



Naamghar Association of America

NEWSLETTER

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MESSAGE FROM *BOR-MEDHI*

Spring is in the air and Bihu greetings from NAAM to all of you for the upcoming Rongali Bihu. I wanted to update you with our accomplishments in Naamghar Association of America, Inc. (NAAM) in the first quarter of 2019 along with what NAAM plans to do to achieve its goal of establishing a Naamghar in America.

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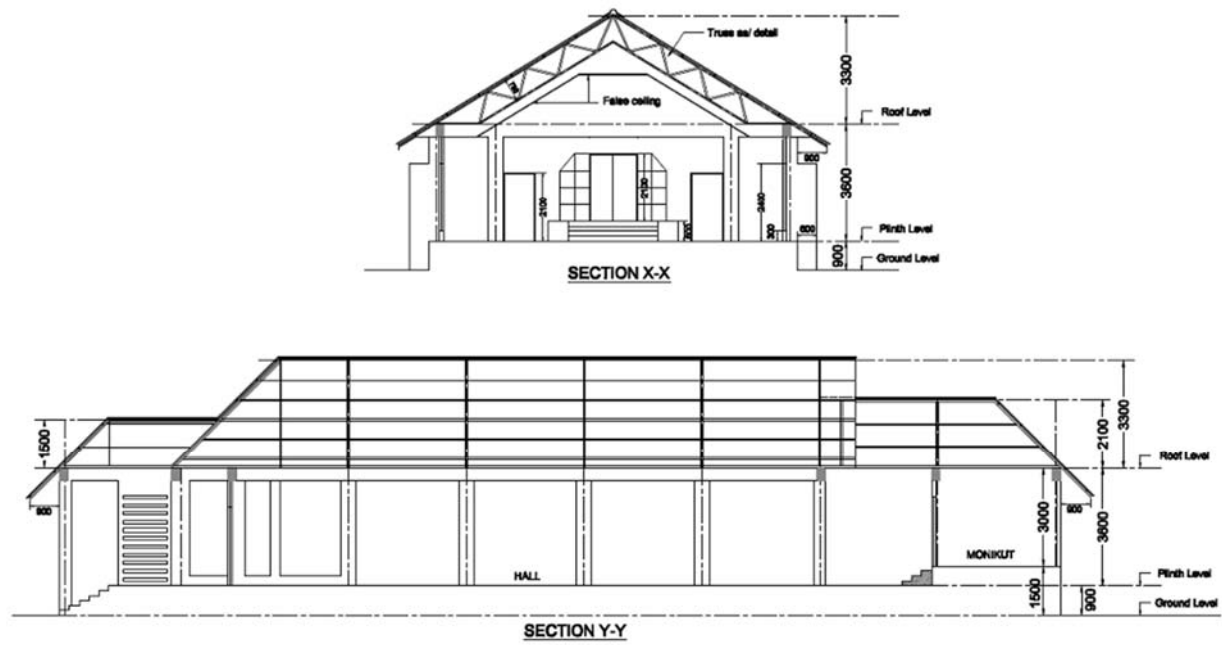
We organized two *Naam-Praxangas* this year and few more are planned. These were well-attended with participation from the entire community. We plan to facilitate video conferencing capabilities so that interested parties from other parts of the country may join the *bhakats* and *bhakatanis* from this northeast region of the country.

We have created a Working Group (WG) which currently has members from across the United States and is open to any individual who is interested in supporting NAAM's mission and goals. Currently the WG work is being conducted remotely using teleconferencing facilities. We may use such teleconferencing facility to incorporate a "spiritual dialog" to be led by the Satradhikar of the Sri Sri Auniati Satra, Sri Sri Dr. Pitambar Dev Goswami.

