

BABURAM SAIKIA

Contradictions In(side) the Tradition:
Lived Religion, Ritual and Change
with Reference to Majuli Sattras



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Figure 1. *Guruasana*, the peripheral space where the community's spiritual energy meets with the divine. The main shrine of the prayer hall (*namghar*) at Uttar Kamalabari sattrra, Majuli. Photo by Baburam Saikia.

Growing up and spending my childhood in a deeply religious neo–Vaishnava Hindu monastic milieu, far away from parents and family members, was not easy. However, since the day I began my spiritual journey at the neo–Vaishnava monastery in Majuli, my monk brother Krishna Saikia tried to calm my fear, uncertainty, and yearning without which my life would have been very difficult. His playful brotherly behaviour, with a smiley face and a kind heart, had a lot of meaning and filled some gaps in my childhood and growing up in the meta-physical land of the God and devotees created by man. We were supposed to do the same amount of physical labour to run the monk family at Uttar Kamalabari sattrra, Majuli. However, most of the time, Krishnada ('brother Krishna') suffered and put in a lot of effort just to make sure that I could pursue my education. It would not have been possible to continue my education without his food, care, and support. When it comes to food sharing in the family, he sometimes decided to suffer in order to ensure that others in the monk family are fed well. I have seen him as a humble person who is dedicated to his duty, and always hardworking. Krishnada is just one example, as there are several other humanitarian stories, kind hearts and supportive minds inside the monk community of Uttar Kamalabari sattrra, Majuli.

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LIST OF ARTICLE PUBLICATIONS

Article 1

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Article 2

Saikia, Baburam. 2019. “Sattras, Magical Power and Belief Narratives in the Context of Flood and Erosion on Majuli Island”. *International Quarterly for Asian Studies* 50 (1–2), 119–136.

Article 3

Saikia, Baburam. 2021. “Marginalisation, Revolt and Adaptation: On Changing the Mayamara Tradition”. *Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristics* 15 (1), 85–102.

INTRODUCTION

1. Research premises

1.1 Formulation of the research task

I am investigating the origin and subsequent transformations of *sattras*, the local monastic institutions belonging to the neo-Vaishnava tradition, one of the basic trends in contemporary Hinduism, which has been propagated in Assam since the 16th century. Some of the oldest *sattras* are located in Majuli, an island in the Brahmaputra river, which is famous as the cradle of Assamese culture. My research examines religious practice and everyday life in some of these *sattras* in the context of socio-cultural change. The thesis foregrounds questions such as:

What does the Assamese *sattras* tradition, especially Majuli as the current hot-spot of the neo-Vaishnava order, represent? What does ‘contradiction in tradition’ mean? How can one outline these contradicting strands (or factors) inside a religious tradition? Why have these conflicts emerged?

To address these questions, I also need to go through a few grounding questions, such as:

What is the background of the *sattras* tradition and who was the founder? What is ‘tradition’ for *sattras* devotees? How does religion function in their lives? What is the ritualistic understanding among the devotees of ascetic *sattras*? Is there a perception and impact of the concept of ‘ritual purity’ in the lives of the devotees? How does the caste (*jati*) system dominate the tradition? How change has been taking place?

Here, I aim to offer some analytical answers to these questions and give readers a first-hand account of the subject. In my discussion, even though there is a lighter intention of philological-historical contextualisation to set the scene, my approach is mainly based on social context.

1.2 Position and ethics

This work is configured with both scholarly and personal attachment, which I try to balance by considering both emic and etic perspectives. It is driven by my personal commitment to the tradition and the community where I was trained into the tradition and lived for almost two decades as a practitioner. Somebody, however, might disagree and suggest that my critical analysis, which is an essential part of my research, is in contradiction with my personal commitment. However, as per my understanding, critical reflection does not necessarily mean a negative or outsider view. In fact, in some cases it might give people a thought-provoking inside perspective. Therefore, I consider that reflecting on oneself critically is healthy when it comes to tradition.

Alongside the folkloric and vernacular religious traditions of Assam, I see *sattras* traditions as an important element of Assamese society. Contradiction and

conflict could also be considered part of change, which might perhaps lower the tradition in the eyes of the critics, but it cannot discredit the dedication of people towards the tradition and society as a whole. I have highlighted several angles related to my research, some of which are sensitive and touching for myself. To discuss these fragments, I have taken the firm position of analysing with a critical lens in order to navigate my research interest. Judgmental attitudes including appropriation of tradition is not part of this research.

As a folklorist, I position myself as a scholar who likes to investigate critical social problems through dynamic perspectives. This research has a macroscopic folkloristic approach based on socio-religious folklife studies, bringing in different issues related to ‘contradictions inside the tradition’ in the context of Majuli sattras. By employing critical reflection I have no intention of navigating anyone’s religious or political agendas. Neither do I wish to impress or hurt my fellow members back in Majuli through this work, which has nothing to do with a negative portrayal of Hinduism, as many Hindus might assume. This is simply an academic attempt to represent my research outcomes and to see “me against myself”. In my case, ethics (see Caplan 2003: 1–5) relies on the historical and cultural context of my textual and personal engagement with the community. I take full responsibility for any kind of mistake that may unknowingly occur in this work.

1.3 Coverage and methodology

Whereas articles in this thesis present different case studies, the current introduction expands the discussion to offer a macroscopic view of the neo-Vaishnava traditions being practiced in the sattras on Majuli island. I have framed an ideological and religious grounding on which the tradition of a certain ascetic school has been built. The central focus here is to look at the tradition through its internal contradictions, and the concept of purity in the ritual and practical lives of the devotees. My research will show tradition as a model, social force, and power practice.

While collecting empirical data during my fieldwork, I visited most of the sattras on Majuli island. Apart from Majuli, I conducted fieldwork in Jorhat, Tinsukia, Lakhimpur and Barpeta districts in Assam and in Madhupur in West Bengal to understand the wider context and to be able to analyse the groundings and the realities of life in sattras. Among many sattras in Majuli, I have chosen the Kamalabari school of sattras, especially Uttar Kamalabari sattra (established in 1673), as the main site of my research. This is because the sattra is a celibate order and is becoming an influential sattra that promotes *sattriya* performing art traditions within and outside India. Their recent strong political affiliation with the Assam Government, formed by the Bharatiya Janata Party¹ (2016–2021), and

¹ The BJP is the one of the two major political parties in India; it has close ideological links with the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangha (RSS).

my personal engagement with the sattra as a whole, are other reasons for choosing this sattra as the main sample.

My research is based upon fieldwork data and ethnographic accounts. I have employed methods such as interview, group discussion, participation, observation, and documentation. My fieldwork approach includes data collection, classification, and decisions on selecting my research foci and collected data. I should mention here that in some cases I have applied my own experiences as an insider. I have used the secondary sources available on the internet and have worked in libraries including the library in the Department of Estonian and Comparative Folklore at the University of Tartu; the K. K. Handiqui Library at Gauhati University, India; Lakshminath Bezbaroa Central Library at Dibrugarh University, India; the Northeast Regional Centre of the Indian Council of Historical Research at the Gauhati University Campus, India; the UCC library at University College Cork, Ireland; and the Carol Grotnes Belk Library at Elon University, USA.

1.4 The current state of the research field, my motivation, and the challenge

Majuli has been changing in an interesting way in recent years because of the growth of religious and political majoritarianism promoted by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangha² (RSS) in India. At the same time, people, including locals and outsiders, are also in the process of standardising and heritagising folkloric practices to give the traditions, especially the privileged or ‘great traditions’, of the island a hallmark. Neo-Vaishnava monasteries on Majuli receive higher preference than ever before in national religious politics. After the recognition of *sattriya* dance as one of the “classical Indian dance traditions” by the Government of India in 2000, the term “classical (*margi*)” started to become more important than “folk (*desi*)”. The power house and a section of upper and middle-class locals do not seem to be worried about the real problems that are being faced by the islanders for years, such as constant yearly flood and erosion, poverty, quality of education, development, health, and unemployment. However, amid all this, I asked myself where this dominant nationalistic religious ideology, standardisation of one tradition over others, and power politics will take Assamese society, which is very diverse in terms of folklore, ethnicity, language, and religion. More than that, a section of society including civil activists and students have started questioning among themselves the role of a few Majuli sattras not only because of their strong political alliance with the RSS and the BJP government, but also their religious and social commitment and the erosion of their traditional knowledge system. This inspired me to formulate some questions, which I have already mentioned in the research task above. Considering these, I could not bypass my personal commitment.

² RSS is a grassroots Hindu nationalist organisation.

The challenging part of this research is the question of fulfilling the community's expectations. It is obvious that expectation is always high when the researcher happens to be an insider. In this regard, I want to say that my fieldwork data and personal experience is the key to analyse and take forward the discussion. Academic scholarship always put emphasis on facts, rationality, and scientific data. Therefore, I am bound by its norms. To understand my discussion, it is necessary to distinguish between rationality and emotional attachment. I am aware that 'insiders over outsiders' emotional narratives are considered crucial in the context of sattras in Majuli. Nevertheless, I have never paid attention to this because it does not help me understand the broad and inclusive perspectives of the subject. Being an insider is an asset, and folkloristics as a discipline is usually about one's own culture, in contrast to anthropology.

1.5 The concept

I came to know during my fieldwork in Majuli that until some decades ago a few of the most powerful sattras, including Auniati, Dakhinpat and Garmur, never considered Sankaradeva³ (1449–1568) the founder of the Assam *bhakti* movement (i.e., the neo-Vaishnava tradition), as their religious icon because of early sectarian division and leadership disputes. They never even celebrated his birth and death anniversaries as his other followers do. However, the situation has been changing slowly because of the increasing widespread popularity of Sankaradeva as a saint and an icon of Assamese society that caused them to regard Sankaradeva as their ideological hero. Clever leaders among them later realised that without acknowledging and prioritising Sankaradeva it would be difficult for them to survive among the religions of Assam.

Despite leadership disputes and sectarian variation between the ascetic sattras in Majuli, some of the sattra devotees, who earlier did not regard Sankaradeva as their ideal, mentioned to me that they consider Sankaradeva as the model of their faith and ideology along the lines of their own sectarian leadership. In addition, they often say now that the initial idea of the sattra tradition emerged from Sankaradeva, which is being upheld by other sattras in Majuli. Here the question is, if Sankaradeva is considered their ideological figure in some sattras in Majuli, then how and to what extent are devotees practicing Sankaradeva's doctrine. In this regard, it is crucial to know first about the essence of the ideal of Sankaradeva to relate my arguments later and to show how present sattra traditions in Majuli and elsewhere have carried out that ideological lineage. What are the contradictory practices in reality, even though they continue to represent Sankaradeva as their ideological icon?

Here, one principle is that the search for authentic doctrines is a mechanism of religious pursuit. Therefore, isn't it that different sattra traditions can have their

³ I write Sankaradeva (not Shankaradeva) following the literation based on Assamese, not the Sanskrit based literation.

own image of Sankaradeva and his teachings could be interpreted differently? Conflict for power and social prejudice within and outside neo-Vaishnava tradition has been the reason for which assets of the faith continue to be marginalised by the followers of the faith. Therefore, contradiction between democratic ideas and discriminatory behaviour based on power, caste, and religion, began to emerge and flourish among sattra devotees during the process of inheriting the tradition.

My discussion will be navigated throughout by the central idea of “contradictions in(side) the tradition” by breaking some conceptual barriers based on feeling. Here, I am not going to use the term ‘contradiction’ in a negative sense, rather I employ it as a part of change in the present sattra tradition. To make a dialectical observation, it needs some thinking to discuss the ‘contradictions’ between whom and what? How is it mediated? How does this contradiction shape the tradition and carry it on? When I use the term tradition I refer to ideas being understood and practiced within the confinement of the ascetic school of sattras in Majuli. Contradiction happens between the sattra devotees’ conception of tradition, its upholding, and their daily life realities. To specify where contradictions exist, I wish to propose the liberal elements of Sankaradeva’s teaching as he is considered by many, especially the celibate sattras, as the ideological icon. In the context of sattra, the contradiction is mediated by the conventional idea of authenticity and considering it as their property. The implication of flexible ideas that could be created or imported are not prioritised, therefore, some difficulties have been created in the lives of the young sattra devotees. The authoritarian approach of supervision, the caste system, nonflexible ideas that contradict real-life issues such as food freedom, dress, sex, and hierarchy based on caste have shaped the tradition. In this process, in a way, young devotees are becoming victims in the sattras in their early lives. It is the followers’ belief, dedication, and complete submission to religious authority started by Sankaradeva, who is considered both human and divine, that has carried sattra traditions forward.

1.6 Conceptual point of departure

Concepts are important tools in scholarly practice with which to create and share knowledge (Valk 2017: 108), therefore, I am going to analyse three crucial concepts, ‘tradition’, ‘religion’ and ‘ritual’. In addition my intention is to show the inner connections between these theoretical concepts, bearing in mind the fact that these concepts are widely interpreted from various angles in scholarship.

1.6.1 Tradition

Relying on Alan Dundes’s “Who are the folk?” (Dundes 1980: 1), Soumen Sen has stated, “to a folklorist, tradition is the basic element in folklore formations. Folk itself is defined as a group that which shares a tradition which it calls its own” (Sen 2010: 10). The concept of tradition has been widely discussed, defined, and redefined by scholars, and yet it is not decisive because of its complexity and

contextual specificity. Tradition could be seen as a humble conception incorporating flexibility in order to persuade people of its constant relevance. The definitions of folklore and tradition themselves change over time and space (see Claus & Korom 1991: 17). Tradition is a collective understanding that people live with and has a strong relationship with community, time, identity, and others. As both word and concept, tradition is inescapably ambiguous (see Noyes 2009: 234).

The idea of change is a cementing force in the context of tradition. Change does not make a tradition irrelevant; rather it helps in the process of continuation. Above all, the essence of tradition is the combination of old ways and new inventions. The question of purity in the context of tradition brings an ambivalent idea because “the notion of authenticity implies the existence of its opposite, the fake, and this dichotomous, construct is at the heart of what makes authenticity problematic” (Bendix 1997: 9).

In the context of Indian traditions, A.K. Ramanujan in his famous essay *Is There an Indian Way of Thinking? An Informal Essay*, states that “there is no one way of thinking; there are Great and Little Traditions, ancient and modern, rural and urban, classical and folk. Each language, caste and region has its special world-view” (Ramanujan 1999: 34). The neo-Vaishnava tradition in Assam could be counted under the category of “great tradition”, which, as Hillary Rodrigues said, “generally characterized as Sanskritic, Aryan, Brahmin, male-dominated, northern, elite culture” (Rodrigues 2017 [2006]: 245).

Apart from the above-mentioned conceptual understanding, what is the contextual specificity here to discuss about tradition? I want to discuss tradition not as a conception that reflects positive values, but as a transmissive aspect of folklore, which evolves by incorporating various socio-cultural aspects including authority, change, modernity, interpretation, and contradiction. In the context of my research, tradition refers to an element of Hindu religious dogma that is controlled by caste hierarchy through a monastic system. Monastic *sattras*, especially ascetic ones, lead the tradition even though the *sattras* tradition consists of different strata. This tradition rigorously maintains social boundaries. An important question is, whose tradition? The *sattras* tradition belongs to those Assamese who follow the institutionalised neo-Vaishnava religion conceptualised by Sankaradeva and his disciples. To be specific, *sattras* as a tradition is being continued by Hindu neo-Vaishnava devotees who come from socially upper and middle caste Assamese society. Therefore, it is a tradition of so-called mainstream Assamese society, which is dominated by the upper and middle caste Assamese population. This suggests that the caste system⁴ still controls the tradition.

Among other monastic orders, the ascetic group of *sattras* is unique because of their monastic lifestyle and maintenance of austere religious customs and rituals, including celibacy. Celibate monastic tradition is not based on family kinship even though non-celibate tradition is. Becoming a practitioner of an ascetic *sattras* is a full-time job and one needs to learn and train from early life to

⁴ In Assam after the Brahmin, upper-class Kayasthas including Mahantas and Kalitas, have priority in the caste system.

be a part of the ascetic tradition. The tradition makers, or *gurus*, get the highest position and honour among neo-Vaishnava devotees. Ascetic devotees need to create new generations to continue their traditional heritage. Therefore, they convince neo-Vaishnava followers to give their boy child to a *sattr*a as a devotee in order to continue the tradition. Continuation of the tradition is very much based on the upper caste of Assamese society and there has been a centuries-long socio-religious connection between *sattr*a institutions and mainstream Assamese society.

