CHAPTER III

THE NEO-VAISHNAVITE MOVEMENT

*Bhakti*, which is devotion to God, is intrinsic in the growth of every religion though we may call it by dissimilar names. When human mind fails to answer the intricacies of life, we turn to God, either to help us in our dull affairs or to find support.

Like any other religion, the feeling of devotion is prevalent in Indian religious tradition since ancient times. But *Bhakti* or devotion as a means of salvation had assumed special significance in the medieval period of the Indian History. It had brought many changes in the socio-religious life of the Indian people and so it is termed as ‘Bhakti Movement’.

When we use the term *Bhakti* movement in general, we should be also heedful that it was neither a uniform nor unified movement having same philosophy and practices all over the country. There were many differences in it and even at time faced oppositions. Yet, by and large they had contributed towards lessening the discrimination towards the lower caste, improved the position of women and encouraged literary and creative activities.

The ‘*Bhakti movement*’ was an all inclusive spiritual movement, particularly in Hinduism, to save it from the gradual decline it witnessed during the medieval period in India. This upheld a path to salvation through a personal relationship of love, devotion and
absolute surrender to God. This movement gave an empowerment to the common people as it strove to remove discrimination in the form of caste, sex or religion and promoted a wide range of literary and creative activities.

The movement is believed to have begun in South India with the Tamil speaking people around 6th to 9th Century. The Alwars, worshippers of Vishnu, and the Nayanars, worshippers of Shiva propagated this movement through their devotional bhajans (songs). The Alwars, who were the primary Brahmin messengers to South India, composed devotional songs and hymns using the local vernacular languages, which reflected the emotions and sentiments of the common people. In this way they could connect themselves very easily to the masses and were successful in spreading the faith of Vaishnavism. In Southern India, an uninterrupted line of Vaishnavite reformers existed from the 9th Century down to the end of the 15th Century.

Between the 12th and 18th Centuries, a major part of India came under Islamic rule and the sentiments of the Hindu people were very low attributed by divisions on basis of caste and conversion of people from Hinduism to Islamism. Hence, there was a spontaneous acceptance of this movement and it rapidly spread throughout the country, aided and abetted by the immense collection of songs and literature produced by the leaders of the tradition in their local dialects. The great Vaishnava renaissance based on the devotional cult of the Alwars was started by Ramanuja in 11th Century, and it was carried forward by Nimbarkacharya (11th Century), Madhavacharya (13th Century), Ramananda (14th Century), Kabir (15th Century), Chaitanya (15th -16th Century) and others through immense painstaking efforts. “The Schools of Vaishnavism founded by the above reformers might differ in philosophical niceties and outward religious observances, but the fundamental basis of these schools of Vaisnavism did not differ very much” (Sarma1999:1). The impact of Islam through its conversions prompted the thinkers and reformers of Hindu society to develop a simpler and liberal faith that would be suitable to all similarly. The Bhakti cult that was confined mainly to South India soon evolved as the accepted religion to all people with certain modifications by reformers of different regions.
And within a short span of time this renaissance had spread across the length and breadth of India.

It is generally said that there are four main sampradayas or sects of Vaishnavism which have been classified based on the teachings of Ramanuja, Madhavacharya and Nimberkacharya. All the existing minor sects are said to have been incorporated in these four main sampradayas. Ramananda, the fifth successor after Ramanuja stressed upon the worshipping of Lord Rama (who is an incarnation of Vishnu) through the chanting of his name. He propagated the teachings of a casteless society and it took the shape of the first sampradaya known as Sri-sampradaya. Madhavacharya was the founder of second sect which came to be known as Madhvi after his name. The third main sampradaya i.e. the Rudra-sampradaya whose founder was Vallabhacharya traces its origin to Vishnuswami. The followers of this sect worship Gopala Krishna with Radha and images of his different manifestations. In several parts of India, particularly in Gujarat many people are followers of Vallabhacharya Vaishnavism. Nimbaditya, the founder of the fourth main sampradaya and the followers of his sect called Nimat worship Krishna with Radha, and they consider Srimad Bhagavata as the chief scripture.

