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NEO-VAISHNAVISM IN ASSAM: SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION, STRUCTURAL HIERARCHIES AND CULTURAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Abstract

This article provides a historical overview of the cardinal aspects of neo-Vaishnavism and the monastic order of Assam. The diversity within neo-Vaishnavism and the monastic order produced new religious networks, conflicts, and politics. The genesis of neo-Vaishnavism materialised through the monastic order, which was produced through social transformation and historical legacies. Subsequently, Samhati, the formation of different sub-sects informed and shaped the dominant history of neo-Vaishnavism. This article briefly outlines the emergence of sub-sects under the legacies of various disciples, emphasizing the role of socio-economic and political factors. It investigates how the practice of certain norms problematized the course of the Vaishnavite movement. From the very beginning, monasteries were the sites of politics, entwined with their relationships with many Kingdoms and, later, with the colonizers. This paper delineates the contours of structural hierarchies of the monastic order via Sattras originating in medieval Assam and how its influence persisted in consolidating a uniform cultural identity during the colonial period.

Keywords: *neo-Vaishnavism, Sattras, Samhati, Transformation, Consciousness*

Introduction

Neo-Vaishnavism¹ is a fascinating and complex religious tradition of Assam. Vaishnavism as a religion and as a movement got momentum through Sri Sankardeva's (1449 – 1568) life and his spirit of religiosity, his engagement with reformation through Bhakti (devotion), and most importantly, his contributions to the socio-cultural and religious realms. By the turn of the sixteenth century, the zeal of Vaishnavism was so strong that it led to a socio-cultural revival in Assam. His personality and religious zeal gave an initiative direction to the movement, a legacy that continued through his disciples and followers. Along with Sankardeva, his chief disciple, Sri Madhabdeva (1489 –

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1596), occupied a key position for his devotion and contributions to firmly establishing the Vaishnava faith. Much of the hagiographical literature (Neog 1965) reveres the divine qualities of the Gurus and their prominent disciples depicting an omnipotent presence in the collective memory. However, this article does not explore this domain; instead, it considers their histories as a tool to understand the existence of a convoluted religio-cultural paradigm. It unravels some of the complexities related to religious structures, devotion, and monastic existence through legacies. Vaishnavism underwent many phases of transformation, including formation of different sub-sects, *Samhati*, with a concrete organizational structure that crystallized its dogmas and doctrines, which were absent earlier in the region. The schematic divisions represent conflict relations of the past and the internal hierarchies of the monastic order. In this context, this paper discusses Vaishnavism's notable transformations and the region's relative changes.

The present study adopts historical sociology as a major framework to understand the context, processes and the varied transformation of the monastic order. The theoretical model includes studies on sectarian movement (Wilson 1959), Bhakti movement (Sharma 1987; Prentiss 1999; Lorenzen 2004) and social change to show the interplay of the past and the contemporary times. This paper is situated between history and anthropology. Relying on historical narratives gathered through fieldwork and exploring the existing literature; the article combines historical data to analyse social changes witnessed due to the overlapping socio-religious and economic structures and their interactions. Majuli, the river island in the Brahmaputra, is an essential site of Vaishnavism and monastic establishments (Bora 2016). The oldest monastery on the island dates back to the late fifteenth century. Currently, Majuli is the only place in Assam with Sattras belonging to all four Samhatis, thereby popularized as *Sattra Nagari* (city/hub of monasteries). The amalgamation of politics and religion gave a new dimension to the Vaishnavite movement in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and it underwent varied phases of transformations. This paper looks at two critical phases: first, the schematic divisions and the hierarchical structures of Vaishnavism, and second, the rejuvenation of the Vaishnava religion and its devotional ethos in colonial Assam that evoked a spirit of regional consciousness.