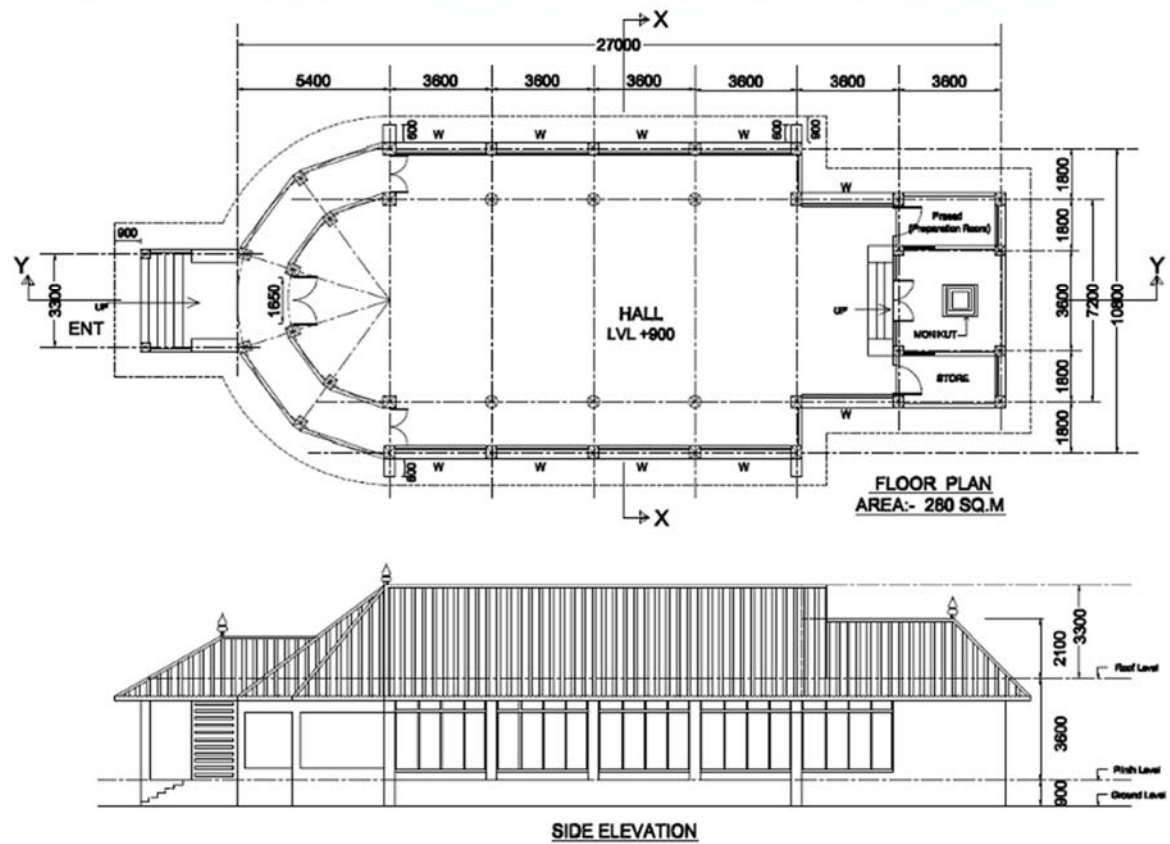
All these activities and well-thought out plans and programs along with your active participation will make all of us proud to achieve the dream of having our maiden Community Naamghar in North America.

Moving forward, we need to have a clear strategy and action plan for our Naamghar project, the scope of which has to be meaningful and deliverable. We are giving further shape to our temporary Naamghar in the first phase followed by our permanent Naamghar next. We have created seven sub-groups with team leaders in each to manage the project from site selection to fund raising. The first draft of the architectural design of our Naamghar is shown here.

The physical location of the community Naamghar is expected to meet the spiritual needs of the northeast communities of New Jersey, Pennsylvania, New York, Delaware as well as the nearby States of Maryland, Virginia, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Washington D.C. Distant communities of North America should be able to join us via video conferencing as well as through occasional visits to the site.



Picture 1: Profile plan of the proposed Naamghar



Picture 2: Floor plan of the proposed Naamghar

I would like to say a few words about the *Auniati Sakha Satra and Cultural Center* at Bandardewa, Lakhimpur, Assam, that was inaugurated in January 2019 with a very well-planned opening ceremony. As the invited *Bor Medhi* of NAAM, I had an opportunity to witness this event and said a few words about our planned Naamghar in America to the well-wishing *Bhakats*. The General Secretary of the Construction Committee has narrated an excellent summary of the project with its history from its inception in the year 2005. It took them thirteen years to complete this community project. While this was a project conceived and implemented in Assam, it could also shed us some light towards our planning here in North America with your active participation.

As you know our concept for the Naamghar in America came from the *Satradhikar* of Sri Sri Auniati Satra in his maiden visit in 2016, when he had joined us at the *Srimanta Sankaradeva Tithi*. Please stay tuned for our 2019-*Tithi* program along with our drive for fund raising for which we seek your full support and blessings.

Sincerely,
Dr. Binoy K. Bordoloi

FEATURED ARTICLE: MAHAPURUSHA SRIMANTA SANKARADEVA: A BRIEF ACCOUNT OF HIS LIFE, PHILOSOPHY AND WORKS

By Dr. Sanjib K. Borkakoty, Nagoan, Assam

Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankaradeva (1449 AD -1568 AD) was an important personality in the annals of Indian history. He was not only a religious preceptor, but also a social reformer, who had sanskritized the ethnic groups of the volatile North East India and assimilated them with the national main-stream. He is considered as the father of the modern Assamese race. He was a great messiah, who rescued the people of Brahmaputra valley from the regressive medieval practices like human sacrifice.

Srimanta Sankaradeva was a cultural maestro too. He created a classical dance form known both as Sankari dance and Satriya dance. The Sangeet Nātak Akādemi of India recognized it as a classical dance form in 2000 AD. Srimanta Sankaradeva also evolved a school of classical music, which is named after him. He created as many as 25 Rāgas of his own. He was also the first playwright in all modern Indian languages. Above all these, he was the first prose writer in the entire world. He introduced drop-scene and elevated stage in the world of drama way back in 1468 AD. He was also a fine artist. His art works have been preserved in the Albert Museum of London.

Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankaradeva is considered by his followers as an incarnation of God because of his multi-faceted contribution to the mankind as well as his perfect life. He strides over the national life of Assam like a giant colossus even five centuries after passing away. He went on pilgrimage twice, the first time touring the entire length and breadth of the country for long twelve years. He gave up his royal power as a king in middle Assam and came down to the level of the commoners. He founded the Eka Sharana Nāma Dharma, which preached devotion to a single God, lord Krishna. The tools of song, dance and drama were used by the saint for this purpose. He was assisted by Madhavadeva in his ventures of social reform and proselytizing activities.

Srimanta Sankaradeva lived almost half of his life in Tembuwani (Bordowa) near the present Nagaon town and the remaining part in several places like Dhuwahata, Patbausi and Kochbehar. He got an institutional structure built at Tembuwani in 1468 AD, which came to be known as Thān over time. Some people started calling it Sattra in later days. It is the centre of entire religious activities and is still going strong. It consists of a prayer-house called Kirtanghar, which is surrounded by huts lived in by the devotees. The Kirtanghar is popularly known as Nāmghar these days.

Srimanta Sankaradeva preached that there was only one God, who controlled the entire creation and remained within all sentient and insentient beings. He observed that worship of innumerable deities acted as a hindrance for attaining the final beatitude. Of course, it helped sustain the priest community. Srimanta Sankaradeva began preaching devotion to the one and only God, lord Krishna or Vishnu. He also suggested that this devotion could be within one's heart, not requiring any religious paraphernalia. Realization of God was an internal matter, not external. So the external worship of icons was redundant. He talked of universal love for all beings as God resided within all beings. He gave a clarion call to all people to shun mutual differences as there was no intrinsic difference between different ethnic groups, all of them having the same soul within. Thus, he talked of universal brotherhood and advocated for integration of different ethnic groups in the society.

Srimanta Sankaradeva educated people himself on his new and liberal ideas. His kith and kin, the Bhuyans had earlier been worshippers of mother goddess and other deities. The Shakti cult was very popular in the valley and even human sacrifice was made very often. Srimanta Sankaradeva persuaded the people to give up those traditions and become Vaishnavites. He also taught them that idol worship was unwarranted as the almighty God was not confined to a mere idol. God is an all-pervading consciousness, which manifests itself in the form of different creatures. Since all the creatures have the same God within them in the form of souls, they are all equals. So he began to preach equality among the people. He gave equal status to all his disciples. It was a major departure from the prevalent system in the society, where caste hierarchy was observed very strictly. Earlier only the upper caste people were offered access to the knowledge of scriptures. Srimanta Sankaradeva opened the door of religion to all and sundry. The Shudras, the Muslims, the tribals—all were initiated by him in his path-breaking religious system that came to be known as Eka Sharana Nâma Dharma.

Srimanta Sankaradeva preached his ideology in the rest of India during his twelve years long pilgrimage in 1481-1493 AD. People accepted him as Guru in different parts of the country. The famous Goswami brothers, Rupa and Sanatana, who in their later lives became activists of Chaitanyadeva (1486-1533 AD) also, took initiation from Srimanta Sankaradeva at Vrindavan. Actually, it was the extraordinary influence of Srimanta Sankaradeva that brought a sea-change in the characters and perspectives of the two brothers, who had till then lived royal lives of comfort. Rupa and Sanatana wanted to stay on with Srimanta Sankaradeva. They accompanied the saint up to Sitakunda. The enlightened wife of Rupa had also accompanied them. The trio were however asked to return from there by Srimanta Sankaradeva. He could foresee that they would be a great factor in the spread of Vaishnavism in the Northern India. A distinguished person named Vrindavana Das also became disciple of Srimanta Sankaradeva at Vrindavan. Two ascetics named Radha and Trijata of Vrindavan and Vrajadham respectively were won over by Srimanta Sankaradeva to the Bhakti discipline. Then there were Ramakanta of Upa-Dwaraka and poet Gopinath of Puskar, who became his disciples. Of course, there had been hordes of people at Puri who took to Eka Sharana Nâma Dharma. Ultimately in 1493 AD, Srimanta Sankaradeva returned home at forty-four years of age.

Thus, Srimanta Sankaradeva sowed the seed of Bhakti movement throughout Northern as well as Eastern India. It was mainly Chaitanyadeva, who reaped the harvest of Srimanta Sankaradeva's labour in later days. Srimanta Sankaradeva can be called the leading light for almost all the later day reformers like Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Bijoy Krishna Goswami, Swami Vivekananda and Prabhupada. His contemporary preacher and reformer, Kabir also paid high tributes to him in his verse.

