AN INTRODUCTION TO THE *SATTRA* CULTURE OF ASSAM: BELIEF, CHANGE IN TRADITION AND CURRENT ENTANGLEMENT

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ABSTRACT

In 16th-century Assam, Srimanta Sankaradeva (1449–1568) introduced a movement known as *eka sarana nama dharma* – a religion devoted to one God (Vishnu or Krishna). The focus of the movement was to introduce a new form of Vaishnava doctrine, dedicated to the reformation of society and to the abolition of practices such as animal sacrifice, goddess worship, and discrimination based on caste or religion. A new institutional order was conceptualised by Sankaradeva at that time for the betterment of human wellbeing, which was given shape by his chief disciple Madhavadeva. This came to be known as *Sattra*, a monastery-like religious and socio-cultural institution. Several *Sattras* were established by the disciples of Sankaradeva following his demise. Even though all *Sattras* derive from the broad tradition of Sankaradeva's ideology, there is nevertheless some theological segmentation among different sects, and the manner of performing rituals differs from *Sattra* to *Sattra*. In this paper, my aim is to discuss the origin and subsequent transformations of *Sattra* as an institution. The article will also reflect upon the implication of traditions and of the process of traditionalisation in the context of *Sattra* culture. I will examine the power relations in *Sattras*: the influence of external forces and the support of locals to the *Sattra* authorities. This research is the result of various interactions and encounters in the field.

KEYWORDS: *Sattra* • Neo-Vaishnavism • tradition • belief • change • narrative

INTRODUCTION

The discussion* below is to a great extent based on my own experience. I had been living in Uttar Kamalabari *Sattra* (Majuli)[1] since 1995, and left the *Sattra* in 2016 to pursue

my higher education abroad. My personal involvement in the life of this *Sattra* started when a celibate devotee, Maniram Bargayan, came to meet my parents in Taranikhat *gaon* (a very remote village in the North Lakhimpur District of Assam) to beg that one of their four children become a devotee. After a discussion, my parents eventually agreed to send me to *Sattra* to take the vows of the *Sattriya* celibate tradition. Even though I was a five-year-old boy, I did not complain about leaving my parents, and followed the path with Maniram Bargayan to the *Sattra*. At the beginning, it was not easy for me

Figure 1. Map of the Majuli region, Assam, India. Drawn by Mafalda Lopes.

with me and giving me the opportunity to interview them: Narayan Chandradeva Goswami (D. Lit. from Dibrugarh University; head of Sri Sri Natun Kamalabari *Sattra*, Majuli); Sri Maniram Bargayan (a senior devotee and an expert *Sattriya* artist of Uttar Kamalabari *Sattra*, Majuli), and my friend Amlan Deep Borah (a PhD student at North Eastern Regional Institute for Science and Technology, Arunachal Pradesh, India and President of the NGO *Abakash Majuli*).

to stay far away from my parents, but slowly I managed to become comfortable with the environment and people in the *Sattra*. Strong rules and regulations, the following of a religious path, the practice of performing arts made my life rigid to begin with, but, after spending a couple of months in *Sattra*, I turned my hardship into a hobby. Eventually, it helped me to become a full-time practitioner of *Sattryia* dance, drama and music, which we considered a medium of worshiping God. As the school and college for general education were near our *Sattra*, I could continue my education there, as did many of my friends in the *Sattra*. Later I stayed away from the *Sattra* campus two years to pursue my Master's degree at Tezpur University.

Likewise, I spent 18 years of my life among the community. I experienced the practices of *Sattriya* culture as an insider. This paper focuses on both emic and etic views of the subject while taking the discussion forward. In the beginning, a demographic overview of the religious and ethnic diversity of pre-Sankaradeva Assam is highlighted, which is followed by a discussion on acquaintance with Vishnu in ancient Assam and Neo-Vaishnavism in the pan-Indian scenario. Later, I outline several issues within the same framework to give a comprehensive image of the on-going evolution of *Sattras*. I employ various sources including own experience and fieldwork interviews as primary, *carit-puthi* ('hagiography')[2] and other literature as secondary data. Emphasis has been put on the ethnographic account of data in the later part of the discussion.

MYTHIC LAND OF ETHNIC KINGDOMS

Assam is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious state situated in the north-eastern part of India. Geographically, the valleys of the Brahmaputra and Barak rivers dominate the landscape. In ancient Sanskrit literature, both name versions Pragjyotishpur(a) or Kamarup(a) were mentioned as names for ancient Assam. As historian Edward Gait (2013 [1962]: 15) has noted, "*Prag* means former or eastern, *jyotish(a)* – a star, astrology or shining. Pragjyotishpur(a) may, therefore, be taken to mean the city of eastern, astrology." There is a mythological story mentioned in the medieval text *Kalika Purana* about the formation of Pragjyotishpur(a): "Formerly Brahma staying here created the star, so the city is called Pragjyotishpur(a)" (Kakati 2004 [1948]: 4). In this connection it is worth mentioning that there is a temple in Guwahati known as *Navagraha*,[3] a place of worshiping the main celestial bodies. "It is probable that this temple is the origin of the name Pragjyotishpur(a)" (Barua 1966: 13).

A legend of ancient Assam speaks of Kamarup(a), explaining its name as the land where the god of love Kamadeva regained his shape (*rupa*). The name Kamarup(a) remained the same until the establishment of the Ahom kingdom (1228–1826). There are different opinions regarding the origin of the modern name Assam. According to Bhuban Mohan Das (1987: 22–23),

> the local people referred to a group of Shan invaders as the 'Asama' which means 'unequalled' or 'peerless'. Over the course of time they came to be known as Ahoms, the modern name of these Shan people and the country was called Asama after the name of the people. Another opinion is that in the 'Tai' language 'Cham' means 'to be defeated'. With addition of an Assamese prefix 'a' it became Acham,

which means 'undefeated', 'conqueror'. The Modern name Assam is the anglicised form of the Assamese name Asom.

In prehistoric Assam the Mother Goddess-like Kamakhya and Kechaikhati were popularly worshiped. Shiva worship also appears to have been a popular form of religion in ancient Assam. It is mentioned in a *carit-puthi* that Srimanta Sankaradeva, the founder of Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam, was so named because his father Kusumvara Bhuyan secured his birth by propitiation of Shankara.[4] Sankaradeva was named Sankara by his parents. When he showed immense progress at school by writing one poem before having learnt even how to write vowels properly, his teacher Mahendra Kandali was very impressed and honoured him as *Deva* ('divine'). Thus, he came to be known as Sankaradeva.

It could be found in various ancient sources that some kingdoms in Kamarup(a) were occupied by different ethnic communities even though in the course of time the Ahom conquered the entire Brahmaputra Valley. 1) Between the 13th century and the early part of the 16th century, the Chutia (a group of Bodo origin) kingdom ruled over the eastern part of Assam, which is known as Lakhimpur at present. 2) The Ahoms were the rulers of the west of the Chutia kingdom, which, during the 14th and 15th centuries, included the modern district of Sivasagar and part of Lakhimpur district. 3) Kacharis reigned over an extensive territory on the south bank of the river Brahmaputra and to the west of the Maran. 4) On both sides of the Brahmaputra, there were several chiefs known as Bhuyans, including Brahmin and *kayasthas*.[5] 5) The western part of Assam was known as Kamatarajya, comprising the modern districts of Kamarup(a), Goalpara and parts of Cooch-Behar. During the 16th century, this part of the region was ruled by Cooch king Naranarayana (1540–1587). The majority of the settlements of local populations, known as Mishing, were on the north bank of the river Brahmaputra and on Majuli island. These different groups of people had worshiped their own deities according to their beliefs in the form of Lord Shiva, the Goddess Kamakhya, Kechaikhati ('Raw Flesh Eater'), Donyi ('the Sun') and Polo ('the Moon'), trees and spirits. However, over the course of time religiosity among some of these local populations has not remained the same. As a result, many of them adopted other faiths. The Ahom and some local groups embraced Hinduism, adopted Hindu names and called Brahmins to the court.

Hence, Assam is a land of complex history, whose roots go back to the mythic sources both in pan-Indian Hindu traditions and local cultures. Since the 17th century many local populations have been converted to Hinduism, and to Neo-Vaishnavism. Close interaction between ethnic traditions and Hinduism has led to the blending of cultures.