The neo-Vaishnavite movement had and continues to have, several dimensions owing to its emergence in a historical time frame. Scholars of neo-Vaishnavism have explored various facets of the religious movement, the formation of its socio-cultural ethos, and its connection with the economic-political spheres (Neog 1965, 1967; Sarma, 1966; Guha 1991). Starting in medieval Assam, the movement vis-à-vis the religious order underwent phases of change and continues to witness many different aspects in contemporary times. To explain such a process, scholars of religious movements use the concept 'institutionalization' (O'Connell 1999, Dube and Beltz 2008, Deo 2015)

establishing an order that propagates the ethos of devotion for its existence as a religious community. The socio-philosophical initiation of a new faith in Assam was enclosed in Sankardeva's doctrinal thesis, found in his rendition of the *Srimadbhagavadgita*, the Upanishads, and the Bhagavata-Purana. Neo-Vaishnavism created a new 'religiousness' (Bainbridge 1997) emphasising on its ability to 'incorporate' and 'accept' a new belief system (ibid).

In neo-Vaishnavism the cultural innovations consisting of music, dance and drama featured as a social force that transformed everyday lives of the Assamese. The cultural assets of Vaishnavism provide an excellent example to study the interrelations between social forces and the reformation in the region (Davis 1965). The process of institutionalization in the context of neo-Vaishnavism occurred through the proliferation of the means of devotion and by establishing a monastic order in Assam. *Sattra*, the Vaishnavite monasteries, emerged as the vehicle of the Vaishnava religious order.

Owing to the establishment of Sattrasin the Brahmaputra Valley, mobilisations led by the apostles started and witnessed further expansion of the religious order. The changes within Vaishnavism led to conflicts about monastic practices and *Sattra* adhering to hierarchical norms. It caused the disintegration of the Vaishnava sect, i.e., the *Mahapurusia* sect, into several sub-sects under different followers. The internal divisions within the monasteries and patronage from the Ahoms kings gave rise to complex religious, political, and economic systems (Guha 1983). These two orders influenced the devotees and the followers: first, followed by the monasteries, and finally, the governance structure of the Ahoms. Consequently, many peasant uprisings and civil wars wreaked havoc on the religious and socio-political order. The transformation within the neo-Vaishnavite movement showed the changing nature of religious conformity and its ability to create variations across the spectrum of the monastic organisations.

The transformations within the *Sattra*, the development of a dominant economic structure, and finally, the emergence of a socially and politically conscious section of the Assamese society were some of the crucial events in the era of colonialism and the post-colonial times. This period saw the growth of a regional consciousness simultaneously with the pan-national identity. One of the issues of regional consciousness was about forming a cultural identity and how the Vaishnavites played a crucial role in fostering that. To understand such processes, the paper highlights the conceptualization of regional nationalism, the role of the middle class in adhering to a shared cultural ideology, and the process of forming such consciousness. The changes within the monastic order concretized an organizational pattern, giving a complex character to the Vaishnavite movement. It offers a space to analyse caste representations within the socio-religious domain.

Hierarchical Structure and the Monastic Order

The Vaishnavite monasteries shared a close relationship with the royal dynasties which brought noticeable political and material transformations. The patronization of Koch kings of Eastern and Western Kamrupain the form of land and money grants to the Sattras gave momentum to the movement. Despite the initial resentment of some Koch Kings in the seventeenth century, later on, they took the initiative to support Vaishnavism in Assam.² It was also when the peasantry of Assam evolved with tribalism and feudalism (Sarma 1966). Many landlords residing in the lower Assam formed feudal groups like the *Bhuyans*, who continued to flourish from the 13th century A.D. to the first half of the 16th century. Sankardeva himself belonged to a Bhuyan family. However, with the expansion of the Koch Kingdom and the rise of the Ahom Kingdom in Assam, they gradually started losing their feudal power.³ Nonetheless, they continued to wield preponderant economic and political power at local levels. A new political hegemony was on the rise with the Ahom systems.