Srimanta Sankaradeva built a new Thân campus at Tembuwani in 1509 AD. Earlier also a Thân had been set up there in a skeleton form way back in 1468 AD. But this time he made it full-fledged with houses for the devotees within the compound and on the four sides of the Kirtanghar. His cousin Jagatananda assisted in the construction work. The new campus was set up in a field where Kusumbar used to cultivate mustard once upon a time. The Kirtanghar was the nerve-centre of the entire Thân. The Kirtanghar was a long and open hall, where the devotees sat together to sing the glory of God. There was no idol, but only a book, generally the Bhâgavata symbolizing God in the altar. Later, a small scripture Gunamâlâ authored by Srimanta Sankaradeva began to be kept there. Gunamâlâ is a summary of Bhâgavata. In addition to prayers, cultural functions and religious discourses also were held in the Kirtanghar. Over time it came to be an integral part of every Hindu village of Assam. Any Kirtanghar set up in the villages outside the Thân came to be known as a Nâmghar.

Srimanta Sankaradeva's teachings were unique in several aspects. He derived these after much

contemplation and offered a systematic line of thought to his disciples. He enjoined upon people in all his books to have company of such persons, who were pious and devoted to God. Good company elevates one, while bad company pulls one down from meritorious life. People of high moral character have tremendous will power, whereby they can inculcate good values in others.

Srimanta Sankaradeva advised chanting of God's name as God's name makes Him available to the devotee. One can elevate oneself on the ladder of spirituality by chanting God's name religiously. Chanting His name arouses the dormant spirituality in one. God's name dispels ignorance and cuts asunder the bonds of attachment to the worldly life and things. Incessant chanting of His name creates an atmosphere of purity and sacredness wherein enlightenment dawn in the devotee. The method taught by Srimanta Sankaradeva is the least costly one for worshipping God. Also, it is the easiest of the different modes of sâdhanâ. The modern men do not have sufficient time for other types of worship; devotion by chanting God's name come very handy for them. Srimanta Sankaradeva's ideas are appropriate for even the wireless era of twenty first century.

Finally, the saint preached absolute self-surrender to God. One should dedicate everything belonging to one to the almighty God and submit oneself at the same time at His disposal. God then takes the entire responsibility of the devotee. Actually, it is His will only that prevails. The self-surrender enables the seekers of truth to understand that. The devotee also becomes capable of getting over his ego, which is a great handicap in the path of spiritual development. The perfect devotee should not have even an iota of ego as it keeps him away from God. The devotee should consider himself as a mere tool in the hand of God. Such an orientation in the devotee's attitude can be possible only when he follows the triple advices—pious company, chanting God's name and absolute self-surrender to God.

Srimanta Sankaradeva preached a unique philosophy. His teachings were in the line of Upanishadic philosophy of enlightenment by knowledge of the self, together with pure devotion to the supreme God as preached in Bhâgavata. He made a fine blending of the two. There are elements of monism, dualism, qualified monism, dualistic non dualism and so many other branches of Hindu philosophy in his teachings. Actually, he carried the entire spectrum of Hinduism in his teachings. But he corroborated his teachings so logically that it came to form a whole new school, which can be termed Vivartanavada in our view. It was a marvelous presentation of the entire range of spiritual inclinations of a person. A devotee could thus evolve through it from the gross to the subtle, from mundane to spiritual and from man to God.

Srimanta Sankaradeva was a great artist as well as an architect. The design of Kirtanghar constructed at Tembuwani was of futuristic design, the like of which was developed in the Western world only in the twentieth century. The Valkishe Theatre of Berlin resembles the Kirtanghar designed by Srimanta Sankaradeva, which predates the former by about four centuries. It has a linear simplicity and is characterized by extensive use of pillars, which also characterize the modern architecture. Another characteristic of Srimanta Sankaradeva's architectural design was symmetry, yet another feature of modern architecture too. Srimanta Sankaradeva was thus the only religious leader in the world to have evolved his own architectural pattern.

Other saints or religious leaders followed the traditional patterns. In India they followed either the Hindu or the Buddhist temples. Contrary to that, the Kirtanghar of Srimanta Sankaradeva set off a completely new style. The altar of the Kirtanghar also has been found to be a pioneer for the modern cubist design.