There is also a sect called Vithal-Bhaktas in Maharashtra. Followers of this sect are scattered across various places of central India, Gujarat and Karnataka. This sect is known as Vaishnava-vir. Their god of worship is Pandurang, Vithal or Vithoba. They consider him as the ninth incarnation of Vishnu i.e. Buddhadeva and hence are called Buddha-Vaishnavas. This sect gives importance to the love between the upasya and upasaka i.e. the object of worship and the worshipper.

In East, particularly in Bengal the foundation of Vaishnavism can be credited to Chaitanya, who is also acknowledged as the founder of the Chaitanya sampradaya. He spread the ideals of the worship of Radha-Krishna and the attitude of the soul to God was represented in this cult by the attitude of the beloved towards her lover. The devoted longing of the gopis (gopi- daughter of a cowherd) for Krishna was considered archetypal of the soul’s longing for the God.
Assam, since ancient times was separated politically from mainland India till the British, sort of united the entire parts of India, however at no point of time was it completely disconnected as far as the renaissance movements and other literary and cultural events are considered. The great Vaishnava renaissance movement inspired the people in other parts of the country and it rapidly spread across Assam (ancient Pragjyotishpur) under the great reformer Shrimanta Sankaradeva. “This does not, however mean that the vainsava faith and movement of Assam was devoid of any speciality of its own. In practical application of the principles and tenets and in working out the details of the faith, it evolved a cult of its own best suited to the genius of the people” (Sarma, 1999:1).

Between the 12th and 15th Century, as in the rest of India, political and social life of Assam was in dump, full of disorder and collapse among various communities. Through the Bhakti movement, Saint Sankaradeva brought these communities under the same roof, providing a systematized code and conduct of life, which made Neo-Vaishnavism a social revolutionary movement, ushering through two unique institutions—the Sattra and the Namghar.

15th Century Assam gradually gathered the power and became an important factor in the socio-cultural changes in India. Main focus of the Bhakti was religion, but one aspect of human life has an outcome on the other aspect, so we cannot totally separate religious and social life. By trying to create relatively harmonious individuals, the Bhakti saints had contributed towards creating a relatively pleasant society. Having a perfectly harmonious society is probably a dream. But after all it is idealists who challenge the impossible and initiate improvements. Without the dream of King Martin Luther, the condition of the Blacks probably would have not been as good as it is today and without Mahatma Gandhi, there would have been more bloodshed in the world. Bhakti saints were also such dreamer-visionary, who profoundly influenced the socio-religious practices of the Medieval India including Assam.
3.1 Neo-Vaishnavism and Shrimanta Sankaradeva

Saint Sankaradeva was born in the middle of the 15th Century and his father was a landlord called ‘Bhuyas’ and belonged to the ‘Kayastha’ caste. In ancient India, Kayasthas were considered as upper castes.

Sankaradeva showed the qualities of a genius since his childhood. But it was the demise of his wife that made him introspective and he became more inclined towards God. It is an irony that a man turns to God when he goes through suffering in his personal life. It may be that when God selects someone to shower his bounty, he himself snatches away those things from his devotees which are likely to create attachments with the material world. So when material possession and the people who create bound with the world had gone we feel increasingly drawn towards God.

Shrimanta Sankaradeva’s first wife died and after that he went for a long pilgrimage. According to ‘Katha Guru Carita’, he visited important places of pilgrimage spread across the country. During his tour he was influenced by the ongoing wave of the Bhakti movement throughout the length and breadth of the country. After coming back he started preaching the worship of Lord Krishna (Vishnu) and established ‘Satras’ (places of prayer) at different places of Assam. His disciple- Saint Madhavadeva also played an important role in the spread of Vaishnavism in Assam.

