as a subjective belief, but as a representation that is reproduced through everyday visible forms, including the language of legal practice, the architectural design of public buildings, the marking and policing of frontiers, or the theorisation of what constitutes socially acceptable behaviour and what not."[443]

It is difficult for even the state-centred literature and the scholars and theorists associated with it to define and fix the elusive boundary between the political system of the state on the one hand and the society on the other. This is one of the major defining characteristics of the modern political order.[444] We historically need to understand the state-society distinction between the frameworks of the conceptual and the material, between the abstract and the real, in order to grasp the reality behind the emergence of the modern nation-state. The most commonly prevailing notion of the state is essentially that of a decision-making or policy-

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[441] Ibid.

[442] Timothy Mitchell, "Society, Economy, and the State Effect," in *The Anthropology of the State: A Reader*, ed. Aradhana Sharma and Akhil Gupta (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2006), 169-186.

[443] Ibid.

[444] Ibid.

making institution. However, the focus on only one disembodied aspect of the state assimilates the state-society distinction into the same problematic opposition between the conceptual and the material. The state in itself is the representation of a world that is based on a fundamental division between the state and the society.[445] In other words, the state appears as an abstraction in relation to the concreteness of the social, and a subjective idealism in relation to the objectivity associated with the material world.

Sankardeva propounded his faith in a manner that was in consonance with the social and religious sentiments of the people of the region. Without any blatant discrimination on the grounds of caste or creed, the doors of his religion were open to all, irrespective of whether he was a *Brahmin* or *Chandala*, a *Kalita* or *Garo*, or a Hindu or Muslim. This is a doctrine that is central to the *Bhagavata-Purana*, which Sankardeva had whole-heartedly accepted as an article of faith. Significantly, while translating that portion of the *Bhagavata-Purana* where the so-called 'low-born' communities are listed with the declaration that they too can attain*moksha*(salvation), Sankardeva replaces the names of the communities appearing in the original with the names of communities belonging specifically to Assam and the adjoining areas of North-East India.[446] It includes not only the lower castes within the hierarchical order of the caste system but also various tribal and other peripheral groups belonging to the family of the *Kiratas* – such as, *Kacharis*, *Garos*, *Khasis*, *Miris* (*Misings*), *Ahoms*, and as well as the Muslims. The same practice was followed by the successors and followers of Sankardeva – starting from Madhavdeva and down to the later gurus. Furthermore, the *Sattras* and the *Namghars* were originally conceived by Sankardeva as the ideal havens where people from diverse backgrounds could live in perfect peace and harmony based on the principles of equality, inclusiveness and non-discrimination. Barring only a few essential belongings, no private property was allowed to be owned by any inmate of the *Sattra*. Such a functional arrangement, characteristic of tribal communism, made it possible for Vaishnavism to make strong inroads among the tribal groups and lower castes of Assam.

The second most significant factor that drew sympathetic attention of the lower castes and tribal masses towards Sankardeva's faith was its simplicity, both in its understanding (theory) and the ritualistic aspect (practice). His teachings were devoid of any complex religious jargons and theological intricacies, as a result of which it became easily comprehensible for

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[445] Ibid.

[446] No. 440.

the literate and the illiterate both, the rich and the poor alike. In order to be a follower of the faith propounded by Sankardeva, one was not required to pass through an elaborate ritualistic process. Simply by chanting the name of *Hari*, anyone could redeem oneself of all the trials and tribulations of life and earthly sins, and could be bestowed with a pure life after death. No doubt, such simplicity was characteristic of a completely opposite path from the Brahmanical rites and rituals that had almost become the order of the day. As such, the simple tribal folk was lured towards it to accept it unquestioningly.

In the Vaishnava theory of *Bhakti* or unflinching devotion to one God and one Guru, the tribal people could draw a point of similarity with their supreme allegiance to the chieftains of their respective clans. They were able to find a parallel between their loyalty to one chieftain and the loyalty to one guru as was enunciated in Sankardeva's tradition of *Mahapurusiya Dharma*, without much obfuscation. These and other such factors facilitated the spread of Vaishnavism in the tribal-inhabited areas of Assam. In due course of time, it indeed became a very powerful catalyst, in the words of B.K. Barua, "a cementing force"[447] – that led to the process of acculturation of the different social groups, tribes and communities inhabiting the region. Hence, in this context, questions related to the issue of leadership within communities can be understood and transferred onto the larger domains of the political and the cultural. The concepts of trust, proximity, and reciprocity which are closely linked to the socio-anthropological and political study of institutions become important here and so do the questions of legitimacy and deference that had been dealt with earlier.

The process of acculturation through religion started right from the days of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva. Amongst their disciples, Govinda was a *Garo*, Joyram a *Bhutiya*, Chand Sai (Chand Khan) a Muslim, Paramananda a *Miri* (Mising), Narahari an *Ahom*, Murari and the famous Chilarai were *Koches*, all of whom occupy exalted positions in the history of Assamese Vaishnavism.[448]All these factors helped to break down the irrational man-made barriers of caste, creed, and ritualism and hence, the caste system here is fairly loose and flexible enough.[449] Caste divisions are not strictly determined by occupational standards and

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[447] B.K. Barua, *A Cultural History of Assam* (Gauhati: Gauhati University, 1969), 68.

[448] No. 205: 210-212.

[449] There are innumerable such aspects related to the food habits, dressing sense, traditional arts and crafts, and dance forms of the non-tribal Assamese society, largely Hindu, which has borrowed heavily from the different tribal cultures spread across the region.

caste-based seclusion and discrimination, although not unknown, have been fairly minimal.[450] No wonder that in the *Hazarighosha*, Madhavdeva himself wrote, "Even the *Garos*, the *Bhutiyas*, and the *Yavanas* chant the name of *Hari*" (*Garo Bhot Yavaneo Harir nama loy* – v. 473), and "The *Miris*, the *Ahoms*, and the *Kacharis* attain salvation through chanting *rama nama*." (*Miri, Ahom, Kachari attain salvation by pronouncing the name of Rama* – v. 531). The large-scale acceptance of Vaishnavism by the tribals of Assam can also be inferred from a verse by Ramananda Dwija, a famous Vaishnava hagiographer: "Kamarupa is a *Mleccha* country and Krishna has incarnated here as Sankara…. The greatly impure *Mlecchas* now perform *naam kirtana*, and at ease, attain *Baikuntha Parayan*" (*Guru Charita*, v. 1147). Later, the members of a large number of plains tribes[451] of Assam such as the *Koches*, *Kacharis*, *Rabhas*, *Chutiyas*, *Misings*, *Ahoms*, *Mataks*, *Morans*, etc. were brought into the fold of Vaishnavism by the *Gosains* and *Mahantas* of different *Sattras* through the process of Sanskritisation.[452]

It is to be noted here that the *Adhikaras* or the religious heads of the *Kala Sanghati* (one of the four branches of Assamese Vaishnavism) played a very important role in the spread of Vaishnavism amongst the tribal population of Assam. They established a large number of *Sattras* in the tribal areas and in this way, accentuated the process of accommodation of the tribes by including within the *Bhakti* cult people from the respective areas. Plains tribes apart, even some hill tribes like the *Noctes* of the present-day state of Arunachal Pradesh were initiated into Vaishnavism by Sri Ramadeva, an *Adhikara* of the *Bareghar Sattra* (of the *Kala Sanghati* division) in the early 18th century. The credit for bringing most of the plains tribes of upper Assam into the Vaishnavite fold of *Mahapurusiya Naam-Dharma* goes to the *Sattras*

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[450] No. 440

[451] The Constitution of India categorises the tribes of Assam into two different groups – Scheduled Tribes (Hills) and Scheduled Tribes (Plains). Assamese language is used as the *lingua franca* by almost all the tribes.

[452] The term 'Sanskritisation' was made popular by the Indian sociologist M.N. Srinivas in the 1950s in his D.Phil thesis on the *Kodava* (Coorg) community of the southern Indian state of Karnataka at the Oxford University. He defined Sanskritisation as a process by which a "a *low* or *middle*-caste Hindu, a tribal or any other group, changes its customs, rituals, ideologies, and way of life in the direction of a high and frequently twice-born (*dwija*) caste. Generally, such changes are followed by a claim to a higher position in the caste hierarchy than that traditionally conceded to the claimant class by the local community."

of the *Moamaria* sect which are also affiliated to the *Kala Sanghati*. There is a story of a much later period of a person called Narottam Atoi of the *Nocte* community (formerly identified as a Naga tribe[453]) of the hills, which is extremely popular among the followers of Assamese Vaishnavism. It so goes that before his transformation into a Vaishnava devotee of high status, Narottam was the chief of his tribe. He became deeply attracted towards the Vaishnava faith and its principles as propagated by Srimanta Sankardeva and hence, he came down to the plains in order to seek *saran* (initiation) from Sriram Ata, the then *Sattradhikar* of the *Bareghar Sattra*. Although initially, Sriram Ata was quite reluctantto accept a Naga man as his disciple, he eventually changed his mind to not only welcome Narottam Atoi into the order, but also later raised him to a very high rank, virtually equal to that of the guru himself.[454] A ballad narrating this particular story has been found in two versions, both of them being popular among the adherents of certain esoteric sects of Assamese Vaishnavism, in which all restrictions related to caste, creed and rank, and even food taboos, are set aside with impunity.[455]

Mention here may be made of a small group of the Konyak Nagas[456]residing in Sivasagar district of Upper Assam. Although historical evidences do not seem enough to confirm the accurate or root cause of their migration into Assam, they have now almost become an inalienable part of the overall Assamese society and culture not only through the process of assimilation but also through their complete acceptance of the Hindu way of life. They identify themselves as Assamese through the institutions of the *Sattra* and the *Namghar* which have become an integral part of their lives, and this has been true despite frequent

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[453] The Naga is a generic name for a group of tribes inhabiting Nagaland, Northern Manipur, and the bordering districts of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. The various groups which fall under 'Naga' as a social category include *Ao*, *Angami*, *Sema*, *Konyak*, *Lotha*, *Phom*, *Chang*, *Rengma*, and a few others. This heterogeneity associated with the Nagas can probably be attributed to inter-marriages within the Naga group of tribes. Comprising of about 40 odd tribes, the Nagas are primarily scattered in North-East India and parts of North-West Myanmar.

[454] No. 440

[455] No. 449

[456] The Konyak Nagas are an important group within the community of the Nagas. They are mostly concentrated in the Mon district of Nagaland. The word 'Konyak' has been derived from 'Keniak' which implies 'man'. The facial features of the Konyaks resemble those of the Palaeo-Mongoloid types. Hutton and Mills divided the tribe into two different groups – Thenko and Thendu, distinguished by cultural and linguistic features.

tensions that keep on erupting with respect to border disputes between Assam and Nagaland. In their study conducted in the Naga Gaon Model Village of Sivasagar district in Upper Assam under Hahchora Gaon Panchayat of Sivasagar Development Block, Partha Protim Dutta and Ujjal Protim Dutta have argued that the Konyak Nagas came to the plains in search of food and livelihood since there was dearth of food and other basic necessities in their native land. The *Gosain* of the *Moamoria Sattra* after inducting them into the fold of Vaishnavism brought them to this village.[457] Their religious beliefs and practices are quite similar to the totemic form of tribal religious practices. However, they also worship various other deities of the Hindu religious pantheon and are ardent disciples of the *Moamoria Sattra* of the Vaishnavite order. One of their key institutions is the *Morung Ghar* (similar to the *Namghar*) where the Konyak Nagas offer their prayers to their gods and where only Hindu people are allowed to enter.

There are two households in the above-mentioned village who have converted into Christianity but interestingly, the local villagers, i.e. the Konyak Nagas, do not support their religious activities and have even excommunicated them from the village. They conduct annual *naam-prasangas* in their households similar to other Vaishnavas and also offer *maah-prasad*. They have also been a part of the *bhaona* performances organised as a part of *Setubandha* of the *Axom Sattra Mahasabha*. As a result of the adoption of the Hindu Vaishnavite way of life and their complete acceptance of it, the Konyak Nagas of this village also abstain themselves from taking dog meat, which is considered a delicacy among the Nagas.[458] They consider themselves to be very much a part of the Assamese society and identify themselves as "Assamese" – their men wear *dhoti-seleng saador* and their women put vermillion (*sindoor*) in their foreheads just like any other married Assamese Hindu woman. The village is surrounded by various other communities, including the *Ahoms*, the *Koches*, and the *Kaibarttas*, etc. that are a part of the Assamese society as much as the Konyaks.

The *Mahantas* or the *Adhikaras* of the *Kala Sanghati* division and those of the *Moamaria* sect in particular, were accommodative enough to allow the new tribes who accepted Vaishnavism as a way of life, to retain many of their age-old customs, traditions and rituals.

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[457] Partha Protim Dutta and Ujjal Protim Dutta, "A Study of a Konyak Naga Village in Sivasagar District of Assam, India," *International Research Journal of Social Sciences* 4, no. 11 (2015): 24-29.

[458] Ibid.

As a result, the obscure and orgiastic cults like *Ratikhowa*,[459] etc. found their ways eventually, although indirectly, into many of the *Sattras* of *Kala Sanghati*.To cite an example, most of the disciples of the *MoamariaSattra*, before their acceptance of Vaishnavism, had been the worshippers of the goddess *Kechaikhati* (literally meaning, eater of the raw flesh) who demanded human blood as sacrifice for her worship. The *Sattradhikars* well anticipated that these new followers might not easily give up their age-old traditions even after their adoption of the Vaishnavite way of life and the practices associated with it. They were, therefore, allowed to build within the premises of the *Sattras Yajnaghars* or *balisalas* where buffaloes, ducks, pigeons, goats and other animals were freely sacrificed.[460] Furthermore, unlike most of the *Sattras* (the Barpeta *Sattra* for instance), those of the *Moamaria* sect imposed no restrictions on women's entry into the *Sattra* premises and perform *naam-kirtan* there. Thus, alleged of having 'polluting' their religion, the *Moamarias* in particular and the disciples of the *Kala Sanghati* in general, were, in those times looked down upon by other Vaishnava sects.

However, the stark reality is that but for this 'pollution', the social synthesis of the Assamese society, at least at the ideological level, would have merely remained a utopia. But, the fact still remains that the process of assimilation of different socio-religious and cultural elements that took place under the garb of religion was far from being a complete exercise. The Vaishnavite movement led by Sankardeva made its impact felt on only the fringes of the tribal societies. It failed to penetrate deep into their social structure.[461] The nature of the society and the economy of the tribes did not allow the ideology of feudalism propagated by the *Sattras* with a religious overtone to get totally enmeshed into it. The most prominent example can be that of the *Bodos*. For whatever the reason might have been, the *Bodos* were never so deeply influenced by Sankardeva's Vaishnavism in the way the *Sonowals*, the *Misings*, the *Chutiyas*, and the *Tiwas* were. The result was that their ethnic identity remained too strong to be torn asunder and get assimilated into the larger umbrella of the

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[459]*Ratikhowa* (meaning 'Night Worship'), is a *Sakta Tantric* cult prevailing in certain regions of Upper Assam.

[460]No. 258: 76-121.