Srimanta Sankaradeva founded a whole new school of art. He initiated a new form of painting with his epoch-making drama-festival Chihna-Yâtrâ held in 1468 AD, where he drew the imaginary pictures of heaven to be used as backdrops. He encouraged illustration of his manuscripts and decoration of the Kirtanghar walls with pictorial depiction of stories from Bhâgavata. The figures in this manuscript have been drawn in an angular pattern and the lines are of flowing type. The Sankari art had its own style, which was different from other art forms in the country. It was marked by the presence of distinctive hair style, costumes, landscapes, local utensils, unique gestures, local flora and fauna, abstractness of depiction, presence of the unique symbol of winged lion, drawing of thatch-bamboo based indigenous architectural pattern etc. Chronological order of the pictures and presence of full details in the Sankari art underscores the importance given to the storyline than any other objective. The art was subservient to the story in the Sankari art form. Colour played an important role in these art. The contrast is also very prominent here. The designs of hills and mountains are abstract; these are not present as background in the picture; the entire art used to be two-dimensional. Rain is shown by bold dotted lines. River is framed symbolically in squares with lotus, aqua leaves, fishes and geese

therein. The eyes of the human characters are a little bit of the protruding type resembling the eyes of fish. The eye-brows are carefully drawn concave downwards. The use of blue, deep red and yellow colours are predominant in this art-form. The art on the body of altar also was completely futuristic and precursor of modern artists like Jacob Epstein (1880-1959 AD).

Srimanta Sankaradeva felt the evil aspect of this situation because he was a victim of it himself. He and his fellow people had become almost nomads because of such unwarranted conflicts. So, he keenly felt the need of bringing about unity among the different ethnic groups inhabiting the valley. There were Koch, Ahom, Kayastha, Brahmin, Kalita, Chutiya, Mising, Kachari, Bodo, Deuri, Tiwa, Rabha, Daivajnya and so many other ethnic groups in the valley. But a composite race had not yet emerged. Most of these groups were well-versed in military techniques and they had carved out their own kingdoms. It was only since arrival of Srimanta Sankaradeva in the scene that a wave of spiritualism began to spread among them and unite them by a common unseen bond. As more and more people subscribed to the ideology of Srimanta Sankaradeva, a feeling of universal brotherhood developed among these divergent ethnic groups. For the first time a bond was realized among all the warring groups of the valley. Religion has always worked as a factor of nation building, even more than the factors like language. Actually, it has always been religion that worked in nation-building in the Indian context. The modern concept of self-determination evolved only in the eighteenth century. But even then the Indian context remained untouched by it. The formation of India and Pakistan in 1947 was also over religion only. Little wonder, the Eka Sharana doctrine of Srimanta Sankaradeva was a great bonding factor for the modern Assamese race.

The unity among the multi-ethnic population of the valley was achieved by the strong emphasis on equality of all people in the Vaishnavite Eka Sharana Nâma Dharma cult founded by Srimanta Sankaradeva. He enjoined upon all his disciples to treat every creature as a manifestation of the one and only God, lord Krishna. One should be kind to all creatures as God resides in every creature, the latter being only an extension of one's own self. There was no differentiation over caste in this order unlike in other cults. Subscription to this philosophy brought about a sea-change in the people. The casteless society advocated by Srimanta Sankaradeva became a stepping stone for a classless society. The Brahminic social system based on castes had earlier maintained a strict hierarchical pattern. Srimanta Sankaradeva dispensed with that social division completely and established an egalitarian society. A millionaire merchant and a poor farmer did not receive different treatments from him.

The saint also specifically asked everyone to shun aggressive nature, which also began to have its impact over time. The subjects of the different kingdoms in the valley began to experience peace and religious fervor. A strong affinity grew in them in the process. It was thus that the formation of the great Assamese race started. Till then the different ethnic groups were only common residents of the Brahmaputra valley, but each of them subscribed to distinct cultures and ways of life. Only now they got united by a common philosophy as well as by a common Assamese culture. The heterogeneous population of the valley came together, thanks to a common culture and a common thought evolved by Srimanta Sankaradeva. Even those who did not embrace his ideology accepted the cultural resources created by him. That is how the modern Assamese nation came into being.

Srimanta Sankaradeva authored ten plays in his life. These were Chihna Yâtrâ, Patni Prasâda, Kâliya Damana, Keli Gopâla, Rukmini Harana, Pârijât Harana, Janma Yâtrâ, Gopi Uddhava Sambâda, Kangsa Badha and Sri Râma Vijaya. The first of these, Chihna Yâtrâ had been staged in 1468 AD. The second play Patni Prasâda was written while the saint was living at Gajalasuti temporarily.

Srimanta Sankaradeva used the Vrajâwali language in his plays like in his Bargeet. As a result, his plays had a wide audience covering almost the entire Northern India. The play Kâliya Damana had such an impact in Bengal that it led to an era known as Kâliya Damana Yâtrâ era there. Similarly, the playwrights like Govinda and Umapati in Mithila were influenced by the peculiar style of Srimanta Sankaradeva.