Vaishnavism forms the major part of Bhakti movement of the medieval period. Worship of Vishnu was prevalent in Assam earlier also, but Vaishnavism that was introduced by Saint Sankaradeva with soul searching innovations that embodied the ideals of salvation revolutionized the society, and affected the social, cultural and political life of the people of Assam. Very lately, Saint Sankaradeva’s new religion came to be known as Neo-Vaishnavism through the writings of various scholars.
3.2 Caste System, Bhakti Cult and Neo-Vaishnavism

Caste system is one of the most unfair practices and had done a lot of harm to the Indian society. One bold step that Saint Sankaradeva initiated was that he appointed some non-Brahmins as head of some of the Sattra’s and he did not encounter any opposition to this newly introduced practice of him.

The influence and rigidity of the caste system in Assam is relatively less than other parts of India. Saints who professed Bhakti cult in many parts of the country could not show similar courage like Shrimanta Sankaradeva because those saints in general had a very high opinion about the Brahmins. Tulsidas, whose ‘Ramchritmanasa’ has a profound influence in North India says,

\[
\text{“Pujiya Bipra Shil Guna Hina,} \\
\text{Shudra na Guna Gyan Pravina” (Hindi)} \\
\text{(Ramcharitmanas, Aryankand).}
\]

(It is stated in the above stanza that a Brahmin with no character and traits should be worshipped, but not a Shudra having all the good character and knowledge).

However, in the domain of religion, the Bhakti saints rejected the discrimination based on the castes; Saint Madhavadeva said, the holy utterance of Lord Ram’s name by all caste including the impure or untouchable ones help them in attaining salvation.

This is very similar to what Ramananda preached in the North India,

\[
\text{“Jat Pat na Puche Koi} \\
\text{Hari Ko Bhaje so Hari Ka Hoi” (Hindi)}
\]

(None should question about the identity of caste or creed, anybody who worship Hari, will be accepted by Hari.)

However those Saints, the followers of Bhakti cult did not systematically attempted to do away with the caste discrimination practiced in the society. This attitude of giving
equality to the lower caste in this cult and treating them as inferior in social hierarchy and practices does not go down well with the rational mind. This undue importance given to the person born as a Brahmin and discrimination against the lower castes is one of the important causes of the lower castes walking away from the fold of Hinduism and made them to embrace Buddhism, Islam and Christianity throughout the Indian territories.

The *Bhakti* saints were pained at the discrimination but they could not rise above the prevailing social practices and in asserting equality for all. It is also difficult for the privileged section of the society to introduce the radical changes which may challenge their own privileged position. Many luminaries of the *Bhakti* movement like Gyneshwara and Tulisadasa were born in the Brahmin family and could not imagine a society without a regulating mechanism of ‘*Chaturvarna*’ (the traditional four folded caste system). Being themselves Brahmins, they were probably also reluctant to let the privileges go from their hands. In comparison Buddha appears to be more courageous, who out rightly rejected the caste system. Similar courageous spirit was also shown by Kabir. However it may be mentioned that Buddha and Kabir, both were non-Brahmins, and so Saint Sankaradeva was.

Saint Sankaradeva working away from the centers of orthodox Brahmanism like Kashi (Vanaras), was relatively bolder than his counterparts in other parts of the country. He did not show servility towards the Brahmins like Tulisadasa. On the other hand as already referred; he appointed non-Brahmins also as head of the Sattras. But at the same time it may also be mentioned that he also did not initiate any radical reforms in the social practices of the Hindu society of Assam. That was never his basic motive. His main focus was to preach the *Bhakti* to Lord Krishna and other aspects in his approach came as complimentary. Unusual domination of the Brahmins, their superiority based on the birth continued. In Sattras higher and lower castes mingled together, but once they stepped out, the old way of life continued. This duality of practicing semblance of equality during prayer and continuation of the discrimination after it is one of the glaring lacunae in the *Bhakti* movement. This is true of the *Bhakti* movement not only in Assam but in other parts of the country as well. Rather it was more glaring in other parts of the country.
The caste system had taken such a hold of Hindu psyche for Centuries together that the attempts of reformers starting from Buddha to Dr.B.R. Ambedkar had made a very little dent in it. Bhakti saints in general had also refrained from any attempt of demolishing it. Yet they must be given credit that they contributed towards reducing the intensity of discrimination towards lower castes.