[461] S. Barman, "Neo-Vaishnavism and Other Religious Cults of Assam: A Study in Conflict and Compromises," in *Religion and Society in Northeast India*, ed. Dambarudhar Nath (Guwahati: DVS Publishers, 2011), 132-151.

"Assamese".[462] An allegation has always been raised that had our *Sattradhikars* been zealous enough to work amongst them, the present movement for a separate state of Bodoland would have never become a reality.

Moreover, Vaishnavism made no significant attempt at the economic upliftment of the tribal masses. It neither introduced any developed techniques of increasing economic production, nor did it teach the people the feudal mode of reclamation of new lands. The *Sattradhikars* too, were not as much devoted to their cause as, for example, the modern Christian missionaries have been. Many *Sattradhikars* of the later periods were also involved in the economic exploitation of the tribal population for their own benefits.[463] A well-known writer of the *Mising* tribe has complained that the *Sattradhikars* make their appearance in the society once or twice a year and that too to collect the religious tithes only, which they largely keep for themselves. It is said that perhaps the only thing that the tribal population of Assam learnt after becoming a part of the Vaishnava way of life was cleanliness and some better ways of living. As M. Neog writes, "(after conversion) they entered a clean and disciplined way of individual and social life. The old ways of unclean food, clothing and general behaviour were now replaced by cleanliness and decency."[464] However, this argument stinks of cultural prejudice and biaseness in determining the standards of cleanliness, hygiene or acceptable behaviour that areunderstood and interpreted differently by different sections of people in the society.

Assimilation, however, has never been a one-sided affair. Its political ramifications have been felt in the shaping of an "Assamese" identity over the years, an identity that is invariably identified with the legacy of Sankardeva and which has been made use of by the state to legitimise its rule over the citizens. For instance, there is a community of Assamese Sikhs in Assam, primarily concentrated in and around Nagaon, who are Sikhs by faith but who, at the sametime, identify themselves as "Assamese". Further, there are also a few small Buddhist communities settled in isolated pockets in different parts of Upper Assam who are devout practitioners of Hinayana Buddhism of the Burmese order, but who have very much integrated themselves into the broader Assamese society. Then there are the *Mising* converts to Christianity and other non-*Misings* who are Christians, but identify themselves as

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[462] Ibid.

[463] Ibid.

[464] No. 449: 212.

Assamese by their culture and traditions. Vaishnavism has also enriched itself in numerous ways by its contacts with diverse castes, tribes, and groups of people, particularly in the cultural domain. As S.N. Sharma writes, "Many articles of artistic quality and utility which we now associate with Vaishnavism were originally received from the tribes, e.g. *bhortal*, *doba*, *xorai*, etc. The practice of writing *Sattra* chronicles was probably derived from the Ahoms who introduced the system of writing chronicles (*Buranjis*) in Assam for the first time."[465] Thus, the socio-cultural synthesis introduced by Vaishnavism, although incomplete, was undoubtedly a progressive historical step. It helped the small, but independent units to come closer to each other and in many cases even merge together into the overall framework of an 'Assamese' identity and society that was pioneered by the Vaishnavite movement. Hence, the concept of Assamese sub-nationalism that later came up during the Assam agitation against the foreigners' issue or even during the recent protests against the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill, 2016 owes much to the Vaishnavite philosophy and teachings of Sankardeva.

Imagining the Assamese Identity as a Pluralistic Idea

A frustrating aspect of many of the political and socio-ideological constructs of identity that have proliferated in the academic literature in the recent decades is the somewhat subtle refusal to imagine and accept the conception of the "Assamese" identity in pluralistic terms. Another is the unwillingness to acknowledge the repetition at the local level of the same centre-periphery dynamics of power relations.[466] While the tribal groups are always explicitly referred to and mentioned in the preliminary build-up to the idea of "Assamese-ness", the imbalance of attention in such a formulation is apparent in the scant notice paid subsequently to the issue. The question of achieving integration and accepting difference at the same time is of fundamental importance. It is about the peculiar reality of accepting oneself as being an integral part of a national body-politic while being diverse and divided in many ways that demand repeated articulations of the issues of inclusiveness and distinctiveness at many different layers of the socio-political spectrum. In situations of hybridised and plural identities, it is assumed that the tribal partakes in the "Assamese" identity narrative but has only a very small and token role to play in its overall formulations with respect to the state;

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[465] No. 461: 123.

[466] Nandana Dutta, *Questions of Identity in Assam: Location, Migration, Hybridity* (New Delhi: Sage Publications India Pvt. Ltd., 2012), 181.

this unevenness is evident in the fact that the conception of an "Assamese" identity assumes that the tribal participates in and borrows elements from the dominant "Assamese" narrative; but, the reverse is hardly ever true.[467]

According to Nandana Dutta, examples of this inequality are nakedly visible in public representations of the "Assamese". The most commonly recognised cultural markers of the "Assamese" identity are the Bihu dance, pat or *muga* silk (a variety of golden-yellow silk known for its extreme durability and geographically tagged to the state of Assam), *mekhela saador* (indigenous traditional dress worn by Assamese women), the *jaapi* (traditional conical hat from Assam made from tightly woven bamboo/cane, ordinarily used by farmers in the field for protecting themselves from the heat of the sun), the *xorai* (an offering tray made of bell-metal that is indigenous to the state of Assam), and the red and white bordered towel called *gamosa* – all of these have been taken from the numerically dominant ethnic Assamese community which is, by and large, non-tribal. The traditional attire worn by Bodo women, the *dokhona*, for instance, has not so far been recognised as a representative cultural marker that is symbolic of the "Assamese" as an entire community.

Besides its world-famous tea, a majority of the people from other Indian states know Assam from the well-known Bihu dance, and the term 'festival' here has almost become synonymous with Bihu, in the process, diminishing the status of various existing folk festivals of the state. An important point to be noted here is that it is always the Bihu festival as celebrated by the dominant non-tribal ethnic "Assamese" community in their traditional *muga-riha mekhela saador* that is recognised in the socio-political narrative of the state, notwithstanding the fact that the tribal communities also have certain distinct ways of celebrating Bihu with their own indigenous Bihu dances and songs, and in their own very distinctive traditional clothes.[468]The fact that the "Assamese" identity is not a homogenous one, and does not include only the native indigenous Assamese-speaking population is corroborated by the fact that the major festival of the state, i.e. Bihu, is celebrated by the tribals and the non-tribals alike, although the nomenclatures that define these celebrations and as well as the dates of ritual commencement vary from one community to another.

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[467] Ibid: 181-182.

[468] Ibid.

For instance, *Bisu* is one of the major festivals celebrated by the *Tiwas*,[469] another prominent tribe of Assam, and it is one of the variants of the Bihu festival itself. It may be mentioned here that unlike the other Assamese, the *Tiwas* do not observe the *Baisak Bihu* on the *sankranti* day, but celebrate it on the first Wednesday (considered by the *Tiwas* as their holy day) that falls after *sankranti*. The deities that are worshipped during the occasion include *mahamai, mahadeo, jamgkong, kalika, bhagawati, kechaikhati, ranchali*, etc. The hill *Tiwas*, on the other hand, celebrate a festival called *Sogra Mishawa*(*Sogra* meaning spring, and *Mishawa* meaning dance) more or less during the same time but in a manner that is quite different from the plains *Tiwas*, also popularly known as the *Lalungs*.Hence, it is quite evident that although the nomenclature and the procedure of celebrations of the *Tiwas*differ, their basic ritual observances associated with Bihu are quite similar to those of the non-*Tiwa* community.

The renewal of agricultural activities aiming at a good harvest is the common objective behind the Bihu celebrations by both the tribals and the non-tribal communities of Assam. Similar to the *Tiwas*, the *Misings*too, celebrate a festival called *Ali-Aye-Ligang*[470] in the first Wednesday of the month of *Phalgun*(February-March) but yet again, they organise a Bihu *mela* separately sometimes later during spring. Likewise, the *Bodos* too, celebrate all the three Bihus with much fanfare but with a slight variation in terms of the rituals observed. The three Bihus are known among the Bodos as *baisagu* or *bwisagu* (Bohag Bihu), *magou domasi* (Magh Bihu), and *khatrigasa* (Kati Bihu).However, there has been a palpable change in the celebration of the Bihu festival among the *Bodos* in the recent times. This has been primarily attributed to the increasing popularity of Christianity among the tribals, including the *Bodos*, and its adoption by a considerable number of people from the community. These and various other factors have heavily impacted upon the differing interpretations of the "Assamese" as

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[469] A prominent plains tribe of Assam, the *Tiwas* are the original inhabitants of the Khasi and the Jaintia hills of Meghalaya, who later migrated to Assam. They are also spread in some parts of the state of Meghalaya and are sub-divided into two major sub-groups – Hill *Tiwas* and Plains *Tiwas*, displaying similar cultural features. Chiefly an agrarian community, most of the festivals celebrated by the *Tiwas* are related to agriculture.

[470] Although closely linked with spring time and agriculture, the *Mising* festival of *Ali-Aye-Ligang* is not a replication of the Rongali Bihu festival celebrated by the majority Assamese community. The *Misings* also celebrate Bihu and have their own *husori*-singing tradition, but with their own versions of music and dance set to their own local melodies and rhythmic beats.

an identity, because the Christian *Bodos* consider themselves as Assamese too, but no longer celebrate Bihu along with all its attendant rituals. Another section among the *Bodos* who are adherents of the *Brahma* faith can be seen to have taken to a middle path by observing the Bihu in a much simpler manner, without taking recourse to any form of rituals. However, the celebration of Bihu through music and dance remains the same, along with the organisation of various community events in the name of Bihu celebrations.

In imagining and evaluating the concept of a modern "Assamese" identity, the term "Assamese" itself appears to be a deeply problematic and contested one for a researcher. It is because as with all other so-called inclusive terminologies, the "Assamese" as an identity too, privileges merely one section of the people at the cost of others, by rendering the "others" invisible and powerless. A society that is composed of so many different groups and communities, each with their own distinct language, and traditions and culture, is bound to have as one of its major problems the phenomenon of inclusion understood singularly as a homogenous whole. Assam's troubled past – several of the present-day north-eastern states were carved out of its original territory – bears a trace in the current problems facing the state regarding language, policy issues, majority versus minority, and tribal versus non-tribal interests.[471] Many of these complex issues became evident in the demands for autonomy and self-governance raised by several tribal groups of the state in the crucial aftermath of the Assam Movement (1979-1985). The memoranda submitted by these groups all throughout the 1980s repeated the same grievances, relating to the chauvinism of the Assamese community – the injustices of the language movement, and the consequent attempts to "Assamize" them through linguistic dominance and erase their distinct cultural identities.

A memorandum for a separate state of Bodoland submitted by the All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) to the then President and Home Minister on November 10, 1987, articulated the grievances that were common to most of the tribal communities of Assam. It also gave a new shape to the narrative of identity that was now supposed to form a part of the grand narrative of what is called the "Assamese" identity. The document described the attitude of the dominant non-tribal Assamese community as anti-tribal, expansionist (referring to the "policy of expansionism and imperialism to capture and dominate all corners of Assam including the tribal areas"), and politically intolerant (they "cannot tolerate the existence of tribal communities and other democratic organisations of the tribals who oppose the policies of

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[471] No. 465.

Assamisation and assimilation").[472] However, it is not only the tribals (of both the hills and the plains) who have expressed their resentment at being expected to forego their cultural distinctiveness and embrace a pan-Assamese identity. For instance, movements have surfaced time and again for the formation of separate administrative units and autonomous regions in the Cachar region of the Barak Valley of Assam since 1954. A memorandum was submitted by the Cachar States Reorganisation Committee, Silchar, pressing for a new, centrally administered province with autonomous districts and states, to be called *Purbachal*.

The tortuous paths undertaken by the identity narrative in the state of Assam therefore necessitate a re-consideration of the question that has been implicit throughout in this work: Who are the Assamese and how have the socio-religious institutions of the *Sattra* and the *Namghar* been instrumental in creating, reinforcing and fragmenting this identity from time to time with respect to the political discourse of the state? Kanaksen Deka, litterateur, journalist and former President of the *Axom Sahitya Sabha* (2005-07) makes an important point about identity formation in Assam. He speaks of fascist tendencies that gradually alienated many who already were in the process of becoming Assamese.[473] This statement is based upon assumptions about identity and identity formation as an ongoing process – a position that is somewhat at odds with the much more popular narrative of identity as something that has been guarded by a people since time immemorial. Deka accepts the facts of historical realities – the relationships that have developed over the years with the people of the Gangetic plain, the land of the Shans, with China, the Arab world, and with Bengal. These relationships have been a significant part of the formative process of Assamese

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[472] Attempts to understand and give shape to who or what the Assamese are, are evident in books like *The Assamese* by Audrey Cantlie (1984), who spent a decade (1940-50) in Assam. Cantlie went on to do fieldwork in one Assamese village and in some of the *Sattras* during 1969-71. The difficulties of attempting to understand an entire people through a micro-study of one village are apparent throughout the work. Another popular book that also wrote of Assamese village life and made a connection between the river Brahmaputra and Assamese identity is Hem Barua's *The Red River and The Blue Hill* (1954). Sanjoy Hazarika offers sketches of Assamese life in *Strangers of the Mist* (1994), where he suggests that the socio-religious institution of the *Namghar* and the teachings of Srimanta Sankardeva deeply continue to shape Assam's rural social structure. This is a common enough view, discussed in much greater detail by Dr. Hiren Gohain in his book on the*Impact of Mahapurushiya Tradition on Assamese Life* (1997). All the three notably use "Assamese rural life" as a metonym for analysing and describing the much larger and complex category of the "Assamese".

[473] No. 465: 190-193.

identity. It is a uniquely plural identity that needs to be nurtured rather than destroyed by the imposition of any single way of being "Assamese" as had been done by the *Sattras*since the Ahom era on the ground of caste. The path that has been followed by the *Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha* too, has been far from satisfactory and smacks of the same prejudices and biases that informed the identity narrative of the Vaishnavite movement, i.e. identity as both a political and a socio-cultural construct, to first assimilate and then integrate diverse groups of people of the state under one overarching umbrella category of the "Assamese".

Sankardeva and his teachings on religion and society, philosophy, spirituality and culture pervade Assamese society at many levels, forming a body of inherited knowledge that has been continuously in circulation. In an essay on "Sankardeva and the Tribals of North-East India", Birendra Nath Dutta, a folklorist and cultural critic of Assam, places his reading of the inclusive nature of Sankardeva's thought and pronouncements against another of those little nuggets that are so important to the making of the identity narrative.[474] Dutta quotes lines from Sankardeva's *Bhagavata Purana* that lay emphasis on both inclusiveness and cultural variety:

The Kiratas, the Kacharis, the Khasis, the Garos, the Miris (Misings), the Yavanas, the Kankas, the Govalas, the Asamas (Ahoms), the Malukas, the Rajakas, the Turukas, the Kuvachas, the Mechas, the Candalas, and all others become pure in the company of the servants (devotees) of Krsna.[475]

The references here have not only been made to the so-called lower castes within the caste-based social order but also to the tribes of the region and as well as to the *Yavanas* (foreigners who came and settled here) and the *Turakas* (Muslims), who were considered to be outside of the Hindu fold by the upper castes with a narrow and orthodox social outlook. This unity of diverse sections of people in their devotion to a popular deity, i.e. Krishna (*avatar* of Vishnu) indicates both an acknowledgement of difference and an erasure of it in purity – the commonality of worship making these differences immaterial and irrelevant. Sankardeva had kept his faith extremely simple for its followers by making it free from all the unnecessary rigours of religion, ritualistic complexities, and banal formalities. This was done primarily with a view to accommodating the 'non-believers' into his faith, including the tribals, who had no organised religion of their own and were chiefly nature-worshippers. Sankardeva also

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[474] Ibid.