Srimanta Sankaradeva brought about many innovations in his plays. It was he who introduced the Shanta-rasa for the first time in his plays. It had not been there in the Natya-shastra of Bharata. Scholars like Ananada Bardhana and Abhinava Gupta incorporated it much later, after Srimanta Sankaradeva had already used it in his plays. It was again Srimanta Sankaradeva who used Proscenium for the first time in entire world for enactment of his plays. However, it had not been used in his first play Chihna Yatra, where elevated stage was used, that too being the first time in the world. He departed from the typical norms laid down by Bharata

for classical plays. For instance, he incorporated scenes of eating, wedding, war, killing etc. in his plays whereas such scenes were strictly forbidden in Sanskrit plays. The Sutradhâra or the compere of Srîmanta Sankaradeva's plays also was completely different from the Sutradhâra of Sanskrit plays. The former remained in the acting arena from the beginning till the end whereas the latter departed from the arena just after introducing the topic of the play. The Sutradhâra of Srîmanta Sankaradeva's plays even participate in acting, singing and playing on the instruments like drum. The Sutradhâra keeps on explaining the story as well as its spiritual import from time to time. Srîmanta Sankaradeva gave so much importance to the Sutradhâra that he himself performed this role in his first play Chihna Yâtrâ. This character was perhaps influenced by the indigenous Ojâ-pâli and Putalâ-nâch (toy-dance).

Srîmanta Sankaradeva used the medium of play for his proselytizing works. All the paraphernalia of his plays were symbolic. The curtain that had to be removed at the outset stood for Mâyâ. It was only after removal of Mâyâ that one could see God. The nine wicks in the Agni-garh implied nine types of devotion. The two Ariyâs stood for singing and listening to God's name and glory. Above all, the altar specially set up at the place of enacting the play meant that all these were only ways of worshipping the almighty.

Srîmanta Sankaradeva's use of drama as a medium for religious preaching was a great act of innovation. In this respect, he was a pioneer in the entire world. Nobody had used this medium for proselytizing or propagational work before him. He was thus a path-finder for even Bertolt Brecht, who used this medium for propagating his socialist message in the twentieth century. Srîmanta Sankaradeva's achievement as a playwright and dramatist was also phenomenal. It was he who introduced the drop-scene in drama. He used it in the Chihna Yâtrâ before it was used in Europe. His dramatic talent can be compared only to that of Shakespeare, who came 119 years later to the realm of theatre. He was also the first director to use elevated stage for play. 'The swan theatre' of London introduced such stage as many as 128 years after Chihna Yâtrâ was staged at Tembuwani.

Education in those days was a privilege available to only a limited few belonging to the upper echelon of the society. People at large remained buried in the dark abyss of ignorance and illiteracy. The enlightened and socially conscious disciples of Srîmanta Sankaradeva constituted a microscopic minority in this vast sea of illiterate masses. nevertheless, Srîmanta Sankaradeva and his followers engaged themselves in the work of propagating knowledge and wisdom in their own ways. He authored many songs, plays, prayers and philosophical writings. These contained a major portion of the course material prevalent in the then residential schools. The teachers of these schools taught mostly the religious scriptures like Vedas, Purânas, Srîmadbhagavat Geetâ, the two epics etc. The teaching was not secular in those days. The essence of this curriculum was very much present in the writings of Srîmanta Sankaradeva. So, when his plays were enacted, when his songs were sung, when his hymns were chanted, people received the very knowledge which one received in the then residential schools and which made one educated by the standard of those days. But there were more in the teachings of Srîmanta Sankaradeva than what those residential schools used to teach. For instance, the value education imparted by him remains a crucial ingredient in modern education also. The saint also taught people by embodying his teachings in himself, not merely by uttering those.

Thus, Srîmanta Sankaradeva was somewhat on a literacy mission. He was not only a religious leader like many people think, but also an educationist in his own inimitable way. He helped the people acquire knowledge of the scriptures as well as of behavioural science. There were even elements of social science in his writings albeit in a primitive form. Analysis of social conditions are found here and there in his writings. His teachings were always full of advices about an ideal life-style. There were exhortations to give up aggressive nature. He asked people to shun evil. Ethics constituted the main component of his teaching. People were also cautioned against pride. Thus, he stood as a teacher of the entire society. We have also seen how he reminded the devotees to abide by the norms of a disciplined life. He was a global pioneer in adult education programme. His plays, discourses and prayer meetings were always full of people. People of all age groups including old ones and ladies invariably attended these. The main message conveyed to all and sundry was that there was no intrinsic difference between man and man, all being expositions of the same God.

Srîmanta Sankaradeva's educational programmes were not restricted to religious aspect only. Despite the fact that the cultural tools adopted by him were steeped in the love of God, there were many secular elements too in his dance, music, art and craft. He imparted these mainly to his disciples; but gradually these knowledges

were passed on to the people at large. The artist in him was never undermined by the preacher in him. The art forms evolved by him flourished because he had a keen interest in those things. He could have very well dispensed with the cultural activities as he had a scholarly image among the people to spread his views. Yet he took up the medium of art and culture, and trained people in those. In this respect he went beyond the then residential schools which remained confined to theological teachings. Srimanta Sankaradeva imparted knowledge of vocational education too. He was a master craftsman. He supervised the manufacturing of musical instruments as well as other accessories used by his disciples in rendering of his songs under his guidance. He had also been in charge of one hundred weaver families as we have seen already. He helped those people increase their productivity and income. He was an expert costume designer too. All the costumes of his plays were designed by himself. Over time an institutional arrangement came up within the Thān to impart all these skills to the new entrants.

