

Naamghar Association of America

NEWSLETTER

WWW.NAAMGHAR.ORG

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MESSAGE FROM THE BOR-MEDHI

Dear community members and well-wishers of NAAM,

We are faced with a global pandemic and the last few months have been very unusual around the world. On April 2, 2020, the coronavirus pandemic reached a grim milestone in the U.S. more than 1 million people had been infected by SARS-CoV-2, the virus responsible for the respiratory disease COVID-19, and over 50,000 had died. There were over 5 million cases of COVID-19 around the world causing more than 350,000 deaths within a two-month period ending May 27, 2020. We express our gratitude to all the people who are working in this environment, putting their own well-being at risk, to help others. Let us all follow the prescribed guidelines not only for our own safety but also for the safety of all others around us.

Now coming to this second quarter newsletter of 2020 from NAAM, it is my pleasure to highlight a few key points:

A) We are very pleased to have **Dr Sanjib Kumar Borkakoti**, President, Society
for Srimanta Sankaradeva, Nagaon,
Assam share an abstract of his upcoming
Spiritual Dialog with us in North
America, to be delivered via Zoom on
July 19 at 10.30 am EST (8 pm IST same
day); details are in the "Recent and
Upcoming Activities" section of this

- newsletter. We look forward to your joining the planned video meeting.
- B) NAAM is also organizing Sankardeva's Janma Tithi celebration scheduled for November 2020 (in-person, if permitted; remotely, otherwise). A tentative schedule is shown at the 'Recent and Upcoming Activities" section of this newsletter. Please feel free to provide your input and contact me directly (binoy.bordoloi@gmail.com) or write to naaminfo@naamghar.org to make it a grand success.
- C) We request all our well-wishers and community members to join us in this journey of establishing a Naamghar with your contribution of ideas, a commitment of time to join us at our monthly WG (working group) meetings, and monetary donations to NAAM.



D) As I had mentioned on a previous occasion, we may begin the process of a Naamghar by renting having premises, say at the Ved Mandir for (Milltown, NJ) campus, temporary Naamghar. Our focus, thus, is not so much on "owning real estate" at this time with our meagre finances, but to start our journey with vigor and energy towards our goal. It is needless to say that owning of the physical facility of a **permanent Naamghar** will evolve in due course of time with our perseverance to propagate the culture.

- E) Now, here are some criteria of considering renting space to start our temporary Naamghar (your feedback is welcome at either binoy.bordoloi@gmail.com or write to naaminfo@naamghar.org);
 - a) The rental location needs to be quickly accessible by major highways, such as the NJ Turnpike, Rt.130, Rt.118, and Rt.1 and close driving distance from any locations in the tri-state area.
 - b) The rental place should have a similar spiritual philosophy as that of NAAM, i.e., very distinctly Krishna conscious and has a **Satra** type of an atmosphere, which is a monastery. A monastery can have a temple, a Naamghar, a library, a museum, and other facilities, including dwelling for the *Bhakats* and Naamgharia in the premises. The rental unit must have adequate space to house our Guru Axon, where we will keep our *Kirtan* / Naamghosha / Gunamala. This area effectively becomes the Naamghar *Manikut*, and it need not be large; 100 square feet may be adequate for us, so that the yearly rental expense becomes affordable for NAAM. Also this area must be physically separate from the temple hall, where deities may be kept.
 - c) It is desirable that the rental Naamghar premises will have an auditorium with a performing stage for us to rent separately for the days when NAAM would

require it for organizing a large cultural event, say for 200 Bhakats / Bhakatanis. This also implies that there should be available a **kitchen with dining facilities** at the premises, because a NAAM event may run for 4 to 5 hours in a day.

- d) There should be adequate car parking provision
- e) That there is no immediate or next-door neighbors so that any possible noise concerns from our *Khol-Taal* performance is limited.
- f) Ideally the priests living at the premises would offer us the services of a *Naamgharia* for daily *Banti Prajalan* at the *Guru Axon*.

If you have any facilities that meet the above minimum requirements, please contact me or any of our Executive Committee members at your earliest convenience. Thank you and wishing you all a very safe summer; may we all overcome this pandemic soon.

We look forward to your regular feedback and continued cooperation to achieve NAAM's goals.

