



Naamghar Association of America

NEWSLETTER

WWW.NAAMGHAR.ORG

Volume 4/Issues 1/ Jan-Mar 2021

MESSAGE FROM THE BOR-MEDHI

Dear community members and well-wishers of NAAM,

We express our gratitude to all the people who are working in this environment, putting their own well-being at risk, to help others. Glad that vaccine distribution is now making good progress. 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 first quarter newsletter of 2021 from NAAM, it is my pleasure to highlight a few key points:

- A) We are very pleased to announce that we are planning a Fund Raising NAAM Event on May 29, 2021 Saturday. Please stay tuned as we give shape to the first community letter for this event to go out by mid-April.
- B) I wish to mention that a few of our members attended the introductory on-line class at the Hindu University of America (www.HUA.edu) during the Fall of 2020. The instructor was the President of HUA, Kalyan Viswanathan. He organized speakers from the USA, Europe and India. We had to submit a term-paper. Both Dr. Babul Borah and I prepared our individual papers independently and submitted to HUA in December-2020. This gave us an opportunity to write about Srimanta Sankaradeba. Dr. Borah's paper is included in this issue of the newsletter for your reading pleasure and comments and my paper will be published in the next issue of this newsletter.
- C) A few of us are pursuing classes at HUA in the current quarter as well. I have been attending a class in the Winter 2021 titled "How Hindu Dharma Transformed America," taught by Philip Goldberg. He is an author, speaker, and spiritual

counselor (<http://www.PhilipGoldberg.com>). His book titled *American Veda* is available in Amazon. He talked about various *Gurus* making an influence in America, starting with Swami Vivekananda. After submitting my paper and requesting him for his comments on Srimanta Sankaradeba, his response was as follows:

"Thank you, Binoy. As you suspected, I had never heard of Srimanta Sankaradeva. Nor have I been to Assam; the closest I've come is West Bengal. I will try to find time to read the paper you attached in the coming days."

All best, Phil"

Let us hope NAAM can make the perception change with our continued perseverance and on-going communication.

I am highlighting from his class the Five Functions of Religion:

1. **Transmission:**

Impart to each generation meaningful customs, rituals, stories, and historical continuity.

2. **Translation:**

Help people interpret life events, acquire meaning and purpose, and affirm their connection to a larger whole.

3. **Transaction:**

Create and sustain healthy communities and provide guidelines for moral behavior and ethical relationships.

4. **Transformation:**

Foster maturation, ongoing growth and the development of more fulfilled and more complete persons.

5. **Transcendence:**

Satisfy the yearning to enlarge the perceived boundaries of the self, touch the infinite, and unite with the ultimate ground of being.

Finally, greetings for the *Bohag Bihu* season and looking forward to your feedback and continued co-operation to drive the processes for our mission.

We look forward to your continued engagement and encouragement to guide us towards our goal of establishing a permanent Naamghar in America.

Sincerely,

Dr. Binoy K. Bordoloi, *Bor Medhi*

Email: binoy.bordoloi@gmail.com

UPDATE ON FUNDRAISING ACTIVITIES

NAAM is planning to host a cultural event to raise community awareness about NAAM's activities and to raise funds for a Naamghar in North America; details are coming soon.

NAAM also soliciting your donations via its website (<https://naamghar.org/>), NAAM Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/NaamgharAssociationOfAmerica/>), and the "DONATE" button on this page to fund a community Naamghar in North America.

NAAM is looking forward to an active participation of the community (Assamese diaspora) for realizing

a common dream of building a Naamghar in North America. Please use the "DONATE" button below and/or contact Dr. Binoy Bordoloi at binoy.bordoloi@gmail.com for additional information.

Thank you!

Please contribute to NAAM's effort to build a naamghar in North America:



RECENT AND UPCOMING ACTIVITIES

On Nov 21st, 2020 NAAM remotely celebrated Srimanta Sankardeva Janmotsav Tithi with audiences and participants from North America, UK, and India. The event was attended by more than 170 guests. In the case that you missed this community event, a recording of the event is available at: <https://youtu.be/YHlQb1zTto>.

NAAM is planning to organize a fundraising cultural event in late Spring/early Summer 2021. Please keep

an eye for communications from NAAM in the upcoming weeks for more details.