Under the leadership of Sankardeva, the widespread Vaishnava movement was the starting point of a renewed social system with ethnic integration and social reforms (Borkakoti 2006). His philosophy on devotion was based on an egalitarian and humanist approach (Borkakoti 2005). It was a time to incorporate the ethnic groups and the lower castes, and Sankardeva did that by discarding Brahminical rituals, polytheism and animal sacrifice. Such situations led to tensions between those who were locally at the helm of political power and those who came into the fold of the Sattra, including the grassroots peasants. Scholars drew attention to the pattern of political and economic dynamism in the region by exploring the feudal trends (Mazumdar 2002). It is stated that 'the Bhuyans whose power and prosperity in the political field were destroyed by the growth of the new state system under the Ahoms and the Koaches now regained in the same in the field of religion with the growth of the neo-Vaishnavite movement in Assam' (ibid: 192).⁴ As mentioned earlier, along with the Koch Kings, Vaishnavism, and the monastic tradition faced clashes from the Ahom kings, including several courses of actions. Some of them included, as stated by Guha (1991), King Pratap Singha's (1603-1641) punitive measures against the Sudra preceptor of the Vaishnava religion, employing official policies to split Vaishnavas into different groups, and patronizing Brahmins and Hindu temples barring monasteries. The clash between the Kings and the Vaishnava preachers took extreme turns during King Gadadhar Singha (1681- 1696), who forcibly dispersed disciples from the monasteries; burnt monasteries and their properties were seized (ibid).

The following discussion outlines the involvement of some prominent apostles who expanded the monastic system in Assam and marked the historical process of the emergence of Samhati. Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Assam witnessed massive transformations within Vaishnavism, mainly the

monastic order. Two interrelated trends emerged in this period – first, the fragmentation of the parent sect of Sankardeva, the Mahapurusha, into several sub-sects, and second, the formation of numerous monasteries across Assam. Historically, this phase was known for the schematic creations under the headship of disciples. The monastic order institutionalized celibacy as the means of true devotion embodied in the tradition of monks and apostles. The *guru-sisya* Parampara perpetuated through legacies and heritage, based on which Vaishnavism and monasticism thrived in Assam. The historical process of the sectarian divisions within Vaishnavism is manifold. Different Samhati emerged from disputes among various proponents regarding successorship, royal patronage and support, Brahminization of Vaishnava ethos, and, finally, resistance to hegemonic religiosity.

This began after the passing of the two Gurus, Sankardeva and Madhabdeva. Many biographical chronicles have documented the conflicts regarding the successorship of Vaishnavism, mainly after the death of Sankardeva and the selection of Madhabdeva as his successor. This resulted in disappointments and branching out of the parent sect. Notably, after the passing of Madhabdeva, Chaturvuj Thakur, Sankardeva's grandson, was initiated as the head of the parent Vaishnava sect known as *Purusha-Samhati* – a legacy that continued with his family lineage, carrying forward the values instituted by Sankardeva. Following that, Mathura Das Aata and Gopal Mishra (who initially were part of *Purusha-Samhati*) parted ways and founded a new sub-sect, *Nika-Samhati*. The Sattras of Majuli preserve the legacies as their socio-cultural history which came out clearly in my discussions with the Sattradhikars and the elderly monks/devotees.

The schematic division brought new changes to the monasteries, such as developing administrative control over land and people by establishing networks between places and devotees. Religious networks and the changing family and kinship relations marked social transformations in the villages. By advocating new practices and relationships, the monastic order conformed to rigidity. For instance, *Damodari* or *Damodariya* Samhati by Damodardeva and his supporters, later joined by a Brahmin named Haridev. He created functionaries for the management of Sattras along with procedure of religious services (Sarma 1978: 76). Subsequently, this sect was known as *Brahma-Samhati*. By this time, the religious authorities, such as the *Sattradhikars* the heads of monasteries (also known as Adhikar/Gossain), developed a close relationship with the Ahom Kings. King Jayadhras Singh (1648-1663) granted wastelands to Sattras and Sattradhikars, transforming the political economy of Assam and affecting the traditional landholdings in Assam. Revenue-free lands were donated to various monasteries and, as a result, they stood as powerful institutions with control over agricultural lands, devotees and villagers,⁵ a practice that is still predominant in Majuli.