Sincerely,

Dr. Binoy K. Bordoloi, Bor Medhi Email: binoy.bordoloi@gmail.com

ABSTRACT OF THE TALK, "SPIRITUAL HUMANIST SRIMANTA SANKARDEVA" BY DR. SANJIB KUMAR BORKAKOTI

Srimanta Sankaradeva was a great polymath, who contributed in numerous disciplines. He created a new religious order named *Eka Sarana Nama Dharma*, which had many distinctive features. It addressed socioeconomic issues in addition to religious ones from the beginning of its emergence. There were many elements of reform in that order. Education for women and people in the lowest echelon of the society were some of the clarion calls by the Saint. Ethics and educational contents constitute a large part of his writings.

Srimanta Sankaradeva had his own religious philosophy. He equated *Brahma* and *Ishwara* which was a revolutionary hypothesis. He said that *Ishwara* exists in every being and hence one should see everyone as manifestation of God. Obvious corollary of it was to shun violence of all types, which he categorically stated. He forgave even his adversaries. He asked his followers not to hate the non-believers. His vision encompassed the entire humanity and was not restricted to people of any geographical region. He was a global citizen in the true sense.

Srimanta Sankaradeva was a great humanist. Unlike other religious *Guru*, he did not denigrate human birth or human body. Rather he treated human body as a perfect tool for elevating oneself. He treated the ailing people and was an expert in *Ayurveda*. He was a married man, and he advised his disciples not to shun the world. He eked out his own living, unlike other *Guru*s. This tradition is followed by the religious heads of his order even these days.

Srimanta Sankaradeva was a pioneer in the entire world in using cultural tools like plays for proselytizing work. He was the first playwright in all modern Indian languages. He used the language of the common people to convey his message about *Ishwara* even though he was a great Sanskrit scholar. Moreover, he used ethnic ingredients in costumes used by the characters of his plays known as *Ankiya* plays. All his works were targeted at bringing together people of different caste and ethnicity. The literary and cultural contributions by Srimanta Sankardeva brought all ethnic groups together, thus creating the modern Assamese society. So, he is known as the father of Assamese society.

Srimanta Sankaradeva created institution known as Than or Sattra, which is equivalent to a monastery, the Namghar being its central component. More than religious activities, this institution included activities like addressing socio-economic and even legal issues faced by the society. He was a pioneer in local area administration too. Thus. institutional structure of his religious order, the Eka Sarana Nama Dharma, also highlighted the emphasis on people rather than on theology alone. This multi-faceted institution is the forerunner of community groups like Kibbutz, Commune, etc. The institution of Than or Sattra along with the Namghar are one of the greatest creations in recent centuries for integrated development of any society. Only a humanist spiritual could successfully promulgate and accomplish such a multifaceted religious order.

FEATRUED ARTICLE

Common socio-economic perspectives of Srimanta Sankaradeva and Guru Nanak

By Dr. Sanjib Kumar Borkakoti

The holy land of *Bharatavarsha*, a wider concept than the present-day India, has seen emergence of many saints and reformers over the milleniums. But there have been very few who have revolutionized the entire socioeconomic scenario of their respective regions together with religious movements, Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankaradeva (1449-1568) and Guru Nanak (1469-1539) did. The social systems maintained by the subscribers of Srimanta Sankaradeva's Eka Sarana Nama Dharma as well as Guru Nanak's Sikh religion are quite distinct from the other socio-cultural milieu prevalent in the sub-continent of Bharatavarsha. Both the orders characterized by absence of the malaise faced by the other orders in this sub-continent. There is no caste difference, no priest community, no hierarchy among the devotees, no disparity among the devotees while distributing offerings and no parasitic dependence on the society at large for the sustenance of the order. Most importantly both the orders have democratic management of their institutions.

The enormous similarity between Srimanta Sankaradeva's Eka Sarana Nama Dharma and Guru Nanak's Sikh religion is not surprising. Different written records of Sikh religion under the title Janamsakhi, which are considered the closest records of the life events of Guru Nanak, categorically mention his visit to Kamrup (Brahmaputra valley) and meeting with Srimanta Sankaradeva.¹ Sikh scholars have agreed that there is no difference between the philosophy of Guru Nanak and Srimanta Sankaradeva. They also say that this could only be so if one had imparted or discussed his philosophy with the other and impressed with his thought process.² It is pertinent to note here that whereas Guru Nanak was born in 1469, Srimanta Sankaradeva had been proselytising since 1468 itself, when he initiated eminent scholar Mahendra Kandali and enacted the religious play *'Chihna-Yatra'*.³