Srimanta Sankaradeva always advised his disciples to be very cautious about where and what they ate. He said that food offered by a pious man could liberate one while the food offered by an unmeritorious person destroyed one's merits. During pilgrimage, he guided his disciples to proper places and proper hosts only. He narrated one story to his disciples at Beli Mandal's house about how food affected one. Once a sage had to take shelter in the house of a criminal. The latter was pleasantly surprised to find the former at his house. He left no stone unturned in treating the sage properly. After death, that criminal earned one day's rulership of heaven for that single act of merit in his life. He decided to enjoy the kingdom of heaven first as it was the hell all the way thereafter. But he performed so much of charity in that single day that all his demerits were done away with. On the other hand, the sage earned a single day's stay in hell for the meal at the criminal's house. He deemed it proper to finish with the one day's suffering before proceeding to heaven for a permanent stay. But he sucked so much of human blood during that single day that he acquired much more demerits and had to rot in hell for many more days. Srimanta Sankaradeva and his disciples abided by the principle of this story. He was never overawed by any powerful king to partake of unholy and unclean food just because it was offered by a king. This happened several times in the court of Koch king Nara Narayana also.

Srimanta Sankaradeva sometimes showered his blessings on people who were apparently great enemies of the Eka Sharana Nāma Dharma, people who had earlier abused and criticised the devotees. Actually, such people had devotion for God hidden inside them and were in need of some accidental impetus. The temporary spell of rusticism in their behaviour was the influence of some misdeeds in the past, which was however less compared to the meritorious works in their lives. It was only Srimanta Sankaradeva, who could see through their outer personality and read their inner mind and intellect. And he went out of his way to rescue them from that temporary spell of evil. One person who was fortunate to have such grace of the saint was Chandsai. A miraculous incident took place involving him.

Chandsai was the royal tailor of king Nara Narayana. He belonged to the Islamic faith and happened to be very arrogant. He never thought twice before abusing a person. The royal connection had given him that air. He abused even Srimanta Sankaradeva and his disciples. He imitated the way the latter performed prayers and singing of God's name in assembly. He mimicked even the saint and wore clothes like him. Unfortunately for Chandsai, he had to call on Srimanta Sankaradeva on the order of king Nara Narayana. The latter asked him to stitch a jacket for the saint as the gold-embroidered jacket earlier presented by the king had been donated to a boatman by Srimanta Sankaradeva. Chandsai was therefore compelled to visit the saint at the latter's residence. He needed to take the body measure of the saint for stitching the jacket.

Srimanta Sankaradeva was sitting in the veranda when Chandsai arrived at the former's Bhela house. Chandsai saw a divine glow around the saint. It brought an immediate change in him. But that was not the only thing. Chandsai even saw that Srimanta Sankaradeva had four arms. The entire impression he had about the saint changed in that very instant. Chandsai rushed near Madhavadeva, who was then staying with Srimanta Sankaradeva. Chandsai began to cry his heart out and lamented that so long he had a wrong impression about the saint. He now understood perfectly that Srimanta Sankaradeva was an incarnation of God, Chandsai said.

The Eka Sharana Nāma Dharma preached by Srimanta Sankaradeva gradually received wide acceptance in the entire Brahmaputra valley. Even the administrative officials of the Ahom kingdom were gradually won over to this egalitarian religion. The Ahoms earlier had their own traditional religion, which was akin to the Shakti worship of the Hindus. Sacrifice of animals to appease their deities was a common thing in the Ahom

religion. Even human beings were sacrificed in some temples. However, the Brahmin priests looked down upon the Ahoms as belonging to low caste and would not partake of offerings by the king before the deity. This led to a dislike for Brahminism among the Ahoms. As a result, many of them changed their loyalty to the Eka Sharana Nâma Dharma. Satananda Doloi, a devotee hailing from Singari in the erstwhile Bhuyan kingdom, was deputed by the saint to preach Eka Sharana Nâma Dharma in the Ahom kingdom.

Srimanta Sankaradeva started visiting the Koch king Nara Narayana regularly on the wish of the latter. The latter showed enormous respect to the former. Nara Narayana had changed a lot since the time he had first met the saint. He came to understand the saint better with the passage of time. The Eka Sharana Nâma Dharma preached by Srimanta Sankaradeva was no longer a subject of derision. Rather it had become the common bond unifying the diverse ethnic groups in the Brahmaputra valley. People of both the Ahom and the Koch kingdom accepted it as the predominant faith. Nara Narayana had seen all these. He started believing that his younger brother Chilarai had some valid reasons in accepting the saint as Guru. The Koch General, Chilarai was a sincere devotee of the saint.