In the context of ritual performing arts, among *sattr*a devotees the idea of tradition is clearly distinguished from classical (*margi*), and folk (*deshi*), which could also be identified as 'high' vs 'low'. This became relevant because outsiders, for their own political reasons, wanted to standardise some artforms and promote them over others in order to widen the pan-Hindu demography. This recently introduced category is very precise and strong today, despite the fact that tradition bearers themselves did not create it. *Sattr*a devotees use the term *parampara*, especially when it comes to ritual performance. Although the usage of the term *parampara* is context specific still the umbrella term *sattriya-parampara* is used to identify all the religious rituals they practice. In addition, the *sattr*a tradition consists of different strands that contradict each other. Each sect has their own ritual conduct. One example would be that some *sattr*as consider image worship (*murti puja*) an important ritual, whereas some take the opposite stand. However, in the present situation it could be said that Sankaradeva and his disciple Madhavadeva's literary compositions and artistic creations unify the devotees belonging to various sects in one common space.

The *sattr*a tradition has a strongly socio-political connotation established by the Ahom kings to link the Brahma-samhati *sattr*as and common farmers. The Ahom king Jayadhwaj Singha (1648–1663) handed over many acres of lands to the Brahma-samhati *sattr*as whereby common landless farmers started leasing these lands. This has pushed a big section of Assamese farmers to work obediently under their *sattr*a landlords. Later, they also started following the religious path of their landowners. Second, Sankaradeva, the initial maker of the tradition, is considered a legendary religious and literary figure in Assam among the dominant majority Assamese section of society. Even though there are some disputes between the *sattr*as when it comes to their leadership, they acknowledge Sankaradeva as the initial maker of the *sattr*a tradition. Importantly, some *sattr*as are considered by some neo-Vaishnava devotees as real bearers of Sankaradeva's legacy. Third, the living folkloric and artistic elements of *sattr*as, including mythical stories, dance, drama and music, have connected Assamese society tightly. Therefore, there is a bond between the *sattr*as and the majority upper and middle caste section of society, strengthening the tradition and helping it to dominate. This social status creates some pressures on *sattr*a devotees when it comes to accepting some new or contemporary ideas. Some practices in tradition are discriminatory in nature because of the caste hierarchy. From time to time the *sattr*a authorities make social welfare contributions to society, although this cannot hide or change the core characteristic of the *sattr*a system, i.e. that it is dominated by the caste system.

1.6.2 Religion

Attempting to define religion could lead readers to confusion rather than clarity because “definition of religion is not value free; they are often implicated in power structures both inside and outside of the academy, for example in legal and political contexts” (Stausberg and Gardiner 2016: 9). In addition much Western scholarship has developed in favour of the dynamic contextualisation of religion starting from institutional to individual, ideal God to spirit, human to non-human, culture to nature. In this regard the concept of ‘vernacular religion’, religion as human beings encounter, understand, interpret, and practice it (see Primiano 1995: 44) has deep perspectives to offer in contrast to a uniform conception of religion.

Here it is important to look at how the phenomena of religion could be understood in the context of India. Wendy Doniger writes, “indeed many people in India would still define themselves by allegiances other than their religion” (Doniger 2009: 25). The Indian concept of *dharma*, which cannot be translated only as ‘religion’, can offer a different dimension in response to the popular understanding of ‘religion’. *Dharma* is a loaded Hindu idea and possesses more than one meaning, for example law, duty, right, action, religion. *Dharma* could be interpreted as that which holds together, i.e. laws that are universal and eternal (*santana*). Here laws are about that which unifies human and non-human. *Dharma* is very context specific because its meanings vary from one situation to another.

Religion plays a crucial role in both understanding and shaping the concept of tradition (Noyes 2009: 235). The same is true in my research context as tradition (*parampara*) is understood as a continuation of past religious belief where the idea of change is constantly denied by the tradition bearers. Tradition binds neo-Vaishnava devotees together to maintain their religion. On top of this the uniform concept of religion was outsourced to the people of Assam by majoritarian Hindu ideology and by Christian missionaries. Tradition had existed historically in multiple forms mainly with animistic practices. The unified idea of the neo-Vaishnava religion was brought to Assam by Sankaradeva, whose “literary works are pointers to the fact that he was steeped in the lore of Hindu philosophy” (Barua 1960: 87). Now the question is how to deal with the ongoing everyday experiences of devotees of ascetic *sattras* in Majuli who are in contradiction with their institutionalised imagined idea of religion. To tackle this question, my discussion will focus on the unified neo-Vaishnava religion being practiced by devotees in ascetic *sattras* and their everyday experiences of shared and personified beliefs. I find that the ‘lived religion’ concept, popularised by Religious Studies scholars David D. Hall and Robert A. Orsi, takes the discussion forward. Among other explanations on “lived religion” I consider that it will, as McGuire describes, “distinguish the actual experience of religious persons from the prescribed religion of institutionally defined beliefs and practices. It examines individual religiosity and spirituality and suggests that they often do not resemble the tidy, consistent, theologically correct packages official religions promote” (see McGuire 2008: 1).

1.6.3 Ritual

Ritual plays a crucial role in the function of a religion, therefore it is a key to religion. Ritual has other dimensions apart from religion because “rituals are constitutive of everyday human life, including secular activities” (McLaren 1984: 271). Religious Studies scholar Catherine Bell has proposed an application of the new prospective. She described a new paradigm of ritual related to improvisation and innovation (see Bell 1997: 241). Bell also writes that ritualisation is a process of setting actions apart from other actions. Her writings help us to see ritual as a form of discourse, a speech act in which knowledge and power are deeply intertwined.

In the context of Hindus, religious traditions are based on performance of rituals and ceremonies, which occurs not only in temples, shrines, and homes but also in workplaces, in cars, at roadside trees. Ritual occurs on special occasions including birth, marriage, and death. Gavin Flood has mentioned that “Ritual provides continuity of tradition through the generations, arguably conveys implicit Hindu values, and sets the parameters for the Hindu’s sense of identity” (Flood 2000: 223).

Rituals (*prasanga*) are very important tools for ascetic neo-Vaishnava devotees to maintain the tradition that is controlled by religion. They believe that without the continuation of ritual, tradition will die. The performative aspect of ritual is considered an essential mode of communication with the divine. Rituals are performed in the form of dance, drama and music. Ritual performances mainly contain mythical stories which were compiled by saint Sankaradeva and his disciple Madhavadeva in written form. Devotees in ascetic *sattras* perform fourteen prayer rituals each day, each of which needs to be performed according to their customs. In ascetic *sattras*, life is nothing but customs and rituals. Rituals have a very important connection with customs (*riti-niti*), which form the first step in a devotee’s training. Without performing certain customs, devotees cannot conduct rituals. For example, purifying customs are mandatory for a devotee before conducting the morning individual prayer ritual. Two important customary local ideas are ‘dos’ (*pai*) and ‘don’ts’ (*napai*). Dos fall within the norms of rituals whereas don’ts are the opposite. Apart from ritual importance, these two ideas are also used to signify moral values. What is *pai* is determined by social norms and inherited knowledge. Therefore, customs are an essential part of rituals.

2. Assam: The people and region

Assam is a land of genetic, linguistic, and cultural intermixtures situated in plains surrounded by neighboring hill states in the northeastern corner of India. Satyendra Nath Sarma writes, “in ancient times, the north east region, especially Assam [...] was known as the land of Kiratas i.e., the habitat of the Indo-Mongoloid people” (Sarma 2001: 36). Assamese, the dominant language belongs to the Indo-European family. The Bodos speak Tibeto-Berman languages.

Ethnically, the people of Assam consist of diverse groups including the Koch, Mech, Jayaintia, Lalung, Dimasa, Garo, Rabha, Moran, Chutia, Borahi, Tripuri, etc. Historian N. Acharya has written that “this stock claims to be the original inhabitants of Assam. Before the rise of the Ahoms, the Bodos controlled the political destiny of ancient Assam and continued a synthetic culture over the region bordering the banks of the life-giving Brahmaputra” (Acharya 1992: 11). Assam was earlier divided into several independent kingdoms that were occupied by some of the above-mentioned communities. The people of the region also had to go through Muhammadan wars (see Gait 2013: 108), Burmese oppressions (see Acharya 1992: 209) and the British intervention (see Barpujari 2007: 353). However, internal–external conflict and internal tensions have always been the part of the mixed population of the region. Folklore in Assam is also very diverse, as folklorist Parag Moni Sarma stated: “Assamese folklore is polyvocal, heteroglotic, and is indicative of the triumph of the ‘vernacular’ that has resisted homogenizing and standardizing [...], and is basically a celebration of myriad forms and moods” (see Sarma 2008: 3). The current tendency is that different ethnic communities are seeking their distinct roots and the notion of Assamese unity is now disintegrating. According to political scientist Sanjib Baruah “since India’s independence, Assam and other parts of northeastern India have been quite a bit of micro-nationalist politics; the boundaries of the state of Assam as they existed at the time of India’s independence, have been redrawn a number of times in respond to demands for separation by smaller nationalities” (Baruah 1994: 650).

During British rule the boundary of Assam was expanded, although it was later reduced again to almost one third of its original size (Sen 1999: 25), something that happened because of the cultural and geographical distinction of ethnic communities willing to become autonomous. Until 1962, the Naga Hills region, Meghalaya and Mizoram were aligned as a part of Assam (see Acharya 1992: 1). First, Nagaland was declared a separate Indian state on 1 December 1963 by the government of India. Then Meghalaya received its statehood on 21 January 1972. On 20th February 1987, Mizoram was separated from Assam as an independent Indian state. The Government of Assam had previously administered the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA). On 21st January 1972 this area became a union territory and was renamed Arunachal Pradesh, gaining statehood on 20th February 1987 (Sharma & Sharma 2005: 7).

After the separation of states from Assam and Indian occupation of the princely kingdoms of North East India, a forum called the North East Council (NEC) was formed in 1971, which functions under the Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (DONER), Government of India. Former princely kingdoms Manipur and Tripura were announced as Indian states on 21st January 1972. After India’s take over in 1975, the kingdom of Sikkim was added to the council in 2002 along with seven other North Eastern States.

3. Religious traditions and beliefs in Assam

Assam is home to major institutional religions such as Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism and Buddhism. Today, Vaishnavism is a dominant religion in Assam, although this was not always the case in the history of the region. Vishnu worship was prevalent in Assam from early times, but “Vaisnavism prospered fairly well from the 7th century onwards [which] can also be learnt from the sculptural representations discovered in the province” (Barua 2003: 175).

Many people in Assam still follow non-institutional and animistic practices in various ways. The supernatural world of spirits and demons is widespread in Assamese culture (see Rajkhowa 1973: 126–136). Rivers in Assam are the domain of the water spirit (*jalkuwari*). Many people believe that a big tree in their village is inhabited by a spirit called *dangoria* who appears in the form of a noble man. In every village pond a female water spirit (*jakhini*) goes about catching fish. Another spirit is called *bak*, a fisheating spirit who is always making some mischief. In Assam “the tribes acknowledged different types of deities, some associated with heaven, some associated with the animated things and objects. Some were good and others were hostile and harmful. Not only a creator deity, a God of the sky, superior to the rest, was also acknowledged and the benevolent spirits were given due recognition” (Barua 1996: 25). Healers (*bej*) of different religious backgrounds are known to be well skilled in dealing with possession by spirits such as *porua*, a misleading spirit, and *pisach*, a soul that has become an aggressive spirit after a sudden death. When dealing with the world of spirits, religious boundaries do not matter even for orthodox neo-Vaishnava adherents.

People in Assam worship the Goddesses Kecaikhati (‘raw flesh eater’), Manosha (the serpent goddess), Kamakhya, Shakti (‘female power’) in her different forms (for example Goshani, Dirgheswari, Bhairabi, Camunda, Burhi, Sidheswari, Ugratara, Mangalacandi), and others. Sitala, the pox goddess, generally known as *Ai* (mother), is worshiped with *Ai* songs. Household female deities like Lakshmi (the goddess of wealth) Saraswati (the goddess of knowledge) are also worshiped by the Hindu or Hinduised section of the population. Among all the goddesses, Kamakhya is a very popular and widely celebrated deity whose abode is on Nilachal hill, Guwahati (see Kakati 2004: 33). Goddess worship is combined with many elements of indigenous magic practice, sacrifice and mystic traditions.

Shiva worship was prominent amongst the aboriginal and Aryanised people in early Assam (see Kakati 2004: 10). Among the Bodos of western Assam, there is a tradition of worshiping Diva and Divi, who are identified with Lord Shiva and Parvati. On the other hand the Sonowal Kocharis, living towards the extreme east of the region, offer puja to Bathou, who is identified with Shiva. The God and Goddess of the Deoris, known as Gira and Girachi (Kalita 2014:150), are considered forms of Shiva and Parvati.

Shiva has played a significant role in the folktales and folksongs of the people of Assam appearing as a funny character in folk narratives. He is also described as half-naked, with matted locks and indulging himself to the rhythmic sound of

the *dambaru* (rattle-drum). It has been suggested that “Saivism in some gross form with wine and flesh was the prevailing religion of the aboriginal Kiratas” (Barua 2003: 165). Satyendra Nath Sarma writes that “the earliest Hindu religion that prevailed in ancient Kamrupa, in addition to tribal faiths, was Saivism. [...] Saivism began to give precedence to Shaktism. The Kalika Purana written in the tenth or eleventh century of the Christian era in eastern India is mainly responsible for popularizing the cult of Kamakhya throughout India” (Sarma 2001: 190).

There are many temples (*mandir*) and shrines (*thans*) all over Assam mainly dedicated to Hindu Gods and Goddesses. Some shrines are considered places of nature worship. Rice beer is a popular drink for almost all the indigenous communities living in Assam. Sometimes alcohol is offered to the deities. According to the indigenous worldview of Assam, consumption of alcohol is neither an impure practice nor an unlawful act. Obviously, this is in contradiction with mainstream Brahminical rites and ceremonies. We should also note that “Hinduism was mainly confined to the Brahmins, Kayasthas⁵, Kalitas, and Keots who at different times migrated to Kamarupa⁶ from other parts of India” (Sarma 2001: 189). The religious scenario of Assam had changed mainly for two reasons, first the growing influences of mainstream Hindu practices from the beginning of the thirteenth century to the end of the seventeenth century (see Sarma 2001:188). Secondly, during British colonial rule (1858–1947) in India the Christian missionary presence helped to promote Christianity as an alternative institutional religion to Hinduism.

The mainstream Hindu beliefs and practices, especially after the post Sankaradeva era of Assam, started to become more influential under the aegis of the Ahom kings, especially Rudra Singha (see Misra 2014: 165) and Brahmin leaders. They were responsible for the import of Hindu rites and rituals to the region (see Barpujari 2007: 306). Many locals under the influence of Brahmins, started to consider themselves ‘true Hindu’, something that equates to a lower level of tribal belief and practice, although some locals have remained true to their animistic beliefs. However, many have adopted Hindu practices (see Thomson 2016: 13) under various circumstances, while also keeping their own customs to some extent. Some of them have lost their own identity in the process of cultural assimilation, and are now struggling to revive it. During the early phase of Vaishnavisation, those who joined were allowed to retain their traditional rites and customs, in addition to which some maintained *panca-makara* i.e., wine, meat, fish, cooked food, and association with the opposite sex, as well as certain forms of ritual (see Dutta 1990: 8–9, 69). This combination of rituals was conducted secretly among some Kalasamhati Vaishnavas.

The diverse ways of worshiping and communicating with spirits, deities, gods and goddesses suggest that pluralistic belief systems have always been characteristic to Assam. This religious–folkloristic scenario of an ethnocentric and

⁵ Kayastha, Kalita, and Keot belong to the *sudra* caste. Kayasthas are upper caste *sudras*. Sometimes high caste Kalitas are also called Kayastha.

⁶ Another historical name of Assam.

pluralistic nature in Assam and North East India was being portrayed as “barbarous and immoral worship” in early European orientalist writings, and in Hindu literature. British orientalist scholars and Christian missionaries also had a negative view in this regard (Urban 2009: 13). However, the blending of religious traditions in Assam suggests that cultural diversity can hardly be overtaken by a fundamentalist, non-secular, majoritarian nationalistic ideology. Some people follow institutional religions whereas some don’t, and the notion of mainstream religion is problematic in this context.