The similarity between Eka Sarana Nama Dharma and Sikh religion arose as Guru Nanak had his spiritual guidance from Srimanta Sankaradeva. There were meetings between them several times, the first being during Srimanta Sankaradeva's first pilgrimage in 1481-1493, when Guru Nanak was in the age period 12-24 years. Guru Nanak entered seriously into the realm of spiritualism almost after this time, being influenced by Srimanta Sankaradeva. He again came to meet Srimanta Sankaradeva, this time in Assam in 1505,4 It was therefore that Sikh religion is so similar to Eka Sarana Nama Dharma, because the latter emanated from the former. Sikh religion is clearly a derivative of the movement initiated by Srimanta Sankaradeva. The Sikh religion is not different from Eka Sharana Nama Dharma in essence, but only in cultural paraphernalia.5

It may be mentioned that absence of idol is an important feature in both the orders. Both *Eka Sarana Nama Dharma* and *Sikh* religion have holy books in the altar instead of any idol. They keep *Gunamala* and *Granthsahib* respectively in the altar. This has had farreaching consequences and immense sociocultural impact in both the orders. Idolatry has always been associated with the priests, as the very presence of idols implies the necessity of a special class of people who are authorized to perform worship of those idols. Any idol required a methodical way of worshiping it;

which gave rise to a priest class, who over time became perpetrators of extortion as well as suffocating customs. By doing away with the very idol itself, both Eka Sarana Nama Dharma and Sikh religion did away with the necessity of the priest class, which had till then been an essential attribute of any indigenous religious system in the sub-continent. So Srimanta Sankaradeva and Guru Nanak did not only remove idols from their religious system, but they also removed middle-men from the religious system itself. That was a great revolution in the medieval period. A new paradigm was developed. The traditional difference between priests and other common devotees no more existed in the new paradigm. The new egalitarian paradigm also had no scope for caste-based social differences.

The issue of caste difference and caste conflict have been haunting the Indian society since long ago. Therefore, the removal of class difference from the religious system by Srimanta Sankaradeva and Guru Nanak by removing idolatry was an epoch-making change. It also became the beginning of many other changes. The suffocating system of caste difference in the society that prevailed in the medieval period had also been strengthened by the class difference embedded into it, as the original occupation-based Chaturbarna caste system of Vedic era had long given way to class difference based caste system in the entire subcontinent. A Brahman was no longer a repository of knowledge that Chaturbarna implied, but perpetrator of inequality and extortion by way of religious tax. Srimanta Sankaradeva and Guru Nanak striked at the root of this malaise. Their removal of idolatry took away the very sustenance of the caste system. This malaise is therefore totally absent in both Srimanta Sankaradeva's Eka Sarana Nama Dharma as well as Guru Nanak's Sikh religion.

It is a corollary of the above-mentioned features that there is no hierarchy among the devotees in both *Eka Sarana Nama Dharma* as

well as *Sikh* religion. Whether it is *Kirtanghar* of Eka Sarana Nama Dharma or Gurudwara of *Sikh* religion, all devotees sit on the same level in their place of worship. No raised seat is kept for any devotee. No one gets any priviledge during the community prayer in either Kirtanghar or Gurudwara. Any person can enter and participate in the community prayers in both the orders. Both the Kirtanghar of Eka Sarana Nama Dharma and Gurudwara of Sikh religion are open to all people. 6 The liberalism is the most important feature in both the orders. There is no disparity among the devotees in any function, not even while distributing *Prasada* (offerings to God). The community kitchen known as *Langar* has fam<mark>ous</mark>ly continued that tradition in Sikh religion. Not only the feature of community feast, but also an element of altruism characterize the functioning of Langar; poor and downtrodden are fed there. This altruism was an important component of Sankaradeva's teachings, Srimanta preached that one should see God in every being.7

Democratic management of the religious institution is another striking common feature of both Eka Sarana Nama Dharma and Sikh religion. Both Kirtanghar of Eka Sarana Nama Dharma and Gurudwara of Sikh religion are managed by democratically elected bodies. Even when the Kirtanghar belongs to any hereditary the residential institution propagates the legacy of Srimanta Sankaradeva, it is inevitably managed by a body which is elected from among the disciples associated with that particular Sattra. This legacy has been possible as Srimanta Sankaradeva introduced decentralized leadership in the Eka Sarana Nama Dharma, democratic management being a corollary of decentralized leadership.8 Similarly the Gurudwaras have Gurudwara Prabandhak Committees, which is elected at regular intervals. This tradition started with the founders of the orders. Neither Srimanta Sankaradeva nor Guru Nanak gave

any special treatment to own family members. Devotees received the greatest care from both of them. Srimanta Sankaradeva made his disciple Madhavadeva his successor, not any of his sons. Similarly Guru Nanak made Angad his successor, not any of his sons.