VISHNU IN ANCIENT ASSAM AND NEO-VAISHNAVISM IN PAN-INDIAN CONTEXT

Vaishnavism is the practice of worshiping Vishnu as the supreme deity in any one of his several forms. To go by literary sources such as *Kalika Purana* and *Yogini Tantra*, the worship of Vishnu was prevalent even before Neo-Vaishnavism was introduced to Assam. The association of Vishnu or Krishna with Pragjyotishpur(a) or Kamarup(a) is mentioned in the legend of Naraka. According to *Kalika Purana*, Naraka's parents were

Mother Earth (Bhudevi) and Vishnu. The Mother Earth herself is said to have nurtured him in infancy. "Naraka was reared by Aryan king Janaka of Videha (North Bihar). Gradually he became an accomplished scholar and a fierce fighter. He became well versed in Vedas and a devotee of the God Vishnu." (Acharyya 1987: 12) It is believed that Naraka had received a *vaishnvastra* (weapon of Vishnu) from Krishna by his mother's prayer. Later Naraka changed his attitude when he came under the influence of Banasura, King of Sonitpur (modern Tezpur) and became the initiator of the Shakta cult.[6] Naraka had helped with the construction of the Kamakhya temple in Kamarup(a). Worship of Vishnu in the form of Vasudeva seems to have been prevalent from early times. "The Borganga Rock inscription of Mahabhuti Varman (554 AD), which references the king as *Parama-Bhagavata*, is the earliest recorded evidence of the existence of Vaishnavism" (Sarma 1966: 5). It was found in the present Nagaon district of Assam.

Photo 1. Hayagriva Madhava temple, Hajo. Photo by the author.

Some of the earliest evidence for Vishnu worship in Assam is the Hayagriva Madhava temple of Hajo which is situated 30 km to the west of Guwahati city. There is not much evidence found regarding the history of the temple construction. However, "the present temple structure was constructed by King Raghudeva Narayana in 1583" (Gait 2013 [1962]: 64). According to Hindu mythology, Lord Vishnu was incarnated as Hayagriva to punish the demons Madhu and Kaitava, who had stolen the Vedas from Lord Brahma. "Bhutias belonging to the Mahayana sect of Buddhism consider the Hayagriva temple as a Buddhistic shrine and identify the deity as Mahamuni (Buddha)" (Datta 2012: 124). Hajo is also a holy place for Muslims as there is a *darga* of *Pir*[7] on another hilltop.

Further evidence of ancient Vishnu worship is the Aswaklanta temple in Guwahati, on the north bank of the Brahmaputra. According to my informant Mridul Hazarika (FM 2016), an assistant to the priest at the Aswaklanta temple, Krishna is said to have halted there when he came to invade Pragjyotishpur(a), and many small holes in the rock near the river are pointed out as the footprints of his horses. When Krishna was searching for Narakasura in order to kill him, the horses of his chariot became tired at this place and Krishna allowed them to rest. This is how the place came by its name Aswa-klanta (*Aswa* 'horse'; *klanta* 'tired'), and a temple was established.

Apart from such mythological and archaeological evidence, we can also point to another source: the 14th-century Assamese translation of the *Ramayana* by Madhab Kandali. Several other translations based on the *Mahabharata* were carried out during the same century by Assamese writers such as Kaviratna Sarasvati, Haribara Vipra and Rudra Kandali, etc., and these established that Vaishnavism was not unfamiliar to the people of Assam at that time. However, as many people were captivated by Shaiva and Shakta cults, it is evident that the flow of Vaishnavism in ancient Assam was thin. It should also be mentioned here that Shiva and Vishnu are not considered as totally separate entities in the Neo-Vaishnava context. Even though the Shakta and Vaishnava cults are two different ways of practicing religion, a link is found between Shakta and Vaishnava cults in the ancient Sanskrit text *Harivamsa*. As Banikakana Kakati (2004 [1948]: 17) has noted, the Goddess Durga has various names for different forms of her incarnation: "In the *Harivamsa*, she is also called Narayanapriya ('Beloved of Narayana') and Vasudevabhagni ('Sister of Vasudeva Krishna'). These epithets show her early association with Vishnu and the Vaishnava cult." There are some interconnected elements among Vaishnava, Shaiva and Shakta faiths and this evidence shows an ancient religious syncretism. Thus, the cultural shift from tantric forms of religion towards Neo-Vaishnava *bhakti*[8] is not as radical as it might seem.

A key question in this regard is how we can look at the Neo-Vaishnavism of Assam in the context of the pan-Indian *bhakti* movement,[9] which proclaims complete devotion to Vishnu as supreme God. Even though Vishnu is considered a Vedic deity, he is still not prominent, like Agni, Indra and others. There are few hymns in the Vedas dedicated to Vishnu. Over the course of time, the growth of devotional literature (*shastra*), the institutionalisation of temple worship, and certain iconography helped to popularise the Vishnu legacy amongst the people. The *Bhagavata Purana* was more inclined towards the *Pancaratra*[10] system. Different forms of Vishnu iconography have been widespread throughout Asian countries including Indonesia, Cambodia and Myanmar, etc. Between the 9th and 15th centuries, a constant line of Vaishnava reformers prevailed in southern India. This cult flourished there with the influence of the *Alvars*, Tamil poet saints who preached *bhakti* and composed songs in the Tamil language in relation to Krishna as the supreme deity. Vishnu, with his all avatars or incarnations, particularly the Krishna avatars, was the object of their deep reverence. They worshiped Vishnu in different forms, chiefly the recitation of his names and the contemplation of his forms.

The same influence found in the north received an additional momentum from the South following the teachings and powerful propaganda of Acharya Ramanuja (1017–1137) and his successors. In northern India, Ramananda, Vallabhacharya, Nimbaditya, Sankaradeva (from Assam), and Sri Chaityanyadeva were Vaishnava reformers of great repute. "The philosophical basis of Sankaradeva's religion, historically speaking, is the

culmination of the *bhakti* movement in northern India augmented by Ramananda, and of Southern India" (Baruah 1960: 87). According to *katha-guru-carit*, Sankaradeva went on pilgrimage twice to visit various holy places in India. "In Jagannath Puri, Sankaradeva met his contemporary Vaishnava reformers such as Ramananda, Sri Chaityanadeva, and Harivyasa, etc., who came from other parts of India and had several conversations among them, they even stayed together for 15 days" (Bezbaruah 1914: 94–95). Biographers remained silent as to whether Sankaradeva received inspiration from his contemporary Vaishnava reformers or not. Laksminath Bezbaruah (ibid.) clearly mentions in the *carit-puthi* that while Sankaradeva interacted with his contemporary Vaishnava figures, his intellectual behaviour had impressed them.

During the 15th century, Sankaradeva – a versatile genius and his chief disciple Madhabadeva (1489–1596) – initiated a form of the Vaishnava movement in Assam and brought about a cultural resurgence by inculcating various arts, such as music, dance, drama, painting, literature, etc. What later came to be known as Neo-Vaishnavism, emerged in Assam in a unique way under Sankaradeva's tutelage. During the 16th century, Sankaradeva's movement had made considerable progress against both sacrificial practices and Brahminical domination. Sankaradeva's new creed is officially known as *eka sarana nama dharma*, meaning devotion to one God, or supreme surrender to the One, Vasudeva Krishna, also known as Vishnu, Hari, Narayana, Rama, etc. He upheld the philosophy of oneness in all. He comprehended one God, Krishna, and one way of serving him. It was made clear that the worship of other gods and goddesses was strictly prohibited. If Vishnu is worshiped, then all other gods and goddesses are worshiped. The primary ideological doctrine of Neo-Vaishnavism is *bhakti*, which propounds monotheism. There are nine types of *bhakti*.[11] Sankaradeva upheld two among them: listening (*sravana*) and chanting (*kirtana*). He went further and placed more emphasis on the servitude (*dasya*) type of *bhakti*. In fact, the servanthood of devotee and the role of God as master is the keynote of Sankarite works. Servitude should work at every possible level of someone's service. The purpose of practicing *bhakti* can be divided into two: with desire (*sakama*) and without desire (*niskama*), where the *niskama* is prioritised in the Neo-Vaishnava faith. A real devotee (*bhakat*) does not seek salvation (*mukti*), although it could be attained through deep meditation. He or she wants to remain in a state of eternal enjoyment of the bliss of *bhakti*. According to *Sattra* devotees, Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva's birth itself is believed to be happened to propagate *bhaktimarga*[12] on earth among people. Further, they consider their birth as a divine incarnation of Lord Vishnu.

ORAL NARRATIVES ON SANKARADEVA AND
MADHAVADEVA'S BIRTH

In some *Sattras* every year in the month of *bhadra*,[13] an event known as *carit-path/carit-tola parampara* takes place as one of the religious rituals. It is an oral narrative tradition based on the biographies of their gurus. For four days the devotees of *Sattras* celebrate the death anniversaries of their gurus.[14] During the final day, a person responsible for narrating the life story of their guru (*caritkar*) receives permission from the head of the *Sattra* and devotees present in the prayer hall, to narrate the biographies of the gurus. The first part

of the narration, which I summarise below, cannot be found in the written biographies.