It is also possible that even though the Bhakti saints wanted to eradicate the discrimination based on the birth, they were cautious that they should not make the powerful Brahmin lobby hostile. We see in case of Saint Sankaradeva, he encountered the hostility of the Brahmins and the Brahmins taking advantage of their proximity to the Kings instigated the royalty and Shrimanta Sankaradeva and his disciples had to suffer. He was compelled to leave the Ahom Kingdom and seek shelter in Koch Kingdom. His son-in-law was executed and Saint Madhavadeva was imprisoned. If this was a situation in Assam, which was relatively new in the fold of Brahminism and was surrounded by the non-Aryan and non-Brahminical tribes, one can imagine the influence that the Brahmins might have had in other parts of the country, where the orthodox Brahminism had taken deeper roots.

The network of Satras and Namghars spread in the Brahmaputra valley. Namghar is a place of worship in village similar to Sattra but on a smaller scale. The population belonging to different tribes and communities found a common place to come together and satisfy their spiritual thrust. Out of these gatherings, Vaishnava identity began to develop. Religious practices are one of the important unifying factors. The attempts of Neo-Vaishnavism to bring the different tribes together is obvious from the sayings of Saint Madhavadeva,

By uttering O Rama,
One attains salvation including

The Miris, the Ahoms and the Kacharis. (Rendered into English from Namghosa).

Neo-Vaishnavism had also given freedom to the people from the tyranny of the Brahmin priest and to avoid the complicated costly rituals and also from the heinous practices of the prevailing Sakta cult.
Coming to Sattra and the *Namghar* and singing the praise of Lord Krishna became new rituals in Assam. These rituals were simpler and were accessible to everyone in comparisons to the complicated and costly rituals of the *Sakta* and orthodox Brahmins.

3.3 **Origin of the Sattra Institution**

In the literature, Sattra means

"*ekanta Vaisnava yot nibasa karai I*

*Jibak saran diya ,tak satra kai*” II

means where the single-minded Vaisnavas reside, where they offer sarana (shelter) to the souls, that (place) is called a satra .( www.auniati.org, 11.07.2012)

According to Williams (1997:113), ‘Etymologically the term ‘Sattra’ is derived from sat meaning honest, pious people and trai meaning ‘to rescue’ or ‘to deliver’.

Barua, (1996:934) has used the spelling (স্ত্র) in the Assamese Dictionary, *Hemkosha*, hence we are using ‘tt’ in the word Sattra. However in some cases, people also used the word (স্ত্র) Satra. Barua has also defined Sattra as a dwelling place of *Neo-Vaishanavite* scholar and devotees like Gosain, Mahanta and Bhakat.