The most unique feature of both Eka Sarana Nama Dharma and Sikh religion is the non-dependence on the society at large for the sustenance of the order. The traditional approach of religious institutions being dependant on donations of devotees or disciples is absent in both the orders. The devotees associated with any Sattra or Gurudwara manage whatever is required for their sustenance by generating resources by own toil. They do not beg from others. Instead they work, like any other person in the society. The devotees living in any Sattra cultivate land to grow own food and also engage in several other occupations like teaching, transportation etc. This work culture is embedded in the orders by the founders, because of which both the orders have penetrated the society so deeply and over the centuries. Sankaradeva advised his disciples not to beg.9

egalitarian socio-economic The perspectives of both the orders Eka Sarana Nama Dharma and Sikh religion is the major source of their strength. It is the egalitarian perspective which makes the two orders stand out among all. Both used vernacular languages to communicate with common masses, unlike the saints of yesteryears who communicated in Sanskrit alone. Although the concept of Bhakti was already there in the scriptures, the special emphasis given by the duo on it had catalytic impetus from the Sufis. While this may be only a guess in case of Srimanta Sankaradeva, Guru Nanak was closely and explicitly influenced by the Sufi culture; he joined the Sufis for some time and also visited Mecca during one of his travels.¹⁰ But one thing was certain. The sociochanges the medieval economic in

Bharatavarsha left distinctive marks on both the saints and their orders.

It was the egalitarian philosophy of the two orders that gave rise to a new socioeconomic homogeneity, which was missing in the other Bhakti orders. The evolution as a homogenous group helped growth of common political interests too. That was why massive upsurge could occur against the tyranny of the rulers. They rose to a man against royal order for conversion to the faiths promoted by the royalty. There were Moamariya uprising (1769– 1805) by the followers of Eka Sarana Nama Dharma against the Ahom regime, who were promoting the Shakti cult and the armed conflict of the followers of *Sikh* religion with the Mughal regime, who were promoting the Islam. These conflicts marked the two orders as distinctive ones in the annals of Indian history. Both the Ahom regime and the Mughal regime were weakened considerably by these conflicts, thereby hastening their downfall.

References and Notes:

- 1. Guru Nanak in Kamrup and Assam, Dr Dalvinder Singh Grewal, https://www.sikhphilosophy.net/threads/gurunanak-in-kamroop-and-assam.50896/, accessed on 26 July, 2019 at 7.00 pm.
- 2. Guru Nanak & Srimanta Sankar Dev ~ A Comparative Study of Their Life and Philosophy,
 Dr Dalvinder Singh Grewal,
 https://www.sikhnet.com/news/guru-nanak-srimanta-sankar-dev-comparative-study-their-life-and-philosophy, accessed on 26 July, 2019 at 5.58 pm.
- 3. *Purnanga Katha Gurucharit*, Dr Sanjib Kumar Borkakoti, Bani Mandir, First edition, Guwahati, 2007, pp 41-49.
- 4. Srimanta Sankaradeva: a multi-faceted genius, Dr Sanjib Kumar Borkakoti, Purbanchal Prakash, First edition, Guwahati, 2015, pp 123-124; Srimanta Sankaradeva aru Guru Nanak, Dr Sanjib Kumar Borkakoti, in Vivek Bhaskar, edited by M. Barua and M. Saikia, Ramkrishna Mission, Guwahati, Vol 3, No 2, July 2016 ISSN 2348-8328.