During the time of *adi-satya-yuga*,[15] all the departed souls get a place in the *Vaikuntha* – the celestial abode of Vishnu – by simply reciting the name of God. They did not have to perform any *puja* ('worship') rituals to gain salvation. All the deities became helpless because they were losing interest from their devotees. The deities gathered at Lord Shiva's place on mount Kailash to discuss the issue. When Lord Shiva got to know the issue, he said: "I cannot do anything, let's go to meet *Niranjana-Brahma*".[16] *Niranjana-Brahma* asked them, while he saw all deities coming together, why are you all here? Then Shiva replied: "Oh, almighty God, people on earth have forgotten to give us *puja*. They have found an easy way to gain a place in the *Vaikuntha*, and because of this they do not pay homage to us. We are here to get a solution to this problem." They showed their regret, saying, "how can we remain deities if we do not get any part of offering. It brings shame to the position of our deity."

The *Niranjana-Brahma* said: "Oh Shankar, write *Agama-shastra*[17] by hiding my name and show different ways of faith. Then your wish will be fulfilled." Shiva said, "Oh God, I am in big trouble, if I hide your name by writing the *Agama-shastra*, then it will be a great sin, and then again, if I do not follow your advice, it will be an offence. Please help me in this dilemma." Then *Niranjana-Brahma* said: "Oh, Shulapani,[18] you have understood very well. Let me tell you how you will be free of this offence. I give you my hundred names and meditate on it every day with full devotion."

Niranjana-Brahma added that he will be born in the *kali-yuga*[19] and take Shiva's nickname 'Shankara', and then Shiva will be completely free of his offence. After that Shiva wrote the *Agama-shastra* and gave it to the deities. *Shastra* was widely spread out by them and all people adopted cruel behaviour to practice their faiths. Then all ten incarnations of Vishnu, known as *brahma-sakal*, gathered at Merumul mountain to discuss the cruel activities people were carrying out in the name of faith and *puja*. Souls cannot get entry into the *Vaikuntha*, if they commit sin during their lifetime. *Brahma-sakal* finally decided to go to the *Niranjana-Brahma* to discuss the issue. They informed him of it, then *Niranjana-Brahma* suggested they should go to the *Nirakara-Brahma* ('a formless presence of Vishnu'). When they came to him, he took the form of formless presence and asked, why have you all come here? They answered him, saying we tried to rescue the souls by ourselves to get a path to the *Vaikuntha*, but we failed. Then *Nirakara-Brahma* said: "I will come to the earth in human form, but you all go first." Then *brahma-sakal* came back to the *Niranjana-Brahma* and explained what *Nirakara-Brahma* had said. After that, while *Nirakara-Brahma* was thinking about it, two people came out of his body: one blue coloured and the other saffron (Krishna and Balorama). They asked one another where they would be born and what kinds of scripture they should bring. Krishna said: "I am going to be born as Sankara at Alipukhuri, Bordowa (Nagaon) to Kusumvara Bhuyan and Satyasandya Ai. I will bring the *Kirtana* and *Dasama* text, where a listening and chanting type of *bhakti* will be prioritised." Then Krishna asked, what about you? Balorama replied. "I am going to be born in Letekupukhuri to Govindagiri Bhuyan and Manurama. I will bring *Nama-gosha* and *Ratnavali shastra*, along with respect and the love type of *bhakti*." Then Krishna said, it seems that your type of preaching *bhakti* will be admired.

This part of oral narration on Sankaradeva's and Madhavadeva's birth (which lasts five to six hours in its entirety) is considered a very important and sacred one. It was

believed that some of the sacred rituals and stories are not to be shared with anyone and are considered the divine truth. Today this strictness seems to be reducing among them. Devotees of the Kamalabari school of *Sattras* consider Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva to be the incarnated ones. It is also evident from Sankaradeva's biographies that some of his activities in early life were close to the miraculous activities of Lord Krishna. Apart from this, it might be observed that in the narrative above *Niranjana-Brahma* himself ordered Shiva to familiarise the devotees with diverse ways of worshiping deities by writing *Agama-shastra*. This shows the early Shaiva and Vaishnava relationship, even though Neo-Vaishnavism prioritises the monotheistic principle.

NEO-VAISHNAVISM OR *EKA SARANA NAMA DHARMA*

Sankaradeva was a social activist, visionary and radical opponent of religious practices that he considered malevolent. This led him to start a revolutionary movement in Assam. According to Kakati (1941: 194),

> The *Eka-sarana* system is not a religion of bargain and barter between god and men or of sacrifice and easy recompense; it is one with exclusive emphasis on slow spiritual regeneration, on the growth of a new spiritual outlook by laying flesh and spirit in the hands of the Lord.

The focus of the Neo-Vaishnava movement was to introduce an ideology of an egalitarian society based on fraternity, humanism, peace and equality. Indeed, this led Sankaradeva to stand against Brahmanical orthodoxy and conservatism. During his lifetime, Sankaradeva "could clearly and rightly perceive that society was more in need of reformation than a system of philosophy" (Sarma 1966: 25). It seems that his emphasis was more on ethnic integration, societal reforms and spiritual uplift through an innovative mode of religious conduct based on local elements of the region. From the blending scenario of culture, we can imagine that there was an incorporation of local elements into Sankaradeva's innovative performing tradition. Yet, it is difficult to say exactly what comes from where. However, "the *Sattra gayan-bayan* [the cymbal-drum ritual performance of *Sattra*] resembles the *gayan-bayan* of the *Sonowal-Kachari*[20] (see Borkakoti 2011: 4). Some similarities can also be found in the way they dress. Indeed, one of Sankaradeva's popular entertainment media is plays (*ankia-nat*). Sankaradeva used this genre to communicate his teaching with the masses where ethnic assimilation is visible, especially in the costume of the main *sutradhara* character.[21] An ancient Assamese folk dance, known as *ojapali*, has always been deeply rooted among people of diverse backgrounds, especially in the lower part of the region. Hence, it is possible that Sankaradeva may have received inspiration from that source to compose *Sattriya-ojapali*.[22]

In his teaching, Sankaradeva holds a non-dualistic approach, unlike many of his Vaishnava counterparts in the rest of India. This explains the absence of dual images in his religion, such as the Radha-Krishna of Chaitanya, Gopi-Krishna of Vallabhacharyya, Rukmini-Krishna of Namadeva and Sita-Rama of Ramananda. The love relationship between the lover and the beloved are not considered dual entities in Sankaradeva's school of thought. The non-dual aspect of Neo-Vaishnavism is evident in the way that the nature of *Jivatma* (Sanskrit *atman*)[23] anticipates its identity with *Paramatma* ('the ulti-

mate spirit', Sanskrit *Brahman*).[24] Neither are separate from one another: *atman* is essentially a part of *Brahman*. Because of *maya*,[25] which inculcates within us very strongly, we look only at the biological presence of our body, which does not help to understand *atman* without the presence of two (Krishna-Radha). But they are two of one. When the feeling of 'I' and 'mine' disappears, the mind at once becomes free of the self and turns into 'we', and that 'we' is essentially the spirit of the one. This is practiced by some of the devotees of the Neo-Vaishnava faith, for example instead of using 'I' in their daily conversations, they use 'we'.

Sankaradeva stood against goddess worship and sacrificial rituals. It was a very challenging task for him to make people understand about their cruel religious practices and as a result he tried to generate a new creed. He chose a flexible means to access the complex situations of the diverse society. He introduced dance, drama and music, which created a space for everyone to share their stories. Sankaradeva applied his creativity in the performing arts as a tool to enter into the heart of wider Assamese society. Over time, Sankaradeva conceptualised a sophisticated institutionalised layout to spread his ideas, which received a proper shape, later, from the hands of his chief apostle, Madhavadeva, and Damodaradeva (1488–1598).

It is evident from Sankaradeva's teachings that he maintained *bhaktimarga* to be the supreme way to realise God. He mentioned in *Balichalan*[26] that in the *bhakti* process, a devotee sees God in everything in the world, and finds him revealed in the form of love. *Bhakti* is the stage of meditation (*sadhana*) and salvation (*mukti*) is the goal, yet Sankaradeva recommends that people stay in meditation rather than seeking salvation. "A *bhakta* must possess the qualities of sympathy, beneficence, forgiveness and complete mastery over his passion" (Baruah 1960: 97). Control over the senses is very much emphasised in this regard. Therefore, perhaps, Sankaradeva propagated *nama dharma* as a practical method of *bhakti*, which consists of chanting the name of the almighty God with undeviating devotion, being pure in heart, thought and action. In this case, Sankaradeva's narration of the story of Ajamila (*Ajamila-upakhyana*; see Neog 1962: 86) is relevant. The story is from *Bhagavata Purana* which I heard from the senior devotees of Uttar Kamalabari *Sattra*.

