



Naamghar Association of America

NEWSLETTER

WWW.NAAMGHAR.NET

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MESSAGE FROM *BOR-MEDHI*

This is to update you all with our Fall newsletter. As you know, NAAM is a spiritual and cultural organization to serve the community. It is a pleasure to announce that NAAM, Inc. has obtained the Federal not-for-profit, 501(c)(3), status approved by the IRS in September 2019. This is a great news for NAAM and its well-wishers because it allows community members to donate to NAAM and such donations may be eligible for Federal tax-deductions.

Our plan for communication with the community and our well-wishers is as follows:

- The NaamgharWG group will have one monthly conference call the First Sunday of Every Month at 8 to 9 pm. Our Secretary will send out the formal meeting invitation with an Agenda via e-mail prior to each meeting. We urge interested community members to contact naaminfo@naamghar.net to join the NaamgharWG.
- One Quarterly Newsletter will be published by last week of the month in each quarter, e.g., the spring newsletter will be published by end of April, and so on.

- Organize at least one Naam-Praxanga every quarter at the request of a community host member
- We will continue to perform Naam-Praxanga at the Tithi (Mrityu) of Sri Sri Sankardeva as usual.
- Our plan is to start an Annual General Body Meeting and Cultural Function around October / November of each year effective 2020. This is for celebrating the Janma Tithi of Sri Sri Sankardeva.

We strongly encourage you to join our efforts and get engaged to drive our cause for our first Community Naamghar in North America. A draft architectural floor / elevation plan is shown in our website. We seek your input to give it the final shape and help us in our fundraising efforts to construct the proposed Naamghar in due course of time.

Please do not hesitate to contact me or any of our Executive Committee members (<http://naamghar.net/team>) for any questions that you may have.

Sincerely,
Dr. Binoy K. Bordoloi, *Bor Medhi*

NAAMGHAR ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA, INC. AND ITS 501(C)(3) STATUS

By Dr. Purandar Sarmah, Treasurer, NAAM, Inc.

Following the maiden visit of Sri Dr. Pitambar Dev Goswami, Satradhikar of Sri Sri Auniati Satra in Majuli, Assam, Naamghar Association of America (NAAM) was formed in the year 2016 as an unincorporated organization by a few spiritual devotees of Vaishnavism from the tri-state area Assamese diaspora to construct and manage a Naamghar for the Assamese diaspora to celebrate and perform the spiritual traditions taught by Srimanta Sankardeva, the great 15th century Assamese social-religious reformer and a figure of importance in the cultural of Assam.

To build such an organization for the community and to maintain it, financial support from members of the community is important and that's where a need to open and maintain a bank account arose. As per Patriot Act, the United States government introduced strict requirements related to financial matters of any organization including opening a bank account.

Hence to open an account NAAM needed at least the Employer Identification Number (EIN) from Internal Revenue Service (IRS), the Certificate of Association as an incorporated organization and a well-written By-Laws/Constitution. Beyond the above three prerequisites some banks required NAAM to have IRS recognition as a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization.

Thus, the answer to the question of whether Naamghar Association of America, Inc needed to be an IRS 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization was an unequivocal YES.

The members of the NAAM who were involved in the process of registering the organization were all new to the process and had little idea how to approach this. We all knew about the requirement

of EIN number and we already obtained that from IRS in April 2017. But unfortunately, we spent more than six months dealing with wrong Government agencies to register NAAM as an entity. Finally, in July 2018 we registered Naamghar Association of America, Inc as an incorporated organization in the State of New Jersey.

After that a few banks, citing their policy, declined to let us to open an account since we were not an IRS recognized 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization. Finally, in September 2018 Provident Bank allowed us to open an account, albeit with a lot of restrictions citing their bank policy.

Having completed the prerequisites, our next step was to apply for 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization with IRS. In October-December 2018 the whole Executive Committee worked tirelessly, met face to face several times to prepare and review all the supporting documents for the application. In the last week of December 2018, we finally mailed the application and after about 10 months wait, in September 2019 we were granted as an IRS recognized 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization status.

During the process of dealing with the State Government and the Federal Government agencies, however we received request for further evidence (RFE) to provide additional documents and make updates to existing documents among others. For example we were required to update our By-Laws/Constitution to meet their requirements.

We are delighted to let the community know that Naamghar Association America, Inc. has now a 501(c)(3) status which designates NAAM as a not-

for-profit organization and your donations to us are Federal Tax deductible.