It was evident that several monasteries founded in Majuli such as

Auniati, *Dakhinpat*, and *Garamur* proliferated under Ahom's patronage. With royal patronage, a selected number of Sattras became rich and powerful. Popularly, *Rajaghariya* (those with royal patronage) and *Bamunia* Sattra (those adhering to Brahminical practices) are used as popular identities and to categorize monasteries as per their affiliations. As discussed below, the monasteries are categorized under four major Samhatis - *Brahma-Samhati*, *Purusa-Samhati*, *Nika-Samhati* and *Kal-Samhati*. Under these four sub-sects, many monasteries flourished in different parts of Assam, adhering to distinct practices and ideologies.

Sects also emerged due to resistance to some of the adherents of Vaishnava establishments. They made severe departures from the original tenets of the faith or relapsed into heterogeneous doctrines discarded by the gurus (Basu 1970: 241). Brahminization, caste practices, reinstating Vedic rites, idol worship became central to the monastic order. Several monasteries became the 'pillars of the caste system' (Gohain 1987). Caste distinctions within monasteries were marked as an index of inclusive religiosity and seen prominently in performing initiation rites, food practices, and commensality. The initiation of upper caste Brahmins (celibate men) as the monastic heads created a casteist and gendered society that continues to exist in the present times. Audrey Cantlie observes, 'initiation is open to men of all castes, including Untouchables, and fellow initiates are united by bonds of ritual kinship which often crosscuts castes membership' (Cantlie 1984: 269). However, the initiation of tribals resulted in their incorporation into the fold of the Hindu caste system.

These practices were inscribed into everyday practices of the monastic order to uphold the purity of the monastic heads. It created a closed structure and clear rankings between Sattras, Sattradhikars, and lay devotees. With the ritual superiority of the Brahmin Sattradhikars, caste practices became evident within the monastic spheres. Monasteries were gendered spaces as women remained outside of such religious and devotional domains of life (Bora 2018, 2020). Ethnic groups, tribals, and lower castes responded to such rigidity through defiance and formation of different sects. Gopala Aata Aniruddhadev and Bar-Yadumanidev founded Kala-Samhati and established Dihing and Mayamara Sattra. They grew strongly in Assam by rejecting upper-caste supremacy and hierarchies. It upheld Sudra-Vaishnavism (Basu 1970: 242) and created space for the subjugated castes. It also gained popularity since it comprised ethnic, tribal, and lower castes, including Morans (synonymously used with Matakas), Kacharis, Chutiyas, Doms, Kaivartas, Haris, and Brittials (ibid). The distortion of Vaishnava ideology and the growth of royal feudalism compelled the disciples of Mayamara to protest against the Ahoms which led to the Moamoria peasant rebellion (1769 – 1805). Civil wars and peasant revolts by 'holy men' continued during colonial times (Pinch 1996), creating a peasant consciousness with communal, caste, and feudal elements (Mukherjee 1988).