‘In Sanskrit literature the word *sattra* has been used in two senses, firstly, in the sense of an alms house and secondly, in the sense of a sacrifice lasting from a few days to a year or more. The latter sense is responsible for lending nomenclature to the Vaisnavite institution of Assam. In the opening chapter of the *Bhagavata-purana* the word *sattra* has been used to denote a long session of sacrifice of a thousand year’s duration performed by sages in the forest of Nimisa. In course of the sacrificial session Suta-Ugrasrava recited and explained the entire *Bhagavata-purana* to the assembled sages. This process of reciting and listening to the exposition of the *Bhagavata* most probably gave currency to the word *sattra* in Assam. Sankaradeva probably initiated his movement by reciting and
expounding stories from the Bhagavata-purana, to a band of followers who clustered around him to listen to his religious discourses. The part played by Sankaradeva reminded listeners of the part played by Suta-Ugrasrava in the assembly of holy sages in the forest of Nimisa. The fact that a sacrificial session known as sattra proceeded concurrently with the act of expounding the Bhagavata, easily led people to believe that a sattra and a holy association where the Bhagavata used to be discussed were identical. Under this impression devotees began to term an assembly where the Bhagavata used to be recited as a sattra. The etymological meaning of the word which means an association or a sitting (‘sad +tra) or an instrument which helps to liberate the noble (sat +’ trai) must have supplied additional weight to form the above notion about sattra. The word sattra naturally became satra in Assamese’ (Sarma, 1999:143-144).

I have used the spelling ‘Sattra’ in place of ‘Satra’ as the same has been used in the recently submitted Nomination Dossier to UNESCO for its nomination for WHS (World Heritage Site). Moreover Dr. Richard a. Engelhardt used the word Sattra with the same spelling in his report that he submitted to the UNESCO headquarter at Paris after his visit to Majuli in 2000 ( UNESCO Report, 2007).

The Sattra as a Neo-Vaishnavite religious institution is more than five Centuries old. Throughout such a long course of history, it is probable that the institution has faced many changes in its growth, development and expansion. In course of time Sattra institution has multiplied in number and it has became a characteristic symbol of Assamese society and culture. (An exhaustive list of three hundred and eighty Sattras under different sects with the name of their founders and approximate time of their foundation is given by S.N Sarma in his book “Neo-Vaishnavite Movement and the Satra Institution of Assam”(1999). Another estimated list of six hundred and fifty Sattras is given in Cantlie’s book, “The Assamese”(1984).

The present day Assamese Vaishnavite Sattra consist of a large assembly hall or prayer hall call Namghar, supported by two rows of pillars. Traditionally, the pillars were
made of wood and the roof covered with thatch, but presently a Namghar is built with brick and corrugated iron sheet roofs. Such a permanent structure can withstand the storms and also gather prestige. It is the center of all religious activities of the Sattra. The eastern end of this hall opens to the Manikut (sanctum sactorium or house of jewel meaning the actual abode of Lord Krishna) where an idol together with precious and sacred assets, books and other paraphernalia are preserved. Namghar is surrounded by rows of huts or spacious houses divided into a numbers of rooms for the accommodation of the resident monks or celibate devotees on its four directions called hatis. Each residences of celibate monks is led the baha and they are universally seen in Auniati Sattra, Uttar Kamalabari Sattra, Natun Kamalabari Satta, Dakhinpat Sattra and elsewhere.

Such structural features of Sattra, evoke a comparison with other religious institution as Buddhist Viharas, where there is also a provision for resident monks. Whatever be the similarities of influence of such institutions, the Neo-Vaishnavite infrastructure establishments of Assam have got the characteristics of their own.

3.4 Stages of Evolution of the Sattra Institution

The early stage of the Sattra institution can be traced back to the days of Saint Sankaradeva. The beginning of such an institution was characterized with the formation of a religious sitting around him. There are references that in those days that the daily sittings of the monks and other lay disciples were held sometimes in the open or under the shades of trees. Such a gathering (in the open air) probably marked the beginning of the Sattra. But during the time of Saint Sankaradeva the Sattra did not have all the features of a permanent institution. Naturally such regular sitting necessitated the construction of a shed which in the course of time became a prayer hall a Namghar or a Kirttanghar. The Sattra at this stage was referred as Devagriha or Deva mandir. The absence of the office of the Sattradhikar (head of the Sattra) indicates that existing formal type of organizational structure of Sattra is of a later period.

There was also no regular source of income at that time. As there is no reference relating to the existence of charihati (four rows of residential huts around the Namghar)
in the preliminary stage of its growth, it is assumed that management of Sattra with the help of the resident devotees is a later phenomenon. Management at that time was simple and self sufficient economy had hardly developed.