IRS provides Non-Profit 501(c)(3) status for charitable, religious, educational, and scientific purposes. While some part of the application process is common to all these entities, some parts are very specific to the kind of entity and without enough supporting documents an entity may not receive the recognition.

We are aware that after an organization has been granted 501(c)(3) status, it is required by law that once per year the organization submit financial status reports to IRS - details may vary from entity to entity based on type. It is important to note that failing to submit the financial status report three years in a row causes IRS to disqualify the entity as not-for-profit organization by revoking the 501(c)(3) status. NAAM shall meet all requirements to comply with IRS related laws including those of other state and federal agencies.

SANKARDEVA AND NEO-VAISHNAVISM IN ASSAM

By Dr. Abhijit Bhuyan

A social reform movement swept across India between the 12th and 15th centuries A.D. It was the *Bhakti* (devotional) movement based on the liberal doctrine of *bhakti* or devotion. It initiated new ideas even as it gave birth to new faiths, which in some places of the country took the shape of a revolution. The context of the new trend was rooted in the societal degradation and cultural distortion that plagued many parts of India at that time. Under the corrupting influence of power and wealth and the incipient ritualism that had taken hold of the priestly and ruling classes of the Hindu society, various malpractices were committed in the name of religion, which vitiated the social structure. These factors impelled the Hindu thinkers and reformers of the day to evolve a simpler and liberal faith that would be acceptable to all. This set in motion what subsequently came to be known as the *Vaishnava Bhakti* movement, originally started by *Alvars* of South India and which thereafter spread to northern India and then to the eastern regions of India.

The *Vaishnava Bhakti* movement thus encompassed the whole of India and thereby brought about a renaissance in the socio-religious life of the Indian people. By propounding in general that divine grace could be achieved through devotion, which was open to all classes and castes, the movement dispensed with the principle of birth, which hitherto determined access to salvation through knowledge and ritual. To that extent the movement initiated structural changes in the socio-

religious sphere of the Hindu society and consequential changes in its value system and equality of relationships.

The Neo-Vaishnavite Movement in Assam:

As in the rest of India, the social, religious and political life in Assam was in a shambles resulting in a society full of chaos and disorder. Since the beginning of the 13th century, the ancient kingdom of Kāmrupa was slowly undergoing a process of disintegration. The whole of Assam, from the eastern-most Dikkaravāsini region to the river Karatoyā in the west, disintegrated into several kingdoms, some of which did not survive more than a few decades. In the easternmost tract of Assam, ruled a line of Chutiya Kings. To the west of the Chutiya kingdom lay the Āhom principality. Further west, there was the Kachāri kingdom to the south of the river Brahmaputra and it probably extended at least halfway across the modern Nagāon district. On both sides of the Brahmaputra to the west of the Kachāri kingdom of the south and Chutiya Kingdom of the North-east, were a number of landed chiefs known as Bhuyāns. The western part of Assam comprising the modern districts of Kāmrup, Goālpārā and parts of Cooch-Behār was ruled by a few dynasties during the course of the fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries and the kingdom was known as Kamatārājya. By the end of the fifteenth century A.D., however, a new power, viz., the Kochs, under the leadership of Bishwa Simha emerged as the dominant political power in Western Assam.

Constant friction and conflict for supremacy amongst the above powers was the order of the day, which severely affected the political condition of the region. The political instability brought about a chaotic condition in the religious sphere also.

Assam in the fifteenth century presented a motley picture of diverse shades and grades of culture. The majority of the people belonged to non-Aryan tribes having distinct manners, customs and religious beliefs. Those who professed Hinduism loosely adhered to *Vaishnavism* or *Saivism*. *Sāktism* bordering on extreme *Tāntricism*, was also widely prevalent. The followers of these cults were all found indulging in evil practices like animal and sometimes even human sacrifices, magical rites, spells and the like. It was based on the philosophy of palate and sensual pleasures. The economically backward classes and the socially downtrodden became the victims of such ghastly practices.

At the other end of the religious spectrum were the bulk of the indigenous tribal population who followed their indigenous tribal faiths. Bringing all these diverse communities and warring factions under a systematized religious code and conduct of life and to provide the masses with a mode of worship, which would be simple and at the same time accessible to all was what constituted the pressing need of the time.