The story tells that Ajamila, a Brahmin by caste, fell in love with a prostitute without any real means to support her and the ten sons they eventually had. So, he took to gambling, highway robbery, stealing and corruption. At the time of his death, the sinful Ajamila screamed that his youngest son Narayana (often identified as Vishnu) should come to him. At this cry from the dying man, the attendants of Lord Vishnu came rushing to Ajamila's side, blocking the attendants of Yama (the god of death) who was waiting to take his soul away to hell. A heated debate began on *dharma* and *adharma*,[27] and the effects of acts of merit and demerit. Eventually, Vishnu's attendants stood firm and proclaimed that Lord's name, whether chanted with or without knowledge of the greatness of the name, destroys the unrighteous elements in a person. Because he happened to utter the name of Narayana (which is also a name of God) at the time of death, the soul of the Brahmin was taken to the abode of Vishnu and not to the city of Yama ('hell'). Thus, it clearly shows that even an unconscious recital of the name of God brings salvation to hard sinners, just as abdominal disease is cured by unconsciously swallowing a powerful medicine. Incidentally, this story shows the importance of reciting the glory of God's name. However, in contrast, Sankaradeva also insists in his literary works that if acts are done with sinful motives, no virtue results.

Neo-Vaishnavism derives its ideological root from the *Bhagavata Purana* and the *Bhagavata-Gita*, which is reflected in Sankaradeva's literary works. *Kirtanghosha*, based on *Bhagavata Purana*, is a text considered a divine product of Sankaradeva among Neo-Vaishnava devotees. Sankaradeva's concern is not limited to human rights alone. He mentions in his literary works that no matter whether it is a *candala* (so-called low caste person), dog or donkey, God lives in everyone's heart, therefore we need to treat them with respect (Neog 1962: 514).

A legend mentioned in the *carit-puthi* (see Bezbaruah 1914: 25–27*)* will give a clear understanding of his views on some other social issues. One day when Sankaradeva was in Bordowa (Nagaon, Assam), some people came and requested him to solve a problem. They said that the river Tembuani flood had caused much harm for a long time to paddies and other crops. Sankaradeva then made an announcement among the people of nearby villages that all should come out the next day along with their own equipment to protect the flow of the river. It happened according to his advice. Even though a good number of people joined together to block the flow, they could not stop it. Then Sankaradeva said to his devotees that they should find a chaste woman (*sati*) who would be able to bring water in a *polo*[28] and throw it into the river. Only a *sati* would be able to solve the problem. Brahmin women proudly expressed their thought that no-one else can be *sati* here except them, but at the same time they were afraid to face the challenge of bringing water in a *polo*. Eventually, some of them tried, but failed. While this was going on, a couple who was considered low caste, was coming down the river in a boat, and they noticed a group of people gathering in a place doing something. Somehow, they came to know about the situation, and a lady called Radhika said to her husband that as she was a *sati*, she should go and help them solve the problem. Someone had heard their conversation and revealed in front of Sankaradeva. She should be brought here, said Sankaradeva. She came and successfully completed the task, thus solving the problem of the people.

The legend contained in the *carit-puthi* explains Neo-Vaishnavism's sympathy towards non-Brahmins. During the course of my discussion, I will engage with this issue later and how, notwithstanding Sankaradeva's teaching, Brahminhood has a particular significance in contemporary *Sattras*.

A similar kind of sympathy had been shown by Madhavadeva towards humanity like his guru which can be found in his literary works as well. According to one example, Madhava is the creator of women and man, and thus he is the soul and intimate friend for everyone (Neog 1962: 805).

Sankaradeva's thought was put into institutional order by his successors following his demise. Those *Sattras* which emerged under the initiatives of Madhavadeva and his contemporaries have played a vital role in propagating and promoting Neo-Vaishnavism for centuries. However, the institutional tradition of the Neo-Vaishnava faith has developed in such a way that it sometimes contradicts the basic doctrine of Sankaradeva. Even though the role of women is recognised by Sankaradeva, both celibate and non-celibate *Sattras* confirm the special position of men in society as intellectual leaders and carriers of Sankaradeva's doctrine.

The term *Sattra* derives from Sanskrit. It was used earlier in the *Satapatha Brahmana*[29] in the sense of a sacrificial session. *Sattra* was also mentioned in the *Bhagavata Purana*. It has been connected with the situation of the Naimisha forest, where hermits used to assemble to listen to the recitation and explanation of the *Bhagavata Purana* for a 1000 years at a stretch, as performed by sage Suta and Ugrasrava. "The part played by Sankaradeva probably reminded the listeners of the same role played by Ugrasrava in the assembly of holy sages" (Sarma 1966: 103). Bhattadeva (1558–1638), one of the foremost prose writers and religious teachers of Assam, defines *Sattra* in his book *Sarana Malika* as an assembly of holy people where *bhakti* in all its aspects is practised. "According to Bhattadeva, the supreme place adored by Gods and Vaishnavas, where ardent devotees perform duties pleasing to God in which the nine-fold *bhakti* prevails daily, is called *Sattra*: Vaishnavas residing there are naturally prone to *harinama* ['name of god']" (Mahanta 2007: 99). However, introducing such an institutional model was part of the Neo-Vaishnava movement which had helped the leaders to transmit their beliefs and practices to the next generation. Later, on the initiative of the followers, several *Sattra* institutions were introduced all over Assam, becoming an integral part of Assamese society. Many Assamese villages came under the influence of one or other *Sattra* and thus the Neo-Vaishnava faith spread.

In *udasin*[30] *Sattras*, devotees come from different places to live together. Even if they do not share any kinship amongst themselves, still they live like a family in *Sattra*. They have individual family-like dwelling place where 3–6 devotees live together. The average number of a *bhakat* household within a *Sattra* is 20–25 (although there are some exceptions). In *udasin Sattras*, boys around the age of five are recruited every year. The decision to recruit boys is made by the *bhakat* household, not by the community. If a *bhakat* household decides to add a new member to their life, then they search for a boy in the villages. Once they find the boy, then it becomes their responsibility to provide him with education, food, clothes, and whatever other things he needs. Devotees always prefer to adopt boys at a young age because it helps them learn all the dance, drama and music forms that are considered a medium of worshiping God. Initially, the newcomers are expected to learn all the art forms, although eventually they can specialise. Even though some rules are very severe in *udasin Sattras*, they are also flexible. Celibate devotees have the right to make decisions in their own lives. They are not necessarily obliged to follow a celibate way of life if they become dissatisfied with it. A celibate devotee is free to give up his monkhood and can live a married life outside *Sattra*. Sometimes this happens with the young ones. As four to five devotees live together for quite a long period of time, they usually become very close to each other. When a person leaves a *bhakat* household to continue his life outside *Sattra* for various purposes, it becomes a very emotional situation. In order to leave *Sattra*, there are some formalities that need to be followed.

In *udasin Sattras*, devotees are strongly committed to ritualistic practices, and everyday life is regulated by strict rules. The celibate *bhakats* need to take ritual baths two or three times a day. This applies also to the 4–6-year-old newcomers. They cannot have breakfast before taking a bath in the morning. By taking a ritual bath, they purify themselves sufficiently to be able to eat food and pray to God. The *bhakats* maintain their

purity by not touching those who have not yet taken a bath. There are certain places where they cannot enter, and things that they cannot touch when they are in the state of purity. If a novice ignores these prohibitions, he needs to purify himself by taking a bath again. When they are in an impure state, certain things are not permitted, such as cooking and eating, entering a kitchen, praying to God, entering the prayer hall, etc. There are some other rules that they need to maintain when they are pure, for example there are exceptions to whom they may touch. They are also not supposed to touch their bed while they maintain their purity. The specific terms that the *bhakats* use for 'purity' and 'impurity' are *saj* and *phura*. This strictness of customs is much maintained in practice, especially in the Kamalabari school of *Sattras*.

Photo 2. Devotees in their costumes before the ritual performance. Photo by the author.

Devotees need to perform the rituals every day. Most practitioners are very well versed either in dance or in drama/music, which they use as a medium of worshiping the deity. Thus, the ritualistic aspect is a very prominent segment of the *Sattra* system. However, one change occurred when the *Sattriya* ritual dance[31] was promoted by the Indian government as classical in the year 2000. Soon afterwards it gained popularity among people outside *Sattra*. It has become a trend for the *Sattra* devotees to work outside the *Sattra*, teaching *Sattriya* dance in order to earn a livelihood. Nowadays, young artists of the *Sattras* travel quite often to perform their ritual arts on stage in- and outside Assam. The recent dance mode is more choreographed and has been favoured by many of the young *Sattra* artists. However, it is a matter of concern for the senior practitioners, who feel insecure about their traditional rituals when they see them in choreographic patterns. According to Sara Shneiderman (2011: 205) this can be called the performatisa-

tion of practice. During one conversation in Uttar Kamalabari *Sattra* (Majuli), a senior devotee Bhaben Barbayan (FM 2017) mentioned, "I never thought about *Sattra*'s dance, drama and music as performance. This term or idea of performance came from outside. *Sattra*'s rituals are very much part of our daily life, which we call *Prasanga* ['prayer']." Shneiderman's (2011: 207) definition of performance helps us understand this notion: "performances are ritualized actions carried out within a broader discursive context created by political, economic or other kinds of external agendas".