Later on, with the introduction of the system of Guru kar (fee to the Guru) by Saint Madhavadeva and sidha-bhojani (donation either cash or kind) the institution for the first time came to be associated with regular source of income. The Guru kar is a direct type of tax imposed by the Sattra on its disciples. The sidha-bhojani is an indirect type of tax; i.e. every house holder disciple has to contribute food stuff to the Sattra, according to his capacity whenever he visits the Sattra.

The first Sattra is Batadruwa in the present district of Nagaon, when Saint Sankaradeva after his return from first pilgrimage used to convert his school mates, swarm covenant, some of his family members and his school masters. Batadruwa as Sattra did not have the structure of a permanent institution and it ceased to exist for more than a hundred years after Saint Sankaradeva’s departure from Vatadrava to Patbansi via Gangmou (north bank of the River Brahmaputra) and Dhuwahat (Majuli). The importance of Vatadrava as a sacred place came to be recognized towards the middle of 17th Century after the discovery of Vatadrava by Saint Sankaradeva’s daughter-in-law, Kanaklata.

Saint Sankaradeva after leaving Vatadrava with his relatives and faithful followers used to settle at different places and finally settled at Patbansi (presently at Barpeta district) where religious cultural restoration gathered momentum. The principal apostles of Saint Sankaradeva during his stay at Patbansi were Shri Shri Madavadeva, Shri Shri Damodaradeva, Shri Shri Harideva, and Shri Shri Narayan Das (Thakur Ata). Very near to Saint Sankaradeva’s abode, Shri Shri Damodaradeva for the first time established the Patbansi Sattra during the period 1560-1590 AD and Shri Shri Madhavadeva built the Barpeta Sattra in 1583 AD. The first Sattra established by Harideva during the period 1560-1580 AD was Maneri (Kamrup). Therefore the early Sattras of Assam were situated within the Koch Kingdom. Establishment of the early Sattras in Koch Kingdom indicates
that the Koch monarchs of both eastern and western Assam (Kamrup) took sympathetic attitude towards Vaishnava Saints together with help and cooperation.

In the growth of Sattra, Saint Madhavadeva role had far reaching significance. Being the successor of Saint Sankaradeva, Saint Madhabadeva appointed a number of apostles for preaching Neo-Vaishnavism ideals among the village folks. Out of the 12 apostles appointed by him the contributions of Vamsigopaldeva (initiated by Saint Damodaradeva), Gopaladeva and Padma Ata in respect of creating a Vaishnavite atmosphere in eastern Assam appear to be noteworthy.

Purusottam Thakur (1561-1619 AD) the eldest grandson of Saint Sankaradeva, felt the necessity of extending the Satstras. His first Sattra was Jania, about 10 Kms away from Barpeta. Here he selected 12 disciples (6 Brahmins and 6 non-Brahmins) to establish Sattra in different corners of Assam in order to propagate Saint Sankaradeva’s religious faith. Following his elder brother Purusottam Thakur, Chaturbhuja Thakur (son of Haricaran, Purusottam’s own uncle) also appointed 12 disciples. After the demise of Chaturbhuja Thakur (1648 AD) his first wife Kanaklata as a religious head was appointed who had 12 apostles. In the history of Assam it was for the first time that a woman played an active role in the establishment of Sattras.

3.5 Vaishnavite Sects of Assam and Expansion of the Sattras

Perhaps the religious orders is ought to get divided. After the death of Saint Sankaradeva the orthodox Mahapurusiya cult had undergone change which resulted in four distinct Samhatis (association or group) viz., Brahma, Kala, Purusa and Nika.