Against this backdrop, Srimanta Sankardeva appeared on the scene. A multi-faceted genius, Srimanta Sankardeva was at once a spiritual leader, a social reformer, a prolific writer and a master playwright and composer. He is credited with providing the bedrock of Assamese culture, and creating a religion that gave shape to a set of new values and social synthesis. He was born in the *Āhin* (September-October) month in 1371 *Sakābda* (1449 AD) at Tembuāni (Bordowā), in the present-day Nagāon district of Assam.

Srimanta Sankardeva undertook the difficult and arduous task of a reformer at a juncture of acute crisis in Assamese society and polity. The Neo-*Vaishnavite* movement initiated by Srimanta Sankardeva in Assam in the latter period of the 15th century ushered in an era of socio-cultural renaissance in Assam, humanist in content and popular in form, in literature as well as in the vocal and

visual arts. The movement was at once unique in nature and revolutionary in terms of its impact. The uniqueness of the movement lay in the fact that unlike other contemporary cults in the rest of India, Srimanta Sankardeva's Neo-*Vaishnavism* rested not on a discursive reasoning and abstract thinking but its emphasis was more on ethnic integration, societal reforms and spiritual uplift through an innovative mode of religious conduct based on indigenous elements of the region, at a time when the society in Assam was in a turmoil fragmented and faction-ridden.

It was revolutionary in the sense that Neo-*Vaishnavism* in Assam meant not only a religious faith but a way of life. It encompassed their social, cultural and religious spheres even as it brought about a change in very outlook on life and the world. Neo-*Vaishnavism* stands out among the different *Bhakti* cults of India in terms of its unique and innovative character, which found expression in the move to create an egalitarian civil society based on the shared values of fraternity, equity, humanism and democracy.

This new creed of faith started by Srimanta Sankardeva is officially known as *Eka-Sarana-Nām-Dharma*. Sankardeva preached devotion to a single God, Lord Krishna or Vishnu, (*Eka Sarana*) who can be worshiped solely by uttering His various names (*Nām*). Srimanta Sankardeva considered the *sravana* and *kirtana* modes of *bhakti* or devotion as prescribed by the *Bhāgavata-Purāna* to be sufficient. They are accessible to the highest and lowest, men and women alike, irrespective of birth, caste or status and no rigid theocratic laws are to be followed by the votary. Idol worship does not feature in Srimanta Sankardeva's system. The Rādhā-Krishna cult is not acknowledged in this system of *Vaishnavism*, nor is any *shakti* (energy represented in a female form) of Lord Vishnu to be recognized.

The four fundamental elements of Neo-*Vaishnavism* are (i) God, (ii) *Guru* (the religious preceptor) (iii) the fraternity of *Bhakats* (devotees) and (iv) *Nām*. Of the different attitudes of *bhakti*, Srimanta Sankardeva advocated *dāsya* or servitude to God. *Eka-Sarana-Nām-Dharma* is also known as *Mahāpurushīā Dharma*, after *Mahāpurush* Srimanta Sankardeva, who founded it. [*the epithet 'Mahāpurusha', in Assam Vaishnavism, refers to the Supreme Being (Nārāyana-Visnu-Krishna) and it is actually for this reason that Sankardeva's religion is known as Mahāpurushīā.*]

The Neo-Vaishnavite movement commenced in Assam in the first decade of the 16th century and reached its climax towards the middle of the 17th century. It started on a missionary note by working towards the uplift of the backward classes and minimization of the rigors of caste distinctions. The peripheral groups including the so-called untouchables and backward classes and tribes were taken into the new fraternity. The earliest attempts to bring the backward tribes, castes and classes into the fold of Vaishnavism was made by Srimanta Sankardeva himself who accepted Govinda belonging to the Gāro tribe; Paramānanda, belonging to the Miri (Mishing) tribe; Narahari, an Āhom man; Narottama belonging to the Nāgā community; Jayarāma, a Bhutiyā person and Cāndsāi, a Muslim person as his disciples. They all took part in the *bhāonā* performances (religious plays) and when required acted as guides to analyze the essence of *Eka Sarana Nām Dharma*. In his popular work, *Kirtana-ghosā*, Srimanta Sankardeva announces:

Nāhi bhakatita jāti-ajāti vicāra

(There is no sense of caste difference in Bhakti)

Thus, people from all castes and walks of life were received by Srimanta Sankardeva as disciples; and they could even act as teachers in his *Vaishnava* Order. A democratic outlook permeates the entire teachings and practices of the Neo-Vaishnavite faith in Assam. On the one hand, God has been brought down from the metaphysical heights to the reach of the ordinary people; on the other hand the status of human being, indeed all creatures, has been elevated by insisting on the relation of God and soul.