[475] No. 317: 570.

took a soberly acceptable and tolerant view with regard to the different customs and traditions of the tribals, and this is clearly brought out in the following piece of one of his writings:

kukarko khay   henaya candela

suddha haya atisaya

soma pana kare   jito maha ajna

tara prati tusta haya[476]

Meaning, even the *Chandala* (untouchable) who eats dog-meat becomes highly clean and the utterly ignorant who drinks liquor pleases god [when his name is remembered, sung, heard, or respected by them]. In welcoming and embracing into the Vaishnavite order several large numbers of tribal people, the beliefs and practices of the latter and the unique diversity associated with them, such as drinking locally-fermented wine, was gradually subsumed under the *Mahapurusiya Naam-Dharma* tradition as had been propounded by Sankardeva. *Mahapurusiya Naam-Dharma* now came to be identified with one collective whole called the "Assamese" that supposedly included within it diverse castes, tribes and groups of people unquestioningly. This, however, is the peculiar problem associated with the ideal of an inclusive collective identity, and it remains unresolved in most statements on the recognition of Assam's many ethnic and linguistic groupings.[477]

After the death of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva and their chief disciples in the later years, power passed into the hands of the *Sattradhikars*, who were mostly upper-caste Brahmanas. As such, the differences of caste and tribe slowly made their ugly appearance towards the latter half of the early 19th century that ultimately culminated in the formation of the *Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha* – a protest movement against the organisation of the *Sattras* and the *Namghars*in Assam that was aimed at the elimination of all man-made hierarchies especially in the ritualistic domain of the Assamese Vaishnava Hindus. However, as mentioned earlier, organisations like the *Sangha* too, are deeply enmeshed in a web of internal contradictions with respect to its ideology, that get reflected in its dealings with different groups of people at different times.

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[476] Ibid.

[477]No. 467: 194-195.

An Analysis of Sankardeva's Vaishnavism in the Light of Caste and Identity Politics

The leaders and members of the *Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha*have criticised the *Sattradhikars* for corrupting the religion of Sankardeva and hence robbing it of its original mass appeal. The unpopularity of the *Sattras* in present-day Assam stems from several reasons. Visitors to the *Sattra* are expected to carry their own utensils and clean them too. Many a times, they are made to sit on the bare ground while the *Sattradhikar* or *gosain* can only sit on a special reed mat called *kath*. These customs are resented by many, especially the educated youth who consider them to be akin to the hierarchical relationship that exists between different castes on the basis of their birth into a particular social stratum. Primarily driven by economic necessity, *Sattradhikars* and *gosains* of many *Sattras* and *Namghars* have now taken up English education so as to avail of employment opportunities outside of these traditional institutions, which today exist for them only in name. Many of them today have also become self-styled entrepreneurs, zamindars and big landlords. Some are also in the government service occupying important posts, and a few others are engaged in business and industry. At the same time, however, a few *Sattradhikars* of the stature of Janarddan Dev Goswami have been playing a role of crucial importance in defending the basic principles of the Vaishnavite philosophy inspired from the Sanatan Dharmic framework.

Traditional institutions may not always be open and democratic in their ways of functioning and organisation. In order to assert their authority, these institutions might eventually come to embody the same values and ethos against which they initially resisted. As we have seen, the *Sattra* is quite deeply entrenched in the narrow parochial tendencies of caste and hierarchy in its organisation. As a reform movement challenging the supremacy of the *Sattras* in Assamese socio-cultural life, the *Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha* too, has adopted the same reactionary stance in its dealings with the tribals and lower castes who do not comply with its norms. As a result, this has created a dent in its overall effectiveness and credibility within the "Assamese" society. Moreover, the "Assamese" identity is not merely a religious identity – it is an amalgam of multiple identities the boundaries of which are constantly changing and overlapping. However, these institutions seem to have consistently focussed upon only the religious/ritualistic aspect of this identity, i.e. *Mahapurusiya Dharma* as enunciated by Sankardeva, but later interpreted only in terms of religion.

Among one of the most wonderful examples of such a syncretic and cosmopolitan "Assamese" identity are the *Zikirs* and the *Jaris* – Islamic devotional songs popular among

the *Axomia* Muslims. The legacy of these songs is intimately associated with the 17th century Muslim saint-poet Shah Milan, who was popularly known as Ajan Phakir.[478] He is believed to have come from faraway Baghdad with the purpose of propagating the right path of devotion and virtue among the Muslims of Assam, and thus enable them to seek God within themselves rather than engaging in meaningless rites and rituals, and in this way, practise love and compassion for all. His task was made easy by the fact that Srimanta Sankardeva had left for him a most congenial atmosphere symbolised in the form of the *Mahapurusiya Naam-Dharma* tradition that too, preached a simple way of living, prayer and meditation.[479] The *Zikirs* and the *Jaris* which are chiefly attributed to him directly or indirectly abound in Arabic and Persian words, apart from various expressions specific to the Islamic faith and they are expressively Assamese in both their flavour and content.The texts have drawn heavily from various genres of Assamese folk songs and oral literature, including the *borgeets* of Srimanta Sankardeva and as well as from Sanskrit literary compositions.At the same time, they are cast and sung to melody in traditional Assamese musical modes of the folk variety. While the spirit of human brotherhood, equality and fraternity runs throughout the compositions, some of them are conspicuous for their direct reference to the cause of Hindu-Muslim unity and solidarity. In this context, the following one is a particularly pertinent specimen that contains an overt reference to the ideal of unity between the two communities:

I have no other thoughts in my mind, O Allah,

I have no thoughts of discrimination,

Be he a Hindu or a Mussalman---

The same is the commandment of Allah,

The end is the same for both.

The Hindu will be cremated,

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[478] Renowned author and Sahitya Akademi Award winner Late Syed Abdul Malik states that Ajan Phakir was a Sufi preacher with a profound mastery over the Qur'an, the Hadith, and Islamic philosophy. He came to Assam accompanied by his brother Shah Navi. He later married an Ahom woman of high social stature and settled at Gargaon, near Sivasagar. His *dargah* is situated at a place called *Saraguri Chapari* near Sivasagar town.

[479] No. 438: 122-123.

The Muslim will be interred,

And the earthen bodies will get mixed with the earth.

Hence, *Zikirs* and *Jaris* are one of the most attractive and effective cultural media preserved in the oral traditions of Assam that highlight religious catholicity at its best. Ajan Phakir had settled in the Sivasagar region of Upper Assam and had thus mastered the colloquial Assamese dialect of the place, which is clearly reflected in the peculiarity of the language used in the *Zikirs* and the *Jaris*. But, in the Lower Assam region too, there are various forms of folklore in vogue – songs, dance-drama performances, religious rituals, traditions and customs, and so on – which contain valuable information concerning cordial relations between Hindus and Muslims (here, by Muslims, it refers only to the *Axomia*/Assamese Muslims and not the *Mia* Muslims, as distinguished in the earlier chapters). For instance, worship of the serpent goddess *Ma Manasa* is widely prevalent in this part of Assam where it is popularly known as *Mare Puja*.[480] An *Oja-Pali*[481] performance is an essential cultural aspect of the *Mare Puja* celebrations and until a few decades back, some of the best *Oja-Pali* troupes primarily consisted of members from the *Axomia* Muslim community. In the South Goalpara area, the *Oja-Pali* troupe members are drawn mostly from the Rabha[482] tribal community while there may also be a few non-tribals among them.

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[480] Ibid: 123-124. The worship of *Manasa*, or *Manasa Devi* (Goddess of snakes) is an important aspect of the Hindu way of life, observed mainly in Bengal and other parts of North-eastern India, chiefly for the prevention and cure of snakebite during the monsoons and also for ensuring year-long fertility and prosperity in the households. *Manasa* is depicted as a woman covered with snakes, sitting either on a lotus or standing upon a snake. She is sheltered by the canopy of the hoods of seven cobras, and is sometimes depicted with a child on her lap, assumed to be her son *Astika*.

[481] *Oja-Pali* is one of the oldest performing art forms of Assam, incorporating in itself singing, dancing, and dramatic sessions together. Performed by an *oja* (master) who is accompanied by a number of *palis* (assistants), this form has two distinct variants – the *Marai-goa* or *Mare-goa* of the *Sakta* tradition, mostly associated with the worship of the snake goddess *Manasa*, and the *Biyah-goa* of the *Vaishnava* tradition. Some groups of the latter variety specialise in performances based on *Rama-Katha* and are thus known as *Ramayan-goa Oja-Palis*.

[482] The Rabhas belong to the Indo-Mongoloid group of people and have similarities with other members of the Bodo group such as Garos, Kacharis, Mech, Hajong, etc. The Rabhas are one of the indigenous tribes of Assam, spread all over Assam, besides its adjoining states like West Bengal, Meghalaya, and a few areas of Bangladesh too. Some of the clan groups of the Rabhas identify

Mention here may also be made of Hajo, a small temple town in the Kamrup district of Lower Assam, well-known for its ambience of inter-religious harmony, underlined by a spirit of amicability and cooperation. There are several temples and shrines in Hajo which are sacred to different sects of the Hindu way of life –Vaishnavism, Shaivism, and Saktism – the most prominent among them being the *Hayagriva-Madhava* temple located on a hilltop. Hindus of all denominations visit these temples and offer prayers. *Bhutiyas* belonging to the *Mahayana*sect of Buddhism[483] consider the *Hayagriva* temple as a Buddhist shrine and also identify the deity here as *Mahamuni* (the Buddha himself). There was a point of time when *Bhutiya* pilgrims used to visit Hajo on a regular basis as an act of piety. There is another hilltop in Hajo near to the *Hayagriva-Madhava* temple where the dargah of a famous Sufi pir (saint) is located, popularly known as *Poa Mecca* (quarter of Mecca). Although it is regarded as one of the holiest spots for the Muslims of Assam, it attracts pilgrims from both the Hindu and the Muslim communities who come here to seek the fulfilment of their wishes.

The fact that the"Assamese" identity has never been about one homogenised way of life or just one community and their cultural ethos has somehow failed to be understood by the institutions considered to be the hallmarks of this identity. Their offshoots too, in the later periods, have suffered from such similar drawbacks in their zeal and enthusiasm to project one single unified "Assamese" identity of the people inhabiting the state. As a result, the political discourse of the state is heavily leaning towards the ethnic non-tribal Assamese-speaking community, marginalising the "Others" – lower castes and tribalsspecifically. However, as has been described earlier, the "Assamese-speaking" community here includes not merely the Hindus defined in terms of religion, but also the non-Hindus, such as Marwari Baniyas (mostly Jains), Sikhs, Christians, etc. who have by and large, assimilated themselves into the larger "Assamese" society and in many ways, have adopted its ways of living in terms of culture and traditions, celebration of common festivals, dressing sense, eating habits,

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themselves as belonging to the *Axomiya* Hindu caste to a great extent. However, some of them are in the process of mobilisation to maintain their uniqueness and preserve their own cultural heritage, language and script.

[483] After the death of Gautam Buddha, Buddhism came to be divided into two sects – *Mahayana* (the Greater Vehicle) and *Hinayana* (the Lesser or Modest Vehicle). While *Hinayana* follows the original teachings of the Buddha and emphasises individual salvation through self-discipline and meditation, *Mahayana* believes in idol worship of the Buddha and the Boddhisattvas. The *Mahayana* sect of Buddhism allows for salvation through having faith and committing oneself to the Buddha.

etc. However, the one religious/linguistic community whose identity has still remained a bone of contention among the "Assamese" as a community is that of the Muslims, precisely the *Mia* Muslims (Muslims who speak in the *Mia* language).

The conflict arises particularly with regard to the non-native *Mia* Muslims and not the native *Axomia* Muslims. While the former are viewed with suspicion because they speak a certain language (*Mia bhaxa*) that does not remotely resonate with the Assamese language, the latter are considered to be a part of the overall "Assamese" narrative in the socio-political discourse of the state. The *Mia* Muslims are categorised without an iota of distinction into one framework as illegal immigrants into the state of Assam who have silently captured the already scarce resources of the state, including agricultural land. Hence, they are looked at more as demographic invaders who have multiplied rapidly, so much so that a majority of the border districts of Assam have now come to be identified as *Mia*-dominated in the popular imagination. The increasing rates of crime and social-community tensions in these areas are also attributed to the ever-increasing population of the '*Mias*'. Hence, the *Mia* Muslims as an entire community are frowned upon as outsiders in the state, who need to be kept out of the idea of the "Assamese" and the popular narrative that is identified with it.

The problem of illegal immigration in Assam has been a persisting one since the colonial times. However, its manifestations became severe when the immigrants came to be used by successive political parties in post-Independent India for petty vote-bank politics in the name of 'secularism'. Here, the problem does not arise from the entire social category of the Muslims per se. Although a general sense of distrust still prevails among the common people of the state in general with regard to the Muslims, Hindus and Muslims have lived here amicably for several generations, symbolised in the co-existence of the *Namghar*, *Masjid*, and *Dargah* side by side at places like Hajo. Sankardeva too, preached the same philosophy to his disciples and followers, i.e. staying true to one's religious identity and at the same time being a part of the *Mahapurusiya Naam-Dharma* tradition. An example here may be cited of an activity common in the regions of Western Assam, i.e. Goalpara, Bongaigaon and the areas contiguous with the Garo Hills and Bhutan. Until a few years back, organised trapping of wild elephants used to be held here in camps called *dhura* from which the operations related to elephant trapping and training were conducted. The expert lasso-wielding trappers (*phandi*), elephant drivers (*mauts*), and as well as the helpers (*kamla*) who were drawn from

different communities – Hindus, tribals, and Muslims – lived and worked together in an atmosphere of mutual cooperation and camaraderie.[484]

In the process, the different beliefs and customs of these communities fused together to give rise to a common unified pattern. E.g. deities of the Hindu pantheon such as *Ganesha* and *Shiva*/*Mahadeva* (in the form of *Baliya Baba* or *Pagla Thakur*) were worshipped while *Maut Pir*, a deified Muslim saint, was equally an object of veneration and obeisance in the name of *Bismillah*. At the same time, certain tribal elements were also visible in the celebration, such as the sacrificing of fowls to appease the jungle *devtas*.[485] While training the newly caught elephants, various songs that reverberated the stories of life in the camps were sung, either solo or in chorus, by all the inmates, irrespective of their community/religious affiliation. These are popularly known as *maut* songs and happen to be a distinctive genre of the variety of folk songs prevalent in the region, commonly designated as *Goalpariya Lok Geet*. Some of these songs which are sung in chorus contain open invocations of *Allah* and *Bhagwan* all throughout.