Some of his apostles after Saint Sankaradeva, deserved religious headship to succeed him. Saint Sankaradeva did not confer his position neither to his son Ramananda nor to Shri Shri Damodaradeva. But Saint Madhavadeva was selected as his able inheritor. This hidden conflict gave birth to the germ of division among the Mahapurusiya. Though they accepted Saint Sankaradeva as Guru, they were not mentally prepared to install Saint Madhavadeva on the same position. Ultimately Saint Damodaradeva separated from the Mahapurusiya fold. Another Brahmin Saint,
Harideva, also separated from the fold and joined Saint Damodaradeva. As a result of the joint effort by Saint Damodaradeva and Saint Harideva, a separate group known as Brahma Samhati was created. The pre-dominance of Brahmanical rituals is the basic feature of Brahma Samhati. Organized efforts were made in the establishment of the Sattras of Brahma Samhati in central and upper Assam. The most influential royal Sattras of Assam popularly known as chari Sattras (four Sattras of Assam) namely Auniati Sattra (1654 AD), Dakhinpat Sattra (1653 AD), Kuruwabahi Sattra (1600 AD) and Garmur Sattra (1715 AD) belong to Brahma Samhati. These four Sattras trace their genealogy to Vamsigopaladeva, who was the direct disciple of Saint Damodaradeva, and Dakhinpat Sattra to Banamalideva, another distinguished disciple of Shri Shri Damodaradeva.

The Brahma samhati developed as a result of Saint Damodaradeva and Saint Harideva moving away from Srimanta Sankaradeva’s successor Srimanta Madhavadeva’s leadership. Over time this samhati brought back some elements of Brahminical orthodoxy. The vedic rituals which are generally prohibited in the other samhatis are allowed in this samhati. Brahmins too found this samhati attractive and most of the Sattras of this samhati have traditionally Brahmin Sattradhikars. Worship of the images of the deva (Vishnu and the chief incarnations, Krishna and Rama) are allowed. Among the Gurus, Damodaradeva is paramount. Later on they came to call themselves Damodariya after Saint Damodaradeva.

After the death of Saint Madhavadeva (1596 AD) the Mahapurusiya group again took the form of three distinct sects. The cause of further sub-division seem to be the dispute over succession to the office of the Guru among Gopaldeva, Mathuradas Ata and Purusuttam Thakur. Subsequently three more sub-sects namely Purusa, Kala and Nika developed within the main body of the order under the leadership of Purusuttam Thakur, Gopaldev, and Mathuradas budha Ata respectively.

The sub-sect Purusa samhati regarded Saint Sankaradeva as the only Guru. It is said that the glory of Saint Sankaradeva was fading due to the over-zealous efforts of
some followers of Saint Madhavadeva. The *Purusa Samhati* proclaimed that other religious heads that followed after Sankaradeva were just his agents. They were reluctant to acclaim Saint Madhavadeva as the second *Guru*. Purushottom Thakur from whose name this order originated was the grandson of Srimanta Sankaradeva. They took an ambivalent attitude towards image worship and Brahmanical rites. This order laid emphasis on the *nam* and developed various creative congregational practices like *Palnam* (recitation in shifts) and *utha nam* (chanting of prayers accompanied by rhythmic body movements).

The *Kala samhati*, initiated by Gopal Ata and named after the place of his headquarters Kaljar, placed its emphasis on *Guru*. The leader of this *samhati* came to be considered as the physical embodiment of *Deva*, and the disciples of this sect are not allowed to pay obeisance to anyone else. This sect was successful in initiating many tribal and socially backward groups into the *Mahapurusiya* fold, and it had the largest following among the different *samhatis*. The followers of this sect were responsible for the Moamoria rebellion against the Ahom royalty.

The *Nika Samhati* emphasized the importance of association (*bhakta-sangha*) and adhered scrupulously to the ideals of Saint Madhavadeva. This order originated after the formation of the other three sects. In their perception the other sects had gone wayward. A set of rules was evolved to purify the *Vaishnava*’s body and mind. They lay stress on proper food, dress, and cleanliness of habit and purity of conduct. Srimanta Madhavadeva is considered their *Guru* and Srimanta Sankaradeva the *Guru* of their *Guru*.

