CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Human society is embroi dered by a wide range of religious customs, beliefs and practices at different parts of the World. Naturally it has always given rise to curiosity since time immemorial and has been the object of study of different cultural anthropologists that gives rise to a wide range of studies related to humanities, theology, sociology, philosophy and other disciplines.

"An important function of religion is to bring about integration in society through the establishment of certain norms. Religion institutionalizes the social norms and persuades the members of a society to accept these norms. In this way, religion strengthens social relations between individuals. The members belonging to a religious faith have a sense of security because they form a relatively stable social group" (Sinha, 1965:24).

"Any religion is an important or even essential part of the social machinery, as are morality and law, part of the complex system by which human beings are enabled to live together in an orderly arrangement of social relations. From this point of view we deal not
with the origins but with the social functions of religions, i.e. the contribution that they make to the formation and maintenance of a social order” (Radcliffe-Brown, 1952:154).

The development of religion has taken different forms in different cultures. Some religion places an emphasis on belief while others emphasize practice. Some religion focus on the subjective experience of the religious individual, while others consider the activities of the religious community to be most important. Though the development has taken place in different times, the renaissance movement across the globe had helped in spreading religious awareness. It was around this time that Vaishnavism that proclaimed a belief in one God; the Vishnu in parts of Asia, primarily in South Asia was also at its peak. In Assam, Shrimanta Sankaradeva laid the foundation of this movement by establishing altogether a different variety of monastery which came to be known as ‘Sattr’ with a centrally located prayer hall called ‘Namghar’ where devotees offered mass prayer to Lord Krishna preceded/followed by recital of Shrimad Bhagavata.

The study of Vaishnavism is important in the religious and social sphere of Assam as it has wide influence on the various changes in Assamese culture. Its impact on the social and religious circle of the people of Assam is indeed great. Vaishnavism which started around the 6th and 7th Century is the worshipping of Lord Vishnu in its various forms. This movement encompassed the length and breadth of medieval India and amongst others practiced equality of all, irrespective of caste and creed. This movement reached its peak during the renaissance movement all across the globe. It strove to reduce the practice of image or deity worship in various forms and lay more stress on eternal belief and adoration of Lord Vishnu. Shrimanta Sankaradeva started this movement in Assam in and around 15th and 16th Centuries and was not too different from what was being practiced in other parts of South Asia.

Saint Sankaradeva developed the Vaishnavite movement in Assam with a unique characteristic of believing in one Almighty God- the Lord Krishna, and actively spread this religious faith in former Assam and Eastern India. He established himself as the torch
bearer of the *Neo-Vaishnavite* movement in this part of the country, and which was the refined form of then *Vaishnavite* movement in Asia.

The focus of the present study is to understand the concept of *Neo-Vaishnavism* and the socio-religious influence of the Sattra institution on the life of the people of Assam. The movement certainly had all the hallmarks of a unique religion and it attempted to oppose some of the traditional Brahminical rituals like deity worship and its associated mode of submission and prayer. Shri Shri Sankaradeva emphasized on *nam-kirttana*, recitation, drama, dance and music, which helped in bringing about unity among various dispersed sections of the society. All people irrespective of any caste and social status joined hands in plays and dramas which centered round the dramatization of the stories inlaid in *Shrimad Bhagavata*, considered as the fifth Veda of Hindu religion. In fact the worshipping of a single God i.e. Vishnu or Lord Krishna is to be followed primarily.

For the propagation of the religious faiths and belief, Saint Sankaradeva did design two types of institutions- the Sattra and the *Namghar*, which are indispensable to each other. The *Namghar* is situated within a Sattra and also in villages, and the Sattra is a more central institution commanding more power and respect and a large religious complex under the supervision of a custodian, the *Sattradhikar*. Apart from the centrally situated *Namghar* there are four different hamlets or *hatis* surrounding the *Namghar* inhabited by resident devotees in East, West, North and South directions. A *Manikut (sanctum sanctorum)* is situated east of the *Namghar* and it houses the *Guruasana* (seat of the *Guru*) on which are placed the following religious scriptures alternately- the *Kirtana*, *Dasama*, *Gunamala* by Sankaradeva and *Ratnawali*, *Namghosa* by Madhavadeva. Sometimes two scriptures are also placed together. A statue of *Garuda* is almost universally present in each and every *Namghar*.