COMPLEXITY OF SCHISM: BELIEF AND CHANGE

Sankaradeva nominated Madhavadeva as his successor in the Neo-Vaishnava order, based on his proficiency and commitment. Some followers were not happy with his decision. A schism occurred after the demise of Sankaradeva. It was Damodaradeva, an apostle of Sankaradeva, who first seceded from the main creed and introduced a new sect of the faith which came to be known as *Damodoriya-Pantha* or as *Brahma-Samhati*.[32] Later, three more new sects arose within the Neo-Vaishnava fold. These came to be known as *Kala-Samhati*,[33] *Purusha-Samhati*[34] and *Nika-Samhati*.[35] The term *samhati* is a synonym of the term *sangha* ('association').

In the *carit-puthis*, different accounts of these conflicts among these four sects of the order are found. The *Thakur Ata-carit* describes a quarrel between Mathuradasa (an apostle of Madhavadeva) and Narayana Thakura (a disciple of Sankaradeva) on the question of leadership. Mathuradasa contended that Madhavadeva was the real guru of the sect and considered Sankaradeva to be an incarnation of Vishnu, whereas Narayana Thakura considered Sankaradeva to be the guru of the sect. Satyendranath Sarma (1966: 69) describes that

> similarly, Purusuttama Thakura did not acknowledge Madhavadeva as the successor of Sankaradeva and when Mathuradasa and Gopal Ata did not approve of this attitude of Purushuttama Thakura, the latter is said to have forbidden the use of the texts *Kirtan-ghosha* and *Dasama*, composed by his grandfather (Sankaradeva), by the groups headed by Mathuradasa and Gopal Ata. Not only that, Thakura even composed a new set of devotional verses known as *na-ghosa* to replace those of *Nama-ghosa*, written by Madhavadeva.

Thus, four sects formed within the Neo-Vaishnava tradition. The rituals of worshipping the idols of different incarnations of Vishnu, seems to be a crucial practice in various *Sattras*. Followers of the *Nika-Samhati* school of *Sattras* claim that they do not believe in idol worship (*murti-puja*). Still, some heads of *Sattras* maintain the *salegram-puja* (a Brahminic stone worship ritual) privately in order to maintain their own Brahminic practices. Over the course of time the principal focus of the Neo-Vaishnava movement took a different direction, and some of the unconventional practices (in terms of the original doctrine) remained in their usage. Power politics and social realities had a strong affect on the institutionalised community of Neo-Vaishnava faith, an affect that started to grow stronger in the later period of the tradition.

The whole degree of institutional diversity is highly complex. As is clear from the discussion above, there is a diversity of the understanding and practice of the faith

within different school of *Sattras*. The trend of introducing a new institutional order within Neo-Vaishnava faith has continued due to disputes among followers. Apart from this, to promote the proper ideology of Sankaradeva, *Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha*[36] was born. In order to uplift and preserve *Sattriya* culture, a union was formed called *Asom Sattra Mahasobha*.[37] Moreover, *Krishnaguru*[38] is a comparatively new institutionalised religious order in Assam. At the vernacular level, there is also the *khel* system[39] to consider. The *khel* system works in a way such that if one *khel* is organising a ceremony, those belonging to other *khels* are not allowed to come to join them. These differences are creating social divisions among the devotees of the Neo-Vaishnava order. I wondered whether it might be possible to bring about an internal reformation within the existing institutional order, rather than having fresh divisions, in other words opting for quality over quantity.

In the *Sattra* order, the process of choosing the head priest has sometimes been a matter of ideological contrast. Some of the *Sattras* give preference to so-called high-caste individuals in the choice of religious leader, whereas some maintain a modern democratic system. Here, I would like to share an incident that I experienced within the *Sattra* community. Through this, I will try to analyse tradition and the process of traditionalisation in two different contexts.

I became aware of the incident in question, which took place at Uttar Kamalabari *Sattra*, Majuli, during my stay among the *Sattra* devotees. When the previous Brahmin *sattradhikar* (head of *Sattra*) passed away, the devotees were faced with the challenging question of who they would choose as the next leader, and how they would make this choice. The usual practice is to adopt a Brahmin boy and train him to become a future *sattradhikar*. As in this case, there was no adopted boy, and so the post remained empty. In order to continue to function effectively, the society took over the power role while they searched for a Brahmin person willing to become the *sattradhikar*. More than a year had passed without the presence of a leader. One day, a senior devotee Jogen Muktiar, who is still a member of the *sattradhikar*'s residence, was travelling from Guwahati to Majuli by bus. There he met a stranger, and as they were seated close by one another, they started a conversation. When Jogen Muktiar realised that his interlocutor was a Brahmin, he let him know of their constant search for a person who would be willing to become a celibate *sattradhikar* at their *Sattra*. The man was interested, and he said that he had two nephews, one of whom might be glad to become the *sattradhikar*. They exchanged addresses when they got off the bus. Later, Jogen Muktiar passed this news to the *Sattra* committee, and the committee decided to send two representatives to discuss the subject with the family members of the person met in the bus. During the discussion, the family agreed to send a 28-year-old man from the family to become head of Uttar Kamalabari *Sattra*. Eventually, at a ritual and highly auspicious ceremony, the devotees of Uttar Kamalabari *Sattra* enthroned their new leader.

It is indeed a matter of fact that there is no valid reason for a well-versed non-Brahmin practitioner to not be permitted to take on the leadership of the institution. I asked the senior devotees during the time of my research why a non-Brahmin devotee has no right to become a *sattradhikar*. One replied that this has been a tradition for 14 generations and tradition cannot be broken. However, it is evident that every group of people has their own understanding of their tradition. Even though *Sattra* followers are very conscious of preserving their tradition, it could be said that there is a contradiction with

Sankaradeva's view. If we trace back the root of the tradition, then we will find that in the beginning, religious leaders of Neo-Vaishnava faith were not chosen because of caste or power, rather, individual quality was prioritised. However, over the course of time hierarchical practices subdued the liberal approach of the *Sattra* system.

It would be relevant here to discuss the case of another *Sattra* that encompasses a somewhat different aspect of the Neo-Vaishnava ideology in terms of inequality. A recent debate about Barpeta *Sattra* in Assam has grasped everyone's attention. Whatever people consider deeply as tradition, always has a close attachment with their emotions. Sometimes it becomes difficult to escape this habit, even though time demands it.

The following is a situation which I came across in July 2016 during my one week stay in Barpeta *Sattra*, Assam. The case relates to the restriction on women entering the *kirtanghar* ('prayer hall') in the Barpeta *Sattra*. A long debate has been going on about this, and a young group of educated people including both men and women raised their voices on Facebook and elsewhere against Barpeta *Sattra*'s unequal treatment of women (FM 2016). This had become a major issue in Assam at that time, and some of the Assamese news channels organised a talk show on this issue, inviting speakers from both sides. The young group claimed that women had played a vital role in the reestablishment of Barpeta *kirtanghar*. Unlike men, women devotees were the first to conduct the daily morning prayer in the *kirtanghar*. As is mentioned in *carit-puthi*, one day Barpeta *kirtanghar* was destroyed by a sudden fire. It was the female devotees who gathered the ashes and continued their prayer without pause. According to the young protesters, this is a proof of women's contribution toward preserving the tradition of the Barpeta *Sattra*. They also mentioned that this kind of discrimination based on gender goes very much against the ideology of Sankaradeva and is the patriarchal influence of society. Even though the representatives of Barpeta *Sattra* did not have any strong points in their favour, they did not change their mind. They just emphasised that, based on tradition, it is the women of Barpeta *Sattra* who do not want women to enter the *kirtanghar*.

Attempts to adopt different cultural practices in the *Sattra* system and terming them 'traditional' is not a recent phenomenon. Sometimes adaptation goes against the ideological doctrine of the faith. The devotees of Barpeta *Sattra* do not allow "a particular group of people" to enter their *kirtanghar*, which they claim is a traditional restriction. Here, the question arises as to how the liberal ideology of Sankaradeva has been manipulated during the process of adaptation in the *Sattra* system. This shows that sometime tradition is practiced and interpreted for someone's own interest. Probably the danger is of considering everything to be traditional within a cultural system without looking at the core values at its origin and the present demand for it. This happens during the process of 'traditionalisation'. Traditionalisation is a self-conscious process (cf. Handler and Linnekin 1995 [1983]) that takes place in a community at different levels. Authority, institutionalisation of vernacular practices and the threat of identity loss all play a role in the process of traditionalisation. As we cannot separate tradition from the present, traditionalism itself is part of modernity. However,

> emphasizing the distinction between tradition and traditionalism, Edward Shils, followed by Hoselitz and Spengler, has defined traditionalism as a more extremists negative reaction to the impingement of forces of modernity, and tradition as a society's reservoir of behaviour and symbols (Eisenstadt 1973: 3).