Such examples are enough to give due credence to the hypothesis that the "Assamese" society understood as one unified whole despite differences of caste, tribe or religion, is largely credited to the Vaishnavite movement of Srimanta Sankardeva and the benign yet powerful effects it had had on the overall socio-political order of the day. The philosophy associated with his teachings along with its religious and spiritual aspects were spread through the twin institutions of the *Sattra* and the *Namghar*. However, the traditional understanding of Sankardeva's teachings as propagated by the *Sattras* for so long has been questioned and challenged by the *Sangha* through vociferous arguments. It has sought, based on the original writings of Sankardeva, to abolish the roots of caste and introduce widespread social reforms within Vaishnavism that had been corrupted by the *Sattradhikars* over a period of time. The gradational relationship between the *bhakat* and the *bhakta* is clearly visible when the *Sattradhikar* is invited to conduct *naam-prasanga* in a *Namghar* or in any other household. In a majority of the cases, he takes along with him his own cook to prepare his food separately. The same holds true of the *gosains* of several *Namghars* as well. Unfortunately, the *Sangha* itself has also not been able to completely break free from such practices. This is where the binary notions of purity and pollution come in and the spiritual

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[484] No. 438: 125-127.

[485] Ibid.

pre-eminence of the *gosain* (mostly upper-caste) is continuously asserted through such activities. For instance, the *maah-prasad* prepared by the*gosain's*own hands as an offering to God is sought after by sick people believing that it is bestowed with magical qualities which can cure many ills.[486]

The ritual significance of this offering (*maah-prasad*) made in a *naam-prasanga* has been analysed in terms of a hierarchical relationship between god and man. This has been evidenced by the fact that the worshippers eat '*the polluted refuse of the god with all its hierarchical implications.*'[487] Babb argues that the prostration of food to the deity is a compensation or payment for past or future favours. Reciprocity in some form or the other is being incorporated in the Hindu ritual sequence so as to affirm the superior status of the god. This is effected by the offering of the *prasad*, in which the food given to the god is considered superior food prepared under stringent conditions of purity; whereas, the food received back by the worshippers consists of inferior and polluted leftovers. Babb argues that eating of these leftovers as *prasad* restores the equilibrium that has been disturbed by the original prostration so that "the god has received payment with honour, and thereby the proper hierarchy has been maintained.[488]

It seems from Babb's argument that an asymmetrical relationship of hierarchy prevails with respect to religion, i.e. between the divine and the human in any form of religious worship in any place. Through the *Sattra* in Assam, it has been emphasised that a man's qualities pass in his gift. Disciples are believed to transfer their sins to their guru, i.e. the *Sattradhikar*, by the payment of annual dues and the guru is expected to improve their spiritual condition. With the emergence of the *Sangha*, lower castes and tribes have seriously begun to resent these distinctions between the guru and the disciple. They have started questioning the validity of these age-old customs on the grounds of openness and equality for all which had been the original foundational principle of both the *Sattra* and its affiliate – the *Namghar*. They have argued that any form of hierarchical distinction is unknown to the spirit of *bhakti* emphasised by Srimanta Sankardeva. *Bhakti*, therefore, should be pursued for the sake of *bhakti* or

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[486]No. 17: 146.

[487] Lawrence A. Babb, "The Food of the Gods in Chhattisgarh: Some Structural Features of Hindu Ritual," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 31, no. 9 (1970): 297.

[488] Ibid: 280.

devotion itself and it should not become a means for the glorification of any individual as God.

All these factors have gradually led to disillusionment among a certain section of the people with regard to the Vaishnava way of life, and also dissociation from the *Sattradhikars* and the *Gosains* resulting in problems of initiation into the Vaishnavite fold or *saran lua*, especially for the followers of the *Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha*. It is because of this very reason that only few men outside the *Sattras* and the *Gosains* of *Namghars* are well-versed in the stages of higher initiation into Vaishnavism with their attendant religious rites and rituals. This initiation ceremony (*saran lua*) is considered an indispensable aspect in the life of a true Vaishnava. It features prominently in the teachings of the *Sangha*, unlike, however, other Vaishnavas, for whom taking *saran* is not as important as it is for the former. The *Sangha's* disenchantment with the *Sattradhikars* and their manipulation of the tenets of Vaishnavism has resulted in minimising the religious aspect of initiation within the organisation of the *Sangha*. This has been effected on the ground that if a man reads the *Bhagavata Purana* everyday, initiation is unnecessary.[489]Hence, the *Sattra* no longer plays a central role as it used to in the past in the domain of initiation. Many *Sattradhikars* and *Gosains* have now taken to other occupations as the dues of their disciples are no longer sufficient as a source of livelihood. However, the base of the *Sangha* needs more expansion in order to attract more and more people into its fold and thereby provide a credible alternative for the *Sattra*.

The original leaders of the *Sangha* initiated converts who, in due course of time, became attached to them personally as their disciples. However, this system gradually gave rise to schismatic tendencies within the organisation and also raised allegations of corruption. Hence, the *Sangha* has introduced in each district of Assam an Initiation Committee, a few members of which are required to be present at the initiation ceremony. Thus, unlike other Vaishnavas, initiates of the *Sangha* belong to the organisation itself and the respective *Namghars* affiliated to it, and do not owe their allegiance to any individual Guru or *Gosain*. In the form of initiation that has been adopted by the *Sangha*, Sankardeva and Madhavdeva are presented to the initiate as the sole gurus of the sect and not those who have initiated them. An important point that can be deciphered from this is that the rapid multiplication of *Namghars* in present-day Assam has mainly been the result of such fissions and divisive tendencies that have emerged within the Vaishnavite sect. The implicit role of caste in this

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[489] Ibid: 285.

regard needs critical examination. In the absence of strong vertical ties based on either the *jajmani* system or traditional landlord-tenant relationships, there are few countervailing tendencies to prevent quarrels from leading to division in Assam. When this occurs, it usually takes place along the lines of caste.[490]

According to Weber, the religious-caste taboo is of more significance in the city than the village.[491] In Assam, caste avoidances have not prevented the emergence of congregational communities. The fact remains that although the Vaishnavite sect is open to the initiates of all castes, it does not follow as a corollary to this that all castes associate as members of the same religious congregation. During a field visit in Golaghat district of Upper Assam, it was found that lower castes such as *Nath*, *Kaibartta*, *Sut Kalita*, *Duliya Kalita*, *Kumar Kalita*, *Ahom*, *Chutiya*, etc. prefer to establish *Namghars* of their own rather than associate with the upper castes who they say, earlier did not permit them to enter their *Namghars*. Hence, it can be said that Sankardeva's philosophy of Vaishnavism made no thoroughgoing attempt to kill the monster of caste, but simply removed the poison out of it. His sole concern was to see that social distinctions did not place any unnecessary restrictions upon one's inherent right to spiritual development.[492]In order to elaborately illustrate the caste factor, Audrey Cantlie gives the example of the *Tamuli Namghar* founded in 1919 by secession from the *Panbari Namghar* of four *Duliya Kalita* (a sub-caste of the *Kalitas*) houses which have now grown as a result of natural increase in population. It is said in the village that they separated after a quarrel over the issue of caste. Also, in many *Namghars*, the *bilonia* or distributor of the offering (*maah-prasad*) is usually chosen from the highest caste so that there is no objection by anyone in taking food from his hands.[493]

As per the Census report of 1891, the *Duliya Kalitas* were one of the five principal sub-divisions of the *Yogis* in the Brahmaputra Valley – the *Sapmelas* or snake-charmers, the *Palupohas* or rearers of a particular kind of silkworm, the *Duliyas* or *palki*-bearers, the *Katanis* or weavers of silk and sometimes also of cotton thread, and the *Thiyapotas* who are

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[490] Ibid, p. 288.

[491] Reinhard Bendix, *Max Weber: An Intellectual Portrait* (London: University of California Press Ltd., 1977), 142-150.

[492]Based on findings from the field study conducted in Sarupathar and Athkhelia villages of Golaghat district, and the *Dhekiakhowa* and *Moinapuria Bornamghars* of Jorhat district, Assam on April 18-21, 2018.

[493] Ibid.

so called because they buried their dead in a standing position. The *Duliya* section of the caste has now taken to calling themselves *Kalita*. However, the report goes on to say that 'their claims are recognised by no one except themselves.'[494] Many in the *Panbari Namghar* claim that earlier they did not accept any food in the house of a *Duliya Kailta*. Conflicts over their claim to *Kalita* status apparently led to their secession and subsequently they built a new *Namghar* for themselves. Today, they are generally ranked above the *Chutiya* and the *Ahom* communities, and all other castes, except brahmanas, accept tea and cooked food in their houses. In 1969, they admitted to the *Tamuli Namghar* a young Ahom living in the neighbouring village across the road. This is probably to be interpreted in terms of the freedom associated with confidence in their improved socio-economic status.[495]

Originally, each village in Assam had a single *Namghar* affiliated to a particular *Sattra* as the representative body for the entire village. But, as mentioned earlier, this is quite rare today. *Namghars* of the *Sangha* are not affiliated to any *Sattra*. In the 1940s, Hayley supervised a survey of fifteen cadastral villages comprising Charing rural Panchayat; of these, only one had a single *Namghar*, and the remaining fourteen villages comprised a total of forty *Namghars*.[496] However, as we have discussed, the *Namghar* generally consists of only a restricted association of households who get together specifically for the religious purpose of maintaining a local centre of worship. At the same time, it also serves as an organisation for conducting public meetings of the villagers. Each such congregation is autonomous in the management of its affairs. It exercises not only religious but also social and juridical functions, which are carried out by other such community institutions too, in other parts of India.

Limitations of Sankardeva's Social Philosophy and the Concept of *Bhakti*

The North-eastern region of India, earlier known as *Kamarupa* and *Pragjyotisha*, came to be called as Assam even though Manipur, Tripura, and NEFA (present-day Arunachal Pradesh) regions had their distinct tribal identities, because tribal religions had flourished here since the pre-colonial era. In the words of Edward Gait, "In the Brahmaputra Valley, large sections

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[494] No. 486: 270.

[495] Ibid: 272.

[496] Ibid: 279. The information cited here is based on a report of the increasing proliferation of *Namghars* in Assam. It was conducted under the supervision of Thomas Hayley in 1947, the then Deputy Commissioner of Jorhat.

of the population are still outside the pale of Hinduism at the beginning of this century – they are somewhere in the lower stages of conversion where their adopted religion still sits lightly on them and they have not yet learnt to resist the temptation to indulge in pork, fowls and other items of food regarded by the orthodox as impure."[497] The penetration of Buddhist religious traditions through pre-colonial era cultural contacts with Tibet appears to have had a greater impact among the hill tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. In fact, Buddhist influence from the Southeast Asian regions is clearly observable in many of the Buddhist traditions prevalent among the *Tai-Khampti* and the *Singpho* tribes of this region. Since 1126 A.D., Buddhist *tantrics*, *Sahajiyas*,[498]*Nath-Yogis*[499]from Bengal, and Mahayana Buddhists from Northern India had gradually penetrated into Assam. The corrupted form of the *Sakta* cult had earlier introduced here the ethos of indulgence in wine, meat, and human and animal sacrifice, including a variety of other esoteric practices in the name of the Goddess (*Devi*).

It was in this context during the 14th and the 15th centuries that Srimanta Sankardeva staunchly advocated the concept of monotheism. The philosophy behind his teachings was based on complete surrender to and devotion of Vishnu because all other objects in the material world were merely the manifestations of that supreme entity (*Adi Sakti*). Based on the *Srimad Bhagavata Gita*, Sankardeva propagated the principle of *eka deva eka seva*, *eka bine nai keva*, which means that there is only one God and there is noother way of attaining salvation (*moksha*) except surrendering at the feet of that God. He wrote in his rendering of the 2nd*skandha* of the *Bhagavata Purana*:

"Do you not worship other gods or goddesses; do you not take the *prasada* offered in the course of their worship; do you not visit their temples or have a view of their icons, for by such acts *bhakti* will be vitiated."[500]

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[497] No. 186.

[498]*Vaishnava-Sahajiya* is a form of *Tantric Vaishnavism* centred in the state of West Bengal, India.

[499]*Nath-Yogi* is a Shaivite group of monks which emerged around the 13th century. They are sometimes also called *Jogi* or simply *Yogi*, and are known for a variety of *siddha-yoga* practices. Their tradition is collectively known as *Nath-Sampradaya*. Many of them had settled in the outskirts of Eastern Bengal, especially in the districts of Sylhet, Tipperah, Noakhali, Chittagong, Mymensingh, and Dhaka, and adopted weaving as their profession (hence, also known in many areas of Assam as *Katani* – the ones who cut and weave clothes).

[500] No. 317.

The basic guiding force of life, according to Sankardeva, was *Bhakti*, which he referred to as the highest desire of life, signified through motion (*gati*), faith (*mati*), and wealth (*vitta*).In the tangled chaos of life, the ideal of *bhakti* was pronounced as the only "metaphysical villa", to use Aldous Huxley's words. The term *Mahapurusiya* itself implies "the one pertaining to the Great Soul" – it represents a revolt against the pretensions of the priestly class, and the licentious rites and rituals related to human and animal sacrifice, i.e. the corrupted forms of the *Sakta* tradition. Aniruddha Kayastha, a Vaishnavite writer of the 17th century, has appropriately described the coming into the picture of Srimanta Sankardeva in his version of the Book V of the *Bhagavata Purana* in the following way:

"*Bhakti* was previously absent (prior to Sankardeva) in this land of Kamarupa. By taking recourse to various acts of violence, the people here had degraded themselves spiritually. At long last, by the grace of *Sri Krisna*, a person by the name of Sankardeva was born. He visited the sacred land of Jagannatha Puri at a comparatively tender age where he served the Lord for quite a long period of time. It was here that he came to know about the doctrine of knowledge and devotion and at last returned to his native place after having received religious orders (*ajna*). He thereafter made known the path of devotion (*Bhakti-pratha*) to the people of his land so long steeped in the shackles of misery."[501]

The spread of Vaishnava ideas based on *Bhakti* started during the latter half of the medieval era and penetrated deeper into every level of the social structure during the colonial period, especially with the opening up of the tribal areas and the influx of Hinduised peasant communities, traders and moneylenders in these areas.[502]The *Bhakti* tradition of Sankardeva was thus a conscious reaction against the dominant cult of *Sakta-tantricism*, particularly its perversions and excesses, that are given due credence with reference to the illicit sexual practices and drinking habits followed by the practitioners of *Tantricism*.[503]Eschmann and other scholars have observed that the Brahmanical incorporation of tribal deities and "cults" occurred more frequently in the post-Buddhist times. However, no notable research is yet available about the cultural contacts between the Buddhists and the tribals during the period of the Buddha. Many tribes of the region of Western Orissa even today, exhibit remnants of

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[501] H.N. Dutta-Baruah, *Bhagavata* V (Nagaon: Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha, 2008), 4390-91.

[502] Dr. N.K. Das, "Perspectives on Religious Syncretism in India," *The Tribal Tribune: Beyond Spheres and Frontiers* 2, no. 8 (2018): 1-10.