3.1 Review of scholarship

Even though the use of folklore materials was very much present in the medieval Vaishnava religious scriptures and texts, still the study and collection of folklore in Assam was started in the 19th century by the British colonial officials and their relatives, foreign missionaries and travellers. Among other books *A Descriptive Accounts of Assam* (1841) by William Robinson, *A Sketch of Assam with some Accounts of Hill Tribes* (1847) by Major John Butler, *A Historical and Descriptive Account of the Kachari Tribes in the North Cachar Hills with Specimens of Tales and Folklore* (1885) by C. A. Sopitt, and James Drummond Anderson’s book *A Collection of Kachari Folktales and Rhymes: Intended as a Supplement to S. Endle’s Kachari Grammar* (1895) could be considered early study of folklore in Assam. Alongside these P.R.T. Gordon’s book *Some Assamese Proverbs* (1896) was published at this time (see Bhattacharjee 2008: 5), and could be counted in the same vein.

The first Assamese language magazine *Arunodoi* (‘Sunrise’) was published on a monthly basis from Sivasagar, Assam, in 1846 by American Baptist Missionaries. This provided a platform for publication including of Assamese folk literatures to notable Assamese scholars such as Anandaram Dhekial Phukan (1829–1859), Hemchandra Barua (1835–1897) and Gunabhiram Barua (1837–1894). Two of Bhadransen Bora’s books, *Ramcharit riddles* (1899) and *Phulkownar and Manikownar ballads* (1903), are early collections of folklore in Assam. Benudhar Rajkhuwa’s book *Assamese Demonology* (1905) is also a folklore collection which seems to show a native intention to collect folklore. In a similar way, in 1911 popular Assamese folklorist **Lakshminath Bezbaroa** (1864–1938) published a collection of stories called *Grandma’s Tales*. He had a very strong family connection with sattras, especially with the Kamalabari *nika–samhati* order of Majuli. Bezbaroa produced a few articles and books on Sankaradeva and the neo-Vaishnava movement of Assam which touch upon the subject of sattras. Lakshminath Bezbaroa had written a book in Assamese called *Mahapurush Sri Sri Sankaradeva and Sri Sri Madhavadeva* published in 1914. This book is a collection of oral and written biographical accounts of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva and gives an opinion on how sattras came into being. The author states in the opening remarks of the book that it is important to have a deep respect

when writing a biography of a person. This suggests that the author has written this book from the point of view of a carrier of the religious tradition of sattras.

Pioneering scholars Maheswar Neog and Satyendranath Sarma carried out prominent academic work on the neo-Vaishnava movement and the sattra institutions of Assam. I have used their studies as a reliable historical work based on solid sources that provides a firm factual base.

Maheswar Neog (1915–1995), in his 1965 book *Early History of the Vaishnava Faith and Movement in Assam: Sankaradeva and His Times*, draws an elaborate religious and cultural history of the neo-Vaishnava movement. At the beginning of the book, the author gives a brief account of biographical literature and the lives of the Vaishnava saints. This is followed by a description of the political condition of Kamarupa prior to and during the time of Sankaradeva, which also includes a brief ancestral history of Sankaradeva. The discussion continues in the book with the issue of different cult traditions and practices that existed before the advent of the neo-Vaishnava movement in Assam. Then the author discusses the early life of Sankaradeva including the question of the date of his birth, childhood, education, marriage, the promotion of the *bhakti* movement and Sankaradeva's life in the kingdom of Koch. The book has also discussed Sankaradeva's legacy carried out by his disciples. Later in the discussion, there is mention of the literary works of Sankaradeva and the philosophical views that structured the doctrine of the movement. The author has also elaborated on the creative works of Sankaradeva including dance, drama and music, which are considered by the devotees a medium of worshipping God. In the later part of the discussion, the author has discussed the neo-Vaishnava institutions and their religious practices. The discussion is carried out by explaining the origin of the sattra institution and its development, including the schism and the importance of ritual within the institutions. The book ends with a discussion of some allegations against Sankaradeva during his lifetime. Neog has written on sattras from the philosophical, cultural and religious doctrinal point of view. He has also portrayed the neo-Vaishnava movement and the sattra institutions of Assam as an important part of Assamese society and culture.

Satyendranath Sarma (1917–1999), who wrote *The Neo-Vaishnavite Movement and the Satra Institutions of Assam*, published in 1966, talks about neo-Vaishnava religiosity and the structure of sattras. Sarma has thoroughly studied the development of the sattra institutions, their function and their effect on Assamese society. Sarma explained about the origin of sattra, its development, sectarian divisions, beliefs and rituals. He also introduced hagiographical literature. Sarma has presented the neo-Vaishnava movement of Assam as a continuation of the pan-Indian Vaishnava movement, although with some unique points. According to Sarma, sattra institutions have contributed greatly towards the cultural development of the people of Assam. This includes reviving and popularising dance and music, introducing dramatic performance, handicraft and the art of manuscript painting, composing religious literature, etc. However, he pointed out that the sattra is not an exception as no institution can claim perfection. In this regard, Sarma highlights the issue of schism within neo-

Vaishnava adherents where money, power and prestige have become important for the leaders.

In some *sattras* women and socially low caste people were not allowed to enter the prayer halls. Intolerance of the beliefs of other sects, strong supremacy and food restrictions have made the institution less progressive. Sarma stated that the *sattr* institution has gradually lost its dynamic quality because of which it no longer enjoys the same enviable status that it formerly had. Unless it adapts itself to the changing circumstances, its future cannot be assumed.

Birinchi Kumar Barua (1908–1964), an Assamese folklorist, wrote *Sankaradeva: Vaisnava Saint of Assam* in 1960. The book focuses on the life of Sankaradeva, literary creation and performing art traditions introduced by Sankaradeva. The philosophy of the neo–Vaishnava movement has been analysed in the book. Later discussion is focused on the institutional aspects of *sattr*, the prayer hall (*namghar*) and the saints of the neo–Vaishnava movement.

Banikanta Kakati (1894–1952) wrote the biography the *Life and Teachings of Sankaradeva* in 1921. Along with the biography, the author gives a description of the neo–Vaishnava movement and its background. This is followed by a discussion of the concept of *bhakti*, the importance of Krishna for His neo–Vaishnava devotees and the inefficacy of image worship. The book also examines the social and literary aspects of Sankaradeva's creed. Later in the discussion, the author talks about the schism in neo–Vaishnava followers after Sankaradeva's death.

Benudhar Sarma (1894–1981), in his book *Dakhinpat sattra* (1967), and **Tirthanath Sarma** (1911–1986) in his *Auniati satrar buranji* or *Chronicles of Auniati satra* (1975), discuss the lineage of *sattradhikars*, religious beliefs and the historical continuation of the two *sattras* mentioned in the titles of these works.

Historian **Dambarudhar Nath**, in his book *Satra Society and Culture: Pitambaradeva Goswami and History of Garamur Satra*, has given the historical context of the Garamur *sattr* with emphasis on the *sattriya* lifestyle. Nath discusses the *bhakti* movement, and the origin and evaluation of the *sattr* institution. Later he talks about the *sattradhikar* Pitambardeva Goswami and his social reforms. The abolition of celibacy and the problem of asceticism in the context of Garamur *sattr* are also discussed in the book.

Here, I would like to point out that many scholars of neo–Vaishnava tradition have tried to establish Sankaradeva as a both literary and religious icon of Assam, and the *sattr* institutions as a strong neo–Vaishnava tradition initiated by Sankaradeva. Several scholars seem to be lost in the stronghold of the tradition because of their emotional attachment to the neo–Vaishnava faith. What is generally lacking in this regard is a critical folkloristic approach, which could identify some inner contradictory dimensions of the tradition, such as discussions on authority, politics, ritualisation, caste, marginalisation and majoritarianism, which I have discussed in this thesis.

One question may appear regarding how this work relates to the existing scholarship in general? Giving the religio-cultural historical grounding of the region in my thesis, talking about the biographical literature and philosophical views of Sankaradeva, and discussion of the origin and development of *sattras*

are strongly linked to the existing scholarship in general. However, what is novel in my work is my critical discussion on the contradictions and tensions in sattrā traditions and my focus on case studies that rely on first-hand experience. I have addressed some daily realities and practices of the sattrā devotees, and changes inside celibate sattras especially in Majuli. I have also discussed the caste system and the relation of sattras with the Mising community on Majuli island. All of this makes my work different from previous scholarship. The novelty of my approach also appears in the folkloristic perspective on sattrā tradition and the orientation of this scholarship to the international reader. Moreover, my investigation draws on my life experience growing up within the sattrā community, which opens up some new aspects and contributes to ethnographic knowledge on sattrā culture.

4. Sankaradeva: Doctrines and traditions

Sankaradeva, the founder of neo-Vaishnava faith in Assam, is held in deep respect among the Vaishnavas in Assam. In fact, he “is venerated today among the Assamese Vaishnavas not only as the founder of their faith, and an incarnation of Vishnu but as the originator of all that is peculiarly Assamese in their social organization and culture and hence, in a sense, as the father of the Assamese nation” (Cantlie 1980: 153). Sankaradeva’s ancestors were *shakta* (shaktism) followers who are considered to have migrated from central India via Gaudadesha (north Bengal) in the mid-14th century. Sankaradeva’s parents, Satyasandha (mother) and Kusumvara Bhuyan (father), were *kayasthas* by caste. It is believed that as a result of the blessings of lord Shiva, Sankaradeva was born to Satyasandhya. According to Ramacaran Thakur, one of the biographers of Sankaradeva, Satyasandha saw lord Shiva in a dream, who requested her to bear him as a child. According to this version Sankaradeva was an incarnation of Shiva (See Bezbaroa 1914: 11; Sarma 2001: 195). Maheswar Neog states that “the traditionally held date of his birth is Asvina-Kartika, 1371 saka/1449 A.D” (Neog 1965: 98). There are some disagreements regarding the date and place of his birth. Neog stated that Sankaradeva himself refers to his native place as Batadrava or Bardowa village, with no equal in point of agricultural crops and fish, situated on the very bank of the Lohitya. Sankaradeva lost his mother soon after his birth (see Neog 2011:5). He was fostered by his grandmother Khersuti. Khersuti put him at a Sanskrit school for his education at the age of twelve under the guidance of Brahmin *guru* Mahendra Kandali. In a short time Sankaradeva mastered the Sanskrit language, studied the Vedas, the Puranas, and the two Indian epics. Sankaradeva and his biographers have nowhere mentioned Sankaradeva’s religious *guru*. Banikanta Kakati (1894–1952), a celebrated Assamese scholar, mentioned that as Jagannath Puri was the great cosmopolitan centre of various Vaishnavite sects during the time of Sankaradeva, it may be surmised that during his sojourn at Puri in his long pilgrimage, Sankaradeva came deeply under the influence of some teacher of southern Vaishnavism and received the fundamental ideas of the southern system

which he later developed in the light of other Vaisnavite texts (see Kakati 2004: 78). At the age of 35, Sankaradeva set out on his first pilgrimage of twelve years, during which he spent a long time in Jagannath Puri. Soon after his return from pilgrimage, he started translating the Bhagavata Purana into Assamese and started preaching his new faith.

Sankaradeva used to refer to his faith as religious actions devoted to one God (*eka-sarana-naam-dharma*) or religious duties of prayer rituals called *naam* (*naam-dharma*) or religious actions based on devotion (*bhakti-dharma*). Neo-Vaishnava is a term which emerged much later in scholarly literature to identify his faith; the popular name of Sankaradeva's Vaishnava tradition is *mahapurusiya*, meaning 'lineage of a great person'. According to Kakati, "*mahapurusiya* is not a very popular word to be used in an honorific sense. Different saints in India had different honorific titles. This designation might also like *kevaliya* come from the south" (see Kakati 2004: 77). Here, *kevaliya* refers to the celibate order or celi-bacy, on which a discussion will follow.

4.1 Literatures from oral to written

Caritpath, literally meaning oral narration of biographical stories about *gurus*, constitutes a remarkable legacy of the Assam *bhakti*⁷ movement. The tradition of *caritpath* emerged by taking Sankaradeva as a central figure. Later, other *gurus* also received attention in a similar way in the hands of their devotees. The biographical accounts were passed down orally from generation to generation. During the days of Madhavadeva, successor and apostle of Sankaradeva, storytelling about the *guru* became a part of the daily religious duty of the sattra clerics, thus creating a living tradition (see Neog 2008: 2). Later biographers such as Daityari Thakur, Bhusana Dvija, Ramananda Dvija, and Vaikuntha Dvija (see Neog 2008: 2–15), i.e. the early group of biographers, transcribed these stories into a written form (*caritputhi*) in order to preserve and popularise the biographical accounts of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva. The recording of the biographical literature is said to date from the early half of the seventeenth century. The first early four biographical works are held to be largely more authoritative than the rest (see Cantlie 1980: 152).

These life stories have been providing moral values and knowledge for centuries to the followers of Vaishnava religious leaders. *Caritputhis* have given a vast bank of knowledge from which to learn about the Vaishnava saints of Assam. There is a remarkable number of biographical accounts of Vaishnava *gurus* in Assam written by their disciples in verse and prose forms.

Madhavadeva, a chief disciple of Sankaradeva, continued to spread the glory of his master through various means including telling stories in ceremonies on a daily basis. Neog writes that "when Madhavadeva succeeded to Sankara's place in the

⁷ *Bhakti* is a doctrine and practice of complete devotion to deities, which has spread widely in India.

order, he organized these ceremonials into fourteen sections, each called a *prasanga* (ritual prayer). He also told the daily congregational tales of the Master. The apostles he sent out to spread the message of *bhakti* far and wide into the country, followed his example, and some of them particularly excelled in the art of narrating the activities of the master” (Neog 1965: 2). This oral narration of the life stories probably led to the tradition of *caritpath* that needs to be performed three times a day in the Kamalabari sattras.

The Kamalabari school of sattras has continued the *caritpath* tradition since its inception. It is an oral tradition of sattras by which an aged expert devotee (*burha-bhakat*) narrates biographical stories of their Vaishnava *gurus*, such as Sankaradeva, Madhavdeva and Badula Padma Ata. This is still in practice in the form of prose narrative as part of their morning and evening rituals. Devotees recite these biographies in prayer halls (*namghar*), but they are long enough that it takes more than a single day. Therefore, the expert devotee decides to narrate one particular story or a segment that has either a moral value or are relevant to a particular devotee, who usually offers *prasad* and seeks blessings during the time of the daily congregational prayers, held in the morning and evening. The narrator tells stories from a seated position assigned to him by the sattras authority. The devotees, including the *sattradhikar* (‘head of the sattras’), participate in the oral narrative event with full devotion. All of them sit near the narrator and maintain complete silence so that they hear the narration. This event is part of the daily congregational prayer.

In the Kamalabari school of sattras, nobody learns the hagiographical accounts of Sankaradeva from a written text as the oral form is still strong among them. There are several extended segments of the life stories of the saint which makes the tradition strong. From the above-mentioned discussion, it could be argued that sattras in Majuli continue the tradition very well in some respects with full dedication to it.

4.2 Sankaradeva’s *bhakti* philosophy

The philosophical concept of Assam Vaishnavism is based on monism. If Vishnu and his manifestations are worshiped all other deities are worshiped. Sankaradeva has written that if water is poured at the foot of a tree then all the branches and leaves of the tree suck up nourishment (Bezbaroa 1914: 47). Sankaradeva expelled one follower because of worshipping Goddess Kali. Devotees who believe in magic, sorcery and charms were also not allowed in his fold. Addictions to smoking, drinking and opium eating were restricted among the disciples of Sankaradeva. Sankaradeva discarded image worship, especially that which occurred as part of the *shakta* cult. Assamese folklorist Lakshminath Bezbaroa mentioned that Sankaradeva never promoted image worship as a mode of ritual, rather it developed years later in some sattras as a result of sectarian disputes. According to Sankaradeva’s textual composition, there is no difference between *Hari-Hara* (Vishnu and Shiva). However, in the *Haramohan* section of Sankaradeva’s

celebrated work, called Kirtan—ghosha, he depicts lord Shiva as a lustful comic deity subverted to Vishnu (see Kirtan—ghosha 2010: 127).

Sankaradeva relegated Vedic rituals to a secondary position. Vedic rituals such as *homa*, *yajna*, and animal sacrifice were banned within the neo-Vaishnava tradition. Instead, Sankaradeva emphasised simple aspects of rendering the name of God, challenging the Brahminic priesthood and their authority. By reinterpreting the Sanskrit texts, which had been the monopoly of the Brahmin for a long time, Sankaradeva made their meaning accessible and simple to his devotees.