The Sattra of Assam can be set out on a genealogical chart after the founders of the sub-sects.
The Sattra as an institution grew due to two main reasons: (a) by the establishment of new Sattra and (b) by the division of existing Sattras. The Sattra institution appears to have reached its final stage of expansion by the close of the 18th Century with the acceptance of *Vaishnavism* by the Ahom rulers.

Extension of the royal patronage to a number of Sattras towards the second half of the 17th Century continued till the end of 18th Century. The development of Sattra reached a higher stage during this period. Such patronage placed the Sattra on a sound economic footing and gave rise to a series of functionaries in the organization of the Sattras. Royal help and patronage were granted mainly in the form of land without any kind of tax. Through patronage the State achieved some degree of control over the religious organizations and thus limited the autonomy of the Sattra. Auniati Sattra is one of the Sattra which got the royal patronage from Ahom Kings. This Sattra is under *Brahma Samhati*.

### 3.6 Saint Damodaradeva’s role in the spread of *Neo-Vaishnavism*

Damodaradeva (1488-1598), an outstanding disciple of Saint Sankaradeva was a Brahmin of a village near Bardowa, near Nowgong. After Saint Sankaradeva had left for Kamrup in 1546 AD, Damodara with his family also migrated to Kamrup and settled at Barpeta. Here he came into close contact with Srimanta Sankaradeva and moved by
reverence to the Saint, he accepted the *Ekasarana-dharma*. Shri Shri Damodaradeva played an important role in the spread of *Sankari* religion, particularly in converting the Brahmins to the faith. With the conversion of the learned Brahmins, the movement gained a status and superiority over other faiths and came to command the admiration and reverence of Kings and nobles. This indeed was by no means an attainment towards the growth and popularity of the faith. After Saint Sankaradeva’s death, dissension arose between Shri Shri Damodaradeva and Shri Shri Madhavadeva, and as a result the former seceded from the main creed. He founded a new sub-sect of *Vaishnavism*, which came to be known after his own name (Damodariya). Shri Shri Damodaradeva is said to have introduced worship of minor gods and observances of Vedic and Brahminical rites. In social intercourse, however, there is no distinction between a *Mahapurusiya* and Damodariya. They join in all religious ceremonies connected with the Sattras and the *Namghar*, only while the *Mahapurusiyas* are stern against idol worship. In later years, for this reason, he had to leave his native place and migrate to Koch Behar where he passed away in 1598 AD. Shri Shri Damodaradeva had several illustrious disciples who carried his doctrines to the eastern part of Assam. Vamshigopaldeva (1548-1668) was one of his ardent disciples. Shri Shri Madhavadeva and Shri Shri Damodaradeva both deputed Vamshigopaldeva to Upper Assam for spreading the message of *Bhakti*.

Vamshigopaldeva like his *Guru* was constantly on the move, and accompanied by disciples and devotees he came into close contact with the people beyond Kamarupa to whom he delivered the messages of *Bhakti*. Vamshigopaldeva was a saint of a practical temperament and had superb organizational abilities. He himself established several Sattras and inspired his disciples also to set up Sattras in Upper Assam. The major Sattra set up by Vamshigopaldeva was Kuruwabahi at the mouth of the Dhansiri River, in the district of Sibsagar, presently situated in Nagaon. Niranjanadeva, a prominent disciple of Vamshigopaldeva, founded the Auniati Sattra in the Majuli Island of the Brahmaputra. Niranjanadeva’s purity of character and devotion to God drew admiration even from the Ahom King Jayadhvaja Singha (1648-1663) who himself became the saint Niranjanadeva’s disciple and endowed the Sattra with suitable land and other grants for the maintenance of the Saint, his monks and the monastery.