Srimanta Sankardeva's concerns were not limited to human rights alone but they extended even to include animal and plant rights, as is evident from some of his literary contributions. It is based on the simple principle that every living being is God's creation. The fundamental principle of the Neo-Vaishnavite philosophy was enlightenment of the human conscience through universal love. As a pointer to the fact, one may quote a verse from the 'Kirtana-ghoshā' written by Srimanta Sankardeva. It gives Lord Krishna's last words to his devotee, Uddhava. The opening sentence of the verse is as follows:

“Uddhavaka sambudhi mātanta Krishna pāche”

In this verse, Lord Krishna explains to Uddhava what the mystic doctrine of love is and asks him to practice it with an unperturbed mind. Lord Krishna then goes on to declare that he lives in all creatures and that all creatures have to be taken as Vishnu and respected. He alone is learned who makes no discrimination between a Brāhman and a chāndāla, sees the image of Vishnu in all creatures, possesses the same regard for the benevolent and the thief, has the same understanding for the vile and the good. Such a man is liberated from jealousy, envy, hatred and egotism. Lord Krishna further says that the 'bhakta' (devotee) is His soul and that He is the bhakta's soul in turn.

The missionary work started amongst the backward classes by the early reformers, was extensively carried out by their successors and followers during the succeeding periods. Members of such tribes as the Koches, the Āhom, the Kachāri, the Chutiyās and the Nāgās soon took to the new creed of *Vaishnavism*. People of the so-called untouchables or lower castes came to live in fellowship with those of the highest castes in Assamese villages and they could take part in all functions of the villages. Accordingly, Neo-Vaishnavism soon became a veritable movement with a mass appeal.

The movement as mentioned above commenced in the first decade of the 16th century and reached its climax towards the middle of the 17th century. The religious reformers of the first two centuries including Srimanta Sankardeva and his direct disciple *Mahāpurush* Mādhavdeva initially faced a lot of difficulties, hardships and opposition from the state and vested interests, the latter determined on preserving the status quo. Various allegations were levelled against Srimanta Sankardeva. Though it is difficult to seek a clear and consistent stand either on the part of the Ahom monarchs or the Koch Kings of Western Assam with regard to the neo-Vaishnavite movement, on the whole, the movement did not have a smooth ride during the early part of its history. But later on, in spite of royal indifference or hostility, the state had to acknowledge it by the beginning of the 18th century. By this time Neo-Vaishnavism got firmly entrenched and established in the Brahmaputra valley, with an unprecedented mass following.

As mentioned earlier, the Neo-Vaishnavite movement initiated by Srimanta Sankardeva ushered in an era of socio-cultural renaissance in Assam even as it developed

a new genre of philosophy, art and music in the form of *Borgeets* (devotional hymns heralding a new classical school of music), *Ankiyā Nāts* or *Bhāonās* (a theatre form introduced for the first time by Srimanta Sankardeva and which became increasingly popular with the masses, centering around themes from the *Bhāgavata-purāna* and the *Rāmāyana*) as well as the *Satriyā* dance as modes of conveying the principles of *Ek-Sarana-Nām-Dharma*, centering around single minded devotion to Lord Krishna or Vishnu based on a spirit of equality and humanism which found concrete manifestation in the institution of the *Nāmghar*.

A new school of painting was also developed by Srimanta Sankardeva, just like his dance and music. It is known as the *Sankari* school of painting. He initiated this new form of painting with his epoch-making drama *Cihna-yātrā*, which was enacted in 1468 AD at Tembuāni (Bordowā) in Assam. Incidentally, this happened to be the first play in any modern Indian language. *Cihna-yātrā* brought about a new era in the cultural history of India. It was the first play in the world where elevated stage and drop-scenes were used^{i ii}. It launched the regional drama movement in medieval India. Srimanta Sankardeva depicted seven *Vaikunthas* (the celestial abode of Lord Vishnu) in scrolls, which were used as backdrops there.