The first Sattra set up in former Assam, as per records available, is Vatadrava or Bardowa Sattra in the present district of Nagaon. Afterwards, Sattras were developed at different localities of Assam by Shrimanta Sankaradeva and his followers. Shrimanta
Sankaradeva used to visit different territories and in course of time finally settled at Patbauri near today’s Barpeta Town and ultimately at Bhela Kakatkuta in Koch Behar.

Along with Saint Sankaradeva, the responsibility of spreading his ideals rested on his principal disciples Shri Shri Madhavadeva, Shri Shri Damodaradeva and Shri Shri Harideva. The Neo-Vaishnavite movement was ably carried forwarded by them by the creation of more numbers of Sattras in Assam. Towards the later part of Shri Shri Sankaradeva’s life, Shri Shri Madhavadeva came into prominence and before his death Gurujona nominated the latter as his successor to spread the ideals of Neo Vaishnavism. When Shri Shri Madhavadeva was nominated as Saint Sankaradeva’s successor, some disciples refused to oblige Shrimanta Madhavadeva in the same status as Shri Shri Sankaradeva. This led to the secession of Shri Shri Damodaradeva and Shri Shri Harideva from the Mahapurushiyia cult and they formed a separate group known as the Brahma Samhati. The main feature of this group is the acceptance of Vedic and Tantric rituals. Vedic rituals, which are otherwise, prohibited in other three Samhatis- the Nika, the Purusha and the Kala. It is well gathered that the concept of the Samhati is a later development. Saint Madhavadeva, at the time of his death did not name any one as his successor. As a result, after his death, three leaders formed their own groups or Samhati’s. Gopal Deva (Gopal Ata) formed the Kala Samhati, Purushottam Thakur (the grandson of Shri Shri Sankaradeva) formed the Purusa Samhati and Padma Ata, Mathuradas Ata and Kesava Ata together formed the Nika Samhati. The Brahma Samhati consists of Sattras which have followers of Saint Damodaradeva and Saint Harideva. The principal Sattras under these are Auniati Sattra, Dakhinpat Sattra, Kuruwabahi Sattra and Garmur Sattra. Out of these four, Auniati, Garmur and Kuruwabahi were set up by Vamsigopaldeva and Dakhinpat by Banamalideva, both of whom were the disciples of Saint Damodaradeva.

Auniati Sattra which was established in 16th Century is one among the few Sattras which hold a prime position out of all the Sattras in existence today. It is also one of the strongest in the Brahma Samhati and received strong patronage from the erstwhile Ahom
monarchs. Gradually the popularity of this Sattra increased and gradually it brought into its fold many rich and influential people. Both Brahmans and non-Brahmins are inducted in the Sattra.

Auniati Sattra is located in the riverine Island of Majuli and has thirteen branches at different parts of Assam. The most prominent of them is the branch situated in the North bank of Brahmaputra near Guwahati.

1.1 The Study

The present study has been conducted in the Auniati Sattra, a renowned Vaishnavite monastery in Majuli River Island in the Jorhat district of Assam. It is situated on the southern side of Kamalabari Mouza and falls under Kamalabari Gaon Panchayat. Auniati Sattra is a center of art and culture of Assam and the bhakats (residential devotees) through the various rituals and devotional performances make the people understand the doctrine of Vaishnavism i.e. belief in one supreme God and the means of the ultimate eternal peace. Though Shrimanta Sankaradeva preached that one can take refuge in Lord Krishna or Vishnu by chanting his name (nam-Kirttan or nam-prasanga), which is performed at Auniati in the same traditional procedure in close relation to other Sattras of Assam Region; but with its affiliation to Brahma Samhati, it is mandatory to do the idol worship along with the nam-prasanga (congregation of prayers).