We look forward to you attending this upcoming spring/summer 2021 event which will feature Assam's traditional Gayan Bayan, Sattriya Dance, Bhaona, and Borgeet among other cultural forms of the Sankari culture.

HINDU STUDIES IN AN ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENT – IT'S IMPORTANCE AND HOW TO APPROACH?

By Dr. Babul Borah

I came to know about HUA and the courses offered by HUA from Shri Kalyan Viswanathan in zoom meeting organized by the Namghar Association of America (NAAM), a non-profit organization of the Assamese Community of NA, where Kalyan Ji was a Guest Speaker. I signed up for the course on 'Orientation to Hindu Studies', with a layman's curiosity and interest. After attending more than 10 lectures and going through many scholarly lectures and videos, I am now convinced that it was a very worthwhile undertaking on my part. While it strengthened my own learning and experience of my religion, traditions and culture, it enriched me with a lot of concepts (and misconceptions) about the world view of Hinduism. It made me introspective - Why I consider myself an 'insider'? Am I entrenched with 'received knowledge'? How are the 'liberal secular' beliefs different from 'Hindu fundamentalism'? How much was the influence of 'Sanatana Dharma' on my upbringing that shaped my present thoughts on religion?

If I were not exposed to the orientation course on Hindu Studies, I would not have asked these questions. As a student of science, there was very little opportunity for me learn about religion. Even for students in humanities and social science, studying religion would be considered out of fashion. Studying Hinduism in a secular society would perhaps be considered as playing into the hands of right-wing politics. Sanskrit was taught at the early High School years, only as an optional subject. The British were successful to convince Indians that Sanskrit was outdated, and there was not much to learn from the Sanskrit Scriptures (1). In free

India, we unfortunately adopted an 'Anglicized' education system with little importance to learning Sanskrit and religion, thereby depriving us of learning about the rich Hindu thoughts from Vedic literature on the central themes of Sanatana Dharma, such as Karma, Moksha and Yoga which bring elevated consciousness in our minds. We began to listen to the 'outsider's voice' and got indoctrinated with an Western view (default paradigm), which does not focus on the ancient Vedic values, but present a concocted picture of our culture and traditions as filled with problems of caste system, superstition, untouchability, human rights, nationalism and Hindutva, etc. These curses also exist in the Western societies, which the Western scholars label as aberrations. But when the same curses are associated with Indian culture, the Western default paradigm describes those as a general confirmation of backwardness of the Indian Society and culture (2,3)

My exposure and experience with Sanatana Dharma did not come from academic teachings or from any structured learning of religion. My views as an 'insider' were shaped by my upbringing in Assam, importantly, in a very unique place called Majuli. Majuli is the biggest river island, surrounded by the river Brahmaputra. Majuli is the epicenter of a neo-Vaishnavite movement started by Srimanta Sankardeva, a religious and social reformer, about 500 years ago. Sankardeva preached a monotheist form of Hinduism called Vaishnavism that was devoted to the worship of Lord Krishna. During that time, Saktism and Tantric cults were the predominant forms of Hindu practices in this part of India (4). The

Brahminic influence was at its peak where the priestly class enjoyed superiority over the lower classes. On the other hand, Sankardeva preached Eksaran Naamdharma (salvation by faith and prayer to one God, Lord Krishna). The emphasis was laid on Sravana (listening to the singing of the acts and deeds of Krishna) and Kirtana (chanting and prayer songs of Krishna). It forbids caste discrimination, elaborate rituals and worship of idols and sacrifices. The followers can pray in prayer halls called Kirtanghar or in a community setting in congregation halls called Naamghar. His disciples (Bhakats) led an austere and spiritual life in Satras (monasteries and hermitages). He talked of universal love and advocated unifying different ethnic groups in the society. Besides devotional songs (Borgeet) and Kirtanas, Sankardev innovated a new tool – staging a play, in order to teach people the doctrines of Vaishnavism. The first play Chihna-yatra was staged to tell the story of Lord Krishna. These plays now are commonly known as Bhawna which are staged in Naamghars and Satras. Through all of these activities, Sankardeva and Madhavdeva, one of his principal disciple spread the doctrines of Sanatana Dharma to common people. Sankardeva has made Sanatan Dharma accessible to all, to the uneducated villager, to the rich and the poor, and his teachings are passed from parents to children, from teachers to students, and from generation to generation (5,6,7).