- 5. *Assamese Sikh*, Dr Sanjib Kumar Borkakoti, http://www.drsanjib.net/2017/11/16/assamese-sikh/, accessed on 25 July, 2019 at 7.37 pm.
- 6. If any *Kirtanghar* or *Gurudwara* has restricted entry of people on any criterion, it must be considered as an aberration, not the tradition. Such aberrations occur over time, one such aberration being the idol worship, prevalent in some *Sattras*. They may have their own reasons or compulsions in putting restrictions, but that does not constitute the guiding principle of the order.
- 7. Samasta bhutate dekhibeka Narayana, in Kirtan Ghosha, verse 382, Srimanta Sankaradeva.
- 8. *Srimanta Sankaradeva: a multi-faceted genius*, Dr Sanjib Kumar Borkakoti, Purbanchal Prakash, First edition, Guwahati, 2015, pp 165-171.
- 9. *Purnanga Katha Gurucharit*, Dr Sanjib Kumar Borkakoti, Bani Mandir, First edition, Guwahati, 2007, p 358.

10. *A History of India*, Vol One, Romila Thapar, Penguin, First edition, England, 1966, pp. 304-314. She attributes the emergence of Sikh religion to Islamic influence; she says "The ideas of Kabir and Nanak were drawn from both the existing and the Islamic traditions." (Ibid, p. 308)

Bibliography:

- 1. Kirtan Ghosha, Srimanta Sankaradeva
- 2. A History of India, Romila Thapar
- 3. *Guru Nanak in Kamrup and Assam*, Dr Dalvinder Singh Grewal
- 4. Guru Nanak & Srimanta Sankar Dev ~ A
 Comparative Study of Their Life and
 Philosophy, Dr Dalvinder Singh Grewal
- 5. Srimanta Sankaradeva: a multi-faceted genius, Dr Sanjib Kumar Borkakoti
- 6. Assamese Sikh, Dr Sanjib Kumar Borkakoti
- 7. *Purnanga Katha Gurucharit*, Dr Sanjib Ku<mark>ma</mark>r Borkakoti

[The author lives with his family in Nagaon, Assam, India]

RECENT AND UPCOMING ACTIVITIES

Naam-proxonga

No naam-proxonga activities have taken place during this quarter because of the corona virus emergency. We will resume regular naamproxonga when normalcy returns.

A Spiritual dialogue by Dr. Sanjib Kumar Borkakoti

July 19, 2020 07:30 AM Pacific Time (US and Canada). Additional details are on next page.

Celebrating Srimanta Sankardeva's Janma Tithi

NAAM is also organizing Sankardeva's Janma Tithi celebration scheduled for November 2020 (in-person, if permitted; remotely, otherwise). A tentative schedule is shown below. Please feel free to provide your input and contact me directly (binoy.bordoloi@gmail.com) or write to naaminfo@naamghar.org, to make it a grand success.

The Janma Tithi celebration will include various spiritual and cultural programs that reflect the teaching of Sankardeva: Naam-Praxonga, Xatriya dance performance, Thiya Naam/Naam from the Barpeta Satra, Abhinaya in Sattriya (ankiya naat), Vocal /Borgeet, etc.

Some of the artists who will perform, either in-person or remotely, include *Ms. Prateesha (Saikia) Suresh*, who is a highly accomplished Satriya dancer; *Mr. Jayanta Nath*, a recognized singer/composer; and *Ms. Mallika Kandali*, who is one of the foremost exponents of the classical Sattriya dance.

"SPIRITUAL HUMANIST SRIMANTA SANKARDEVA," A SPIRITUAL DIALOGUE by DR. SANJIB BORKAKOTI



NAAM cordially invites you to join a spiritual dialogue with renowned scholar, **Dr Sanjib Kumar Borkakoti**, President, Society for Srimanta Sankaradeva, Nagaon, Assam on July 19th, 2020. It will be delivered remotely via Zoom, details of which are given below. We look forward to you joining this NAAM event.

Date and Time: July 19, 2020 07:30 AM Pacific Time (US and Canada)

July 19, 2020 10.30 AM Eastern Time (US and Canada)

July 19, 2020 8.00 PM INDIA Time

Join Zoom Meeting ID/PW: will be made available soon

One tap mobile:

+16699006833,,88005973877#,,,,0#,,13646485# US (San Jose)

+13462487799,,88005973877#,,,,0#,,13646485# US (Houston)

Dial by your location:

+1 669 900 6833 US (San Jose) +1 312 626 6799 US (Chicago) +1 346 248 7799 US (Houston) +1 929 205 6099 US (New York) +1 253 215 8782 US (Tacoma) +1 301 715 8592 US (Germantown

Meeting ID/PW/your local number: will be made available soon

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 (WG): 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.org.

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

Email: Naaminfo@Naamghar.org

Website: www.naamghar.org

Facebook: Naamghar Association of America - NAAM