For most of his works, Srimanta Sankardeva used the Assamese language of the period so the lay person could read and understand them. But for dramatic effect in his songs and dramas he used Brajāvali, an artificial mixture of Braj language and Assamese.

His magnum opus is his *Kirtana-ghoshā* containing narrative verses in praise of Lord Krishna and meant for community singing. A copy of the *Kirtana-ghoshā* is found in nearly every household in Assam.

Srimanta Sankardeva and his disciples used many instruments for a dramatic effect in his songs and dramas. All these were innovated indigenously. Two of the most important of these instruments are the *Khol* (a form of drum with a unique acoustic property) and the *Bortāl* (big cymbals).

Neo-Vaishnavite Institutions - The Satra and the Nāmghar:

The hallmark of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement initiated by Srimanta Sankardeva is reflected in two distinctively

unique institutions, viz., the *Satra* and the *Nāmghar*, both of which are intimately associated with the social, cultural as well as religious life of the Assamese society. The *Nāmghar* actually evolved as an offshoot, an extended wing or a miniature replica of the *Satra* institution. Accordingly, while tracing the origins of the *Nāmghar*, a brief account of its parent body, the *Satra* becomes necessary.

To create an atmosphere where single-minded devotion to God based on a fellowship of devotees or *Bhakats* under the guidance of a *Guru* or teacher could be achieved, the *Satra* institution was brought into existence and it became a well-organized and a popular institution within a century of its inception. In fact, the most distinguishing feature of Assamese Neo-Vaishnavism is the network of decentralized monasteries – the *Satra*, literally meaning “holy areas” each headed by a *Guru* (teacher) designated as the *Satrādhikār*.

At Tembuāni (Bordowā), the birth place of Srimanta Sankardeva, the saint set up his first *Kirtanghar* (prayer hall), with houses for the devotees within the compound and on the four sides of the *Kirtanghar*. The *Kirtanghar* was the nerve center of the entire place. It was a long and open hall, where the devotees sat together to sing the glory of God. There was no idol in the altar, but only a book, generally the *Bhāgavata*, symbolizing God. In addition to prayers and cultural functions, religious discourses were also held in the *Kirtanghar*.

One of the functions of these Satras was to initiate aspirants to Neo Vaishnavism. This activity of initiation by the *Satras* prepared the ground for cultural integration of different sections of the Assamese society with increasing numbers of both tribal and non-tribal sections of the Brahmaputra valley population accepting the new creed, which had a strong democratic content based on a common code of conduct. It is important to recall that after Sankardeva's Departure, the movement was no longer monolithic. Variations and multiple leaderships emerged with Sankardeva's direct disciple Mādhavdeva and his protégé Gopāldeva (Gopāl Ātā) carrying forward the *Sankarite* tradition in its original vibrant form, thereby commanding larger following than the other disciples of Srimanta Sankardeva, chief among whom was Dāmodardeva.

The Neo-Vaishnavite movement initiated by Srimanta Sankardeva, by and large, remained confined to the western part of the Brahmaputra valley during his lifetime. After his Departure, his chief apostle *Mahapurush* Mādhavdeva succeeded him to be the head of the order. Mādhavdeva, a man of vision and action, sent twelve disciples to different parts of Assam to spread the message of *Eka-Sarana-Nāma-Dharma* propagated by Sankardeva. By the end of the seventeenth century, ideological differences resulted in the emergence of orders or *samhatis* of *Satras*- (i) *Purusha* (ii) *Nikā* (iii) *Kāla* and (iv) *Brahma*.

The *Purusha samhati* derives its origin from Purusottama Thākura, the eldest grandson of Srimanta Sankardeva. The *Satras* of this *samhati* were founded by the preachers belonging to Srimanta Sankardeva's direct line or *Purusha*. This *samhati* lays emphasis on *Nām* or prayer. The *Nikā samhati* was founded by Mathurādās Burhā-Ātā and Badaluwā Padma-Ātā. They organized their *Satras* in strict conformity with the rules and regulations prescribed by Madhavdeva and their adherents and paid great attention to outward cleanliness (*nikā*). In this *samhati*, the position of Madhavdeva is more important than that of Srimanta Sankardeva, the latter being revered as the *Guru* (teacher) of their *Guru*.