The neo-Vaishnava movement in Assam was based on elements of *bhakti* (devotion). *Bhakti* is the central concept among neo-Vaishnava followers through which devotees connect themselves with the almighty. It is a bridge between the deity and devotees. Sankaradeva mentions nine ways of expressing or practicing *bhakti*. They are (see Kirtan—ghosha 2010, 85): (i) *sravana*— acts of listing the names of God; (ii) *kirtana* – the act of chanting the names of God; (iii) *smarana* – the act of remembering the names of God; (iv) *arccana*– the act of offering; (v) *vandana* – the analysis of God’s nature; (vi) *dasya* – serving God with the attitude of a selflessness slave; (vii) *sakhitya* – establishing friendship between God and devotees; (viii) *padasevana* – the act of serving the feet of God; (ix) *atmani-vedana* – the act of complete surrender of the self. Among these nine forms of devotion, *sravana* or hearing and *kirtana* or singing are upheld by Sankaradeva. Respect and love (*shraddha* and *priiti*) are believed to be very crucial in this regard without which hearing and singing the names of God have no meaning. According to Sankaradeva, these two forms constitute a real contribution to the total knowledge of devotion. In addition, Sankaradeva is of the opinion that a devotee’s attitude of selflessness (*dasyabhava*) towards his master is the proper way to approach God. Regarding the *dasya* mode of worship, “the *ekasarana* Vaisnavism of Assam seems to be at one with southern system” (Kakati 2004: 74).

Bhakti could be practiced freely by anyone at any time and in any place. According to Sankaradeva, in the age of Kali (*kaliyuga*) there is no better mode of serving God than *bhakti*. Sankaradeva talked about four fundamental elements (*carivastu*) of devotion: (i) *nama*, the name of the God; (ii) *guru*, spiritual guide; (iii) *deva*, the deity; and (iv) *bhakat*, the devotee. “*Nama* and *Guru* are two mediating categories which can reestablish the unity of *jivatma*⁸ and *paramatma*⁹. The act of *bhakti* is accomplished by singing *nama* under the guidance of a *guru*” (Bhattacharjee 1996: 176).

Sattrā devotees of the ascetic school follow three types of ceremonial action known as *nitya* (daily), *naimittika* (occasional), and *kāmya* (motivated). All lead to the path of *bhakti*. Of the two types of *bhakti*, *sakāma* (with desire) and *niskāma* (desireless), the latter has been prioritised by Sankaradeva. *Bhakti* is also reflected through visual and performing arts.

⁸ In Hinduism, *Jivatma* means living being; its soul/self, which is trapped in the earthly body until the death of the body.

⁹ Primordial self or beyond self is known as *paramatma* in Hinduism where all self and personalities eventually merge with.

Bhakti is divided mainly into two categories i.e., *saguna* and *nirguna*. Followers of *saguna – bhakti* believe in imagery figures of God, whereas the doctrine of *nirguna-bhakti* does not acknowledge the existence of God in images. Both Sankaradeva and his chief disciple Madhavadeva considered *bhakti* to be the best way to realise God. “Some interpreters of Shankaradeva presented the philosophical position of Shankaradeva’s Vaishnavism as the synthesis of *bhakti* with *jnana*; opting Saguna Brahman as a means to reach to higher stage of Nirguna Brahman and giving lower place to theistic Vedanta” (Barua 1996: 70). *Bhakti* is regarded as superior to all other modes of worship. “Sankaradeva regards *bhakti* as superior to salvation (*mukti*). Though *bhakti* is the *sadhana* (the stage of meditation) and *moksa* (salvation) is the goal, yet it is the *sadhana* stage that is the best” (Barua 1960: 95). Sankaradeva believes in the theory of rebirth and the doctrine of *karma* and *maya*. It is possible to overcome *maya* through devotion to God. “The individual soul, steeped in the darkness of *maya* should approach somebody who is the possessor of knowledge. He is no other than the *Parama Isvara* himself. The way is to be shown by a guru” (Chaudhuri 1978: 91). Sankaradeva did not present the lord Krishna’s relationship with the cow-herding girls (Gopi-Krishna) mentioned in the Mahabharata with erotic overtones. Rather Sankaradeva emphasised it as an expression of *bhakti* incorporated between God and devotee. According to neo-Vaishnava belief people of any caste can be liberated by the act of *bhakti*.

It was mainly Madhavadeva who assigned the foremost position to the holy book instead of worshiping images (*murtipuja*). Therefore, a sacred book, the Bhagavata, in Sankaradeva’s translation, is placed in the shrine complex of *manikut* (the heart of the prayerhall) where offerings and homage are paid by devotees. In this regard, Banikanta Kakati has said that the idea of scripture worship instead of *murtipuja* sounds similar with the Rāmānuja’s¹⁰ commentary on the Vedanta Sutra – “the Brahman can be understood only through the Scripture” (Kakati 2004: 75).

Madhavadeva took forward the Sankaradeva’s legacy for 28 years after the demise of the saint. He systematised the organisational aspects of the order. He established Barpetta sattra as led by an elected leader (*sattradhikar*). However, this is not to suggest that Barpetta sattra follows a completely democratic pattern, as they do not allow women to enter the community prayer hall (*namghar*) despite the immense contribution made by local womenfolk to the hall. Muslims too are banned from entering the community prayer hall. Even though it is not certain, Satyendranath Sarma writes, “the system of community prayer was probably inspired by the Muslim prayer system in the mosque” (Sarma 2001: 209).

¹⁰ A Tamil Hindu philosopher who propagated Sri Vaishnava philosophy within Hinduism. Both Rāmānuja and Sankaradeva promoted the non-dualistic philosophy of Vedanta school.

4.3 Relationship with pan-Indian Vaishnavism

Vaishnava literatures leave a vague picture of the connection between Assam Vaishnavism and Bengal Vaishnavism. Tension is becoming part of the process of contemporary writing. However, Maheswar Neog states that the Sankaradeva “movement is not only an offshoot of Bengal Vaishnavism” (see Neog 2008: vii). By mentioning this Neog does not deny the relationship between Assamese and Bengali Vaishnavism.

Regarding Assam Vaishnavism, Banikanta Kakoti has offered a critical view in some of his writings. Maheswar Neog writes “Lakshminath Bezbaroa, a dominant figure in modern Assamese literature, is largely responsible for [...] revival of interest in the Vaishnava movement; and it was Dr Banikanta Kakoti who focused the light of modern criticism on the literary works of the period” (Neog 2008: 1). Banikanta Kakoti has made a couple of points in *The Mother Goddess Kamakhya* regarding Assam Vaishnavism and its similarity with southern Vaishnavism. Kakoti meant that Sankaradeva’s concept of the One God is not a native idea. Rather it has more to do with southern Vaishnavism. As an example, Kakoti refers to Sankaradeva’s writing: “a Vaishnavite should not worship any other god except Vishnu”, which has similarity with the southern Vaishnava idea, i.e., “Vaishnavism interdicted its votaries from the worship of any deities except the highest known to it, who was the God *Nārāyana* of the *Upanisads*, the primal cause of all things” (Chariar 1909: 18). In Assam Vaishnavism, “the process of initiation is called *sarana* and not *diksā* and the *mantra* is called *namā*. The word *sarana* occurs very prominently in the three Sanskrit prose pamphlets of Rāmānuja which he calls *Saranāgati*. The mode of prayer is constant recitation of the names of the Lord”. (Kakoti 2004: 73) Satyendranath Sarma mentions that before the advent of Sankaradeva a different form of Vasudevism¹¹ existed in Assam affiliated to the cult of Pancaratra. Pancaratra Vasudevism was a tantric Vaishnavism in which *mantra*, *yantra* and other tantric methods were employed (see Sarma 2001: 207).

Here, it could be said that Sankaradeva did not uphold an ethnocentric notion in his neo-Vaishnava movement. He had not only mentioned and referred to “*Bharata Varsha*” forty-six times (Saikia 2013: 132) in his writings, but also glorifies the idea of India (*bharata*) in his poetic composition of devotional songs called *borgeet* (see Sankaradeva 2008: 36). Therefore, one could argue that alongside his local Assamese affiliation, Sankaradeva was a pan-Hindu Vaishnava figure. Assamese Vaishnava religious adherence had increased gradually with pan-Indian Vaishnavism, which later became strong among people in Assam. However, Sankaradeva’s stand against the caste hierarchy makes his neo-Vaishnavism unique when we put it in the scenario of pan-Indian Vaishnavism.

For years, many scholars and artists in Assam have been promoting Sankaradeva and his literary and artistic works in order to favor the narratives of

¹¹ Vasudevism is a term that arises from another name of the God Vishnu, i.e. Vasudev. Therefore, Vaishnavism and Vasudevism are the same.

nationalism and sub-nationalism. Baniprasanna Misra writes, in the book *Sri Sri Sankaradeva* (1911) “set the keynote for critical discussion. But, in course of time the critical spark was largely extinguished, and the attention was narrowed down to establish Sankaradeva as a marker of Assamese identity above all considerations, thereby leading to provincialization of the saint” (see Misra 2015: 18). This also suggests that Bezbaroa was not only responsible for “reviving the interest in the Vaishnava movement”, but that he also “set a keynote for critical discussion”.

4.4 Openness in ideologies: Controversies

Paying homage and praising Sankaradeva for his extensive work is omnipresent in modern Assamese literatures on Sankaradeva (see Rajkhowa 2015: 2), which he deserves. In addition, there has been a sense of glorification involved in most literary and oral genres when it comes to discussions on Sankaradeva. Sankaradeva added some democratic elements to the neo-Vaishnava faith, such as the idea of universal brotherhood (Goswami 2013: 153).

He was against the idea of excessive ritualism and the dominance of caste hierarchy. “Sankaradeva preached equality in the spiritual domain. According to him the path of spiritual realisation cannot be the exclusive monopoly of a socially privileged few” (Sarma 1996: 18). Devotion to God (*hari-bhakti*) is not confined to caste hierarchy, rather it should liberate people of all castes, classes and creeds. Sankaradeva suggested that *paramatma* exists in animal life as well. The soul of a dog, jackal or donkey is the same as the human soul. Sankaradeva himself wrote “the essence of *bhakti* is the practice on concentration. Hari (the God) exists everywhere therefore everyone should be treated as equal. He is to be called wise who does not find any distinction of caste between a Brahmin and a Chandala, considers a giver and a thief equal view” (Goswami 1989: 442). As a result of this ideology, Sankaradeva embraced people of different castes and religions.

Among Sankaradeva’s disciples were Candsai and Jayahari, both Muslims, Govinda, a Garo, and Jayananda, a Bhutia. This also includes members from communities such as the Ahom, Koch, Mising, Kachari, Naga, Maran, etc. Sankaradeva writes that all becomes pure in the company of the servants (devotees) of Krsna (Datta 1996: 207). Brahmins and so-called untouchables were to be treated alike. This generous effort and open hospitality to all had increased the number of devotees in Sankaradeva’s faith. To institutionalise the religion, Sankaradeva established community prayer halls (*namghar*) to facilitate different aspects of socio-religious life of the people of Assam. To unite people of different backgrounds Sankaradeva composed performing art traditions including dance, drama and music that were based on Hindu scriptures, and performed them in the prayer hall in front of the public both for ritual and entertainment purposes. When it came to the nomination of the successor, “like guru Nanak, who instead of nominating

any of his relatives, selected Angad to succeed him, Sankara¹², too, nominated his most faithful and efficient disciple Madhava to succeed him after his demise” (Sarma 1996: 11).

Compared to above mentioned democratic aspects of the Assam *bhakti* movement, there are also some contradictory elements associated with the faith. As with other major world religions, the neo-Vaishnava order is also patriarchal when it comes to socio-religious structure and authority. The ascetic *sattras* particularly do not allow the presence of women in their lives: there is no order of nuns in neo-Vaishnava tradition. Men always lead the rituals and the chorus. However, there is an example of women holding superior position within the neo-Vaishnava order (see Dutta 1990: 49–50). Sankaradeva’s grand daughter-in-law Kanaklata contributed to the growth of the *sattras* system by organising the Bardowa group. She appointed twelve *sattradhikars* to set up more *sattras* in Assam. Here women can take part in community prayers and initiated women are allowed to perform varied duties in the prayer halls. But all these reasons are not enough to say that Assamese Vaishnavism is founded on non-patriarchal ideology.

Madhavadeva denounced women because he thought that women’s *maya* could mislead man from the path of devotion. Sankaradeva became a widower with a daughter of four years. After his wife’s sudden death, when he was 34 years of age, Sankaradeva set out on a 12-year pilgrimage to the holy places of North India. At 46 years of age, when Sankaradeva returned from his 12 years pilgrimage, he married Kalindi (see Bezbaroa 1914: 32). He had three sons by this marriage. During the time of Sankaradeva “pre-puberty marriage was prevalent. Sankaradeva’s own daughter was married at the age of thirteen. Sankaradeva himself married twice, but widow re-marriage was not permitted” (Mahanta 1996: 195). In the neo-Vaishnava order women are sometimes considered a polluting agent, because of which they are not permitted to enter the prayer halls. This contradicts the liberal notions ingrained in Assam Vaishnavism, although it is typical of general Hindu patterns of ritual purity and women as agents of pollution.

5. Sattras

“Sattras is a very old Sanskrit word mentioned even in the Rigveda (7/33/13) and its etymological meaning is — that which protects good and the honest” (Barman 1996: 186). It also means a holy assembly. Upen Bargayan is a 40-year-old devotee at Uttar Kamalabari *sattras*. He explained to me what *sattras* means to him. Referring to Sankaradeva he said that the “*sattras* is a place where people of true nature live, who always upholds truth, peace and rituals. We live here by maintaining celibacy and pursue religious values by doing good *karma* to achieve salvation (*moksha*). We use *tilaka* on our foreheads and wear white cloths which represent cleanliness and purity. If the dress does not represent our *karma* and thought, then there is no meaning of being a celibate devotee. Our *guru* advised

¹² Here, Sankara is the short name of Sankaradeva.

us to worship One Krishna with a pure heart by wearing white cloths as adevotee of feminine nature. All scriptures like the Bhagavata and the Gita suggest that Krishna is the One” (January 4, 2020). This seems to me a more or less common definition among devotees of celibate sattras in Majuli, which is not free from contradiction. There will be further elaboration of this in my later discussion.

At Uttar Kamalabari sattra I heard (June 26, 2018) from elders a legend about the early formation of the sattra structure that goes as follows:

While Sankaradeva along with his 120 devotees were returning from a long pilgrimage, they made a stop one day upon reaching the kingdom of Koch. They fastened their boat on a riverbank to take a rest after a long journey on foot and by boat. They all sat under a huge tree where a big beehive happened to be hanging from a branch. At that time, devotees requested Sankaradeva to tell some stories of his past times. Some of his disciples wished to have some honey. Being able to understand their desire Sankaradeva asked his chief disciple Madhavadeva to create a hymn. As a result, Madhavadeva created a honey hymn. When Madhavadeva started to sing the hymn, honey from the hive melted and fell on Sankaradeva. Since then that area came to be known as Madhupur (town/castle of honey). The Madhupur sattra was established at that place thereafter.

During my fieldwork at Madhupur sattra in West Bengal (15 July 2018), I discovered a beautiful painting done by English artist Robert Cartwright under the financial support of a London-based Assamese Ankuran Kakoti. The painting depicts the same story through visual art hanging on the wall of the residence of the *sattradhikar* of Madhupur sattra. This helped me to visualise the story, which could be found in the biographical literature of Sankaradeva.



Figure 2. The painting shows honey dropping on Sankaradeva’s head while he communicates with his devotees under the shade of a tree. Photo by Baburam Saikia.

During Sankaradeva's time no permanent structures were built for the *sattras*. Only the concept of *sattra* emerged from the seated gatherings of devotees. The literature on Sankaradeva suggests that the daily meetings of devotees were held in the open under the shade of trees. During the days of Madhavadeva onwards, these gatherings took on an institutional shape. The present structure was raised during the succeeding generations. "It was at the time of Madhavadeva and Damodaradeva that the *sattra* institution approached the second phase of its development" (Sarma 1978: 77). The present structure of the *sattra* is the result of the historical process. "Within a century and a half of its foundation, the institution multiplied by leaps and bounds and by the end of the seventeenth century its number increased to a few hundred all over the valley" (Sarma 2001: 210).