[503] No. 194

Buddhism assimilated within the tribal religion. According to Eschmann, "High Hinduism or Great Traditions and tribal religion or little traditions are not directly confronted. They are combined through several intermediary stages within the regional tradition."[504]

However, the egalitarian ideal of a society as based on the *Bhakti* tradition and envisaged by Srimanta Sankardeva, could not retain its character for long and soon began to break up after his death. Its implications have been clearly visible in the relatively diminishing role of the *Sattras* in Assamese socio-cultural life in the present times. Moreover, internal conflicts within Vaishnavism and its division into various sects such as the *Sangha* have questioned the overall effectiveness and credibility of the *Sattra* in upholding the principles of equality and non-discrimination in the way originally propounded by its founding fathers. The basis of Sankardeva's Vaishnavism represented a revolt against the hostile social conditions of his age when no formal state structure existed to address people's needs. He was thus deeply concerned with the question of liberation of people from the sufferings that those conditions inflicted upon them. Sankardeva had a clear vision of the future society free from all forms of oppression and discrimination and based on equality for all. He, however, realised that the translation of this vision into reality would necessitate a radical change of the entire socio-economic system – an arduous task in itself considering the turbulent times he lived in and preached his ideas to a largely illiterate public.

Thus, Sankardeva tried to establish, within the confines of the existing society, safe havens where the conditions of freedom and equality could be attained at their optimum best. This he did by establishing the traditional institution of the *Sattra* in medieval Assam. He believed that in these institutions, his disciples could live in perfect peace and harmony, unaffected by the trials and tribulations of worldly life. This represented the materialisation of Sankardeva's vision of a perfect society in the fulfilment of his quest for unity in diversity. Relieving oneself of the misery and impermanence of the material world by taking refuge in the divine order was attached to taking *saran* or initiation in the *Sattra*. A simple and egalitarian way of life prevailed here, devoid of any influences of caste, rich-poor divide or the system of private property. This can be inferred from the scattered descriptions given by some early writers. For instance, Daityari Thakur in his book on Sankardeva and Madhavdeva wrote that

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[504]Anncharlott Eschmann, "The Role of Hindu Traditions in Contemporary India: An InterdisciplinaryStudy of the Temple City of Puri and the Jagannatha Cult," *Bulletin of the South Asia Institute of Heidelberg University* 10, no. 8 (1973): 92-99.

in the *Sattra*, people of all castes including the *Kaibarttas*, *Kalitas*, *Koches*, and *Brahmanas* took their meals together consisting of milk, parched rice and banana.[505]

Gradually, however, this simple community life gave way to a life where inequalities and differences based on caste and class raised its ugly head. The search for salvation and *bhakti* gave way to the cravings for pomp and power. The unusual multiplication of *Sattras* towards the end of the 17th century and afterwards, cannot be ascribed solely to the evangelical motives of the *Vaishnava-Bhakti* tradition. Allurement of money, power, and prestige was one of the primary factors behind the foundation of so many *Sattras* and their affiliated *Namghars* during this period. Professor S.N. Sharma writes that brothers and other members of the same family could be frequently found to have established different *Sattras* instead of devoting themselves to the cause of their ancestral *Sattra*. The chronicles (*Buranjis*) of several *Sattras* during the period of the Ahom rule contain numerous accounts of friction among members of the same family on the question of succession to the post of the *Sattradhikar* or the chief *Gosain*, and the founding of separate *Sattras* subsequently.[506] The history of *Mayamara*, *Dihing*, and *Elengi Sattras* furnishes ample evidence of such internal dissensions.

Tithes and offerings given by disciples regularly and the honour and prestige associated with the leadership of a *Sattra* in fact, provided sufficient allurement to establish new *Sattras*. Moreover, the principle of hereditary succession to the post of the *Sattradhikar*, as adopted by most of the *Sattras*, sometimes elevated even undesirable persons to this position that later resulted in internal feuds and the consequent degradation of the spiritual and religious standards of the *Sattras* concerned. Especially with the extension of royal patronage to a few *Sattras*, attempt to bring in the nobles and if possible, the princes too, within the fold of the *Sattra* system in order to increase the sphere of influence of the latter, could be noticed in the case of many *Sattras*, including the *cari-Sattras* of Majuli during the peak of the Ahom rule. *Sattradhikars* and *Gosains* now began to exercise their influence by seeking a presence for themselves in the royal court, which further degraded their earlier exalted status and position in the spiritual, religious, and cultural spheres. *Sattras* favoured by the kings and the nobles gradually began to lay more emphasis on courtly demeanour, pomp and grandeur primarily in a show of their power and influence as a result of the close nexus that existed between them

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[505] No. 19.

[506] No. 495: 47-62.

and the Ahom royal court.[507] Other less influential *Sattras* too, began to imitate the former as far as possible. Reference may here be made of the *Ramagopala-carita* where an interesting comparison has been made between the *Sattras* of Eastern Assam and those of Western Assam. Ramananda, the then *Sattradhikar* of the *Ahatguri Sattra* who lived during the last decade of the 17th century, is said to have described to one of his disciples the difference in the lifestyles of the *Sattradhikars* between these two regions of Assam in the following way:

"Religious heads can maintain themselves here and are recognised by the people if they can make a show of luxury and pomp. Therefore, they require soft cushions, big pillows to recline at ease, beautiful trays of brass, and fine mattresses having floral designs to sit on and expensive clothes to put on. But, the religious heads of Kamrupa and Cooch Behar are not in need of such luxuries to receive recognition as *sadhus*. They make use of simple things made of wood and bamboo, put on simple white cotton clothes and can perform their prayers sitting on mattresses made of ribs of the plantain leaf. There (Western Assam) simplicity is considered as the chief trademark of religious persons."[508]

A few *Sattradhikars* even went to the extent of using the royal insignia, viz. *kekoradola* (a kind of palanquin especially designed for use by the kings) and *arowan* (a type of royal umbrella used only by kings). This crave for power and prestige eventually came to replace simplicity with formality, and the earlier close and friendly relationship between the *Sattradhikars* and their disciples no longer remained. In other words, direct approach to the *Sattradhikar* by the common-folk without an intermediary now ceased to exist. Moreover, the rapid multiplication of *Sattras* also adversely affected the then political situation of the region. Towards the latter period of the Ahom rule, *Sattras* came to serve as an asylum for those who tried to escape from the rigours associated with compulsory labour service (*paik* system) in connection with various works of public utility services under Ahom royal patronage. Hundreds of able-bodied men sought refuge in the *Sattras* in the garb of Vaishnava devotees. In fact, the Ahom ruler Gadadhar Singha had to take really stern action in order to check this tendency among his subjects.[509]

It has also been said that the insistence on non-violence and a simple way of living characterised by a simple diet had an adverse impact on the martial qualities of the people of

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[507] Ibid.

[508]*Ramagopala-carita*, Transcript No. 113, D.H.A.S., verses 1901-04.

[509] No. 495: 72-76.

this region in the long run. The same people who could successfully resist several mighty Mughal invasions in the later periods, strangely enough, succumbed to the rebellion of the untrained *Moamorias* in the latter half of the 18th century and to a few thousand Burmese soldiers during the first half of the 19th century. Although there might have been many reasons for this physical and martial deterioration among the Assamese at this period of time, S.N. Sharma opines that the deep-rooted influence of the Vaishnava way of life as one of the important factors in this respect cannot altogether be denied. Sankardeva's philosophy of Vaishnavism and the teachings associated with it fostered a fatalistic and other-worldly attitude among people, which created the impression that everything in life is pre-destined and hence the worldly life is futile, which gradually worked to destroy people's martial (*Kshatriya*) spirit. They began to develop a feeling of hostility and aversion towards military actions which compel man, sometimes, to be violent and vindictive. In order to bring to light the fact of the influence exercised by Vaishnava ideas on the attitude and mindsets of the people at large, political historians like Dutiram Hazarika, the writer of the *Padya Buranji* and political personalities like Manjay Barbaruah have attributed the reverses sustained by the Ahom royal army at the hands of the *Moamorias* to the result of inscrutable fate.

Many writers on the subject have attributed the reason for the present-day decadence and decline of the *Sattra* as a traditional institution to Sankardeva's social philosophy itself. They have argued that Sankardeva did not strike at the very roots of the economic and social fabric of the society in Assam as it existed then. Instead, in a way of digressing from the real problems facing humanity, he built small islands of peace in the midst of an ocean of suffering and misery that engulfed the society at the time. According to Sivanath Barman, the major weakness of Sankardeva as a social philosopher is that he was reticent on a radical social upheaval on an economic basis. This was to be seen quite explicitly in the institution of the *Sattra*, where very little importance was given to the immense potentiality of human labour and human productive power.[510] The monks who lived in these institutions were not engaged in any form of productive labour and instead, depended entirely on alms for their survival.

Initially, the monks used to live on the charity of the laity. Later, the *Sattradhikars* began to seek patronage first of the royal officials and then the kings. The latter were at first reluctant to patronise these institutions apprehending that these might eventually pose a threat to the

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[510] No. 20: 64.

administration of the state. But the moment it came to be known that these institutions were politically harmless, both the kings and the officials bestowed gifts on them in the form of land and property, primarily in an attempt to win over their allegiance. They also conferred on the *Sattradhikars* and *Gosains* royal titles and other privileges. Royal patronage gradually led these institutions to deviate from their original foundational principles. Heated debates on theology and ritualism became the order of the day, while the practical problems of maintaining equality and brotherhood of man were relegated to the background.[511] The *Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha* also suffers from the same limitation and hence it has not been able to bring about comprehensive social change based on equality and non-discrimination of all sections of the society. The concept of *bhakti*, on which both the *Sattra* and the *Sangha* are based, is in itself deeply contradictory. Sankardeva's Vaishnavism and his yearning for monotheism, to a great extent, went against his ideal of an egalitarian society. The idea of *bhakti* is representative of an unquestioning allegiance to the Supreme Being. From a sociological point of view, it means the expression of personal loyalty of the peasant to the landlord or of the landlord to the king.[512] On the other hand, the concept of monotheism in Vaishnavism to which both the *Sattra* and the *Sangha* adhere, represents the ideological reflection of absolute monarchy where the king reigns supreme. It is the logical consequence of the common man's idea that under monarchical rule, one can live in peace and harmony only by satisfying the rulers through praise, prayer or by any other means that seem the most appropriate. In other words, it means glorification of the ruling authority.

The ideals of *bhakti* and monotheism as reflected through the institution of the *Sattra* represented an all-encompassing entity of the Assamese society at the time of Sankardeva. However, these ideas either directly or indirectly strengthened the basis of feudalism in Assam in due course of time. As has been opined by Sivanath Barman, a reading of Sankardeva's *Raja-bhatimas* or eulogies in praise of the king, clearly shows that he was on the side of the feudal monarchy.[513] Thus, the very philosophy of Sankardeva's Vaishnavism appears to be a conflicting one. This has adversely affected both the *Sattra* and the *Sangha*, although in differing degrees and extent. Initially, his aim was to build a classless society through the *Sattra* and its offshoot – the *Namghar* – in every village of Assam, by preaching the ideals of *bhakti* and monotheism. However, since the hold of feudalism in Assam was

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[511] Ibid: 67.

[512] Ibid.

[513] Ibid.

gradually consolidated, these fancy ideals were not able to address the rigidities of caste and the hierarchical divisions based on it. This ultimately had shaken the basis of the *Sattra*, leading to various splits and fragmentations within the community.

Monotheism means the worship of only one single god, i.e. *Krishna*, through *naam-kirtan*, to the complete exclusion of other gods and goddesses. This was, however, rooted in its own problematic strands. There were, originally, many communities and tribes, including hill tribes, tea-garden tribes, etc. within the fold of Sankardeva's Vaishnavism, who were worshippers of various religious deities in the Hindu pantheon. They were not ardent followers of a monotheistic form of worship. The question of efficient accommodation of the varied beliefs and practices of these people throughout the entire length and breadth of Assam extending from Cooch Behar to Sadiya, remained unaddressed. The same problem still plagues the *Sangha*, which has paved the way for dissensions to emerge within the social philosophy of Vaishnavism. The contemporary problem of separatism inflicting the state has therefore centred around the fluid notion of identity between Assamese and non-Assamese people or between plains and hill tribes.

The incorporation by the state of traditional institutions like the *Sattras* and the *Namghars* in order to reinforce the politics around the issue of identity continues even in the present times. It is in this context that the rather ambiguous traditional-modern distinction in terms of differences between the state and the society to analyse identity issues as theorised in the first chapter can be understood. It may be mentioned here that in the recent times, Sankardeva and his legacy has come to be increasingly projected with an ever-increasing fervour as the icon par excellence by the state. The intellectual, academic, and artistic achievements of Sankardeva are being studied and highlighted with a much greater zeal than ever before. The naming of various institutions and organisations of repute, including government-funded educational institutions such as schools,colleges, and even universities, besides street names, lanes and bylanes, museums, etc. after Srimanta Sankardeva brings to light the fact of legitimacy which the state continuously seeks to project in order to maintain its omnipotent status and inevitable presence among the citizens at all times. Several public activities such as meetings, essay and poetry competitions, etc. are organised not only on the occasion of the birth anniversaries of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva but also almost all the year round at various places across Assam.This can be understood in the light of the relationship between the state and the society and its varied dynamics that play out at different levels – from the national to the local. In the words of Akhil Gupta, "Studying the state

ethnographicallyinvolves both an analysis of the *everyday practices* of local bureaucracies and the *discursive construction* of the state in public culture."[514]

For a majority of the Indian citizens, the most immediate context for their interaction and encounter with the state is provided by their relationships with government bureaucracies at the local level. In addition to its promulgation by the mass media, representations of the state are effected through the public practices of different institutions and agents of the government. Thus, any analysis of the state requires us to conceptualise a space that is constituted by the intersection of local, regional, national, and transnational phenomena. The discourse of *Sankari* culture and the appropriation of *Sankar-Madhab* in the larger political narrative of the state of Assam constitutes a very important mechanism through which the politics around the issue of an "Assamese" identity has come to be discursively constructed in the public culture. For instance, in the Namami Brahmaputra International Festival organised by the Government of Assam in March-April 2017 to celebrate the beauty of India's only male river – the Brahmaputra – the Vaishnava cultural heritage of Assam and the contributions of Srimanta Sankardeva in this respect were a major feature, and the *Sattradhikars* and *Gosains* of various *Sattras* and *Namghars* respectively, were especially invited to be a part of this festival as guests.

Thus, an inference can be drawn here that many public activities organised in the name of Sankardeva or Madhavdeva that reflect the legacy of the Vaishnava culture and traditions, and sometimes even the organisations that are associated with such activities, wear the 'national' tag and some boast of an 'international' status too. However, more often than not, the major driving force behind such public displays of a culture appears to be the lure of political power rather than any genuine concern for a critical understanding and appreciation of the long-held beliefs and value-systems of a community of people. In fact, the *Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha*, one of the most influential and powerful socio-political organisations of Assam, professes "true" allegiance to the ideals and principles of the Vaishnava system as propagated by Sankardeva, but it has also been responsible for sowing the seeds of dissension and division among the followers of the faith on petty issues of ritualism and dogma. Such

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[514] Akhil Gupta, "Blurred Boundaries: The Discourse of Corruption, the Culture of Politics, and the Imagined State," in *The Anthropology of the State: A Reader*, ed. Aradhana Sharma and Akhil Gupta (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 211-241.

tendencies need to be checked by the people themselves from time to time in the overall interest and protection of their long-held traditions and cultural beliefs.