I grew up in Majuli in a home, may be a mile away from a Satra (Kamalabari Satra). I could listen to the Kirtanas by the Bhakats and enjoyed the Bhawnas. In fact, I participated in many Bhawnas in the Naamghar and Clubhouse of my little town. Through my participation in such activities, I have experienced and learnt from the stories of Krishna, Mahabharata and Ramayana. For me, there was no other better place to learn about Sanatana Dharma – for ethical and moral behavior, for peaceful social order, for carrying out duties and responsibilities and for service to community

and adherence to spirituality. Although not recognized by the contemporary and modern India, Sankardeva, by propagating the doctrines of Eksaran Naamdharma, sowed the seeds of democracy and socialism nearly 500 years ago.

Another teacher from whom I learnt about Sanatana Dharma was my father, Late Sri Keshob Ram Borah. My father was one of the first five science graduates in 1920 from Cotton College, Guwahati, Assam. He joined the Freedom Movement against the British. Following Gandhiji's non-cooperation movement, my father declined the offer of Judgeship from the British Government. Instead, he decided to spread education amongst villagers and made Majuli a launch pad for his mission. He opened the first High English school in Majuli. Even in the face of financial hardship, he did not give up his mission, going from door to door to spread education amongst the people of Majuli. He even succeeded in opening up the first college (Majuli College). Today, there are many more high schools and colleges in Majuli. My father's life and his selfless pursuit to spread education in Majuli taught me about Dharma as service to the community. He was never in the pursuit of Artha and power. Otherwise, he could have accepted the British offer of an influential position in its Government. My father's life of sacrifice, study, service and contribution to society remain an inspiration to many of us, including the people of Majuli.

My predicament with the default paradigm: At personal level, I identify myself as an 'insider' to Hinduism. I was conditioned to this thinking through my upbringing in a place that was the epicenter for the spreading of Sanatana Dharma. My father also had helped me in shaping my insider's views. However, my predicament with the default paradigm is that, it is still pervading in our society, and it creates a false perception of our religion and culture in the minds of the young Indian generation in India and elsewhere. These false images today

pass for objective truth about India and Hinduism and get incorporated into school history textbooks making children abroad Hinduphobic at a very young age (8). Changing the default paradigm has been a challenge in the past and it remains so even today.

I see this battle to change the old paradigm at several fronts. First, this battle must be fought at the academic level to develop a new paradigm, not through accusation and confrontation with the Western scholars, but through a constructive dialogue with a goal to bring about a balance between the outsider's and insider's views. Second, the knowledge of Vedic Hindu culture buried in Sanskrit Scriptures must be re-discovered and translated into languages for current day and age. This is a Herculean task and would require the engagement of Indian scholars with sufficient research funding and should be taken up by the Indian Government. Third, to make sure that teachings of Sanskrit and moral science as espoused by the Vedic values and thoughts are introduced into school curriculum as compulsory and not optional. Lastly, the changes of the default paradigm must take place in peoples hearts and minds. After all, some social evils such as untouchability, discrimination, exploitation by the upper castes and violation of human rights still exist within the Indian society. Over centuries, we have come across Indian social and religious leaders who fought against such social injustices. Centuries ago, saintly leaders like Sankardeva strengthened the moral fabric of society. During British era, Sir Ram Mohan Roy and Rani Rasmoni fought to eradicate Sati. In the

modern era, Swami Vivekanada taught us that service to man is service to God and emphasized the importance of self-improvement. Mahatma Gandhi introduced and practiced non-violence to fight the British, a strategy later adopted by Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela to fight injustice against the Blacks. Teachings of Sanatana Dharma will ultimately uplift the human being to develop Swadharma (Dharma of self-expression) when the full inner potential of each human being will be realized leading to a more just and prosperous society. (2019, Hindu University of America).