There are three principal categories of people connected with the management of the ascetic school of *sattras* in Majuli and elsewhere in Assam. First, the *sattradhikar* – the main religious leader. Second, the *bhakats* – ascetic devotees who spend their lives in a *sattra*. Third, *sisyas* – lay disciples from outside the *sattra* campus. There is a wide range of possibilities to think about the origin of the *sattra* tradition. Some scholars suggest that the *sattra* system was developed on the basis of Buddhist viharas. Some others trace its origin to the Hindu monastic communities of northern and southern India. These scholars refer particularly to the schools of Shankaracharya and Ramananda (see Sarma 1966:197–199).

The physical structure of an ascetic *sattra* in Majuli has four rows of attached residences for devotees on each side, east, west, north, and south. Usually, the northern and southern rows are longer than the rest. The prayer hall (*namghar*) is surrounded by rows of residences known as *hati* that face towards the prayer hall. Devotees' residences are called *boha* and here devotees of different ages live together, making them a monk family¹³. The senior person of the family is considered as the monk father (*burha-bhakat*) by other members. The main *sattra* entrance is called the *karapat* or *batsora*. This entrance is the place where all are supposed to take off their footwear before entering the *sattra*. The main shrine area (*manikut*) is situated on the eastern side of the prayer hall (*namghar*). It houses a place for the deity (*guruasana*) where scriptures such as the *Kirtana*, *Dasama* and *Gunamala* by Sankaradeva, and the *Namghosa* and *Ratnawali* by Madhavadeva are kept. In *sattras* like Dakshinpat, Garmur and Auniati image worship of different forms of lord Vishnu is prevalent. The *sattra* architecture is usually built from bamboo, timber, thatch, cane, and mud, even though currently concrete brick is overtaking traditional materials.

¹³ A monk family consists of two to five male members without any genealogical relationship. They stay together inside a hut in an ascetic *sattra* and form the smallest social unit of the *sattra*.

5.1 Asceticism and celibacy

“Assamese Vaishnavism is distinguished from the Vaishnavism of Bengal where the deepest of Bhakti is expressed in an erotic idiom” (Gupta 1996: 3). Sankaradeva did not favour the erotic nature of *bhakti* and his chief apostle Madhavadeva lived a life of celibacy. “It was probably the idea of Madhavadeva’s individual life that brought into being an order of ascetics (*kevaliya*), who formed the innermost circle within the *sattras*” (Neog 2001: 21). Celibacy is obligatory in some *sattras* (the *kevaliya* order) while in others it is left to the opinion of the devotees. According to Banikanta Kakati, the word *kevaliya* “does not seem to designate the Vaisnavite monks of any other system in Northern India who are called by different names. A Vaishnava saint from South India called Rāmānuja in recognition of this class of Bhaktas writes – who desire final deliverance and seek the consciousness of their pure soul – uses the word *kevalin*” (Kakati 2004: 74).

Ascetic devotees, especially of the Kamalabari school of *sattras*, keep their hair long in the belief that all humans are female, only lord Krishna is imagined as being male. But “Sankaradeva, ever mindful of the erotic overtones of Krishnagopi episodes, would not allow any form of eroticism in his faith, not even as an allegory of divine love” (Phukan 2010: 42). The contradiction here is that, on the one hand, there is no place for female Radha, and on the other, it is the imaginative position of female devotees who can gain the spiritual love of God. The night worshippers’ (*raatī-khowa*) cult, which comes under the Kalasamhati sect of the neo-Vaishnava order, has an important insight in this regard. In the secret *gopikhela*¹⁴ ritual, sex between a human Radha—Krishna couple is an auspicious ritual act. During this ritual devotees offer worship to the genital organs of both the male and the female (see Dutta 1990: 113–115).

The monastic system calls for customs and rituals to be conducted very strictly. Devotees (*bhakats*) live a life of dedication, maintaining an ascetic lifestyle throughout their lives. However, devotees of semi monastic orders can enjoy much more freedom. Those, who consider ascetic practices the norm have a fully residential campus with a good number of devotees and are considered to be the carriers of tradition and the heritage of the past. There is an exception, however, with the Garmur *sattrā* of Majuli. Here the *sattradhikar* should remain unmarried and the rest of the devotees can live a married life. Some devotees say that this is a tradition for this *sattrā* and that, therefore, it should not be changed, although others don’t agree with this. However, the then *sattradhikar* of Garmur *sattrā*, Haridev Goswami, proposed before the *sattrā* committee that he should be allowed to live a married life. On this question the committee was silent and never came to a decision. As a protest, in 2004 Haridev left the *sattrā* and stayed at his father’s home for some years, after which he came back to the earlier position of *sattradhikar* at the request of his devotees. Eventually, in 2015, Haridev took a firm decision to get married, a decision that was opposed by his devotees. Therefore, the *sattradhikar* was discharged from his position and was asked to leave

¹⁴ A ritual based on a mythical theme consisting of Radha-Krishna’s love expression.

the campus before his marriage. He did so by handing over all property documents to the committee. However, the new bridegroom was embraced by a section of devotees of Garmur saru-sattra (the brotherly sattra institution) as their religious leader. The managing committee filled the empty position of the *sattradhikar* of Garmur sattra with a grand ceremony by employing a 16-year-old Brahmin boy who was then in the 10th class. He agreed to remain a bachelor throughout his life.

Both sides have different narratives related to the *sattradhikar* marriage issue. First, devotees of Garmur sattra do not want to break their tradition that the *sattradhikars* be celibate. Therefore, they cannot allow their leader to get married. Second, by referring to the previous 11th *sattradhikar* Pitambardev Goswami (see Nath 2012: 94), who was a dynamic religious leader, Haridev talks about a dream he had in which Pitambardev Goswami asked him to get married. Therefore, he wants to obey this advice. In addition, Mrinalini, wife of Haridev, said that she wanted to remain unmarried as she was a devout Shiva devotee. Later she changed her mind. So, there is a controversy about the veracity of the issue. The couple had never mentioned whether they were maintaining a long-term relationship before their marriage. This proves how the concept of tradition becomes contradictory sometimes even to its own people if change is not allowed to play a role according to the demands of the situation.

5.2 Life stories inside a sattra

Even though there are various reasons to join a sattra, the common narrative among Vaishnava devotees is that it is customary practice for some village families to offer a boy to their respective sattra. This is considered a contribution towards carrying on the traditional lineage that they believe is an essential part of their lives. But the severe financial situation of families, tragic family stories of conflict and separation, and sometimes death of a father or mother, also leads children to a sattra. Some parents also believe that their boys will enjoy a better lifestyle in the sattra environment because they will have the chance to receive a spiritual education including dance, drama and music, something they would not have the chance of at home. Next, I shall introduce the life stories¹⁵ of a neo-Vaishnava monk family.

Hari's monk family¹⁶.

Hari, age 34, is a young devotee and a passionate *sattriya* artist living at Uttar Kamalabari sattra (Majuli). He began his ascetic life before the age of five at the sattra. Since he joined the sattra, Hari had enjoyed learning *sattriya* dance, music and drama, even though he had to go through a sad and difficult situation. He grew

¹⁵ The life stories were collected during my interviews conducted on Jan 24, 2020 and Jan 17, 2021.

¹⁶ The names have been changed.

up under two senior devotees. Kamal, the senior most devotee, was a kind and loving to him. Bhola, the other senior devotee, was somewhat the opposite and aggressive in nature. Therefore, Hari's childhood was a mixture of love and sadness. At around the age of twenty one, Hari had to take responsibility for his monk family as they were going through a financial crisis. Hari's source of income was mainly from his art and craft work. Later, from his savings and with the help of a colleague, Hari set up a small tourist accommodation project in 2015 near the sattra, which helps him run his monk family. Because of Hari's difficult past, he was interested in adopting a child with love and affection. In 2006, Hari and Bhola adopted a boy named Jadu as a new member of their monk family. Currently, Hari and Bhola have two adopted boys, Jadu (age 20) and Madhu (age 4) under their care. When Hari became the source of their income, Bhola changed his aggressive behaviour towards Hari.

Jadu's parents had three children when he was sent to Uttar Kamalabari sattra because of his parent's financial situation, around the age of four. After a couple of years, his mother got engaged again leaving behind her husband and children. More than a year later, Jadu's father married another woman. A girl child was born to them after their marriage. Three of them along with two children from his previous wife, live together. One day, suddenly, Jadu's father got ill and had to lease out all his land to pay for his treatment, which lasted for some time. Eventually he died because he lacked good medical care. As Jadu said, some villagers claim that his father died as a result of black magic tricks used by his mother and her new partner.

Madhu, the little one in Hari's family, was nearly four when he was sent to Uttar Kamalabari sattra. Madhu's mother Ruhini is separated from her husband, who lives in Vishnupur Nath village, Dhemaji. She belongs to the Nath community of Assam and married a Brahmin man. Until the time of their marriage, Madhu's father hid the fact that he is an aggressive and alcoholic person. Ruhini, could not tolerate the violence and left him when Madhu was just one month old. Ruhini started to live with her parents who were supportive to her. Ruhini's parents lived a simple life with two of their children without any stable financial support. According to Ruhini, the Vishnupur area is not a good place to raise children because of increasing consumption of alcohol by the young boys. Therefore, she and her parents decided to send Madhu to a sattra. Hari came to know about Madhu and expressed his desire to adopt him as a devotee. Hari explained to me that Madhu's beginning stage at the sattra was difficult for them to control as he wanted his mother frequently.

On January 17, 2021, I called Hari using WhatsApp to know how they were doing. Hari received the call but could not talk to me because Madhu was crying on his lap and shouting repeatedly, saying "I want to go to my mother". On February 23, Hari gave me a WhatsApp call and expressed his sorrow in our conversation about Madhu saying, "usually, Madhu talks with his mother every day, especially in the evening time. He has been asking me for the last three days what happened to his mother. I am just thinking how I should inform Madhu that Ruhini ran away with another man three days ago. Since then, her phone is switched off. Probably Madhu will not understand it.

In Hari's family, I observed that Jadu and Madhu are under good care, and that the same care could be expected at their parental home. As the youngest member of the community, Madhu gets all the attention from the devotees. On the other hand, this is the situation that has made both Jadu and Madhu devotees without their consent. Later in their life, this might turn out to be a paradoxical reality, as is true for some other young devotees. In the case of ascetic *sattras*, devotees are bounded by their situations. If they get education or sufficient financial independence, then there is the possibility for them to make a life changing decision and leave monastic life. Otherwise, it is likely that they become victims of the situation. On the other hand, the above-mentioned life stories suggest that ascetic *sattras* in the Majuli area are good places for needy children.

Through my interviews and observations at Uttar Kamalabari *sattr*a, I came up with the conclusion that the majority of devotees came from families whose financial situations were very weak when they joined the *sattr*a. However, almost two thirds of them said that they are being sent to the *sattr*a because of their parents' belief and affiliation with the *sattr*a, to learn *sattriya* performing art traditions and to educate themselves. Others referred to their family's financial situation. But I noticed that some of them did not want to reveal their family's financial situation. There are 59 devotees at Uttar Kamalabari *sattr*a (August 2021). According to my observations many of them have improved their financial situations in recent years by either engaging in business or by becoming performing artists or teachers.

5.3 Intake process and experience

The recruitment of devotees in celibate *sattras* is based on two criteria. Usually, anyone around the age of five who belongs to a Vaishnava family is considered well qualified. Any unmarried person without an age limit can also become a celibate devotee if he has a specific reason for that. The *sattr*a authorities consider caste an important criterion, for example only those who belong to castes/categories such as brahmin, mahanta, kalita, keot, koch, considered higher among neo-Vaishnava followers, are accepted. The *sattr*a authorities do not accept people from other castes or communities as full-time devotees because of the social hierarchy based on the caste system. Senior devotees make a decision on the recruitment of devotees based on whether or not a monk family needs an assistant (*aldhora*). Devotees of ascetic schools maintain a set of unique practices in their dress, food habits, daily and occasional ceremonies. They even use some unique Assamese language phrases and proverbs in their day-to-day conversations. Devotees in ascetic *sattras* should remain celibate throughout their lives, although they are free to leave that bachelor life and take up a different life outside the *sattr*a campus if they want.

A devotee of an ascetic order does not need to quit his original family relations, they can be maintained through various means. Usually, devotees visit their parental homes once or twice a year during the Assamese festive seasons. Devotees also join occasional family events such as marriage or death anniversaries. During

the time of birth and death in the family, a devotee needs to maintain ritual vows (*vrata*) for several days depending on the closeness of the new baby or deceased relative. Devotee's relatives also come and visit them occasionally in the sattrā.

Once the young boys join the monastic system, they are bound to follow certain religious rules and regulations. Dance, drama and music, based on Hindu scriptures, are considered a necessary tool to be learnt by all newcomers. Boys can continue their formal education at Government schools alongside their spiritual education at the sattrā. Earlier, formal school education was not allowed for young devotees. It was believed that spiritual education is enough for those growing up in a sattrā. In addition, if they are well educated then there is a fear in the minds of the old monks that the novices might leave in order to have a different life. Today, they allow every young boy to go to school. Young devotees also learn to do their own work, including cleaning and helping their seniors, from an early age.

If I unfold my diary of experience from nearly of two decades as a devotee in a sattrā, then I would say that when I grew up, the value of education and freedom became more important for me rather than anything else. I did not care more if others would feel proud of me; the way I live, what I wear and what I eat, etc. I did not like to present myself as a museum item throughout my life for someone else to look at with wonder. However, there is also no reason for me to complain about my bygone sattrā life, because I know that a tradition cannot run on the basis of each individual's choice. The sattrā tradition may or may not have some reasonable and logical groundings towards embracing freedom and the material value of life. But, the long continuation of the sattrā tradition and its lively climax for needy boys proves that it is still valuable, and that it works for many people, although most of them do not have other choices than to commit to the ascetic lifestyle of the sattras. Perhaps, life would have been different if some ascetic devotees had other choices. However, some devotees are economically sound enough to decide for themselves, but they are so deeply rooted in their faith that ultimately the 'beliefbox' of the orthodox system is too strong for them to escape. At the same time those who are educated and have the potential for a better future leave their monastic lives. Some young devotees leave their ascetic lives for several reasons. One-year data of incoming and outgoing ascetic devotees at Uttar Kama-labari sattrā (Majuli) are given bellow.

Table 1. Number of incoming devotees of Uttar Kamalabari sattra, Majuli.

Sl. no	Name of the incoming devotee	Age (apx.) at time of entering sattra	Year	Caste	Reasons for sending boy to sattra
1.	B.S. ¹⁷	10	2020	Kalita	Constant fighting between two sons and inability of parents to handle it.
2.	L. B.	9	2020	Koch	Economic problem in the family, difficult to raise four children.
3.	K. B.	6	2020	Keot	The father of the child committed suicide. Later, the mother ran away with another man leaving the child alone with his grandparents. Grandparents could not take care of the child and sent him to the sattra.
4.	S. S.	11	2020	Brahmin	Devotee asked family to give the child to the sattra in order to train the child as a future sattra Brahmin priest.

Table 2. Number of outgoing devotees of Uttar Kamalabari sattra, Majuli in 2020.

Sl. no	Name of outgoing devotee	Age (apx.) at time of leaving sattra	Year	Caste	Reasons for leaving sattra
1.	N. B.	42	2020	Koch	Love affairs with a girl and marriage.
2.	S. B.	22	2020	Koch	Dissatisfaction with the ascetic sattra lifestyle.
3.	S. B.	16	2020	Koch	Difficulties in following strict rules and customs in the sattra.
4.	R.S.	45	2020	Koch	Love affairs with a girl and marriage.
5.	H. B.	26	2020	Koch	Dissatisfaction with the sattra lifestyle.

¹⁷ Full names are not revealed for privacy reasons.

This one-year data could be counted as a general tendency of incoming and outgoing devotees, although it does not give the whole picture.

In my personal experience tradition gave me a life, but that life would be contradictory if I would choose to live it once again inside the same tradition with which I grew up. By saying this, I do not want to deny the core values, principles, and knowledge system of the tradition. I have no intention to make negative remarks on the tradition because it has contributed a lot, not least to making me able to write this thesis. What I see in the present scenario is a contradiction between daily life realities of the devotees, orthodox traditional customs and modern education. The main question here is can the sattra tradition of Majuli include flexible values without practicing caste and creed? Is it possible to minimise authority and make the system more liberal? Sattra tradition is based on an authoritarian worldview and dedication towards it. Moreover, sattras are a system that was created centuries ago, not necessarily by analysing the personal values of life. Later, it gained momentum on the basis of religious groundings fully engineered by Brahminic influence. Even though the system has evolved various changes over time, sattra authorities do not think much about consciously updating the system as time passes. In this regard, the young ones suffer a lot as they are being controlled by an orthodox system. To some extent, freedom is just a dream that they live with but never get to practice.