Most of the time modernity is understood as the opposite of tradition. However, nowadays this understanding has got something else to say. "A progressive tradition, old but still alive in our days, is that called modernization" (Glassie 1995: 405). There is a strong relation between them. To renounce the earlier dichotomy, it is crucial to accommodate "modernity in tradition" or "tradition in modernity" to make a tradition/society lively. Indeed, modernity has different expressions (see Eisenstadt 2000). Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (1995: 1) have noted that, "traditions, which appear or claim to be old, are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented". In fact, tradition is not static, rather it is a set of dynamic processes that have always been bound to flow. In this case, what binds tradition and modernity is change. Even though change of every kind cannot be accepted in a tradition system, its positivity is still very important. Tradition cannot be endangered by change, rather it helps to make a tradition dynamic. What we call tradition is continuously changing. As Henry Glassie (1995: 396) puts it, "if tradition is a people's creation out of their own past, its character is not stasis but continuity, its opposite is not change but oppression, the intrusion of a power that thwarts the course of development". The labelling of every practice within a cultural framework as 'tradition' could deconstruct its value. However, sometimes, members of an order/tradition/sect uphold certain elements or reject others; they often do so pushed by a mixture of interest and faith. In this discussion, it should also to be remembered that "traditions are often discussed in terms of continuity and discontinuity, but it is also important to scrutinize the stability of tradition" (see Noyes 2009: 239–243).

POLITICS, EXTERNAL INFLUENCES AND *SATTRADHIKAR*'S RESPONSE

An egalitarian attitude in the Neo-Vaishnava faith seems to have been marginalised to some extent in the present-day *Sattras* context. On Majuli island, Mishing is one community amongst others that lives very close to the *Sattras*. Mishings are associated with *Sattra* devotees in many ways. Poverty and the yearly flooding of the river Brahmaputra has made the Mishing people's lives miserable. Many families do not have their own land and work together with *Sattra* devotees in the paddy field. They share their eventual produce. But the irony is that sometimes some *Sattra* devotees do not treat them equally. The Mishings are not allowed to enter a *Sattra* devotee's residence unless they are powerful figures. The devotees never allow them to use their tea cups or dishes when they offer them tea or food. Moreover, their participation in the *Sattra* as a celibate devotee is still prohibited. This unequal treatment has created a barrier in the society and is also one of many other reasons that probably influence Mishing conversion to Christianity.

It should be remembered that not all *Sattras* have the same attitude towards local communities. Missionaries (Catholic, Baptist, and Believers' Church) entered Majuli in the late 1980s, and after the big flood disaster of 1998, they became very proactive. As one of my informants Siraj Mili has mentioned,

> during the flood disaster, the missionaries helped people, giving them food, clothing, water, nets, blankets, etc., just to draw their attention to the Christian religion. They targeted the Jengraimukh area at some distance from *Sattras*, and this became

the epicentre of their missionary activity, and the place where they established the first St. Paul's school in 1987. (FM 2017)

Later, I came to know from the same informant that when news of the conversion spread, the *sattradhikars* became more active. They tried to express liberal views by performing some social activities among the Mishings to prevent further conversion. But that initiative did not continue for long. However, the *Sattras* of the *Kala-samhati* sect seem somewhat liberal in this context. Aniruddhadeva (1553–1626) introduced a religious sub-sect called Mayamara to the indigenous communities in the north bank of the Brahmaputra valley. The inclusive attitudes of the Mayamara *Sattra* had attracted the local population into the Neo-Vaishnava religion.

Sri Pitambardeva Goswami (1885–1962), head of the Garamur *Sattra*, undertook many initiatives to help with the development of the Mishings during his lifetime. In the present context, Sri Janarddandeva Goswami, head of the Uttar Kamalabari *Sattra*, has a keen interest in bringing about social harmony and raising the level of wellbeing among the Mishings, as well as in several other communities in Assam. Most of the *sattradhikars* do not actively practice religion as a tool to inculcate social harmony, equality and development. On the contrary, to quote a recent case, during the Assam Legislative Assembly Elections of 2016, some *sattradhikars* were seen as active supporters of the Bharatia Janata Party (BJP). A group of people criticised the *sattradhikar* on Facebook for their active participation in the election. Some unknown people sent letters to one *sattradhikar* to warn him not to run for election, a gesture that reminded him of his duty. This news was published the following day in the newspapers. (FM 2016)

Pan-Indian Nationalistic forces have been more active and influential on Majuli island very recently. Some of the *sattradhikars* have particularly encouraged *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS)[40] to be more active in the *Sattras*, and in the remote areas of the island as well. However, the *sattradhikars* collaboration with an aggressive nationalistic organisation has always been a matter of disappointment for some socially concerned people of Assam, particularly in Majuli. Their claim is that *sattradhikars* have abandoned their great ideology of Sankaradeva. The BJP has always been influenced by the RSS. One of the key ideas of the RSS is to promulgate the ideology of *Hindutva*, which has more to do with Hindu nationalistic ideas than with religious amalgamation. It clearly stands against the ideology of Sankaradeva. There is no doubt that Sankaradeva emphasised the elimination of religious differences in society at every possible step of his life, even though that was a big challenge for him. However, the process of vaishnavisation has always been a part of Neo-Vaishnava faith. It seems that it did not appear to be detrimental in the faith and belief of locally-converted communities because of the religious flexibility given to those local population. A Vaishnava devotee from Mishing community could continue his or her own local practice, even though some limitations were imposed. Performing their own rituals in a Vaishnavite way, the celebration of their festivals did not necessarily have to be given up by the converted Mishings. Tensions did not emerge in the early phase of the conversion process. But gradually the faith turned into a tool of social domination in the hands of the ruling upper class, then division resurfaced and the reaction to it acquired an ethnic colouring.

Photo 3. Interview with a devotee at Natun Kamalabari Sattra, Majuli. Photo by Debananda Borah.

I conducted fieldwork in Majuli in August 2017, and my informants revealed some of the issues important to them in the course of interviews. I have chosen to discuss two of these here. Firstly, I interviewed Sri Narayan Chandradeva Goswami, head of Sri Sri Natun Kamalabari *Sattra*, Majuli. He holds an honorary D. Lit. from Dibrugarh University (Assam) for his literary work on *Sattriya* and *Sankari* culture.

> B. S.: What, as you see it, is the effect of the many recent changes in *Sattra* tradition?
> N. C. G.: Changes are happening because of time. For example, you are undertaking research on a subject which was not there earlier. Changing trends have also led to a thought to circulate among the young *bhakats* – what would happen if we remain as a celibate *bhakat*? We should find a job and earn money. A feeling of exasperation could also be another reason. There are many reasons.
> B. S.: How would these changes influence the future of *Sattras*?
> N. C. G.: It is a very critical time, especially for the *udasin* or celibate school of *Sattras*. The future of *Sattra* looks bad, nothing will continue. In this row over our *Sattra* residence [pointing his finger to his right], it was full of *bhakats*. Everywhere it was full. There were about 250 *bhakats* earlier in our *Sattra*, but now there's less than 100. The number of *bhakats* going out from the *Sattra* for various reasons are higher than the number of *bhakats* coming into the *Sattra* as *bhakat.* Can you get boys in your *Sattra* easily if you want to include them as *bhakat*? Nowadays, it's rare to get boys. Economic problems are one factor. The production of paddy is not as good as it previously was. How they will survive? If a young man cannot earn, then he is in danger. These are some questions emerging in the minds of the young ones.

Those young ones who are now *bhakats* in *Sattra* will not stay as *bhakat*s once they are grown up. Like Barpeta *Sattra,* there will not be *keulia* or celibate *bhakat*s to perform prayer [*nam-prasanga*] or to continue the rituals of *Ramdhemali* and *Nadhemali* [a kind of drum and cymbal ritual]. These rituals will no longer be available. Likewise, the *Sattriya ojapali* rituals are no longer available in our *Sattra*. There are only one or two performers who know them. *Kirtania* performance [a ritual consists of song with symbols] is no longer available in our *Sattra.* I am very surprised to see the changing trend in *Sattras*.

B. S.: What is the role of the *sattradhikar* in this regard? Some *sattradhikars* seem to be going in a direction other than that of emphasising their own work towards *Sattra* and society? What are your thoughts on that?

N. C. G.: It's the power of time, and thought processes are distracted. The attraction towards money and wealth is increasing. Earlier it was not like that. The importance of study is absolutely zero in this regard. We have failed to achieve our aims and objectives. We have not come to the *Sattra* to earn money. We should live to adopt work culture [*karma-sanskriti*] to continue our art and culture [*kala-sanskriti*]. Now we have neither *karma-sanskriti* nor *kala-sanskriti*. Just running after money. The recent 'workshop culture' for *Sattriya* dance is destroying our tradition. Previously *Sattriya nritya* was proceeding in a unique way. Now the Kamalabari *Sattra* dance tradition follows the Guwahati style. Earlier Guwahati people looked up to us. Now it's the opposite.