1.2 Aims and Objectives of the Study

The Sattra are the centers of Assamese culture with their traditional prayer form, a 566 year old tradition that embraces classical dance and music, open-theatrical custom, colourful boat races, handicrafts and script writing in paper made from plant tissues. The very nature of the topic suggests that there is a great scope to investigate and conduct a detailed study on the Neo-Vaishnavite tradition under the auspices of the Auniati Sattra.
In the present study, the following aspects of the Auniati Sattra will be examined:

(i) Origin and development of the Sattra;

(ii) Sattra’s role in the propagation of Neo-Vaishnavite culture and tradition;

(iii) Contribution of the Sattra in the field of dance, music, drama and literature;

(iv) Research and development of art and craft in the Sattra;

(v) Accounts of daily, annual and occasional rituals in the Sattra;

(vi) Sattra’s relation with common masses and its contribution to the people of Assam

(vii) Effect of modernization on the Sattra.

1.3 Review of Literature

The Neo-Vaishnavite Movement started by Shrimanta Sankaradeva has attracted many scholars of our country to conduct research on it. Though a lot of work in the form of books and journals has been published yet a very small number of studies have been made with particular reference to the Auniati Sattra. To gather knowledge about the past history of the Sattra, a number of secondary sources in the form of books, journals, periodicals and articles in them in English and vernacular magazines, and PhD thesis have been verified.

Edward Gait (1962) provides a comprehensive account of the history of the region and can be said to be an authority on the same. The evolution of Shrimanta Sankaradeva’s movement has also been covered by his book that provides relevant information about the course of its development. Neog (1963) has thrown light on the essence and philosophy of Eka-saran–Naam-Dharma or Neo-Vaishnavism initiated by Shrimanta Sankaradeva. He has also dealt with the various works of Shrimanta Sankaradeva and his direct disciple, Madhavadeva. Barua (1965) treats in details the cultural contribution of Shrimanta Sankaradeva ranging from the plays (ankiya nat or bhaonas), their various forms, timings to the poems, songs and verses composed by the Saint (Bargeet, Kirttan-ghosa and
others). Neog (1967) has traced the background of the movement at the very outset of his work. Subsequently, he goes on to discuss Shrimanta Sankaradeva’s *Neo-Vaishnavite* order, the tenets and practices of the faith and his attempts at social reorganization significantly, in the chapter titled *An Anthology Of Songs and Verses*. In the fourth stanza of one of his poems the readers can get an insight into Shrimanta Sankaradeva’s concern for all living creatures.

The Koches and their racial affinities, their original homeland dealing with the problem of the original habitual and racial affinity and the rise and fall of the Koch political power has been discussed by Nath (1989) in relation to *Neo-Vaishnavism*. The way of administration, the nature of the society and economy and the patronage of religious and literature by the Kings are also dealt within proper perspective.

Gogoi (1991) has described the system of Ahom Administration. The Tai–Ahoms, a branch of the great Tai race entered into the Brahmaputra valley in the 13th Century AD. They have their own language, script, literature and culture. They not only founded a strong Kingdom but also introduced a scientific system of administration. Rastogi (1991) in his book has spoken about the life and culture of the vibrant Assamese people that owe immensely to the evolution of Vaishnava fraternity envisaged by the Vaishnava saints who through their writings and commitment to spiritual value created insight and vision in every sphere of life. The movement took the first step towards democratization of diverse tribes into one composite Assamese culture upholding the age long spiritual values and moral ethos; the foundation-stone of the Assamese language was laid by the Vaishnava Saints like Shri Shri Sankaradeva, Madhavadeva and others. It was the period of the efflorescence of Assamese nationality too. The treatise breaks new ground in bringing to light the sociological importance of the cultural processing that Vaishnava movement has set in motion over the Centuries.
Steven Rosen’s (1992) book provides the following information:

i) Vaishnavism, like Christianity is a living religion, numerically the largest segment of modern Hinduism, as pervasive in India as Christianity is in the western countries.