One day the king requested Srimanta Sankaradeva to describe the signs of an incarnation of God. When Srimanta Sankaradeva described those signs, Nara Narayana went on comparing those with the physique of the saint. The king found that Srimanta Sankaradeva had all those thirty-two characteristics of God mentioned in the scriptures. His belief became even stronger that Srimanta Sankaradeva was an incarnation of God himself. That day he instructed his wives to pay obeisance to the saint and also take initiation from the latter. The wives acted accordingly the next day and paid their obeisance to Srimanta Sankaradeva. However, the latter did not initiate the ladies. Every one of them offered one piece of cloth as well as one rupee each to Srimanta Sankaradeva. The latter took one piece of cloth and returned the rest to the queens as his blessings. Nara Narayana was surprised that every queen got one piece each in spite of Srimanta Sankaradeva having taken one piece away for himself. There should have been shortage of one piece, which did not occur. Nara Narayana became firm in his belief thereafter that Srimanta Sankaradeva was an incarnation of God. The former decided to embrace Eka Sharana Nâma Dharma from the saint.

Nara Narayana prayed for initiation from Srimanta Sankaradeva. The latter tried his best to dissuade the king from this decision. It was because Srimanta Sankaradeva knew about the strong allegiance of Nara Narayana to the Shakti cult. Moreover, the latter had not gotten over his ego. Actually, the king treated the saint just like an exceptional scholar and nothing more. Of course, he respected the saint. But his behaviour was predominantly that of a king, not of a disciple prepared to go to any length. His wish was almost an order to the saint to initiate him. Nara Narayana had not gone to Bhela, where Srimanta Sankaradeva was residing, to ask for initiation, but declared it in the court like any other royal decree. It ran contrary to the principle of unqualified submission to God and the preceptor in the path of devotion. It was quite clear that accepting the king as disciple would have compromised the egalitarian principle of the Eka Sharana Nâma Dharma order.

The king would never have sat with his fellow devotees, which would have created inequality in the democratic order. So Srimanta Sankaradeva expressed his inability to initiate the king. The saint instilled this spirit in his disciples too. It is because of such sincerity to the ideology, that Eka Sharana Nâma Dharma has become the foremost religion in Assam. •

Q&A

Q: What is NAAM?

A: Naamghar Association of America, Inc. (NAAM) is a non-profit spiritual and cultural organization formed to construct and manage a Naamghar for the Assamese diaspora to celebrate and perform the spiritual traditions and philosophical teachings of Srimanta Sankaradeva. With strong ties with all the Satras of Assam, NAAM seek to provide a forum for learned spiritual leaders and traditional artistes to share their knowledge and talent with the current and future generations of the Assamese diaspora.

Q: What are the immediate goals of NAAM?

A: Some of the immediate goals of NAAM include spreading awareness on NAAM initiatives, build a digital media platform, plan for fund raising, and participate regularly in Naam-proxongo. NAAM seeks volunteers from the large Assamese diaspora across the United States to achieve these goals. Please join us (details at the bottom of this newsletter). In our planning activity, the first priority is to identify what is needed to establish a temporary *Naamghar*. This will make the *Guru Axon*, consecrated by the Sri Sri Auniati Satra Satradhikar, more easily accessible to the public, while we work on the longer-term project of building a permanent *Naamghar*.

Q: Does NAAM collaborate with other organizations?

A: NAAM is actively seeking to collaborate with all community organizations which are willing to help achieve NAAM's mission. NAAM plans to have meaningful discussion with all organizations in our community; please contact us if you would like to be a part of this conversation (contact details at the bottom).

HOW TO GET INVOLVED

JOIN THE NAAM WORKING GROUP: We need your help in achieving the dream of building a Naamghar in the United States. Therefore, NAAM is open to everyone who is interested in building the Naamghar. If you are interested in getting involved actively in NAAM's mission, please join the NAAM by sending an email to: Naaminfo@Naamghar.net. The Working Group meets regularly via teleconference/video conference to discuss various issues that are related to NAAM and its mission and goals.

NAAM TEAM MEMBERS

Following individuals comprise the current NAAM team. We invite all individuals who are sincerely interested in the Mission and Goals of NAAM to join the NAAM team. Current members are:

- Dr. Sanjib Bhuyan, NJ
- Niraj Barbara, PA
- Pranab Bora, WI
- Utpal Borah, VA
- Dr. Binoy Bordoloi, NJ (*Bor-medhi*)
- Manoranjan Bordoloi, NJ
- Monidipa Bordoloi, CA
- Susanto Bordoloi, CT
- Niren Choudhury, NJ (*Barik*)
- Dr. Pradip Das, MO
- Shyam DevChoudhury, PA (Secretary)
- Hemanga Dutta, NJ
- Sawmick Dutta, CA
- Suranjoy Hazarika, NJ
- Dr. Jukti Kalita, NJ
- Rashmi Kalita, CA
- Rachna Nath, AZ
- Anu Perlmutter, VA
- Dr. Purandar Sarmah, NJ (Treasurer)

Contact Us

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