B. S.: Why do you think this is happening?

N. C. G.: It's true that gurus do create some innovative ideas in the workshop, but there are no similarities with one another. The performing tradition of the Kamalabari school of *Sattras* is heading towards darkness. There are no learners of *pathak* ['reciting/singing the scriptures'] and *namlagua* ['person responsible for prayer with the help of big cymbal'].

B. S.: In this whole process what should you, as a *sattradhikar*, or what should other *sattradhikars*, do?

N. C. G.: We cannot play any role here. We can gather people together and discuss something, and we can also make decisions. But nobody will follow the decision. If nobody feels its importance, then it's difficult. Every year changes are happening rapidly in a surprising way.

This interview raises many questions. I wonder if there is a way to deal with these recent changes as expressed in the interview that leads the tradition in an unwanted direction. How is change relevant in continuing the tradition? Change has always been part of tradition, being that which makes it fluid and lively. It is required in moving from the past to the present. As Elliot Oring (2012: 225) puts it, "the change of past forms is required for survival in the present; survival in the present demands change in forms from the past". Recently, technology has brought change into the lives of the young people in *Sattras*, as they start watching TV, using computers with access to the internet, and smartphones. As the world has become a global village due to the improvements in technology, tradition itself is trying to fit into that technology-driven space. In this context, it is necessary to understand that "in that scientific time when culture was preferred to tradition for its ahistorical non-human properties, it was also valued for

its comprehensive, systematic nature" (Glassie 1995: 39). Practitioners of *Sattras* think that they are the absolute authority on tradition, and their wish is to drive tradition on according to their advice. In a way this negotiates the inclusiveness of the demands of time. But the fact of the matter is that it changes shape in its own way in order to survive in the contemporary situation. In terms of tradition, "the attention of folklorists has been directed to one type of change: change that is deliberate, crafted and aesthetic. The terms for this type of change are 'innovation', 'improvisation' and 'creativity'" (Oring 2012: 224). How traditional practitioners will deal with rapid change in the *Sattra* context is very challenging.

Another informant was Amlan Deep Borah, a PhD student at the North Eastern Regional Institute for Science and Technology, Arunachal Pradesh, India. He is also a young *bhakat* from Samoguri *Sattra*, Majuli. As well as this, he is the president of an NGO called *Abakash Majuli*, a pressure group aiming to protect the geographical shape and size of Majuli island and preserve the cultural, medical, education, and socio-economic condition of its people. My interview with him ran as follows:

> B. S.: Nowadays *Sattra* people seem to be working together very closely with the RSS. How do you see that?
> A. D. B.: Sankaradeva's ideology is very different from the RSS's concept of *Hindutva*. It seems today that there is no difference between these two different ways of thought. A few days ago, one of my friends in the media said that he has visual evidence of RSS training somewhere very close to the *Sattra* campus.
> B. S.: Why do you think Christian conversion is happening in Majuli?
> A. D. B.: The Christian religion is very rich [economically] when compared to our Neo-Vaishnava tradition. They introduce their faith first by helping people. The economy is the big factor in this case. But the most important fact is that *Sattras* in Majuli still need to work towards communal harmony. Still, some of the *Sattras* collect good revenue and donations. They can do much social work if they want. There is a lack of something else here. Instead of celebrating grand festivals, for whatever reasons, they are expected to do something else with this huge amount of money. A *sattradhikar* should follow the ideological doctrine of the faith, he doesn't necessarily have to be a full-time writer.
> B. S.: How would this influence the reputation of *sattradhikar* or *Sattra* people in society?
> A. D. B.: It lowers the reputation of *Sattra* in society. *Sattras* are not institutions of Hindus only. They should remain open to all, according to Sankaradeva's ideology. We, who represent the younger generation, have strong apathy towards *Sattras*, but not necessarily towards Neo-Vaishnavism. This is only because of the recent works and behaviour of *sattradhikar* and *Sattra* people. The future of *Sattras* is very difficult. However, as an insider and a person with higher education you also need to say something in this regard, why do you remain silent?
> B. S.: Well, perhaps I am still trying to develop my way of thinking. If I react to a social system, then I think it is necessary to develop a quality experience within myself. Most importantly, the *Sattra* system is such that not everyone's voice is treated equally. I should also mention that we cannot blame everything on the *Sattra* system and keep ourselves away from such situations. I am very much part of

it. I can confess that without any doubt. I think as *Sattra* tradition is also very much part of Assamese culture, we all have something to do in one way or another. Perhaps my research work itself is an answer to your question.

A. D. B.: In this whole process, people living in the *Sattra* have the primary duty. They will have to play the main role. We are also Hindu, there is no doubt about that, but our practice is something different from the RSS's way of practicing *Hindutvabad*. We prefer to refer to ourselves as people of Sankaradeva's Neo-Vaishnava ideology.

Whilst I was doing my fieldwork, my curiosity led me to investigate how far the followers have created a common platform where all local and non-local people of different backgrounds can live peacefully with dignity and respect for their ways of life. My observation is that, even though they have made some attempts now and then towards acculturation, they are still very conservative in this case. However, most of them have been trying to popularise Sankaradeva's doctrine outside Assam. To me, it does not matter whether Sankaradeva should be introduced elsewhere or not, what matters more is how Neo-Vaishnava followers can make their egalitarian view relevant in contemporary Assam for the betterment of people's lives. Is it not necessary to ask themselves why they want to promote Sankaradeva's ideas outside Assam, and how this will help the people of Assam. As his work has a universal value, it seems that there is no need to force the establishment of his faith elsewhere. Those who are familiar with Sankaradeva and his work would accept the fact that his works have a universal applicability. If Sankaradeva's followers fail to make his work relevant in their own society among their own people, then a policy of taking Sankaradeva abroad does not make sense.

Having said that as a student of folklore, I would like to sum up my discussion by narrating a mythological story of two brothers in this context, which I heard from my *burhabhakat* ('monk father') Maniram Bargayan. This is a story about Ganesha, the elephant-headed god and scribe of story tellers, and Kartikeya, the athletic warlord of the gods. The sage Narada announced a competition between the two to race three times around the world. Kartikeya immediately leapt on his peacock and flew around the continents, mountains and oceans. He went around the world thrice. But his brother Ganesha simply walked around his parents, once, twice and thrice, with full devotion and love. While Kartikeya returned then Ganesha said, I won the race. "How come?" asked Kartikeya. Ganesha replied, "You went around 'the world' and I went around 'my world'". What matters more? Because parents are one's entire world, Ganesha won the prize.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

From these discussion above it can be mentioned that since the time of the *Mahabharata*, involvement with the belief and ritual of the inhabitants of Assam in terms of chasing divinity has always been very strong and heterogeneous. The people in each ethnic community have created their own religious space to be able to live their lives according to their faith. During the 17th century, the Neo-Vaishnava movement became influential and the Vaishnavisation/Assamisation of culture began in Assam. Because of this, people of different ethnic communities came into the Neo-Vaishnava fold. From several

conversations in and outside of *Sattra*, I came to know that at the early stage of conversion, the process was so liberal that the question of the ethnic identity of different local populations did not emerge, and one united religious identity was beginning to form. But after Sankaradeva's demise, a schism took place. The power politics of religious leaders, and discrimination based on caste, became pervasive, among Neo-Vaishnava followers, who were little in tune with the pan-Indian *bhakti* movement. As a result, the process of assimilation has not remained consistent among the local population. As the representatives of the ethnic communities have experienced caste hierarchy and inequality, and the suppression of their ritual practices within the Neo-Vaishnava fold, they felt sceptical, and the educated ones amongst them started restoration of their own ethnic identity.

I observed that in today's *Sattra* context, individual power politics and the absence of any sincere dedication to uplifting the needy prevents the Sankaradeva's doctrine from moving forward. The interviews quoted above reveal that the *Sattra* tradition is in danger, and that practitioners are confused about how to deal with their present challenges. A cultural shift can also be seen in the traditional practices of the *Sattras* because of the government standardised one particular form of ritual tradition as 'classical'. Young devotees are more interested in learning *Sattriya* dances, as they then have more potential to perform outside, garner popularity and earn money. There is little interest in learning folk or semi-classical forms of ritual such as *Sattriya-ojapali*, *Kirtania*, *Pathek*, and so on. Today traditional religious practices are not treated with the same importance as they once were, leading some of them being in their final stages.

In recent times, tradition has been used by many of the young *Sattriya* practitioners as a commodity. They are very much interested in choosing those traditional performance rituals that supposedly have more potential to gain public interest on the modern stage. Newly emerging 'professionalism',[41] as the current *Sattriya* artists call it, is transforming the traditional way of practicing performing rituals. When I interviewed some of the young *Sattriya* practitioners, they seemed to be liberal in their views. I came to learn from them that today the younger-generation people in the *Sattra* community do not want to consider everything as tradition but, rather, are eager to analyse the past and address the present according to contemporary demands. The conservative force of the *Sattra* institutions has been an obstacle to the furtherance of their thought. According to young representatives of *Sattras*, the orthodox authoritative power given to so-called high caste individuals by the man-made social system needs to switch towards making institutions more flexible in the contemporary scenario. The rich performing art forms of the *Sattra* institutions could be used more for the betterment of communal harmony, which could probably re-establish the real importance of *Sattras* amongst all sections of the people. Indeed, some of the younger devotees do not seem to be as liberal in their views as others.