The *Satras* established by Gopāldeva and his successors formed the *Kāla-samhati*. The *Kāla-samhati* gave the guru a supreme position. It was more egalitarian in outlook and more liberal in matters of caste than other *samhatis*. Besides, the *Satrādhikārs* of these *Satras* preached mainly among the tribal and so-called backward or depressed people of the region. Though these *Satras* had caste Hindus in their fold, their disciples mainly consisted of people from the Kachāri, Āhom, Kaivarta, Brittiyāl, Chutiya and Morān communities. The most prominent *Satras* of this *samhati* were the Moāmariā and Dihing *Satras*. The Moāmariā Satra was distinguished by strong democratic traditions with a large congregation of people of Tibeto-Burmese origin.

The *Brahma samhati* consisted of the sub-sects of Damodardeva and Harideva, two Brahmin disciples of Srimanta Sankardeva. Most of the *Satras* affiliated to this *samhati* are headed by Brahmin preceptors; hence the name *Brahma samhati*. This *samhati* permits *Vedic* rites and devotional practices alongside *Nāma Kirtana* and lays highest importance on *Deva* (God) in comparison to

the other three fundamental aspects, viz., *Guru*, *Nāma* and *Bhakat*.

The genre of art and culture stemming from the *Satras* are part of a living cultural tradition. The *Satras* have been serving as the very custodian of the Assamese cultural identity.

The first stage of evolution of the *Satra* naturally began with Srimanta Sankardeva. But in his times, the religious association organized by him did not take the shape of a regular institution of a permanent nature. Sankardeva, as has already been mentioned earlier began preaching at his native place Bordowā and built a *Satra* there.

It was during the time of Madhavdeva and Damodardeva that the *Satra* institution attained the second phase of its growth. The architectural structure of the *Satra* also received the final shape during this period. It thus came to possess the prayer hall (*Nāmghar*) and the *Manikut* with the wooden throne (*Singhāsana*) attached to the former and containing a sacred scripture.

The *Satra* institution, by the middle of the 17th century, firmly established itself and the royal authority had to accord recognition to Srimanta Sankardeva's faith. Subsequently, the Ahom kings and nobles accepted Neo-Vaishnavism. The *Satras* played a great role in the social life of the people. The Hindu Assamese had now two affiliations: that of temporal allegiance to the state and the king, and that of spiritual submission to Neo-Vaishnavism and a *Guru*, the head of a *Satra*. The leaders of Neo-Vaishnavism by this time found a more peaceful and accommodating atmosphere to preach their faith and consequently numerous branches of *Satras* were established by family members and disciples of the principal Neo-Vaishnavite (religious) leaders of the 16th and 17th centuries. The period 1650-1800 may properly be called the era of the growth of the branch-*Satra* (*sākhā-Satra*).

One component of the *Satra* institution, the *Kirtanghar*, became an integral part of every Assamese village in Assam over time. It became popular by another name too, the *Nāmghar*. Over time it came to be an integral part of every Hindu village of Assam. As a result every Assamese village came under the religious influence of one *Satra* or the other and its influence even penetrated gradually into the neighboring tribal areas. The *Satras* gave Assam a rich

religious literature, besides reviving and popularizing the art of classical music and dance.

As institutions having an unmatched symbolic value and commanding deepest of reverence from all sections of the people of Assam, the role of *Satras* becomes immensely significant in terms of reaching out to the people. In this context one might mention the role of the *Satras* during the National Freedom Struggle with special reference to the role played by the *Satrādhikār* of Garmur *Satra* in Mājuli situated in Jorhāt district of Assam, Sri Pitāmbar Goswāmi. It was due to his efforts that the anti-opium and boycott programs and eradication of untouchability became popular slogans and practices in the island even before the Congress adopted them seriously.

Lately, the Asom *Satra* Mahāsabhā was formed at the initiative of a few visionary *Satrādhikārs* or heads of *Satras* of such places as Jorhāt, Sivasāgar, Mājuli, Nagāon, Kaliābor and Tezpur in Assam with a view to bringing coordination in the religious and cultural activities of the *Satras* across the different *samhatis* or orders. Originally launched as *Satra* Sanmilan in 1915, it subsequently came to be known as *Satra* Sangha and finally in 1990, it was renamed as Asom *Satra* Mahāsabhā. The organization has undertaken a number of steps in the direction of restoration of the atmosphere of peace and integration in Assam. As part of its efforts, it organized a massive peace rally in the State on October 31, 1999 from Sadiyā to Dhubri in which people from different linguistic and ethnic groups from different parts of Assam took part in great numbers. The organization appealed for peace and harmony to the participants, numbering around nine thousand, who finally gathered at the Judges' Field in Guwahati. Again on November 17, 2000 and on December 17, 2000, similar rallies were held in Dhubri and Rājmai respectively.