***Mahapurusia* Tradition and ‘Regional-Nationalist’ Consciousness in Assam**

Despite the fragmentation, neo-Vaishnavism and Mahapurusia tradition was established as the dominant and popular religion that continued to impact the socio-cultural fabric of Assam. Medieval Vaishnavism, as discussed, moved from devotional religion to sectarian politics. In popular parlance, Vaishnavism was construed as a religion (*dharma*), tradition (*parampara*), and culture (*sanskriti*) that emerged through a political revival in the wake of a national/regional consciousness (*jatiyachetana*) in colonial Assam. The *Sankari* culture’s projection of a shared cultural consciousness significantly differed from the medieval reformation via the neo-Vaishnavite movement. Scholars’ (academic and literary) emphasis on neo-Vaishnavism made it the most critical event of medieval Assam. The cultural hegemony of the Vaishnava tradition was undeniable because it continued to invoke cultural nationalism in modern Assam done through “rediscovery and celebration of the past” (Saikia 2023: 229). This was evident in the later decades of the nineteenth century due to the socio-political crisis of Assamese society and the flourishing of nationalist ideologies. The politicization of Vaishnavism and its association with the ‘regional-nationalist’ consciousness was a modern phenomenon that developed when Assamese society felt threatened by the immigration of Bengalis/Bengali-speaking people from the neighbouring regions. The situation in the latter half of the nineteenth century metamorphosed into an anxiety over linguistic hegemony, and the identity of the Assamese language often debated in vernacular periodicals (Sengupta 2012).

The treatise to understand the Vaishnava faith in a pan-Indian context was compared with other religious movements in India. It was an attempt to link it to mainland India and position Vaishnavism within pan-Indian religions. The cultural specialists of colonial Assam projected Sankardeva as a national reformer and the helmsman of the Assamese language. At the crucial time of the colonial epoch, they invoked the political (nationalist) temper and religious sentiments to form a collective consciousness, which was part of a larger socio-political project of colonial India (Bose and Jalal 1997). The popular and scholarly writings contrived to revive the Mahapurusia tradition and reaffirm Assamese culture, language, and nationality. Regional consciousness was evident as the shift happened from neo-Vaishnavism to Assamese Vaishnavism. As for the political significance of the Vaishnavite movement, it continued to struggle within the minds of secular and socialists and the nationalists and theists (Gohain 1987). The social history of Assam recognized the roles played by the Assamese intelligentsia – the cultural elites and political nationalists who tried to brand a regional identity based on Mahapurusia tradition. The groups of the intelligentsia were viewed as the new Assamese middle class⁶, the socially privileged class, or the Western-educated rationalist, who, with their modern sensibility and rationality, tried to overcome the conservatism of

Assamese social life. They claimed their voices over social, cultural, and political matters.

The cultural revival of Vaishnavism produced an array of literature based on the religious life of Sankardeva, the basic tenets of his philosophy, and Bhakti that promulgated a unitarian and liberal attitude rooted in devotion. However, academic and literary interpretations of Bhakti may differ in their analysis and usage. Bhakti, as a generic term, refers to ‘an emotive state of mind’ ...but its meaning gets particularized when used in a religious context (Sharma 1987: 5). Following the Indian trend of Bhakti, neo-Vaishnavism as a movement had a materialistic basis (Gohain 1987) in addition to its spiritual attributes, that emulated socio-economic growth. The expansion of vernacular literature formed the underpinnings of material culture in Assam. In that process, vernacular literature created “an alternative world” and “constitute[d] an intricate social phenomenon...of cultural identity formation” (Pollock 1998: 46). The world of vernacular literature led to rigid “territorialization” and “ethnicization” (ibid 42).