ii) The basic tenet of Vaishnavism is that human beings are spiritual beings living in a material world. Consequently, they live exterior to emotions and know only the thinnest veneer of true experience. Vaisnavas use practical methods, such as chanting and dramatic performance, to revive spiritual emotion and reach the deeper, spiritual levels of experience.

iii) Vaisnavism encompasses the most egalitarian of theologies: the worship of Radha and Krishna. It is the only religious tradition to recognize the pre-eminence of both the female and male aspects of God. (This is most true of the Gaudiya tradition. In Judaism, Kabbalists also recognize the dual aspects but do not emphasize them.)

iv) Its goal, divine love of God, is not easily attained, but it is attainable; there are self-realized Vaishnavas through history whose lives provide us with examples to study and follow.

He even manages to adhere to the sastric rule of reserving deeper, more intimate subjects for the final few chapters, much like the Bhagavatam, which admonishes aspirants to study carefully the first nine’ Cantos before attempting to penetrate the pastimes of Krishna and the gopis described in the tenth.

Neog (1988) familiarizes the readers with the overall contribution of Shrimanta Sankaradeva to the social cultural and religious life of the Assamese people even as he initiated the Neo-Vaisnavite Movement. He gives a very detailed survey of Sankaradeva with a full account of his background and a resume and appraisal of his work. Here in one compact volume we have almost all that we should know about the Hindu culture of Assam as it expressed itself through Vaishnavism and the Ekasaranitya faith which may be described as Assam’s expression of the mediaeval pan – Indian Bhakti Movement. He has not missed in his book anything which is apropos to the study of Sankaradeva. In a way his book can be described as encyclopedic for the subject.
Sarma (1999) has described the history of Vaishnavism, its origin and the development of Sattra institution. This book is first published in Assamese and in 2004, it was translated to English and published.

Bhuyan (2000) is devoted to the role of the noted freedom fighter from Assam, Shri Shri Pitambar Deva Goswami, then Sattradhikar of Garmur Sattra in Majuli Island, who played a leading role in mobilizing the people of the Island during the National Freedom struggle.

Dev Goswami (2002) tries to describe all the rituals and the festivals of the Vaishnava Sattras of Assam.

Bhattacharya (2004) has described in detail the Sattras of Assam belonging to the four samhatis.

The work of Kalita and Dhing Mazumder (2005) contains all the information about Saint Sankaradeva and his multifaceted personality and contribution in the field of religion, culture, social reform, economic manifestation and other which are hardly found in one book. The book is a critical historical and sociological account of the famous Majuli River Island that was created centuries ago by the River Brahmaputra. Separated from the mainland society of Assam being encompassed all around by a large water body of that great River, the Island nurtures a typical traditional social and culture systems that crystallized since the time of 15th and 16th Centuries when the rulers of Assam made it a land of the Vaishnava preachers and founded there, on their behalf, grand religious institutions called Sattra. In the 20th century, especially in the post colonial period, geography and society of the Island, its institutional structure and social stratifications have been significantly impacted upon by the forces of change created mainly by modernization, demographic change and globalization. The work looks at the evolution of the society in the Island and its value systems during the last few Centuries, and its response to the forces of changes in the modern times.
Unique Contributions of Shrimanta Sankaradeva in Religion and Culture authored by Borkakati (2006) is a comprehensive book dealing with diverse themes ranging from the life sketch of Shrimanta Sankaradeva and his philosophy to Ankiya Nats and Bhaonas of the Saint. The book has dealt with different contributions of the Saint in the field of Bargeet, Sankari music and Dance. There is a deep analysis of each of these in the book. The author has proved in a chapter the originality of Srimanta Sankaradeva’s works. This was in fact a rejoinder to those people who termed Srimanta Sankaradeva as indebted to other people like Chaitanyadeva for his philosophy and dance compositions. One particular chapter titled ‘Ethnic integration by Shrimanta Sankaradeva’ gives the readers an insight to how Shrimanta Sankaradeva brought the composite Assamese nation into being through his Vaishnavee creed.