However, the most notable step taken by the Assam *Satra* Mahāsabhā has been the *Bhāonā* festival called *Setubandha* (literally meaning “building bridges”) which it has been organizing periodically since 2003. Aimed at achieving cultural integration in the society, the hallmark of this festival is the participation by the various ethnic tribes and communities of Assam such as the Mising, Sonwāl Kachāri, Nepāli and tea tribe communities to name a few. They are imparted training by the organization itself. The first such festival was held in Guwahati in 2003 and the Mahāsabhā together with

Srimanta Foundation has since been organizing the festival at regular intervals.

It may be noted here that over the years, the *Bhāonās* performed in the *Satra* premises have helped to evolve the system of *Satriyā* dance which officially has been given the status of a classical dance form, belatedly though. The *Satriyā* dance is an integral part of the Assamese cultural identity. Accordingly, the *Satras* have an immense role to play as custodians of the Neo-Vaishnavite tradition and emerge as nerve-centers from where the entire Neo-Vaishnavite genre of song, dance, plays and literature can spread far and wide.

As has already been mentioned earlier, one component of the *Satra* institution, the *Kirtanghar* or *Nāmghar*, became an integral part of every Assamese village in Assam over time. The establishment of the village *Nāmghar* came about with the idea of popularizing the Neo-Vaishnavite faith to the masses. The *Nāmghar* came to serve as a forum of not only religious but also socio-cultural activities of the community. In fact, the existence of these prayer halls is noticed in almost every Assamese village. The village *Nāmghar* has for the last four hundred years has been serving as the village public hall: it is at once a village prayer hall, a cultural center, a “village court” and a “village parliament”, thereby providing a common forum for the villagers to assemble in an atmosphere of goodwill and cooperation.

The village *Nāmghars* operate and are managed on democratic principles. The *Nāmghars* since the time of Srimanta Sankardeva have been so designed and constructed that people of all races and tribes living in this part of the country could easily enter them and take part in congregational prayers and the like. Thus, significantly, the *Nāmghar* is built without walls or if at all, only with half walls with two rows of pillars with a thatched or tin roof. This has a great deal of symbolic value in terms of promotion of the ideal of equality. An open wall-less *Nāmghar* underscores the point that its doors are open to everyone and that it is an *inclusivist* institution embracing all people without making any discrimination among them along such artificial lines as caste, creed, religion, tribe or language.

All activities of the *Nāmghar* are directed towards the *Singhāsana*, a wooden throne, in which is kept a sacred book composed by either Mahapurush Srimanta

Sankardeva or his direct disciple Mahapurush Madhavdeva. These include the *Dasham*, the *Kirtan-ghoshā*, the *Nāmghoshā*, *Bhakti-Ratnāvali*, etc. The wooden throne may be a three, five or seven storied one with a canopy called *Chandratāp* over it. The shrine is adorned with beautifully woven *Gāmochās* (a form of local fabric) contributed by the villagers. A brass or bell metal lamp stand is kept in front of the shrine. It is known as the *Akhyoy Banti*. The *Nāmghar* has a fixed drum or what is known as *Dobā* in Assamese. It is sounded twice every day, once in the morning and once in the evening. The size of the *Nāmghar* varies depending on the population of the village.

The corporate life of an Assamese village moves centering round the village *Nāmghar*. It is constructed by the joint labour of the villagers. Every household is considered as a unit and therefore, each household is required to place the service of at least one member of the family in constructing and maintaining the *Nāmghar*. Every household must contribute proportionately to the *Nāmghar* according to the number of its members in cash or kind. Those who are not in a position to contribute are required to put additional labour in the cause of the *Nāmghar*. The daily religious functions held in the *Nāmghar* are performed on a co-operative basis. Tasks like the kindling of light, cleansing and sweeping of the floor and making arrangements for materials necessary for daily services are done by each household by rotation, depending upon its capacity. The *Nāmghar* is the center of cultural activities of the villagers.