The tenets of neo-Vaishnavism became the assets for cultural and political mobilizations in Assam. Many who either belonged to the monastic order or culturally privileged sections wrote biographies by reiterating Sankardeva and Madhabdeva’s ideas, heritage, and history. Lakshminath Bezbarua (1864-1938), one of the foremost and highly celebrated literary figures of modern Assam, was, in the public image, accepted as the “Assamese patriot”, “a champion of the Asomiya language and its cultural heritage of devotional religion” (Sharma 2011: 147). His literary contributions created a new discourse reviving Vaishnava ethos, reflected in two of his earliest writings on the Vaishnavite Gurus, published in 1911 and 1914, respectively.⁷ The next generations of experts (culture, history, literature, religion) thrived on his writings to explore his varied ideas and politics. Vaishnavism and the idea of Bhakti were reinstated as a vehicle of progress and integration as he ‘writes from the perspective of a devotee, while in his consideration of the saints’ more mundane achievements, he feels at home with the perspective natural to an objective biographer or historian of culture’ (Phukan 1996: 139). The twentieth century was a time for ethno-historical revival and ‘consolidation of the idea of the Assamese classical past’ (Saikia 2023: 229), influenced by the reformation in the neighbouring Bengal. Cultural critics like Hiren Gohain call it ‘the reflection of Bengali culture of *Bhadralok* (elite)’ (1973: 17). Manik Chandra Barua, Maniram Dewan, Ganga Govinda Phukan, Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, Hem Chandra Barua were known as the cultural revivalists of modern Assam and the promoter of scientific rationality who wanted emancipation from social evils. They felt that social barriers and internal sectarian divisions were hindrances to this homogenized process that was deemed necessary for surviving colonialism. Reverting to the teachings of Mahapurusa, which was once able to bring diverse groups into a mainstream system of belief, the cultural

revivalists tried to inculcate a collective way of viewing the world with a renewed identity.

Natalie Zemon Davis, while explaining the establishment of the printing press in the popular life of sixteenth-century France, shows that the beginning of new communication networks opened new options and provided new means of controlling the people (Davis 1965: 190). The new means of communication in Europe enlightened the masses through popular literary works about artisans, peasants, or the commoners. The literary inventions in colonial Assam focused on forming Assamese (community) identity and the modes of achieving it. Colonialism paved the way for a literary movement in Assam with print⁸ and propaganda writing.⁹ Nineteenth-century Assamese writings drew heavily on the devotional tradition of neo-Vaishnavism. Despite reflecting the distinctive nature of writing in each phase, both shared some similarities in their devotional and motivational means, cultural innovations, and integration. It was evident how writings on the religious Guru, his teachings, and discussions on social barriers were regularly published in *Bahi*, a noted Assamese magazine, started in 1909 and edited by Lakshminath Bezbarua.

In the regional-nationalist discourse, Vaishnavism in colonial Assam was seen as a cultural bridge and a unitary medium supported by political ideologies. Many political and literary organizations emerged to regenerate Assamese culture and language during this time. They constituted a new public arena and were known for their discursive activities.¹⁰ These distinctive bodies acted as public platforms to promote social reforms in Assam. Through cultural revivalism, they tried to reaffirm the *Mahapurusia* tradition as their cultural asset, which is still relevant in today's Assam. Presenting a socio-cultural history of Assam based on the Mahapurusia tradition, they asserted a self-conscious nationality to protect the Assamese language and culture. That resulted in assertions against Sattras and the cultural elites by many lower castes and tribal communities. Various tribal communities became vocal against their traditional 'social marginalization' and led their movements under many tribal leaders (Sharma 2011). Tribal activism and lower caste resistance provided new narratives on the region's social transformation and political changes. Colonial India witnessed growing intolerance against discriminatory practices rooted in pre-colonial India (Dube 1998), and Gandhi's non-corporation movement influenced many. The birth of *Sankardeva Sangha* in the 1930s was an example of democratization and bureaucratization of religious ethos and conspicuous structural changes within Vaishnavism. The formation of the Sangha and its proliferation took Vaishnava ideology out of the precincts of the Sattras (Bora 2017) and renewed the consciousness among the lower castes. Haladhar Bhuyan, one of the prominent adherents of Sangha, advocated Gandhi's Harijan movement. Sangha challenged the traditional authority of the Sattras or routinisation of Charisma as the core structure of the monastic order. New waves of Vaishnavism in colonial India brought together those

outside the monastic order and needed urgent reform from orthodoxy and casteism.