5.4 The caste system and sattras

The origin of the caste system is connected with professions that determine the position of a person or a family in the hierarchical system of Indian Hindu society. The caste structure in Assam is slightly different from other parts of India. Here, it needs to be mentioned that “many tasks, which in many parts of India are assigned to particular castes, are carried out in Assam by individual household” (Cantlie 1980:16).

The textual account, just to give a brief background, of the explanation of the caste (*jati*) system could be traced back to the time of the Rigveda (1500–1000 BCE). One Rigveda hymn (see O’ Flaherty 1981: 31) talks about a cosmic man’s body. Different parts of that body, the four *varnas*, represent social hierarchy and position: mouth = *brahmin*, arms = *kshyatriya*, thighs = *vashyas*, feet = *sudra*. Several centuries later, a text called the Laws of Manu or Manusmriti (around 1st century CE), elaborating on the caste system, gained popularity. “The central agenda of the text is the distinction between good and bad people” (Doniger and Smith 1991:1i).

Over time there have been several Indian intellectuals who criticised the caste system. Rammohan Roy (1772–1833) disapproved of caste distinction and the oppression of women, including suttee (Killingley 2013: 602). He also founded a social forum in Bengal in 1828 called Brahmo Samaj based on egalitarian principles. B. R. Ambedkar stood even more strongly against caste discrimination. As the Manusmriti text contained discrimination against some castes (see Doniger

and Smith 1991:liv-1x), B. R. Ambedkar (1891–1956), social reformer and principal author of the Indian constitution, burned the text publicly in 1927 as a symbol of rejection of caste and untouchability. Ambedkar argued that, “there was no Hindu society if by that one meant a group of people who shared common values and interests; such commonalities were shared only within castes” (Viswanath 2016: 257). But his message never seems to have reached many parts of the country.

It should be mentioned here that Sankaradeva used his literature not only to spread religious ideology but also to provoke new thinking in educating to help uplift the ignorant sections of society. However, with the advent of institutionalisation after the demise of Sankaradeva, hierarchy on the basis of caste turned out to be crucial among sattra devotees. The Brahma-samhati school of sattras are known to be a set of Brahminic order. They believe that the traditional rights of the Brahmins need to be prioritised and protected, rights that were under threat because of Sankaradeva’s propagation of the neo-Vaishnava faith. Importantly, in other sattra schools caste hierarchy remained a center of social power and decision-making. In all the sattras across Majuli and elsewhere in Assam, the so-called upper caste gets all the privilege. By looking at the inclusive aspects of Sankaradeva’s ideology, one can argue that sattras have changed their principles from heterodoxy to orthodoxy. Caste among devotees of sattras is practiced at various levels. Sattras belonging to the celibate order do not consider lower caste Hindu boys to be full-time Vaishnava devotees. Outcaste people are not allowed to enter the residence of the sattra devotees, who offer food and drink outside using separate plates and glasses which are kept outside the main residence.

By taking the tribal folks into his order Sankaradeva set an example by upholding socio-religious harmony and trying to do without caste hierarchy. This served the liberal idea of his religious reform. However, today the *sattradhikars* of Majuli sattras are appointed based on caste by the general body of the sattra managing committee. In the initial stage of forming a sattra, intellectual capability and traditional knowledge were preferred. In addition, even though a section of the tribal population is being converted to the neo-Vaishnava faith, they are not allowed to become permanent members of neo-Vaishnava monasteries because of caste hierarchy.

According to my informants, generally there are representatives of two castes, Brahmin and Sudra. Within the Sudra caste there are upper and lower castes. Upper caste Sudra consists of Kayasthas and upper caste Kalitas. Lower caste Sudra includes Koch¹⁸, Keot and lower caste Kalitas. Mahantas and bar-Kalitas are placed next to Brahmins, which is the highest of Sudras. Among the Kalita groups a different caste hierarchy exists. Bar-Kalita claims superiority over other Kalitas, such as saru-Kalita, nat-Kalita, pati-Kalita, kumar-Kalita. Both Koch and Keot get the lowest social status in the ascetic sattras in Majuli. Regarding the Kayastha caste, there is a disagreement among scholars. “Kakati considers the

¹⁸ A section of the Koch ethnic group of Assam has transformed themselves into a caste and also adopted neo-Vaishnavism.

word Kayastha to be Sanskritization of non-Aryan formations like Katho, to write, kaiathoh (to keep accounts). In early Assamese records Kayasthas are referred to as Kath" (Barua 2003:126). The two other *varnas*, i.e. Kshatriyas and Vaisyas, appear to be hidden in sattras.

Here I argue that the caste hierarchy upholds mainstream sectarian Hindu values that do not match Sankaradeva's view of Brahminical supremacy, although these caste hierarchical values seem to be liberalised by the converted Mising tribe members in Majuli who have adopted the neo-Vaishnava faith. Even though they have adopted the neo-Vaishnava faith, they never practice Hindu orthodoxy and the caste system in their daily lives as neo-Vaishnava followers do.

5.5 Ritual purity

Religion is considered by sattra devotees a contemporary life reality that functions mainly through ritual. *Dosa*, a violation of ritual law, is a dominant ritual concept in the context of Majuli sattras. Breaking ritual rules will cause *dosa* to any person. For example, entering the kitchen area in the morning without having first bathed is believed to bring *dosa* to that person. *Dosa* is related to the concept of sin and virtue (*pap-punya*) and leads to *pap* and to hell. On the other hand, *punya* leads to salvation and to heaven. Therefore, sattra devotees take religious rituals very seriously.

Rituals (*prasanga*) in the context of Majuli's ascetic sattras, could be divided into two, i.e., *nritya* (daily) and *naimittika* (periodical/calendric). This division is applicable in their official ritual conduct performed in the prayer setting. Ritual also plays a dominant role in devotees' individual lives. Purity (*soj*), and impurity (*phura*) could be observed in various ways in the daily lives of the sattra devotees. I am going to explain here purity and impurity in a ritualistic sense to show how it is applicable when it comes to devotees themselves, animals, places, objects, clothes, food, etc. There is also another ritual concept called *suva* which I will discuss later in this section.

Devotees follow very strict rules to maintain purity against pollution. Take for example a normal day for a devotee. A sattriya devotee cannot drink water or eat food before taking a bath in the morning. They consider their beds impure; therefore, they cannot eat food or drink water while in bed. Even if they touch a bed then their purity will be polluted, which they will have to regain by having a bath. If it is absolutely necessary to drink or eat late at night, then they should take a bath again first. Taking a bath in the morning is the first step towards purity. But a purified devotee can revert to an impure state easily if he comes into a physical contact with someone who has not yet taken a bath. A purified person will also become impure if he is touched by a dog, or if he has unknowingly used some impure object, which usually happens with beginners. Bicycles, cars, motorbikes and footwear are considered polluting objects. These objects can only be used outside the sattra campus. None of the ascetic devotees of the Kamalabari school

of sattras wear footwear inside their sattra campus even though it is very cold during the winter season.

Dogs are always considered impure animals; therefore, sattra devotees never allow dogs to come inside their houses. On the other hand, cats, and especially cows, are regarded as pure and are well taken care of. But one will always have to be careful as they might sometimes carry some polluting trash. Devotees do not consider cowdung as impure. Sometimes Brahmin priests use cow dung during death rites to purify non-Brahmins. Sattra devotees in Majuli and elsewhere cannot raise animals such as chickens, pigs, goats, horses, etc., because of long-standing caste-related taboos.

Some places are considered always pure, such as prayer halls (*kirtanghar*), prayer rooms in their residence (*guruseva-thai*) and the kitchen. Daily cleaning is needed to keep these areas pure and avoid them becoming impure (*bahi*). On the other hand, night beds (some devotees also keep a small bed for napping) and toilets are believed to be impure, therefore, after access to these places one should purify oneself in order to eat and take part in religious ceremonies. There are some designated areas where devotees can and can't go while maintaining purity. In addition, after peeing one needs to wash one's hands, mouth and other parts of the body including the male organ.

New and woolen clothes are always considered pure. But when it comes to other kinds of clothes purity depends on the situation. White and cleanliness are not enough to keep clothing pure all the time. Devotees always wear white clothes, even though there are some exceptions among the young ones in informal situations.

Suva literally means 'ritually polluted' and is mainly related to birth and death among Assamese Vaishnava followers. Each member of the descent group becomes ritually impure when a birth or death happens within the group (see Cantlie 1980: 37). Male descent in the family is considered more important than female. When someone from the descent line dies, then sattra devotees need to maintain a long ritual vow (*vrata*) for several days. For the death of their parents or brother ritual vows need to be maintained for thirty days. During this period, the relatives of the deceased maintain ritual restrictions including entry to some places, eating food, dressings, behaviour, etc. When it comes to Brahmin priests and Brahmin sattra devotees, the ritual vows can be completed in ten days. Brahmins have more relaxed ritual vows because of their so-called superior status.

There is a difference in the performance of the death ceremony between Brahmin and non-Brahmin devotees in the ascetic sattras. The relatives of the non-Brahmin deceased need to maintain ritual impurity for 30 days, whereas for Brahmins ritual impurity can be completed in 11 days.

All the time sattra devotees need to think about purity versus impurity. But the striking question here is if purity is the absolute focus of their lives, how do they maintain it in their ideological and moral domain? I observed that there is a clear contradiction between their ritual lives and the morals they uphold. It is also clear from my discussions above that the ascetic school of sattras has practiced caste hierarchy, power, politics and religious majoritarianism since the process of the

institutionalisation of the faith. Again the question is who is polluting their purity in their moral domain, are they also not simultaneously responsible for polluting their purity? I think an answer is not far from our understanding.

5.6 Food-related rituals

Food is always prepared ritually. For example, if there are four members in the monk family there should be a designated cook, called a *randhoni*. To become a cook in a monk family the monk candidate must go through two initiation processes, called *saran* and *bhajan*. After taking both the initiations, the person must learn about cooking rituals under an expert in order to become a cook. On the first day of his work as a cook, he needs to offer a *gamosha*¹⁹ along with some money, betelnut and leaf while serving food first to his seniors. This ritual is called *mandhora* or paying respect. After that day onwards, the person will be considered a cook. The young devotees who have not yet taken initiation are not allowed to touch the food of their seniors, not even the cooking utensils. If they do, the senior members will not eat that food. This food should then be eaten either by the non-initiated, or in the worst-case scenario it should be thrown out. No one, even non-initiated people of the same monk family, should touch the seniors while they are eating.

Like other householders devotees need to replace empty gas cylinders with new ones from the gas distributor. Unlike others, once they receive the gas cylinder, devotees purify it with water before installing it in the kitchen.

Devotees of the ascetic school in Majuli follow strict restrictions on what to eat and what not. They divide food consumption into three categories, i.e. a) *satvik* (pure, natural, clean, etc.) for example vegetables, fruits, milk, rice, etc., b) *rajasik* (hot and bitter), for example meat, including duck and pigeon, fish (excluding stinging catfish and gaint murrel), eggs, garlic, onion, etc. c) *tamasik* (related to intoxicants, sexual excitement), for example alcohol, beef, pork, marijuana, etc. Devotees eat only *satvik* food, although eating some varieties of fish is allowed.

When eating rice a devotee is not usually allowed to wear cloth on the upper part of their body. If a grain of rice falls on the ground, that grain is considered impure. Ritually impure rice is called *suva-vat*. If a grain of rice has somehow fallen on the devotee's body, he is supposed to take a bath to purify himself. Today, they just wash the place where the rice grain fell. They always eat food in a sitting position. Food is served only once, and repetition is usually not allowed. As I mentioned earlier, the celibate school of sattras in Majuli is considered a unique religious and cultural symbol of the state. Here, it is interesting to look at the real struggles of those who are involved in making the tradition unique. There is a kind of contradiction between the real-life needs of sattras devotees and the demands of traditional norms in order to uphold the tradition. The question is where one will stand in this situation if there one has a choice. Well, if you are an insider

¹⁹ A rectangular piece of cloth significant to Assamese people.

then you don't have much choice, you are expected to uphold traditional rules and values. However, if there is no one to observe what you are doing then definitely one can make a choice according one's wish. This is only possible in minor cases. For example, sattrā devotees are not allowed to eat cooked food offered by outsiders. This restriction is applicable for those who are initiated, but not for newcomers. In addition, sattrā devotees cannot eat before they purify themselves by having bath. But sometime the young ones seem to be going against the rule by drinking tea, water and even eating food offered by people outside the sattrā campus in rare cases, although while doing so they are afraid that this secret will get out.

Majuli sattrās seem to be suffering from contradictions between more relaxed behaviours in everyday life and the limitations imposed by the authority. I would argue that in most of the time the young devotees need to maintain a liminal state and that this causes some suffering.

Ascetic devotees need to perform a purification fasting ritual called *loghon*. When they stay out of the sattrā campus for more than a day and eat food outside cooked by someone else, *loghon* needs to be performed once they are back in the monastery. The devotee needs to avoid either lunch or dinner. If they decide to avoid lunch then the process of fasting starts from early morning and finishes at 1 pm. Night fasting starts at the time of sunset and finishes during next day sunrise. The last part of the fasting ritual is that the devotee is supposed to go to the prayer hall to get blessings after the daily congregational prayer. This finally allows them to eat or cook food. Before the process of fasting, the devotee can have a light meal. *Bhajanīa* (second level of initiation) devotees cannot eat food cooked even by their parents.

Ascetic devotees also have a specific place called *suvapatani* in the backyards of each residence where they throw their ritually impure food. It should also be mentioned that the young devotees do not want to follow this strict food restriction as they sometime consume *tamosik* food behind the bar. The last two varieties of food are equally resisted by high caste Hindus. It could be said here that concept for purity and pollution is very much visible when it comes to food consumption. The concept of ritual purity and impurity is very strong and dominates the caste system among sattrā devotees. "Those who see caste as particular to India stress the importance of purity and impurity, viewed as inherent in Hinduism, and the idea of *karma* where accumulated merit in one life may result in birth at a higher position in the next, or indeed vice versa" (Tambs-Lyche 2011:25).

5.7 Standardisation of rituals: Folk vs classical

Sattriya is a set of music and dance-drama ritual performances and composition based on Indian mythical sources. It was originated in the sattrās and attributed to Sankaradeva. *Sattriya* dance has folk roots and was recognised by the Sangeet Natak Academy (SNA), an autonomous body of the government of India, as one of the eight classical Indian dance forms on 15th November 2000. There are eight

dance forms in total in the Indian classical dance category. Classical dance forms are considered to have a deep-rooted relationship with the ancient *Natya Shastra* text, written between 200 BCE and 200 CE by sage Bharata Muni. On the other hand, folk dances also emerge from the local traditions of ethnic groups and various geographical regions. The culture-typologies between folk vs classical are well accepted by *sattriya* artists, including members of *sattras*. In practicality, outside the *sattria* circle *sattriya* classical dance is mainly associated with mainstream upper caste and middle-class Hindus, whereas folk dance has always been a tradition that was acquired and practiced mainly by so-called ‘lower class’ and economically unprivileged people. Therefore, this distinction between folk vs classical and the standardisation of one tradition over others goes against the fervor of these ‘folk’ and their folkloric heritage. In addition, “scholars who believe that folk and classical dance traditions have remained apart and not influenced each other, are in fact ignoring the multi-dimensional complexities of Indian culture” (Handoo 2000: 20). However, in the context of the *sattriya* tradition, Parasmoni Dutta mentions that “it is not easy to demarcate where the flavors of the folk disappear and where the blending of the elite/classical begins. Rather, the whole phenomenon demonstrates a folk–elite and folk–classical continuum” (Dutta 2005: 90). It is true that the categorisation of *sattriya* dance as classical has given the art form a wider acceptance and recognition within and outside Assam. It even opens up several opportunities to insiders to promote their cultural heritage, helping them to be financially self-supporting. *Sattriya* dance may have lost its traditional context but it has created a new folkloric performance context. It has also increased the number of *sattriya* performers and created a sub-section of glamour artists.