The *Sangha* – A Fresh Beginning or a Repeat of the Past in a New Incarnation?

To outrightly say that the *Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha*has not been able to address the limitations of the *Sattras* in entirety would be an understatement. The *Sangha* has indeed posed a formidable challenge to the dominance and influence exercised for long by the *Brahmana-KayasthaSattradhikars* and the priestly class in religious matters.[515] Through simplification and cost reduction of the various Vaishnava rituals, the economic burden on the poor has been minimised to great extent. The *Sangha* has also appointed some of its members to officiate as priests in different religious ceremonies. Poor Vaishnava peasants have found an opportunity to be included as office-bearers of the *Sangha*, which have led to a sense of empowerment among them. The *Sangha* also permits these common people to perform various socio-religious functions which were earlier reserved exclusively for the Brahmanas. A. Saikia has rightly remarked on the positive role played by the *Sangha* in ushering a wave of socio-economic mobility in Assam in the following words – "By being a member of a social organisation which allowed them to perform various socio-religious roles which had for so long, been preserved for the Brahmanas exclusively, the poor peasants were invested with a new sense of authority. Power came to them through their ability to negotiate various socio-cultural practices and also village resources.[516]

Talking about the tribal society in Assam, the *Sangha* has been, to a great extent, able to make up for the void left behind by the *Sattras* in the lives of the former. Jatin Mipun in many of his published articles has clearly talked about the positive changes brought about in the lives of the *Misings* after they came into contact with the *Sangha*. He has quite earnestly admitted the important role played by the *Sangha* behind his own individual upliftment. The activities of the*Sangha*have contributed a lot in their society by encouraging the tribals to give up their habit of drinking *Apong* (a locally-made fermented liquor); this is however, based upon the idea of attaining cultural homogenisation in a context of diversity of tribe, ethnicity and race, and the varied dietary preferences of different identities that eventually

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[515]No. 292: 112.

[516] A. Saikia, *A Century of Protests and Peasant Politics in Assam…Since 1990* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2014), 271-272.

make up the 'Assamese'.[517] Mipun has also written that soon after his father was initiated into the *Sangha* in 1965, their entire household environment had changed for the better. In the same year along with his father, ten more *Mising* families had given up for good the habit of taking liquor and other intoxicated drugs.[518] Hence, by making the tribal people aware of the negative effects of the usage of alcohol in the name of tradition, the *Sangha* has been able to usher in a new way of life for them.

With the emergence of the *Sangha*, the common Assamese have been freed to a large extent from economic exploitation in the hands of the priestly class in the name of extravagant religious rituals. As the rites and rituals associated withthe *Mahapurusiya Naam-Dharma* tradition and as originally prescribed by Sankardeva and emphasised by the *Sangha* as well, are simple and cost-effective, a lot of the people from backward communities have endorsed this new sect. As a part of this thesis, it was really a very wonderful experience to visit the Gamariguri area at Merapani near Sivasagar district where various tribes such as *Koches*, *Keots*, *Misings*, *Kacharis*, tea-garden labourers, et. al had taken initiation (*saran*) as members of the *Sangha*. They had also established their own *Namghars* not associated with any *Sattra* for the fulfilment of their social, spiritual and religious needs as members of the same community relegating caste and tribe differences to the background.[519]Moreover, as a socio-religious reform sect inspired by the Gandhian ideology, the *Sangha* has been playing a very instrumental role in Assam for the social and economic upliftment of women.[520]At the time of the formation of the *Sangha*, Assamese society was steeped in the dens of blind conservatism and narrow religious orthodoxy propagated by the *Sattras*. With the rise of the *Sangha*, numerous opportunities have been opened for women in the spheres of religion,

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[517] Ismail Hussain, *Oitihyar Bichar* (Jorhat: Rekha Prakasan, 2012), 198.

[518] Ismail Hussain, "Dr. Jatin Mipun aru Mishing Samaj Sahitya," *Mahekiya Bartapakhili* 3, no. 5 (2014): 2-9. It has been quoted from Jatin Mipun's original article published at *Baikuntha Behar*, a souvenir published by the *Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha*, Nagaon, 2005.

[519] The field visit was undertaken on April 25-26, 2018 at Merapani area, 22km from Sibsagar town in Upper Assam, where a number of families have embraced the ideas and ideologies of the *Sangha*. A woman, Basanti Mech, belonging to the Kachari tribe informed, "We are all members of the *Sangha* and the *Namghar* represents our symbol of togetherness and unification. Under its roof, we all are equal. We cook and dine together here without any ill-feeling or hatred towards anyone."

[520] J. Nath, *Srimanta Sankardeva Sanghar Padadhikar Sakalar Abhibhasan* (Nagaon: Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha, 2005), 436.

education and culture. For instance, poor, illiterate women in the villages are encouraged by the *Sangha*to take up self-employment opportunities by assisting them in availing bank loans and other credit facilities provided by the government.

Hence, for all these reasons, the *Sangha*has emerged as a new social force among the Assamese, vibrant and energetic enough to reckon with – a bastion that had originally been reserved for the *Sattras* alone. The *Sangha* has formulated its own rules and regulations elaborated through its constitution, which is strictly adhered to by both its members and officials. However, the promise of the *Sangha* to bring about social equality and abolish all forms of caste discrimination has been marred by its own controversies as discussed earlier. Nonetheless, its popularity among the socially and economically backward non-Brahmin Assamese people in the rural areas since the early 20th century till the present day has to be applauded. Of late, the establishment of educational institutions such as the Srimanta Sankardeva University, schools and *Sankari Sangeet Vidyalayas* in order to propagate and popularise Sankardeva's ideology in the world stage, has earned the *Sangha* the respect and admiration of all, far bypassing that of the *Sattras*. It is because the institution of the *Sattra* which once spearheaded the movement for the formation of an Assamese nation and an umbrella identity is today facing a crisis of authority and leadership. Whether the *Sangha* has actually been able to step into the shoes of the *Sattra* and provide a formidable alternative to it to all castes and sections of the people constituting the 'Assamese' is still a matter of debate. However, the socio-cultural renaissance that heralded in Assam and a new genre of philosophy that developed alongside with the birth of the *Sangha* is noteworthy. The ever-growing audience in the *barxik adhibeshan* (annual conferences) of the *Sangha* is the finest example to lend credence to this fact.[521] The most important aspect of this sect is that it is not based on a particular caste or community and all members are bestowed with equal rights to bear the responsibility of the organisation whenever required. "Sankardeva wrote", observed one of its Vice-Presidents from the untouchable fisherman (*kaibartta*) caste, "that he who believes in more than one god is an untouchable. That was the opinion of Sankardeva and Lord Krishna both."

Hence, all these give us reasonable ground to believe that the *Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha* maintains a healthy relationship with all the marginalised castes and creeds and treats all its devotees equally, at least in principle. Membership in its organisational ranks has swelled

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[521] P. Mahanta, *Janagosthigata Cetana – Atmapratisthar Prosno* (Guwahati: District Library, 2009), 69.

over the years. Members come from communities as diverse as the Sikhs and the tea garden tribes. Although, however, members of the *Sangha* eat together with the untouchables who have joined the organisation, but they refuse to eat with Brahmanas observing Brahmanical rituals and others as well who have not joined the *Sangha*. They reject the notion of caste and believe in 'one and the same' among their devotees by sharing a common ideology of *bhakti* and monotheism. This, in itself, is deeply problematic, given the diverse socio-cultural set-up of the state and the presence of numerous castes, tribes and communities with different lifestyles, religious practices and food habits. Hence, in its rejection of caste and the discrimination associated with it, the *Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha* has given rise to new forms of untouchabilities, further alienating certain sections of the people from being a part of the grand "Assamese" narrative as envisaged by it. In several ways, it has also led to new fissures and gaps in this narrative on grounds of religion, tribe, and caste. New questions have of late arisen with regard to the understanding of "Assamese" identity – religious or linguistic – and the different interpretations of different sections of people that underlie them, taking into account the various changes and transformations that have taken place in both the structure of the state and its associated institutions – both traditional and modern.

Chapter – 7

CONCLUSION

As discussed in detail in the preceding chapters, the change of attitude and perception of a section of the socially backward non-Brahmin Assamese towards the Vaishnava religion and their objective to reform it from the orthodox Brahmanical rituals, led to the emergence of the *Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha*. With the spread of modern education under the British rule, an educated but socially backward non-Brahmin class emerged who openly challenged the prevailing caste system, untouchability and authoritarian attitude of the upper caste Hindus in religious matters in the society. They aggressively expressed their views against such religious traditions and proclaimed that they were in no way inferior to the Brahmanas.[522] The effort to reform the Vaishnava religion as well as society in the 20th century became more organised and adopted comprehensive methods of social mobilisation in this direction. The main thrust of the *Sangha* was to reconstruct the Assamese society based on the root of Sankardeva's original doctrine, which had been distorted over time, manifested overtly in the nature of caste discrimination.

The reform movement was developed first as a response to the comprehensive social changes introduced under the British colonial rule and accelerated its activities during the post-independence period.[523] The newly educated Assamese non-Brahmin middle class was now able to read and understand the actual meaning of the *shastras* and hence could better comprehend religious matters. They began to realise that the ideology of the Vaishnavite movement propagated by Sankardeva and Madhavdeva had undergone some undesirable changes under their successors. A few *Sattras* at this time did not even accept Sankardeva as their preceptor (*guru*). Hence, in order to reinstate the original position of Sankardeva as the guru of the Vaishnavas, the *Sankar Sangha* movement played an important role. However, the role of the *Sangha* needs to be analysed here as a traditional institution in terms of the original research questions that this thesis sought to answer, i.e. whether the movement has been able to break away from the existing caste-based barriers in the socio-religious system of the 20th century society, and if so, how? Secondly, has it been actually able to rise above casteism among its members so much so as to carve out a new identity for the Assamese Vaishnavas outside the traditional *Sattra* system and its affiliate – the *Namghar*?

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[522] No. 249.

[523] Ibid: 290.

Since its inception, the *Sangha* has not only raised its voice against the authoritarian attitude of the priestly class in religious matters but also wanted to make people free from the exploitation and domination of this class. It is true that as long as the *Sattras* were devoted to the original ideology of *Mahapursiya naam-dharma* of Sankardeva, all sections of people accepted Vaishnavism as their religion. However, the gradual penetration of Brahmanical elements, viz. image worship, untouchability, caste discrimination, etc. in the *Sattras*, conservatism and orthodoxy became the order of the day.[524] Even Pitambardeva Goswami, the then *Sattradhikar* of *Garmur Sattra*, had vehemently criticised the *Sattra* system for the prevailing casteism and untouchability within it. He later became one of the stalwarts of the *Sangha* movement and adorned the chair of its *Padadhikar* in 1954.[525]

The *SrimantaSankardeva Sangha* was formed as an anti-Brahmanical institution to propagate Sankardeva's *ek saran naam-dharma* among all the communities of Assam. It, in fact, tried to define itself as a distinct religious creed against Brahmanical authority. The Indian freedom movement had provided space for mass participation, irrespective of people's position in the social hierarchy. At this crucial juncture, the larger issue was how to mould the heritage of the Bhakti movement in Assam to respond to the changing needs and aspirations of a democratic framework which was gradually moulded by the Gandhian ideals of mass participation in the freedom struggle against the British. In Assam, along with the freedom movement, a parallel socio-religious reform movement was also carried out by a few Congress leaders (most of whom were members of the *Sangha*). The latter were inspired by the Gandhian spirit of making the society free from orthodox Brahmanical rituals, which did not form a part of the original teachings of Sankardeva.[526]

The main point of controversy started on the issue of the period of impurity (*asoch*) to be observed by the non-Brahman castes upon a death in the family. In 1930, the mother of Jogendranath Baruah, a renowned judge of Golaghat had died. Baruah had observed *dasah-asauca* (10-day ritual impurity) and performed the *sraddha* on the 11th day itself by *naam-kirtan* as per the advice of Gopika Ballabh Goswami of Golaghat. This issue had created a

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[524]No. 258: 201.

[525] Ismail Hussain, *Garmuriya Sangrami Sattradhikar Pitambardeva Goswamir Jivan aru Darshan* (Guwahati: Banalata, 2007), 101.

[526] K. Das and J. Nath, *Srimanta Sankardeva Sanghar Itihas* (Nagaon: Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha, 2012), 20.

huge uproar all over Assam. The crucial issue debated was whether the *sastras* permitted a *shudra* to observe 11th day ritual impurity. A *sabha* (meeting) was convened on this issue in which the Brahmana pundits gave the judgement that only the Brahmanas have the exclusive right to observe 11th day ritual impurity and for a *shudra*, 31st day is mandatory for the *sraddha* ceremony. The Brahmanas even published a small booklet to preach their beliefs. Predictably, this judgement was challenged by the leaders of the *Sangha* citing many *slokas* from different *sastras* in order to refute the claims of the Brahmana pundits. The latter were ultimately defeated and the futility of the *Karmakandi* rituals had been proved in the debate. Hereinafter, the view of the *Sankar Sangha* had been established as the true *shastric* code of belief.

Soon after, the supporters of the *Sangha* movement composed many books in vernacular related to *asauca*, so that the common people could easily understand. All these gave a new dimension to the *Sangha* movement in the years to come. Thus, the *Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha* started codifying the rules and norms for the members of this institution which later came to be considered as the characteristic rituals of this Vaishnavite creed. As described by Haladhar Bhuyan, the main object of the *Sangha* as an institutionhas been the propagation of a monotheistic religion, abandonment of ritual impurity, abolition of untouchability, establishment of equal rights for men of all castes and cementing of goodwill between the peoples of the hills and the plains of Assam.[527] Most of the founder leaders of the *Sangha*, including Haladhar Bhuyan[528] and the renowned Vaishnava Pandit Sonaram Chutiya,[529] had the bitter experience of blatant caste discrimination at the hands of the upper caste people of the society. In this context, the freedom movement also had a tremendous impact on the structure of the Assamese society. As mentioned earlier, a majority of the leaders of this reform sect actively participated in the freedom struggle through which they came in touch with Gandhi's Harijan movement. It became a source of inspiration for them to reform their own religion as a means of reforming society.[530]

The various attempts made by the priestly class since the beginning to check the rise of the *Sankar Sangha* have measurably failed. However, despite all such schisms, the supremacy of

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[527]Ibid.

[528] Ibid.

[529]Ibid: 162.