References:

- (1) Prof. S.N. Balagangadhara Rao (from HUA course material, 2020)
- (2) Arvind Sharma, "Insider and Outsider in the Study of Religion", Eastern Anthropologist, 1985.
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- (4) Sir Edward Gait, "A History of Assam" 1905, 1st edition.
- (5) Dr. Sanjib Kr. Borkakoti, "Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankardeva", Book published by Bani Mandir, Guwahati, 2005.
- (6) Dr. Karabi Deka Hazarika, "Madhabdeva – His Life, Art and Thought", Book published by Bani Mandir, 2007.
- (7) Dr. Maheswar Neog, "Sri Sri Sankardeva", Book published by Bani Mandir, 1985.
- (8) Kundan Singh and Krishna Maheswari "Making children Hinduphobic - A critical review of McGraw Hill World History Textbooks" (2018).

[The author is a scientist with over three decades of experience in the pharmaceutical industry. He resides in Ohio and may be reached at: babulbrh@gmail.com]

FEATURED ARTICLE

THE GOLDEN MONGOOSE

By Kamalakshi Hazarika

The king of Hastinapur was having an Ashvamedha Yajna. He donated generously to the Brahmins who were very impressed and commended him for his immense sacrifice. The Brahmins were still overwhelmed by the extreme generosity of the king, when suddenly a mongoose came by. It looked strange because half its body was golden, and the other half was normal. The mongoose dampened the exuberance of the Brahmins by telling them that the sacrifice and generosity of the king was small compared to what he had witnessed. Having said that he started narrating the story.

It was a time of famine. A poor Brahmin family was starving. One day the father came home with a handful of corn and asked his wife to make a meal. The whole family had not eaten for many days and they were weak in hunger. The mother made the corn and the family was about to eat when a person knocked at their door asking for food. Now a Brahmin's duty is to serve his guest first. He should never refuse a guest. Therefore, he told his wife, "Amma I will give my portion of food to the guest." When the visitor had eaten, he seemed as if he was still hungry. The Brahmin went inside and asked if there was more food to offer. The mother gave her share of food and asked the father to serve the guest. The guest was not satisfied and seemed hungry again. The son

then sacrificed his food. When the visitor was hungry yet, the Brahmin was in a dilemma. The daughter-in-law went up to her father-in-law and said "father take my portion of the food to serve the guest and let me do my dharma". At this gesture, the guest revealed that he was a Devalok. He said that all the deities were satisfied with the sacrifice of the Brahmin family. He offered a place for them in heaven. A flying chariot came and took the noble Brahmin family to Swarg.

The mongoose was a witness to this story. He had rolled in the corn that fell on the floor at the Brahmin's kitchen and that is how he became half golden. Since then, he has rolled over several sacrificial grounds with the hopes of turning the rest of his body golden. However, this has not happened because there has not been a sacrifice greater than the sacrifice he had witnessed at the poor Brahmin's household. This goes to show that big sacrifices can be made irrespective of one's position in life or the amount of wealth one has. The story also give us a thought from the Upanishads- *Atithidevo Bhava*, meaning "May your Guest be God to You."

[The author lives with her family in New Jersey, USA]

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 WITH NAAM?

JOIN THE NAAM WORKING GROUP

(WG): We need your help in achieving the dream of building a Naamghar in North America. 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:

- Niraj Barbara, PA
- Dr. Rajen Barua, TX
- Dr. Sanjib Bhuyan, NJ
- Pranab Bora, WI
- Lolit Bora, PA
- Dr. Babul Borah, OH
- 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)
- Dr. Saswati Datta, OH
- Hemanga Dutta, NJ
- Panchali Dutta, NJ
- Sawmick Dutta, CA
- Prandeep Gogoi, NJ
- Kamalakshi Hazarika, NJ
- Suranjoy Hazarika, NJ
- Priyadarshini Inman, NC
- Dr. Jukti Kalita, NJ
- Rashmi Kalita, CA
- Sangaurav Kaushik, NC
- Nilanjona Mahanta, CA
- Nabanita Mazumdar, WA
- Chayanika Mohan, NC
- Rachna Nath, AZ
- Shakhyar Neog, NJ
- Dr Yashwant Pathak, FL
- Anu Perlmutter, VA
- Gayatree Prasad, CA
- Dr. Purandar Sarmah, NJ
(Treasurer)
- Vavani Sarmah, CA

Contact Us

Email: Naaminfo@Naamghar.org

Website: www.naamghar.org

Facebook: Naamghar Association of America – NAAM