Here I can argue that in the present scenario, apart from aesthetic and artistic development, *sattriya* dance could be analysed as a tool for comprehending Indianness through its mainstream Hindu religious lineage. This argument could be supported by the fact that urban *sattriya* enthusiasts particularly, including critics and dancers, are interested in prioritising Indianness in their professional activities, rather than a local Assamese association. This has helped make a good pan-Indian connection and promote upper and middle-class interests on both sides. In this regard, old Hindu hierarchies are mingled with the new ones, forming a different competitive *sattriya* society where, forget about other communities, even *sattria*-based tradition bearers are relatively marginalised. Another dimension to think about here is the question of what, among *sattriya* practitioners, is the place of ‘indigenous theory’ (which stands for local systems of meaning or understanding, see Guzy 2013: 10), as *sattriya* favours more pan-Indian Hindu narratives?

To close this part of the discussion, I will quote the view that “in scholarship and popular thought, India has usually been identified with its classical traditions and culture. But there is another harmony, sometimes in counterpoint and sometimes autonomous, found in India’s folk traditions” (Blackburn & Ramanujan 1986: 1). This ‘another harmony’, as pointed out by Blackburn and Ramanujan, potentially has a great deal to offer in the context of *sattriya* classical tradition.

5.8 Tradition, technology and change

In the context of *sattras*, people are bound by tradition. Freedom is not a part of devotees' lives until and unless they decide to continue a different life outside. Some devotees in celibate *sattras* become lifelong members by choice; however, some remain there by force. Here force could be of a social, economic, or religious character, or implemented by the family. It also needs to be mentioned that contradiction between upholding rigid traditional customs and daily life realities have become more prominent than ever before because of the widespread influence of globalisation. Young devotees are learning many things on the internet that they would never have had the chance to learn before.

Technology and social media have also played a dominant role in this regard among the *sattras* youths. Obviously like anyone else, today devotees of ascetic orders use smartphones, TV, computers, motorbikes, cars, etc., in their daily lives. Because of the widespread influence of social media, networking with friends has become easier than ever before. Female friends also started to have access to devotees' lives through Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp. In some cases, Facebook friendships turn out to be flirting with friends and falling in love with girls. Each devotee has a device in his hands through which he can communicate with whomever they like. In this regard, it could be argued that technology has given them some freedoms which were not there earlier. But technology also has some contradictory ramifications that go against traditional principles.

Some years ago, devotees spent more time in the paddy fields and raising cattle. People in ascetic *sattras* kept themselves busy in practicing and discussing their traditional knowledge based on scriptures. Some devotees living in *sattras* often say that today religious discussions are replaced by contemporary issues like politics, corruption, and business. There is a sense of the idealisation of the past even though the partial truth of these narratives cannot be denied. The young *sattras* devotees are busy these days in their real-life business rather than learning traditional ritual performing arts which have either no, or less, commercial value. However, they consider some rituals as an important tool of worshipping God and are committed to continue practicing these ritual arts. This is because, first, they do this with dedication as it is a religious and spiritual path and a way of life. Second, rituals, i.e., dance, drama and music, are standardised as a product of stage performance. Therefore, it has an entrepreneurial and a glamorous aspect to it. As a result, young devotees put more emphasis on the performative aspects of rituals rather than the spiritual in order to make these practices self-sustainable. Teaching *sattriya* dance, drama and music to the students in villages and towns has attracted devotees away from the spiritual life to the material world. This is where existential conflict between different values begins. The young celibate devotees who are involved in teaching *sattriya* dance and music try to enjoy some freedom (for example, eating food outside) as their lives are full of social restrictions inside the *sattras* campus. Sometimes, this beginning of enjoying freedom leads them to a married life.

5.9 Authoritarian shift

I interviewed the *sattradhikar* Janardandeva Goswami of Dakhinpat Ashrami sattrra (Majuli) in January 2020. Currently, Janardandeva Goswami's older brother is the 16th generation of priests serving at Dakhinpat sattrra who along with sattrra devotees belong to the celibate order. Janardandeva Goswami lives a married life with his wife and two children in his Ashrami sattrra, and according to their family tradition one of his sons will be the successor at Dakhinpat sattrra in future.

Sattradhikar Goswami has been playing a paradoxical role in the religious and political scenario of Majuli in recent years. While doing my fieldwork, I requested that he give me some time for my research. He was kind enough to agree. When I arrived at his home, I noticed a big banner up on the front wall of his house written in Assamese, "Hindu Raksha Sena [Hindu protection force] –main office". He also served as the regional head (*provvari*) of the organisation. He answered the following questions (January 10, 2020):

Author: Is there any difference between *Hindutva*'s and Sankaradeva's view? How do you see it?

Answer: It is the same. Sanatana Hindu dharma is division-less. The differences between Sankaradeva, Damodaradeva and Harideva are not there. Even the division between Satramahasabha²⁰ and Sankarsangha²¹ should not be there. There could be shakta followers in our Damodaria pantha. We do practice image worship (*murti-puja*). Sankaradeva also did that. The image where Sankaradeva offered his worship is still preserved in some sattras. Sankaradeva was not against it. We people in the society have divided Sankaradeva. Sankaradeva's ideology should be one, or likewise Damodaradeva's ideology should be one, because Sankaradeva, Madhavadeva, Damodaradeva and Harideva are considered great people (*mahapurusha*). There was no difference in their ideologies. Today, all the divisions are made by people. Sanatana Hindu means one without division.

Author: Some scholars and locals say that sattrra people have not propelled equality from time to time towards local tribes. Is it true?

Answer: This is a false allegation. There was a Mising disciple [he could not recall the name]. As I mentioned earlier Misings almost lived by hunting. During that time, those who were in the line of religion did not touch them. Even now also when a person (Vaishnava Hindu) is about to go for a religious ceremony, he does not touch even his family members including his children and wife. The person keeps and uses his cloth separately. Once he wears that pure cloth he does not touch anyone else. If someone touches him, then he will have to take a bath again in order to purify himself. This kind of behaviour was there earlier. But now it's different. Now, if we say that Mising live by hunting then people will laugh at you. Hunting does not necessarily always mean killing animals, it also includes fishing activities. There is not any intention of hatred involved. This is not untouchability.

²⁰ A sattrra umbrella organisation established in 1990.

²¹ A religious-political organisation dedicated to Sankaradeva's so-called "pure ideology", as they say, emerged in 1930 against Brahminic authoritarianism, caste, ritual and untouchability which were being propagated mainly through the sattras.

In Nika-samhati sattras, purity and impurity are considered an essential part of the tradition which is reflected in different rituals.

Author: Regarding the attempt to demolish a church²² in Majuli, what happened on that day? Can you tell me about that incident?

Answer: This is an allegation only; I did not go to demolish the church. We had a meeting at Phulani on that day. I went out for that meeting. Those who like Hindu culture came to join that meeting. Some people got emotional and went to the village. They took away the banner of the church. When we came to know about it, we went there to stop it. There was a 10–12-year-old prayer hall (*namghar*) near the church. We went to that prayer hall to see if we could repair it or not. The church was just ahead of the *namghar*. I went to the front side of the church later when they took away the banner.

I was born in Majuli, this is the meeting place of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva (known as *manikanchan-sonjyog*). Lord Krishna kept his feet here during the time of Rukminiharana²³ and named Majuli as the second Dwaraka. Therefore, it cannot be accepted that some people will come from outside to perform religious conversion by manipulating people. We are hopeful that those who have already converted to Christianity will come back to their roots. Two or three of them have already come back to their roots.

The local Christian followers had started a court case against the *sattradhikar* immediately after the incident. Eventually, on the 18th of December 2020, the Majuli session court gave the verdict. The court fined the *sattradhikar* 10,500 rupees for “his involvement in the dismantling of a makeshift church” (20 December 2020, *The Sentinel*²⁴).

I observed that Janardandeva has 35 boy students in his sattra including Misings. He gives all the disciples sacred thread by applying necessary Brahminic rituals. He also said to me, “one has to be purified to read the Vedas”. Today, the *sattradhikar* prefers to wear saffron cloth²⁵ rather than white for some of his public appearances. It could be considered a major change even though wearing cloth is one’s individual choice. Marginalisation is big concern in the context of the sattra tradition that can be found in different forms within and outside. Caste hierarchy plays a crucial role when it comes to marginalisation within. Marginalisation outside, as pointed out by Young, is “often driven by national discourses that value and propagate the ideal of an undifferentiated, unified body of citizens thus underscoring the norms of dominant or majority groups in society” (Young 1989; see also Guzy and Kapáló 2017: 1–2).

²² The case was filed against the *sattradhikar* by a young Mising called Prasanta Payeng alleging that a group of people led by the *sattradhikar* demolished a church.

²³ A mythical story explaining Krishna’s abduction of the princess Rukmini from Assam to his homeland Dwaraka.

²⁴ <https://www.sentinelassam.com/topheadlines/majuli-session-court-slaps-fine-on-sattradhikar-janardhan-dev-goswami-517049>

²⁵ According to Hindus, saffron represents the Sun god and the Fire. It is the symbol of quest for knowledge, sacrifice and salvation.

Here, I argue that the Dakhinpat Ashrami sattra, situated at the eastern corner of the Majuli island, is a newly emerging *Hindutva* sattra model. A few sattras in Majuli, however, have a different outlook on religious politics. Some sattras, including *sattradhikars*, have maintained political neutrality and never indulged in communal politics. I observed that a few evening rituals in Dakhinpat Achrami sattra are similar to Bengal Sankirtan²⁶. This might be because the Brahma-samhati sect “admitted and assimilated some elements of Bengal Vaisnavism” (see Dutta 1990: 51).

5.10 Sattra’s involvement in power politics: past to present

The Brahma-samhati school of sattras, which received patronage from the Ahom royals, has always been involved in politics. “During the reign of king Pratap Singha (1603-41 A.D.) the influence of the brahmanas increased considerably” (Dutta 1990: 6). Later other sattras also tried to have a good political relationship with the regime. The biggest Auniati sattra was established in 1653 by the Ahom king Jayadhwaj Singha (1648–1663) under his full patronage. He endowed a huge property including 81,650 *bighas* (around 10,923 hectares) of land. Under the patronage of the same king, Dakhinpat sattra was established by Banamalidev in 1584. So, the sattras that were patronised by the Ahom kings always had close contact with royal power. However, the Kalasamhati schools of sattras were different in this regard. It should be mentioned that the Kalasamhati sect of the neo-Vaishnava order has rejected both Brahminic supremacy and political affiliation with the Ahom. Therefore, they had to endure terrible political suppression and atrocities, although despite this they never gave up and stuck to their religious beliefs and values.

During the time of India’s freedom movement, sattras were also divided into two, where the majority of sattras supported British rule and the minority not. Auniati, Dakhinpat and Benganaati sattra, which had thousands of devotees across the state, played a neutral role during the difficult time of establishing independence. This is because of huge revenue-free lands that were granted by the Ahom royals and also by the British government. Therefore, they did not take strong steps against the British Raj. During colonial rule in Assam, sattras did not stand against the British government when it imposed Bengali (from 1836 to 1873) as an official language. Rather, they supported the government decision and followed it (see Kalita 2020: 687). Perhaps, as a result of which the Bengali language was used in the mythological dramas composed by the *sattradhikars* during that time. However, there are a few exceptional cases. For example the revolutionary *sattradhikar* of Garmur sattra, Pitambardeva Goswami (1885–1962), and some of his followers took very active and firm steps to fight against the British Raj. It is also said that Hemchandra Goswami, the *sattradhikar* of Auniati sattra, showed some sympathy towards the freedom movement by contributing some money to

²⁶ A genre of Bengali devotional songs sung by Vaishnavas.

fund Majuli freedom fighters. Many *sattras* did not show enough courage to join the freedom movement. Even some *sattradhikars* criticised Pitambardeva Goswami for his initiative in standing against the British government.

Many *sattradhikars* have directly or indirectly maintained a good political relationship with the state government in order to gain privileges, even after the colonial era. Although their political stand goes against their religious ideology and belief, still they remain firm to their political connection in a bid to stay powerful. To discuss the present situation, I would like to bring in a case study related to my field work experience.

In December 2019, I went back to India for another fieldwork trip. Assam, along with a few cities in India, were at the peak of protesting against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) passed by the government of India on 11th of December 2019. According to the protesters, the CAA is discriminatory, unconstitutional, and threatens local identities. The government had shut down the internet connection in Assam for more than a week to stop the protest, because of which I could not contact my family and friends when travelling to Guwahati, India, after the completion of my exchange PhD work at Elon University, USA. As I felt the need, I also expressed my protest on Facebook three days before the internet was shut down.

It was in the news that a few members of Asom Sattr Mahasabha, a *sattr* umbrella organisation, had extended its support for the Act in the Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) in New Delhi. The general secretary of the umbrella organisation and the *sattradhikar* of Uttar Kamalabari *sattr*, Majuli, were in the group who went all the way from Assam with sponsored funding from an unknown source to extend support to the government. Later, when I was stuck in Guwahati amid the CAA protest, I came to know that the general secretary of Asom Sattr Mahasabha was expelled from his position²⁷. Some of my *sattr* friends told me by phone that on December 12th, 2019, a group of young people were protesting in front of Uttar Kamalabari *sattr* (Majuli) because the *sattradhikar* was still not showing any sympathy for the widespread protests. One of my monk friends explained to me later how he had to enter his workplace through the back door to escape the protesters. The *sattradhikar* neither changed his attitude nor apologised. Rather, he continued to support the government.

My support in social media for the protest, and the opposite stand taken by the *sattr* authority, had put me in a difficult and liminal situation. I never expected this kind of situation even though I was not surprised at the role taken by the *sattradhikar*. I was asking myself where I should stand. Then I decided that as I know the value of equality over discrimination, and the Indian constitution, and I couldn't be a confused decision maker.

Sattr devotees have responsibilities to continue their traditional practices, inherited by them from their seniors and *gurus*. This means that *sattras* are authorised to run a faith. They do not have much choice when it comes to continuing

²⁷ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/guwahati/asom-sattr-mahasabha-expels-official-for-proposal-on-citizenship-for-immigrants/articleshow/63866127.cms> (accessed April 10, 2021).

their practices. They have permission to become the cultural and religious authority of Vaishnava followers. Most of the time, *sattradhikars* try to maintain a good political relationship with the government because of the increase in opposing religious forces. But this does not mean that we cannot hold the sattrra authorities accountable for their acts. This above-mentioned fieldwork experience has left no doubt in my mind that this is an era dominated by corruption, which started much before outsiders came to India with the domination of Brahminic Hindus and the privileged class. Today the situation looks equally dangerous.

5.11 Othering and majoritarianism

The neo-Vaishnava religious demography in Majuli is very complex. In the context of Majuli sattras, the conception of ‘others’ in terms of religion and caste is a major issue that is not much discussed. Most of the time there is denial because of the dominant trend that represents sattras as upholding the liberal values of Sankaradeva. The rejection of discrimination and false representation of liberalism are promoted both by sattrra devotees and the *Hindutva* followers for their own reasons. The problem here is that until and unless both parties realise and accept the fact that discrimination is a major social issue among them, one cannot bring the issue to the table for discussion. There is a clear division between us vs them in the context of religious understanding because of caste, religious orthodoxy, and social hierarchy. Not enough attempts have been made for inter-religious communication. Because of discriminatory practice and the prejudice towards tribes and communities, some Majuli Misings claimed to have converted to Christianity. However, as the matter has been criticised from time to time by some social activists, today *sattradhikars* more consciously motivate the Misings to stay connected to the neo-Vaishnava faith. Misings originally came from Arunachal Pradesh and made Majuli their home centuries ago. Over time Misings have adopted some tenets of the neo-Vaishnava faith while continuing to follow their animistic practices.

I was curious to know whether this was because of the strong presence of the idea of ‘others’, promoted by the Hindu nationalist organisation (RSS) across the country. The RSS was not a powerful religious force on Majuli island until the BJP came to power in 2014. I still remember some moments when RSS leaders came quite often to Uttar Kamalabari sattrra to meet the *sattradhikar* in order to build a local relationship. Yogesh Shastri, a senior RSS leader, became very close to the *sattradhikar* in a short period of time and started to implement some projects under their collaboration. In 2007, they organised an event for children called Children Reform Camp at Uttar Kamalabari sattrra auditorium. I also participated in the event along with my fellow sattrra members. The RSS gathered many children at a week-long event to teach religious and spiritual lessons related to health and the mind. They then introduced to Majuli an ongoing education project, also present elsewhere in India, called one-teacher schools (*ekol vidyalayas*). During this process they also handed over their leadership to the

locals. Around 300 workers (*pracharak*) from different parts of the country have worked in Majuli under the leadership of RSS leader Yogesh Shastri. According to my observation the idea of ‘othering’ is a very old practice among devotees of Majuli sattras. It is not the RSS who introduced it, although the RSS has contributed a lot to the idea.