[530] No. 1: 274.

naam-prasanga was gradually established by the *Sangha* and the movement became popular as *Naam-Kirtaniya* among the people for the simplicity of its rituals. Hence, in this way, the *Sangha* has been able to accommodate a large number of lower caste people and tribes into its fold. According to Dr. Dhrubajyoti Borah, the *Sankar Sangha* is a huge and widespread institution mainly guided by the marginalised or subaltern people of the society but has proved to be a successful one.[531] On the other hand, A. Guha has remarked that this movement was a struggle for upward social mobility carried out by the oppressive castes of the society.[532] In other words, it was the struggle of the oppressed (who were so long exploited in the name of religion) against the hegemony of the upper castes. In contrast to the western conception of the secular state, the *Sangha* resorted to Hindu spiritual traditions as an approach to reform the society.

Although the *Sangha* as institution of socio-religious reform has been able to free the Assamese society from the stronghold of the Brahmana-Kayastha *Sattradhikars* and the priestly class in religious matters, this change has not been widely noticeable in many places, especially in the nerve-centre of Assamese Vaishnavism – Majuli. So entrenched and deep has been the role of caste in people's psyche that the *Sangha's* dream has remained unfulfilled, i.e. the emergence of a homogenous society under the banner of Vaishnavism. The identity of the 'Assamese' as a community is not merely confined to religion and this has been the basic problem with the *Sangha*. It is not possible to constitute a homogenous society based on language or religion alone. Almost all the castes and classes who have for so long suffered discrimination, and of late experienced upward social mobility, continue to assert their identity, besides raising demands for social and economic justice. Conventional methods to usher in an era of social change have been rightly questioned by the present generation. For instance, increasing Christian conversions in Majuli among the *Misings*, have brought to question the *Sangha's* paradigm of looking at society and its perspectives on social change. It is time that the *Sangha* formulates new conceptual frameworks to address its own limitations; and this cannot be confined to merely religious discussions and debates which it has been doing for long.

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[531] Sivanath Barman et al., *Oitihya aru Itihaas* (Guwahati: Ajanta Publications, 2005), 118.

[532] Amalendu Guha, "Axomor Samajot Srimanta Sankardeva Sanghar dare Jat-Pat Virodhi Dharmiya-Samajik Anusthanar Prasangikata," in *Timir Faria Baj*, ed. G. Gogoi and G. Kalita (Jorhat: Jyoti Prakashan, 2005), 14.

A very important point of criticism against the *Sangha* has been its uncompromising rigidity in association and inter-dining with other sects. Although it has spoken continuously about the evils of caste and class-based divisions, its members neither eat nor associate themselves even with their relatives if they follow other faiths. This has also led to situations of conflict within families. Therefore, a section of the people in Assam, led by the *Sattras* of Majuli, has raised an allegation that the *Sangha* has created a new social division in the villages of Assam which threatens the basic foundation of unity of the village.[533] Hence, although the *Sangha* has carved out for itself a niche in the Assamese socio-cultural life, its most important inadequacy has been its failure to give due recognition and respect to the diverse cultures of its followers. After initiation into the *Sangha*, it means a complete surrender of one's community identity and instead, identification of oneself as only *mahapurusiya* or *Sankari*, which is the overriding framework of the *Sangha*. In a country like India where people still attach deep meanings to their age-old traditions and community beliefs and practices, it seems quite immature to expect them to give up their caste, tribe or community identity after initiation as a member of the *Sangha*.

In Majuli, the *Sangha* has been successful to quite an extent in its missionary zeal to reform the decadent *Sattra* institutions from the evils of casteism and untouchability. However, it has failed to arrest the inroads made by Christian missionaries into the island of late. It has earlier been mentioned that agriculture and other allied activities, particularly livestock rearing, is a major occupation of the people in Majuli, especially the plains tribals. But, the domestication and rearing of pigs, ducks and chickens is strictly prohibited by the *Sangha* for its members. Recently, there was a case of social boycott by the *Sangha* of an unemployed youth from a village in Golaghat district who had taken to poultry farming and pig rearing at the backyard of his home. The issue of rearing of pigs has always been a bone of contention between the *Sangha* and the tribals. A few years ago, a member of the *saran* committee of the *Sangha* who was a *Mising*, was even compelled to resign from his post in Jonai in Dhemaji district.[534]

It is precisely because of this intolerance that the *Sangha* has not been able to garner overwhelming support from all sections of the people in Assam, especially the tribals. As a reform institution, it seems that the *Sangha* has failed to rise above the narrow domain of customs and rituals, a characteristic feature of most traditional institutions worldwide. The

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[533]Information provided by the then *Kakati* of the *Dakshinpat Sattra*.

[534] Information provided by a local villager and a resident of Notun Kamalabari area, Majuli.

emphasis has been more on what a devotee can or cannot do, rather than addressing the real issue of caste-based discrimination in the *Sattras* and *Namghars*. Hence, in many ways, it has not proved to be a credible alternative for the *Sattras* in the larger socio-political discourse of the state. It is in this context that the inherent constitutional and institutional defects of the *Sangha* have been brought to light in due course of time. This has also been responsible for the problem of desertion of membership of the *Sangha* that has arisen from time to time. Many people including a few top rank leaders of the organisation have already left because of its rigidity on religious and ideological matters. Particularly with the desertion of Acharya Ilaram Das from the *Sangha*, it has lost the support of a large segment of the Scheduled Caste population of the state.

The deeply entrenched conservatism and uncompromising attitude of the *Sangha* has become more and more prominent in the present context since the time of its formation in the 1930s. Hence, the *Sangha* has always been criticised on the ground that that it intermingles freely with only those who are its initiates and is open-minded only to the extent of not digressing the rule of *mahapurusiya dharma* as enunciated by it. Its members vehemently oppose caste discrimination as is blatantly visible in the *Sattras* and hence eat together with untouchables who have joined their organisation.[535] But, they do not take part in any religious functions/celebrations held at other households in the same village, who do not belong to the *Sangha*, even of their near relatives. The intolerance of the *Sangha* towards the Brahmanas and the priestly-class in the name of religion also does not hold water for ensuring harmony and social solidarity in the long run.

An allegation that has always been raised against the *Sangha* since its formation is that most of the *Padadhikars* have been elected only from members of the upper castes. This definitely points out to a trend of upper caste dominance within the *Sankardeva Sangha*. Therefore, the leaders of this reform organisation have not been successful enough in its mission of inculcating the concept of equality among all its members due to which casteism still reigns supreme. It has, for long, dissuaded the tea-garden labour community and the tribal groups of Assam, both hill and plains tribes, from joining the *Sangha*. Hence, the *Sangha* has failed to check the large-scale conversion of these people in Assam into Christianity and the assertion of their own distinct identity in the overall political realm of the state. With respect to the

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[535]Ibid.

issue of illegal infiltration as well against which it vehemently speaks often,the position of the *Sangha* has remained rather ambiguous.

A Comparative Analysis

The institutional significance of the *Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha* in the socio-political scenario of Assam cannot be denied because it had brought in its wake a renaissance in the overall social and religious fabric of the state. It would not be fair to measure the success of this reformist organisation solely in terms of its apparent popularity. Its strength and resilience to withstand the challenges of time, the philanthropism and perseverance of its leaders, have been the most important factors in building confidence among the socially backward non-Brahmin castes and communities of Assam. It has been because of the continuing efforts of the *Sangha* that these people have found a platform to raise their voice against upper caste domination. However, one of the most significant drawbacks of the *Sangha* has been that it has given more importance on pomp and public display – a major reason for having failed to address the genuine grassroot problems of the society. As a result, they have not been able to challenge the overall supremacy of the *Sattras* in the socio-religious life of the state by providing a viable alternative narrative.

Not many such socio-religious reform institutions have been able to survive the onslaughts of time and thereby faded away from living memory sooner or later. Many of them even disintegrated before attaining their desired objectives.[536] In this context, however, the *Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha* has been sincerely upholding its aims and objectives since its formation which has led to its ever expanding base of supporters and devotees. Although, however, the hold of the *Sattra* and its affiliate, the *Namghar*, still remains unquestionable in the social, cultural and religious aspects of the lives of the people of Assam. The leaders and ideologues of the *Sangha*need to carefully examine the various shortcomings and limitations within its organisation and try to either reform or remove these, lest it will fail to embark on a path of radical social transformation. If the tribals, who have so far remained alienated from the *Sattras* and the mainstream Assamese society, find a scope for social and economic mobility vis-à-vis preserving their distinct ethnic identity within the framework of any institution (whether the *Sattra*/*Namghar* or the Church), they are more likely to embrace it initially as a matter of survival but later as a distinct way of life of their own. This analogy would help us understand better the inroads made by the Christian missionaries in Assam and

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[536] Ghanshyam Shah, *Social Movements in India* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2013), 267.

the support base they also enjoy among a sizeable section of the locals in places like Majuli. Hence, it is time that the *Sangha* emphasises more on a path of long-lasting social reforms while disseminating in its true spirit the philosophy of *Srimanta Sankardeva* to the world community.

Religion versus the State in Identity Formation

The relationship between the state and religion is interdependent. Traditional institutions such as the *Sattra* and the *Namghar* provide moral support to the state either directly or indirectly. After the demise of Sankardeva, splits and fragmentations occurred in the Vaishnavite movement mainly because of various ideological differences among the preceptors. This gave rise to neo-Vaishnavite institutions like the *Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha*. As a result, the *Sattras* and their affiliates – the *Namghar* – also deviated from the original progressive thrust of Sankardeva's Vaishnavism and lost their earlier mass appeal. In due course of time, especially with the rise of the Ahom dynasty, the *Sattra* became a royal institution that received material benefits from the state. It thus got involved in state politics which further consolidated the 'Assamese' regional identity. This cultural homogenisation of the Assamese identity came to be challenged by socio-religious reform organisations like the *Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha* which raised new questions about caste and community in the Assamese society. As such, the credibility of the *Sattra* and the *Namghar* as socio-cultural and religious reform institutions to create a society based on equality and fraternity now came to be challenged.

Tradition, religion and politics are inter-linked in a very fascinating and illusive manner. The state derives the moral basis of its authority from religion and religious practices as well as an institutional and metaphysical structure for social transactions. Religion, in turn, is influenced by the change of political power structures and social norms and attitudes.[537] As a result, the formation of identities is guided by a complex inter-dependent play of different forces at work on the ground. The role of religion and traditional institutions in politics and the political system of a state is influenced by the specific kind of state politics and also the overall state-society relationship in a given historical conjecture.

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[537] S.K. Mitra, "Desecularising the State: Religion and Politics in India after Independence," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 33, no. 4 (1991): 755-777.

In this context, mention may be made of the Marxist aphorism "Religion is the opium of man" and "Religion is the heart of the heartless world." In the Marxian analysis, economic transformation is seen as the driving force of history. The eventual outcome is a classless society in which the influence of primordial sentiments will increasingly disappear. However, despite the postulation that religion is the epiphenomenon of an exploitative economic structure and works as an instrument for ensuring smooth exploitation by the ruling class, its potential to fight against that exploitative social order is now widely recognised.[538] Religion and the various institutions associated with it are deeply rooted in age-old traditional beliefs and practices of a community. These are considered to be sacrosanct and inviolable, which not only define the identity of that community but also enable them to relate themselves to the outside world. This identity is subject to several societal tensions from time to time. Hence, identity as a social construct means that they are always in a state of flux and fluidity. Cross-cultural influences are one of the foremost determinants in the shaping and re-shaping of identities at different points of time.

The state as a formal legal and constitutional body also determines the various ways in which different identities are expressed and articulated. This, it does in a manner that does not threaten the very existence of the state and its institutions but also at the same time, community identities remain intact. This also explains the inter-relationship between the state and traditional socio-religious institutions such as the *Sattra* in the creation and consolidation of an Assamese identity. It is this regional identity of the Assamese which stands as distinct and separate from the "non-Assamese" who may be different in terms of religion or language or food habits, etc.The co-existence of traditional institutions like the *Sattra* with the state and their influence in the making of a regional identity can be gauged from the fact that they have played a direct or indirect role in the political affairs of the state during different periods of history. For instance, the *Rajaghoriya Sattras* established and patronised by the Ahom royal family have always played a vocal role in favour of the state since the medieval period till the present.[539] The behaviour of these *Sattradhikars* at present has not changed much from the nature of their predecessors in the medieval monarchical system. At present, almost every

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[538] No. 258: 167-182.

[539] The *Rajaghoriya Sattras* of Majuli include Dakshinpat, Natun Kamalabari, Garmur and Auniati. Earlier, Samaguri and Bengenaati *Sattras* were also included in the ambit of the *Rajaghoriya Sattras*. Since they were not patronised by the Ahom kings, they are now no longer included within the category of *Rajaghoriya Sattras*.

candidate contesting elections (either Parliamentary or legislative) from *Sattra*-based constituencies visit the *Sattras* to seek the blessings of the *Sattradhikars* and also to gain ideological support from the inmates (*bhakats*) of the *Sattra*.[540] This brings to light an important fact that the *Sattradhikars*, not necessarily of the *Rajaghoriya Sattras*, are maintaining some kind of political influence and try to enjoy all possible favours of the state.

Of late, the issue of encroachment of *Sattra* lands by immigrants from Bangladesh has assumed a religious dimension and led to an outburst of anger and despair in the Assamese public discourse for quite sometime. The recent protests over the Citizenship Amendment Bill, 2016, however, remained quite silent on this issue, although it has been raised time and again in the legislative assembly debates. Interestingly, a section of the intelligenstia and protest organisations are of the opinion that no official records exist to prove that *Sattra* lands have been encroached upon by illegal immigrants.[541] However, during an interaction with the local villagers residing near the *Sattras* as mentioned earlier, they expressed apprehension over the issue. There was a clear line of demarcation between the natives and the "others" (mostly Muslims) who were mostly living in small matchbox-sized hutments comprising of many families. Of late, it has been seen that a number of *Sattradhikars* are aligining themselves close to organisations like the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), the Bajrang Dal, etc. The same holds true of the *Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha* as well, clearly manifested in certain rituals that take place in its annual conferences, e.g. mass recital of the Bhagavata Gita. The larger message is that they want to draw a clear line of demarcation between themselves (Hindus) and the "other" (identified mostly as the *Mia* or illegal Bangladeshi settler).

Both the institutions of the *Sattra* and the *Namghar* have led to the conscious or unconscious formation of an 'Assamese' identity and the gradual consolidation of the same with time. The

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[540] The presiding officer of the *Axom Sattra Mahasabha*was also one of the candidates contesting the Assam Legislative Assembly Elections in the year 2016 from Bardowa constituency in Nagaon. Bardowa is the birthplace of Srimanta Sankardeva and also the seat of the famous Batadrava (Bardowa) *Sattra* and *Namghar*.

[541] During an informal conversation with Mayur Bora, (an ex-employee of NABARD who has written extensively on *Sattriya* culture and the role of the *Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha* in present-day Assamese society), he said that the government has been continuously raising the issue of illegal land encroachment of the *Sattras* by Bangladeshis. But, according to him, due to the inadequacy or lack of official documents in support of the same, the authenticity of this claim stands diluted.

emergence of the *Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha*has added new dimensions to this debate over identity. Although such institutions generally appear to have emerged in a context outside the boundaries of the state, they cannot be studied as an isolated entity existing exclusively outside the purview of the state. No institution, howsoever its role may be perceived, functions independently of the particular socio-political context of which it is a part. The *Namghar* is no exception. Here comes the distinction between the traditional and the modern, given the role of the *Namghar* as an institution whose importance and role as an agency of decision-making is experienced at the ground level of a community. This tradition-modern dichotomy, as seen earlier, however, should not lead us to an exclusive understanding of the state and society in terms of different institutions that are a part of either one or the other. Institutions such as the *Namghar* therefore need to be analysed and studied from a perspective which do not neatly fit into the categories of the tradition or the modern, but still have retained their contemporary relevance in their relationship with the state. This has been the case despite the emergence of socio-reform institutions such as the *Sangha* challenging the very existential principles of their parent institutions.