Conclusion

Neo-Vaishnavism has manifold representations within the fold of sectarian and monastic traditions of Indian religions. The article focused on regional traditions, a neglected area due to ‘scholarly scepticism’ in a series of scholarly works on Hinduism (Chakravarti 2001). Most of the scholarly writings on monastic traditions in India is predominantly on Buddhism and Jainism; one needs to see more critical academic engagements with the neo-Vaishnavism of Assam. Monasticism and devotionalism of Northern Indian religions (different sects of Hinduism) are the most studied areas, isolating the North-eastern (with this N.E.) region and influencing the historical representation of this region. Comparatively, Vaishnavism in the neighbouring regions of Bengal and Orissa is popular among the scholars of Vaishnavism, but the monastic traditions of Assam are one of the most neglected fields. The proliferation of Vaishnavism in other N.E. states like Manipur is often forgotten, considering that the entire N.E. is reduced to identity (ethnic and tribal) politics, separatist movements, and the presence of violence. From the medieval to the end of the colonial period, Vaishnavism of Assam underwent a prolonged transformation process. This paper provided a historical overview to critically analyse the complexities of the schematic divisions and the monastic order that continued to determine the socio-political, economic, and devotional spheres in a region composed of diverse ethnic and tribal groups. Reformation as an ideology was adhered to by different groups and meant going back to the original creed or reinstating Sankardeva’s Vaishnavism. The heterogeneity of Vaishnavism as it exists today is owed to its diverse preachers and followers, who often claim to rest on the egalitarian principles of medieval Vaishnavism initiated by the great reformer Guru.

Notes

- 1 Neo-Vaishnavism of Assam is a renewed form of Vaishnavism, representing its regional variations found in India. Studies have shown different forms and practices of Vaishnavism existed in India. While it centered around worshipping Vishnu, however among many forms of Vaishnavism, monotheistic Bhakti as a mode of worship became the most distinguished feature (See Jash 1982). Neo-Vaishnavism in medieval Assam started as Ek-Sarana-Naam-Dharma, discarding worshipping of multiple Gods and Goddesses, and instead incorporated Vishnu – his two avatars, Krishna and Rama. The proliferation of Sankardeva’s teachings during and after his lifetime culminated into a collective system of beliefs.
- 2 Lakshminarayana (1584-1622), Viranarayana (1622-1633), and Pranalarayana (1633-1666) of the Western Kingdom and Mahendranarayana (1637-1643) of the Eastern Kingdom supported and patronized many Vaishnavite monasteries. See Sarma (1966: 181).
- 3 For a detailed study, see Nath 1989, Sarma 1966, Guha 1983, 1991.

- 4 For a detailed study, see Mazumdar, Rahul Sankritayan, 'Feudal Trends in the neo-vaishnavite SATRA System.' In Dr. Bharat Ch. Kalita and Hemanta Dhing Mazumder 2002 (eds). 'Srimanta Sankaradeva Bharata Barise'. Bharitiya Itihas Sankalan Samiti.
- 5 While talking about the nature of royal grants, Guha writes that the "inventory of the Mahanta of Moamaria Satra...included amongst others ten to twelve Khats, four to five thousand buffaloes and eight to ten thousand attendants, besides thousands of tithes paying adherents during 1751-69" (1991: 52). Khats were the revenue free estates granted by the Ahom kings.
- 6 Looking at the composition of the Assamese middle class and considering the economic structure of colonial Assam, Baruah (1983) sees them as the 'western educated extension of the rural gentry', a privileged class resonating well with Bourdieu's notion of 'cultural capital'.
- 7 See Lakshminath Bezbarua's 'Sankaradeva' (1911) and 'Mahapurush Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva' (1914).
- 8 The American Baptist Mission established a printing press and initiated publishing books in Assamese.
- 9 *Arunoday*, the first printing paper, gave rise to new discourse in the Assamese public sphere.
- 10 Some of the famous literary organizations were Gyan Pradayini Sabha (1857), Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha (1888 - the Society for the Development of Assamese), Assam Association (1903), Assam Chatra Sanmilan (1916) (Assam Student's Union).

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