The *Nāmghar* becomes the venue for congregational chanting of prayers or *Nām-Prasangas*, singing of *Borgeets* or classical devotional songs composed by Srimanta Sankardeva and his disciple Madhavdeva and enactment of *Bhāonās* on various occasions. No discrimination is made in terms of class or caste in distributing roles in the *Bhāonās* held at the *Nāmghar*. The villagers contribute according to their capacity and aptitude to make the performance a success. Accordingly, the staging of such performances in the village *Nāmghar* unites all castes and classes under a common cultural tradition. It may be mentioned here that an entire handicraft based cottage industry centering around the *Bhāonā* performances has also sprung up over the years. The *Nāmghar* has thereby contributed immensely to the overall socio-cultural development of the Assamese people.

The role of the *Nāmghar* as a *panchāyati* institution can hardly be exaggerated. In fact, Srimanta Sankardeva in medieval Assam conceived the idea of community development and *Panchayati Raj* and through the institution of the village *Nāmghar*, he united the village communities to settle their common disputes in accordance with their local judicial procedures and methods. The villagers assemble here on various occasions to discuss matters concerning their village. The *Nāmghar*, in its capacity as a “village parliament” has traditionally been a vibrant center of community development activities. On the premises of the *Nāmghar* are taken collective decisions regarding various issues of community life ranging from construction of water tanks to educational institutions.

Since at the *Nāmghar* the people of the village themselves, or more precisely, the *rājī*, (the general body of the villagers composing of eldest male member from each household of the village) take decision on issues which directly matter to them, the *Nāmghar* provides an effective forum for decentralized planning and decision making.

The *Nāmghar* as a village court, witnesses the village elders (*rājī*), assembling in its premises to try cases of moral or social delinquency on the part of any villager with the help of the relevant *Rājī-Medhi* or *Barmedhi*, the local agents of the *Satras* concerned (of which the parties involved in the dispute are disciples). Punishments are then meted out according to the nature of the offence. However, criminal cases are kept outside the purview and only minor cases of moral and civil nature are tried. The ruling of the *Nāmghar* is generally taken as binding upon both the plaintiff and the accused, which the latter can afford to violate only at the risk of social ostracism.

In the light of the above discussion, it can be concluded that the neo-*Vaishnavite* tradition initiated by Srimanta Sankardeva, in terms of its humanistic philosophy, art, literature, music and institutions stands at the very core of the Assamese cultural identity even as it contributes immensely to the process of socialization in Assam. Adherence to the Neo-*Vaishnavite* philosophy in its true spirit is the key to building a vibrant civil society based on peace, goodwill, mutual respect, social justice and self-help.

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NAAM-PROXONGA ACTIVITIES

We are pleased to report the following naam-proxonga that took place in the tri-state area (NY/NJ/PA) in 2019:

January 26: Manoranjan (Mark) Bordoloi hosted a naam-proxonga at his residence.

March 23: Suranjoy and Kamalakshi Hazarika hosted a naam-proxonga at their residence.

May 18: Satyajit Dutta and Chayanika Dutta hosted a naam-proxonga at their residence.

September 14: A community naam-proxonga was performed at the death anniversary of Srimanta Sankardeva (Tirubabh Tithi observation).

October 5: Prabin and Sangeeta Dutta hosted a naam-proxonga at their residence on the occasion of his beloved father/father-in-law Late Chandra Kanta Dutta's 9th death anniversary.

Q&A

Q: What is NAAM?

A: Naamghar Association of America, Inc. (NAAM) is a 501(c)(3) 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 Sankardeva. 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
- Lolit Bora, PA
- Pranab Bora, WI
- Utpal Borah, VA
- Dr. Binoy Bordoloi, NJ (*Bor-medhi*)
- Manoranjan Bordoloi, NJ
- Monidipa Bordoloi, CA
- Susanto Bordoloi, CT
- Malabika Brahma, NJ
- Debojit Chowdhury, CA
- Niren Choudhury, NJ
- Dr. Pradip Das, MO
- Shyam DevChoudhury, PA (Secretary)
- Hemanga Dutta, NJ
- Panchali Dutta, NJ
- Sawmick Dutta, CA
- Prandeep Gogoi, NJ
- Kamalakshi Hazarika, NJ
- Suranjoy Hazarika, NJ
- Dr. Jukti Kalita, NJ
- Rashmi Kalita, CA
- Rachna Nath, AZ
- Shakhyar Neog, NJ
- Anu Perlmutter, VA
- Dr. Purandar Sarmah, NJ (Treasurer)

Contact Us

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