It is crucial to mention that *Sattra* institutions have been serving Assamese society since the 16th century, and in fact, have strengthened Assamese culture in various ways, especially in preserving and promoting Sankaradeva's legacy, along with familiarising the Assamese people with *Sattriya* dance, drama and music rituals. A number of *sattra-dhikars* were active in social work aiming at communal harmony over the period. Sometimes, too much responsibility has been laid on the shoulders of the *Sattra* institutions. The presence of other organisations opposed to the *Sattras* has probably pressured the

Sattra leaders into a greater involvement in politics in order to preserve their powerful traditional roots. By considering all the contributions made by the different institutional orders within the Neo-Vaishnava faith, I have observed that Neo-Vaishnavism is holding its egalitarian flow of dynamism at the level of individual thought, rather than in practice at the institutional level.

Finally, I should confess here that as an insider I have written this paper from a very uncomfortable point of view regarding our own tradition. Some of the unfortunate factors cannot overshadow the glorious contribution of *Sattras*, even though it may lose social dignity for some period. It is worth mentioning that some boys around the age of five go to *udasin Sattra* having experienced severe and tragic lives and make it their home. They also get an opportunity in the *Sattra* atmosphere to receive a modern education in spirituality, the performing arts, etc. It seems that there is a need for social intervention to create an awareness which should evolve in favour of restoring the significance of *Sattra* culture in contemporary times. In fact, it is crucial that realisation and consciousness should come from within rather than being imposed from outside. Different interpretations should arise and reach people in a way that it would not harm their dedication towards their tradition. I am optimistic that it will happen in the near future.

NOTES

1 Uttar Kamalabari *Sattra* is a monastery-like celibate institution situated on the Majuli river island, Assam. The *Sattra* belongs to the Kamalabari school of *Sattras* established in 1673 by Badula Padma Ata.

2 Biographical literature based on Sankaradeva and his proselytisers.

3 *Navagraha* includes the sun and the eight planets of the solar system.

4 Lord Shiva is also known as Shankara.

5 *Kayastha* is a broader category of caste group among the Hindus. It consists of several groups and sub-groups of people.

6 Worship of Shakti as a divine female power and her manifestations in the form of goddesses.

7 A shrine built over the grave of a revered religious figure. *Pirs* are considered direct descendent of Ali.

8 *Bhakti* refers to an intense feeling of devotion, real participation and love, which implies service.

9 A religious movement started in southern India. The focus of the *bhakti* movement was on the idea of making people aware of the practice of loving devotion towards Lord Vishnu and His incarnations.

10 *Pancaratra* refers to a movement centred around the idea of Narayana as the avatar of Vishnu. This is related to the concept of incarnation: for example, Vishnu is worshiped in various forms and ten of these forms were recognised as avatars.

11 Nine types of *bhakti* include *sravana* ('listening'), *kirtana* ('chanting'), *smarana* ('remembering'), *archana* ('offering'), *pada-sevana* ('bowing down in front of His feet'), *dasya* ('servitude'), *sakhitya* ('friendship'), *vandana* ('by explaining his image'), *deha-arpana* ('by surrendering one's physical presence').

12 *Bhaktimarga* is a path, existing at the stage of intense devotion, which can lead devotees to salvation.

13 *Bhadra* is a month in the Assamese lunar calendar beginning during August and ending in September.

14 The four days are divided thus: 1) *saulbhojani* ('distribution of rice'); 2) *thapani* ('establishing the offering tray'); 3) *kirtan* ('the main celebration') and 4) *bhangani* ('ending').

15 *Adi-Satya-yuga* means the beginning of the *Satya* era. According to Hinduism, the eras, or *yugas*, are divided into four categories, i.e. *satya, dvapara, treta* and *kali*.

16 *Niranjana-Brahma* means 'the supreme Brahma', in this context referring to a form of Vishnu.

17 A text containing different ideas and observations that lays down the rules for worship of the goddesses and the deities.

18 Another name of Lord Shiva. As Shiva holds the *trisul* (a weapon) in one hand, he is known as Shulapani.

19 *Kali-yuga* is one among the four eras of Hinduism (see also Note 15). Our present era is the *kali-yuga*.

20 *Sonowal-Kachari* is an Assamese ethnic group, commonly referred to as Kirata. They belong to the Mongoloid race of people.

21 *Sutradhara* is a principal character who introduces the play, explains various situations, announces the entrance and exits of characters, and also leads the music part of the play.

22 *Sattriya-ojapali* is a mythical storytelling tradition introduced by Sankaradeva. *Ojapali* is the composition of two words (*oja* 'expert' and *pali* 'associates'). The *oja* recites themes from mythical stories with the help of hand gestures, body movements and dance, whereas the *palis* take up the refrain and repeat the song while playing cymbals.

23 *Jivatma* means an individual's soul, which is a part of the ultimate spirit, or *Paramatma*.

24 In Hinduism, Brahman is the source of all energies and creation. It is the supreme cosmic spirit.

25 In Sanskrit, *maya* means 'magic' or 'illusion'. In this context, *maya* refers to four manifestations of desire: *kama* ('lust'), *krodha* ('anger'), *lobha* ('greed'), *moha* ('illusion').

26 A section of *kirtanghosha* – a text composed by Sankaradeva based on *Bhagavata Purana*.

27 Dharma is a very loaded concept in Hinduism which has no direct semantic equivalents in any Western language. It has been translated as 'duty', 'religion', 'justice', 'law', 'ethics', 'religious merit', 'principle' and 'right' (see Flood 2005: 52). Adharma means 'unethical' or 'immoral' and is opposite to Dharma.

28 *Polo* is a fishing tool made of bamboo, which cannot be used as a container for water.

29 A sacred Hindu text which describes details of Vedic rituals, including mythical and philosophical backgrounds.

30 *Sattras* can be categorised into two basic types: *udasin* follows celibacy whereas *grihasthi* continues married life. Aside from these two, there are some *Sattras* where only the head of the *Sattra* remains celibate, and the followers can marry. There is also another variation in which devotees and head of *Sattras* are free to decide whether they will remain celibate or not.

31 *Sattriya* is a ritual form of dance introduced by Sankaradeva, the origin of which can be traced in the Krishna-centred Vaishnava *Sattras* of Assam. It was recognised as one of the eight classical dance forms of India by the Sangeet Natak Akademi on November 15, 2000.

32 The main preachers of this sect were Damodardeva and Harideva. They were appointed by Sankaradeva to propagate Neo-Vaishnavism among the people in Assam.

33 *Kala-samhati* was introduced by Gopal Ata (1540–1611), one of the 12 preachers appointed by Madhavadeva to spread Neo-Vaishnavism at different places in Assam.

34 *Purusha* derives its name from the elder grandson of Sankaradeva, Purushuttam Thakur.

35 *Nika* means 'clean'. *Nika-samhati Sattras* were established by two disciples, Padma Ata and Mathuradas Burha Ata. The followers of this sect place importance on the scripture. This sect does not practice idolatry.

36 *Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha* is a socio-religious organisation established in 1930. It focuses on propagating and promoting the pure ideology of Sankaradeva which, according to them, was being misused by other institutional orders.

37 *Asom Sattra Mahasobha* is a united body of the *Sattras* of Assam, which emerged as *Sodou Asom Sonta Sanmilani* (1915), and later came to be known as *Asom Sattra Sangha* (1945), and then renamed *Asom Sattra Mahasobha* in 1990.

38 *Krishnaguru* is a religious organisation established by Arun Goswami in 1974 at *Na-Sattra*, Sarthebari, Assam. It was named after the founder, who is also considered by the devotees to be a divine soul, or *Krishnaguru*.

39 The *khel* system is the segregation of devotees into groups within Neo-Vaishnavism, which is more common in villages, viz. *bamunia* (Brahmin) / *mahekia* and *sangharia* / non-Brahmanic. It is based on the tension between the Brahmanic, which represents *Sattras*, and the non-Brahmanic order, which represents Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha.

40 The RSS is a nationalistic Hindu organisation established in 1925 by Keshav Baliram Hedgewar (1889–1940). It advocates a Hindu patriotic agenda under the banner of *Hindutva* or 'Hindu-ness'.

41 Young *Sattriya* artists seem to be promoting themselves more as professional. But the fact of the matter is that all traditional *Sattriya* practitioners were/are professional, as they dedicate their whole lives to practicing dance, drama and music as mediums to worship God.

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