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APPENDIX I

Accord between AASU (All Assam Students' Union), AAGSP (All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad) and the Central Government on the Foreign National Issue

(Assam Accord, August 15, 1985)

1. Government have all along been most anxious to find a satisfactory solution to the problem of foreigners in Assam. The All Assam Students Union (AASU) and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) have also expressed their keenness to find such a solution.

2. The AASU through their Memorandum dated 2nd February 1980 presented to the late Prime Minister Smt. Indira Gandhi, conveyed their profound sense of apprehensions regarding the continuing influx of foreign nationals into Assam and the fear about adverse effects upon the political, social, culture and economic life of the State.

3. Being fully alive to the genuine apprehensions of the people of Assam, the then Prime Minister initiated the dialogue with the AASU/AAGSP. Subsequently, talks were held at the Prime Minister's and Home Minister's level during the period 1980-83. Several rounds of informal talks were held during 1984. Formal discussions were resumed in March, 1985.

4. Keeping all aspects of the problem including constitutional and legal provisions, international agreements, national commitments and humanitarian considerations, it has been decided to proceed as follows:

Foreigners Issue

5.1 For purposes of detection and deletion of foreigners, 1.1.1966 shall be the base data and year.

5.2 All persons who come to Assam prior to 1.1.1966, including those amongst them whose names appeared on the electoral rolls used in 1967 elections shall be regularised.

5.3 Foreigners who came to Assam after 1.1.1966 (inclusive) and upto 24th March, 1971 shall be detected in accordance with the provisions of the Foreigners Act, 1946 and the Foreigners (Tribunals) Order 1964.

5.4 Names of foreigners so detected will be deleted from the electoral rolls in force. Such persons will be required to register themselves before the Registration Officers of the respective districts in accordance with the provisions of the Registration of Foreigners Act, 1939 and the Registration of Foreigners Rules, 1939.

5.5 For this purpose, Government of India will undertake suitable strengthening of the government machinery.

5.6 On the expiry of a period of ten years following the date of detection, the names of all such persons which have been deleted from the electoral rolls shall be restored.

5.7 All persons who were expelled earlier, but have since re-entered illegally into Assam shall be expelled.

5.8 Foreigners who came to Assam on or after March 25, 1971 shall continue to be detected; deleted and practical steps shall be taken to expel such foreigners.

5.9 The Government will give due consideration to certain difficulties expressed by the AASU/AAGSP regarding the implementation of the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act, 1983.

Safeguards and economic development

6. Constitutional, legislative and administrative safeguards, as may be appropriate shall be provided to protect, preserve and promote the culture, social, linguistic identity and heritage of the Assamese people.

7. The Government takes this opportunity to renew their commitment for the speedy all-round economic development of Assam, so as to improve the standards of living of the people. Special emphasis will be placed on education and science and technology through establishment of national institutions.

Other Issues

8.1 The Government will arrange for the issue of citizenship certificates in future only by the authorities of the Central Government.

8.2 Specific complaints that may be made by the AASU/AAGSP about irregular issuance of Indian Citizenship Certificates (ICC) will be looked into.

9.1. The international border shall be made secure against future infiltration by erection of physical barriers like walls, barbed wire fencing and other obstacles at appropriate places. Patrolling by security forces on land and riverine routes all along the international border shall be adequately intensified. In order to further strengthen the security arrangements, to prevent effectively future infiltration, an adequate number of check posts shall be set up.

9.2 Besides the arrangements mentioned above and keeping in view security considerations, a road all along the international border shall be constructed as to facilitate patrolling by security forces. Land between border and the road would be kept free of human habitation, wherever possible. Riverine patrolling along the international border would be intensified. All effective measures would be adopted to prevent infiltrators crossing or attempting to cross the international border.

10. It will be ensured that relevant laws for the prevention of encroachment of government lands in tribal belts and blocks are strictly enforced and unauthorized encroachers evicted as laid down under such laws.

11. It will be ensured that the relevant law restricting acquisition of immovable property by foreigners in Assam is strictly enforced.

12. It will be ensured that Birth and Death Registers are duly maintained.

Restoration of Normalcy

13. The All Assam Students Union (AASU) and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) call off the agitation, assure full co-operation and dedicate themselves towards the development of the country.

14. The Central and the State Government have agreed to:

   a. review with sympathy and withdraw cases of disciplinary action taken against employees in the context of the agitation and to ensure that there is no victimization;
   b. frame a scheme for ex-gratia payment to next of kin of those who were killed in the course of the agitation;
   c. give sympathetic consideration to proposal for relaxation of upper age limit for employment in public services in Assam, having regard to exceptional situation that prevailed in holding of academic and competitive examinations, etc., in the context of agitation in Assam;

d. undertake review of detention cases, if any, as well as cases against persons charged with criminal offences in connection with the agitation, except those charged with commission of heinous offences;

e. consider withdrawal of the prohibitory orders/ notifications in force, if any.

15. The Ministry of Home Affairs will be the nodal Ministry for the implementation of the above.

<div align="center">

Signed/-

(P.K. Mahanta, President AASU), (R.D. Pradhan, Home Secretary, Govt. of India),

(B.K. Phukan, General Secretary, AASU), (Smt. P.P. Trivedi, Chief Secretary, Govt. of India), (Biraj Sharma, Convenor, AAGSP)

In the Presence of Signed/- (Rajiv Gandhi, Prime Minister of India)

Date : 15th August, 1985

Place: New Delhi

</div>

1. Election Commission will be requested to ensure preparation of fair electoral rolls.

2. Time for submission of claims and objections will be extended by 30 days, subject to this being consistent with the Election rules.

3. The Election Commission will be requested to send Central Observers.

Signed/- Home Secretary

1. Oil refinery will be established in Assam.

2. Central Government will render full assistance to the State Government in their efforts to re-open:

   i. Ashok Paper Mill.

   ii. Jute Mills

3. I.I.T. will be set-up in Assam.

<div align="center">Source: The South Asia Terrorism Portal (Website)</div>

APPENDIX II

Membership of theSrimanta Sankardeva Sangha

In order to become a member of the Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha, certain qualifications are required as per the provisions of the constitution of the Sangha:

1. A person aged 12 years or above irrespective of his/her sex shall be eligible for membership of the Sangha.

2. A person intending to be a member of the Sangha must sign an application agreeing to abide by its objectives, rules and ideals as laid down in its constitution.

3. No member of the Sangha shall be a member of any other organisation, which stands against the ideals and values propagated by the Sangha.

4. Those who are not formally inititiated into the Vaishnava order, i.e. those who have not taken *saran* before becoming a member of the Sangha must initiate themselves within one year of acquiring the membership of the Sangha. If a person is initiated by any other organisation before joining the Sangha, he must re-initiate himself according to the rules and regulations prescribed by the Sangha. People who are religious converts must inititate themselves immediately as per the rules of the Sangha after acquiring its membership, and they are required to submit a written affidavit before the initiation in this regard.

5. Any member wishing to transfer his/her membership from one prathamik/anchalik/zila sakha to another prthamik/anchalik/zila sakha, he/she must submit a certificate that he/she does not have any liability to the respective sakhas.

Published for and on behalf of the Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha by the General Secretary of the Sangha, Nagaon, Assam, pp. 1-2.

(Source: Constitution of the Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha, 2009)

APPENDIX III

Anusashan (Rules and Regulations) of the Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha

The members of the Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha must abide by the following rules and regulations and violation of the same would lead to disciplinary action on the part of the members of the organisation:

1. All members of the Sangha must abide by the rules and regulations as prescribed in their constitution.

2. Members who are accused of violating the constitutional rules and regulations, besides the booklet of instructions of the Sangha, sub-rules, *Prasanga-Pranali*, *Aasouch Paddhati*, *Bibah-Paddhati*, etc. action may be taken against them step-wise by the central executive committee on the basis of a petition filed by the *prathamik*, *anchalik* and *zila sakhas*. Immediate steps are to be taken if somebody is found guilty after a proper investigation. However, such a matter must be referred by the *prathamik sakha* to the *anchalik sakha* and the *anchalik sakha* to the *zila sakha*. The *zila sakha* can re-investigate the matter and if the individual/family is found guilty, disciplinary action may be taken against them subject to the approval of such a resolution by the central executive committee of the Sangha.

3. Any function such as weddings or death-related rituals that are performed other than the rules prescribed by the Sangha is punishable. *Naam-prasanga* is strictly prohibited at the marriage ceremonies that are solemnised by the chanting of Vedic mantras either in the side of the bride or the bridegroom. Membership of the organisation is lost automatically if any member is involved in such activities.

4. The *prathamik* and the *anchalik sakhas* shall continue to non-cooperate with such members who have lost their membership as per the above-mentioned clause 3 and inform the matter to the central executive committee.

5. The member who loses his membership of the organisation may however re-apply for membership to the *prathamik sakha* after a period of one year, provided he repents for his misdeeds and assure to remain ritualistically pure. The *prathamik sakha* by a unanimous decision can give membership to such persons after performing *Naam-prasanga* and *saran-sansudhan*. However, such members are not allowed to be office-

bearers of the organisation for at least 5 years right from the *prathamik sakha* to the central executive committee.

6. It is only the central executive committee that has the power to deprive a member of his membership and expel him/her from the organisation. The central executive committee can also take disciplinary action and dissolve the *prathamik*, *anchalik* and *zila sakhas* and their respective executive committees. However, the respective executive committee can constitute an investigating committee to investigate the allegations and solve the issues of their *sakhas*. In any high-level investigating committee constituted by the *anchalik* and the *zila sakhas*, members of the central executive committee and the *saran sakha sadashyas* cannot be a part. The member accused at the lower *sakha* can appeal for reconsideration to the higher executive committee. Both the member and the *sakhas* must communicate the matter to the higher authority step-wise to the central executive committee. The central executive committee is not allowed to take any action on a matter which has not come through the *zila sakhas*.

7. In case the secretaries of the central executive committee, *zila sakhas*, *anchalik sakhas*, *prathamik sakhas* and other office bearers of the different committees of the organisation fail to perform their duties properly or are found to be involved in any kind of unlawful activities, the *Padadhikar* and the respective Presidents or any five members of the executive committee can serve a notice to the secretaries to convene their respective executive committee meetings. If the secretaries do not convene the meetings within 15 days from the date of the receipt of the notice, the *Padadhikar* and the respective Presidents can convene the meetings and take decisions. In case the *Padadhikar*, Presidents of the *zila sakhas*, *anchalik sakhas*, *prathamik sakhas* and the Presidents of various sectional committees violate the rules and principles of the organisation, the respective committee has the right to initiate the necessary steps.

8. No member or any other office bearer from the central executive committee to the *prathamik sakha* of the Sangha can be an office bearer of any political party at any level.

9. If any office bearer of the Sangha right from the central executive committee to the *prathamik sakha* want to contest in the elections, either from the nomination of a political party or on his own, he is supposed to resign from his office in the organisation of the Sangha and also its executive membership with effect from the date of his/her filing of the nomination papers.

10. Those members of the Sangha and its *sakhas* not observing the *Aasouch Paddhati*, *Prasanga Pranali*, *Bibah Paddhati*, and the instructions incorporated in the leaflet and the constitution of the Sangha are considered as criminals for not following the disciplinary code of conduct of the organisation.

11. Any office bearer(s) involved in any kind of financial irregularities are not allotted any portfolios in the organisation at any level.

Published for and on behalf of the Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha by the General Secretary of the Sangha, Nagaon, Assam, pp. 1-2.

(Source: Constitution of the Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha, 2009)

APPENDIX IV

List of Original Sattras in Majuli

1. Dhunyanhat or Belguri Sattra (transferred to Kasikota of Lakhimpur district because of erosion by the river Brahmaputra)
2. Adi Alengi Sattra (transferred)

   Adi Alengi Sattra (branch at Majuli)
3. Boralengi Sattra (Malual)
4. Boralengi Sattra (Balichapari)
5. Boralengi Sattra (Borgoyan branch)
6. Boralengi Sattra (transferred)
7. Takoubari Sattra
8. Bahjengoani Sattra
9. Ahatguri Sattra (transferred)
10. Sakupara Sattra
11. Garamur Sattra
12. Bihimpur Sattra
13. Motiabaribihimpur Sattra (Adibhimpur Sattra)
14. Bhogpur Sattra
15. Kamalabari Sattra (transferred)
16. Notun Kamalabari Sattra (new Sattra)
17. Kamalabari Sattra (North)
18. Dakshinpat Sattra
19. Auniati Sattra
20. Dikhoumukhia Alengi Sattra
21. Bogiaai Alengi Sattra (transferred)
22. Punia Sattra (transferred)

Punia Sattra (branch)
23. Bhagoti Sattra
24. Letugram Sattra (transferred)
25. Moderguri Sattra (transferred)
26. Belsiddhiya Sattra

27. Owa Sattra

28. Adhar Sattra

29. Digholi Sattra (transferred)

30. Bengenaati Sattra

31. Narasimha Sattra

32. Samaguri Sattra (Majuli or newly established)

33. Samaguri Sattra (old)

34. Baghargayan Sattra (transferred)

35. Karatipara Sattra (transferred)

36. Chakala Sattra (transferred)

    Chakala Sattra (branch)

37. Anantakalsila Sattra

38. Botorgayan Sattra (transferred)

39. Pohardiya Sattra (transferred)

40. Nachonipar Sattra (transferred)

41. Ulutolia Sattra (transferred)

42. Douka Chapori Sattra (transferred)

43. Kathbapu Sattra (transferred)

44. Katonipar Sattra (transferred)

45. Kalakota Sattra (transferred)

46. Koupotiya Sattra (transferred)

47. Kherkotiya Sattra (transferred)

48. Gojola Sattra (transferred)

49. Dihiing Sattra (transferred)

50. Randhoni Bor Alengi Sattra (transferred)

51. Chupoha Sattra (transferred)

52. Fulbari Sattra (transferred)

53. Kakorikota Sattra (transferred)

54. Kamjonia Alengi Sattra (transferred)

55. Nepali Sattra (transferred)

56. Saudkuchi Sattra (transferred)

57. Laiati Sattra (transferred)

58. Hemarbori Sattra (transferred)

59. Dichiri Sattra (transferred)

60. Nikamul Sattra (transferred)

61. Ratanpur Borkolia Sattra (transferred)

62. Doloni Samaguri Sattra

63. Garamur Saru Sattra

64. Dakshinpat Ashromi Sattra

Additional Sattras:

1. Madhya Majuli Kamalabari Sattra

2. Sarjan Na Sattra

(Source: Majuli Cultural Landscape Management Authority (majulilandscape.gov.in))