Dash (2008) has thrown light on Jagannath temple complex, Vaishnavite, Saivite, Jain and Buddhist traditions.

Sarma(2004) traces the history of Auniati Sattra. The writer feels the history of the Sattra is part of the Assamese history and culture which is rich and vibrant. According to Phukan (2011), Sankaradeva a mere religious reformer is a misnomer. This book tells the story of a man who rose to greatness in his lifetime. Emphasis is on Sankaradeva’s multi-faceted genius often obscured by religious overtones. Saint Sankaradeva well and affectively conveyed a message of humanism to people through music and dance, something that remains relevant to several Centuries after they were conceived. Nath (2012) has traced the role of former Sattradhikar Shri Shri Pitambar Deva Goswami of Garamur Sattra of Majuli, who revolutionized the entire system associated to his Sattra with the developmental aspects of Indian national life. The writer has drawn the history of the Garamur Sattra as well.

1.4 Methodology

Field study is the most important essence of Anthropology and ‘no amount of book knowledge is a substitute for field experience.’ (Srinivas, 1992: 121). Importance of
investigation is given high priority in this study. The facts and data presented here have been collected from a number of visits to Auniati Sattra which is widely acclaimed as the biggest and the most important of the Sattras in Majuli. This study is the outcome of three years of field work in Auniati Sattra in Majuli as well as in its branch in North Guwahati.

The qualitative and analytical data was collected through visiting the main as well as the branches of the Auniati Sattra. Schedule of meetings and personal interviews was done with the Sattradhikar, Deka Sattradhikar, the senior bhakats holding position of prominence in Sattra’s day-to-day activities and administration and other bhakats in the Sattra. Various methods for data collection was employed like one to one interaction, structured as well as unstructured interviews, case studies and observations of different activities of the Sattra. The research scholar has also visited different households of local people of the area to understand the lifestyle, and different religious and cultural festivals in the Sattra together with information on the impact of modernization on the Sattra. These interactions along with participation in the local festivals helped in broadening the knowledge base regarding the lifestyle and day-to-day religious practices of the local people. In addition to Auniati Sattra, some visits were also made to other Sattras like Garamur, Dakshinpat and Kaliyapani Sattra to have a deeper understanding of the Sattra culture.

Further, available literature, books, journals, periodicals, historical documents, published/unpublished doctoral thesis and internet were also consulted from time to time. Elaborate library work was undertaken in the Libraries of the Department of Anthropology, Gauhati University; Krishna Kanta Handique Library, Gauhati University; Library of the Regional Centre of Indian Council of Historical Research, and research institutions like Kamrup Anusandhan Samity, Guwahati and Vivekananda Kendra Institute of Culture, Guwahati. The researcher also visited Central Library, University of Calcutta, Library of Asiatic Society, Kolkata and Library of Anthropological Survey of India, Kolkata.

1.5. Presentation of Materials

Chapter I gives an idea about the study area, the objective of the study, methodology adopted and also about the literature consulted during the course of the work. Chapter II
deals with a descriptive account of the Majuli River Island with special reference to its culture, the different caste and communities residing in the Island, their source of livelihood and its flora and fauna. In Chapter III, the origin and development of *Neo-Vaishnavism* in India and subsequently to Assam has been discussed. The history, architectural features, management, the different functionaries, functions of the *bhakats* and their daily life are discussed in Chapter IV. Chapter V gives a detailed description about the administration and the different activities- daily, annual, occasional and other religious and organizational activities of the Sattra. Chapter VI gives an idea about the Cultural contribution of the Sattra in the field of dance, drama, music, literature, journalism and an attempt has also been made to show the Sattra’s relation with the society. In Chapter VII the research work has been summarized and conclusions have been drawn.
Fig 4. FORMATION OF MAJULI ISLAND, TRACEING WITH THE HELP OF WRITTEN RECORDS AVAILABLE