In 2016, the BJP won the election by making Majuli the main religious-political playground. The Chief Ministerial candidate fought the election from Majuli constituency. The amusing thing for me was that when I went back to Majuli in 2017 to do my fieldwork I noticed a saffron flag fluttering at the front of the ferry which depicts the monkey god Hanuman, with Sri Ram written on it in Hindi. This appearance in public of this *Hindutva* was something new for me in the context of public transport in Majuli.

On 20th August 2017, I had an interview with the *sattradhikar* of Benganaati sattra (Majuli) at which I asked him several questions related to the changing cultural and religious scenario of the island. He said, “whatever it is, be it *Hindutvavadi* ideology or others, all are failing to perform their religious moral responsibilities. India is a spiritual country. Indian civilisation is an ancient civilisation in the world. The Gita has been an inspirational scripture for many thinkers in the world and also being considered as a unique scripture. So, where is that culture, civilisation, education which created a scripture like the Gita? Where is that education which was not bounded by ‘ism’ (*vad*)? That universal ideology is being pushed into a communal trap. I don’t think that the term Hinduism (*Hindutvavad*) is grammatically correct. Our real culture is Vedic, not Hindu. Hinduism is a very narrow definition. According to history ‘Hindu’ is just a geographical identity. I don’t know how come this *Hindutvavad* has come here? This is because of the lobby and the force. The Vedas give us a humanitarian culture.”

No other *sattradhikar* has given me such a wise explanation during my fieldwork in Majuli. But if I apply his thought to some of his practical activities, unfortunately I find it contradictory. A question arises: is it the stubborn and arrogant aspect of the tradition bearers that does not allow the *sattradhikar* to apply his knowledge to take the tradition forward? If so, then it looks alarming.

In my fieldwork in December 2019, I also noticed the Ram sign²⁸ cropping up on trees beside the roads. The Ram sign is a newly introduced phenomenon in the religio-cultural scenario of Majuli island. Then I asked myself, are the liberal aspects of *eka-sarana-nama-dharma* at risk? I had an interview with Rameswar Borah Borgayan, a senior devotee at Dakhinpat sattra, Majuli. I asked him why some sattras seem to be influenced by politics much more than before? He replied: “politics is not our subject. We might be bounded by the law of the king (*ji raja, xi poja*). But gaining popularity and money is not what we want. If sattras play a part in politics who will save the *dharma*? There is a lot of responsibility with me at the moment. If I take part in politics, I cannot perform my responsibilities. I

²⁸ The Wire (online portrait), 23 May 2018. <https://thewire.in/religion/in-assams-majuli-river-island-ram-signages-on-trees-create-a-flutter> (accessed April 10, 2021).

should know what my duty is and what is necessary for me. Some of our *sattradhikars* have gone into politics and become involved in corruption” (1 March 2020).

While Borgayan was replying to my questions, a villager was waiting for him to take local medicine for his relative’s loose motion, believed to be caused by an evil mouth/eye (*mukhloga*). Borgayan, who is also a *bej*, gave some blessed water to the person. Borgayan’s words, acts and the way of simple living looked like less contradictory with his ideologies compared to the powerful *sattradhikars*.

6. Summary of the main findings

The thesis consists of three published articles, all mainly analysing the contradictory religious and socio-political dimensions of *sattras* through various case studies. It also shows the present situations of *sattras*’, changes, and inside vs outside discourses.

6.1. The main arguments

1. Devotees’ conception of tradition is religious. Tradition in the context of *sattras* is considered as an authoritative property rather than anything else. The contradictions between traditional norms being imposed on the devotees by the *sattras* leadership, and individual needs and choices, have always been part of the *sattras* tradition, and this puts the young devotees in a difficult position. *Sattras* institutions have changed the liberal *bhakti* ideals to incorporate Brahminic orthodoxy, authoritative power, and politics. This has caused a socio-religious intellectual dominance over devotees and neo-Vaishnava followers across Assam. It draws a clear contradictory image that does not fit with the liberal aspects being upheld by the founding father of the faith.
2. The current form of neo-Vaishnava tradition being practiced in Majuli *sattras* has a strong relationship in terms of its textual and behavioral conducts with pan-Hindu Vaishnava traditions. Its uniqueness is in the monastic set up and celibate lifestyle of the devotees. The strong caste system has influenced millions of Vaishnavas in Assam to move towards social hegemony and non-commensality practices.
3. The *sattras* tradition is a man-made authoritarian system. There is a clear separation in *sattras* devotees’ understandings in terms of religion, sex, caste, and colour. The concept of ‘other’ is very strong among the devotees at Majuli *sattras*. This concept is inherent to the devotees as individuals because of the caste system.
4. In the context of Majuli *sattras*, on the one hand, the practice of traditional knowledge is reducing because of increasing emphasis on material aspects of life and the effect of globalisation. On the other hand, the physical architecture of the *sattras* has been rebuilt and decorated more than ever before.

5. In recent years there have been multi-dimensional changes in the sattras, even though there is a strong sense of antipathy towards the idea of change among sattrā devotees. Sattras have not paid enough attention to modern education and the pragmatic thinking which might help devotees see the positivity of religious conviction, and current changes and their future effects.
6. Celibate sattras in Majuli are considered unique because of their lifestyle. Celibacy is being prioritised as ‘pure’ and as ‘the marker’ of tradition. Often, sattrā devotees use the term *udash* (celibate) in opposition to *grihastha* (married or householder) to mark the difference, and to signify the notion of purity associated with the idea of celibacy. Here, I argue that young devotees suffer a lot because of the idea of ‘celibacy’ as it is difficult to practice in real life.
7. Sankaradeva proposed and set up a grounding for inclusive and liberal religious ideology in the neo-Vaishnava faith. Therefore, majoritarian nationalistic ‘*Hindutvavad*’ does not fit even though Sankaradeva could be argued to be a pan-Hindu figure.
8. Currently, Majuli could be considered a ‘little India’ in religio-political terms. Sattrā devotees consider Sankaradeva their ideological icon, although in fact they rarely practice his liberal approach to the faith. This resembles the pan-Indian *Hindutva* consideration when it comes to seeing Mahatma Gandhi as the national hero without following his inclusive ideology in practice. Both approaches are equally contradictory.
9. The dominant religious characteristic of the sattrā tradition, as with caste hierarchy, does not incorporate the idea of multiculturalism, rather it creates boundaries. Long blending of cultural and religious history in Assam suggests the upholding of religious and cultural diversity without monocultural dominance.
10. The ascetic sattrā tradition of Majuli does not seem to have a bright future without the implementation of values associated with modern education and individual freedom. The caste system is a big barrier in this regard that needs to be overcome. The reason behind the maintenance of the caste system is the lack of modern education and a focus on an authoritarian implementation of belief.

6.2. Conclusion based on research questions

The sattrā tradition of Assam, especially Majuli as the hotspot of the neo-Vaishnava order, primarily represents Brahminic pan-Indian Hindu ideologies. In this case, unique democratic aspects of Sankaradeva’s doctrine are very much marginalised. Vaishnava adherents have prioritised Sankaradeva as an ‘Indian-Assamese Hindu figure’ rather than ‘Assamese-Indian’. This idea is mingled with the dominant Hindu nationalist agenda which has not yet focused on the indigenous worldviews of various [ethnic and religious] communities living in Assam. Rather, it has played a decisive role in bringing tribal populations into the

neo-Vaishnava fold, as a result of which religious demography began to change in the region. The present situation of increasing majoritarian domination has supported Assamese Vaishnavas in creating a new RSS *Hindutva* trend in Assam. This has not only created trouble in mainstream religious society, but also threatened the folk-lives of the indigenous Assamese communities inhabiting in the region. Therefore, the present situation portrays a contradictory picture in the folkloric and religious history of Assam. Sankaradeva and his neo-Vaishnava movement cannot be counted alone without connecting the long pre-Sankari history of the people of Assam. This indicates that previously Hindu beliefs existed in the vernacular medium rather than having a more uniform conception.

Sattras' characteristics as a social orphanage deserve respect without any question. This is a highly cherished and significant aspect of society which, most of the time, outweighs other negative dimensions associated with sattras traditions, especially the celibate sattras order. However, separation of children from their parents, for whatever reason, is a less well-known issue that sometimes makes the lives of those adopted children difficult in the sattras. There are a few cases of young devotees running away from sattras to return to their parental homes.

Sattras are a reservoir of performing art forms that have been maintained by devotees for hundreds of years as devotional ritual practice dedicated to Lord Vishnu and his incarnations. The performing arts are expressive forms of mythical stories that can be found in ancient Hindu scriptures. This suggests that the mythical traditions of the sattras have a long history.

I will conclude by saying that tradition dominated by religion can become a socially compelling regime. This regime is based on a shared knowledge system and has to be constantly reinvented to maintain its functionality and social relevance, and also to absorb criticism. In fact, acceptance and liberal views can make a tradition stronger than ever. Emotions and dedications in a tradition always have a place even in the current education-driven society if it is manufactured by openness and pluralistic ideologies. In the context of Majuli sattras, there is no need to import pluralism as some liberal elements are already embedded in neo-Vaishnava tradition. Sattras traditions in Majuli deserve some attention in this regard just to make pluralism central. Their involvement in the continuation process of the tradition is remarkable, and emotions are deeply rooted in the past. 'Contradiction' can be understood as part of the process by which a tradition changes, with each tradition changing differently according to its characteristics. Tradition just moves on with people and time and takes a different shape. As a young folklorist, I consider traditional knowledge of any kind a potential tool which might give scholars different viewpoints. Therefore, no matter what shape it takes, it is a source for our epistemological pursuit.

SUMMARY OF THE ARTICLES

Article 1

Saikia, Baburam. 2018. "An Introduction to the Sattra Culture of Assam: Belief, Change in Tradition and Current Entanglement." *Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristics* 12 (2), 21–47.

The article reflects initially on my personal association with the community that I am researching. It shows how I became a member of the neo-Vaishnava monastic community at a very early age, even though I was born in a different district of Assam away from Majuli island.

The article explains how the name of the region of Assam has changed over time and outlines the mythic and ethnic past associated with the region. Assam was a dominant place for *Shaiva* and *Shakta* followers. Even Sankaradeva's family followed *Shaivism*. There were several followers of Vishnu worshiper in Assam, gaining momentum when Sankaradeva introduced *eka-sarana-nama-dharma*. The ideological root of the neo-Vaishnava tradition is the Bhagavata Purana and the Bhagavata Gita. Neo-Vaishnavism became an influential religious tradition over time, which changed the multi-religious and multi-ethnic demography of the region. This has also led to the blending of Hindu and ethnic traditions. I discuss the origin of Vishnu worship in Assam by bringing in some mythological and archeological evidence. In this connection, the pan-Hindu relationship with the Assam *bhakti* movement is analysed.

Then I write about the origin of the term 'sattra' and the establishment of the sattra tradition in Assam. I explain the celibate sattra tradition and its process of continuation. This also explains how young devotees start their lives at an early age in Vaishnava monasteries and the importance of ritual in their lives. In this regard, I talk about the performatisation of rituals in the context of sattras. I found that in the celibate sattras of Majuli, devotees consider the oral narratives of their *gurus* an important element to communicate with the sacred.

The article points out that the caste system and Brahminic supremacy is still very active among sattra devotees. The idea of traditionalisation has been practiced in the sattras in order to connect the emotional past and promote authoritarian values in society. The issue of women not being allowed to enter the prayer hall in Barpeta sattra is alarming. Excluding women from the temple is also a process of traditionalisation. In sattras, tradition is practiced as something opposite to modernity. I argue that change and modernity are both very important for the continuation of a tradition. I stress that when it comes to the sattra tradition there is a contradiction between the way sattra devotees uphold the tradition and Sankaradeva's view. I have synthesised emic and etic approaches, as I represent the tradition and write as an insider. My education abroad and PhD preparation has influenced my understanding.

The issue of inequality among sattra devotees is raised in this article. Even though the Mising community lives and works closely with sattra devotees in

nearby areas, still they are not treated equally and because of this some of them have converted to Christianity. One recent major problem for Majuli sattras is the active involvement of sattra priests in the RSS politics of the present BJP government. RSS politics goes against the egalitarian aspects of the neo-Vaishnava religion, and this is a cause for concern for many people.

My research methodology is based on interview and observation. I have used tradition as a theoretical concept. In this article, I bring in some interview materials to show how insiders think about their tradition. According to a *sattradhikar* called Narayan Chandradeva Goswami, of Natun Kamalabari sattra, Majuli, the celibate sattra tradition is in danger because the young devotees do not want to remain celibate. Modernisation has brought a lot of change to the lives of the celibate neo-Vaishnava devotees which, according to the *sattradhikar*, is not what he wants. My informant Amlan Deep Borah revealed that the *sattradhikars* are more involved in politics. Rather than making an effort to improve society, they are enjoying power, wealth and domination.

Article 2

Saikia, Baburam. 2019. "Sattras, Magical Power and Belief Narratives in the Context of Flood and Erosion on Majuli Island." *International Quarterly for Asian Studies* 50 (1–2), 119–136.

This article starts with a conceptual note on belief, which has both individual and collective value in society. I have described what belief means to different individuals in different contexts. I have explained the relationship between belief and faith. Faith has something more to do with religion than anything else. In the context of India belief narratives are often taken seriously which helps the continuation of traditions. Flexibility of storytelling is evident when it comes to the narrative genres.

Next, I have discussed narratives related to Majuli island that I discovered during my fieldwork trip to Majuli island in July 2017. Place legend related to the origin of the Majuli island has an important place among people. This discussion has also highlighted the historical perspective of the origin of the island. Even though Majuli is a multi-ethnic region, neo-Vaishnavism plays a dominant role among the population. I have introduced the relationship of the neo-Vaishnava movement with Majuli island regarding how two Vaishnava saints met each other at a place called Dhuahat-beloguri. This also shows how Madhavadeva, a chief disciple of Sankaradeva, came into contact with Sankaradeva.

I have described the islanders' relationship with the river Brahmaputra. The people of the island offer worship to the river Brahmaputra during the monsoon to get rid of floods and erosion. But they do not worship the same river during the winter when there is no fear of destruction. Even sattra devotees offer worship to the river during the monsoon even though they are supposed not to worship any deities other than the lord Vishnu and his manifestations. The interview with the

sattradhikar of Punia sattrā reveals that floods and erosion have been a constant threat to the islanders and several families have had to move. Some families who are economically sound have bought another property in some other part of the state.

Even though sattrā devotees in Majuli follow a monotheistic principle, they acknowledge the importance of their different Hindu deities on different occasions. According to some educated youth in Majuli, the belief of the *sattradhikar* is hierarchical and does not include all segments of society. The marginalised section is very much part of this belief system. The intension of some *sattradhikar* to present themselves as divine-like figures does not impress the educated youth. Rather it separates them from sattrā society.

Apart from belief I have also discussed a couple of problematic environmental issues including floods and erosion. Fear of floods and erosion is always in the minds of the islanders throughout the year. In addition, people sometimes need to go to other parts of the state for medical purposes. To cross the river to the mainland by the ferry takes about 1.5–2 hours. Sometimes a patient dies while transferring to a mainland hospital. In terms of flood, erosion and transportation, the state government and the existence of the Brahmaputra board has not been able to solve the long-standing problems of Majuli island. On the contrary, the government of Assam has recently introduced river worship in the form of a big festival. This seems to have the intention of establishing a pan-Indian Hindu religious ideology rather than promoting local beliefs related to the river Brahmaputra.

Even though neo-Vaishnava devotees follow a monotheistic principle, they still move outside their religious affiliation sometimes and acknowledge other Hindu deities when needed. They particularly do this because of the needs of their family members. Here, I argue that religious traditions display flexibility and creativity, especially in times of crisis, something that is a feature of vernacular religiosity, as Leonard Primiano has conceptualised it.

Article 3

Saikia, Baburam. 2021. “Marginalisation, Revolt and Adaptation: On Changing the Mayamara Tradition.” *Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristics* 15 (1), 85–102.

I opened up the discussion by analysing the relationship and the hierarchical association between ‘great tradition’ and ‘little tradition’. A great tradition not acknowledging a little tradition could lead a tradition to a marginal position. I argue that marginalisation in the neo-Vaishnava religion is a systematic social practice in which caste, dominated by Brahminic ritual, plays a crucial role. This is followed by a methodological introduction.

Next, I discussed the neo-Vaishnava tradition and its schism. This shows that even though the Mayamara subject belongs to the neo-Vaishnava tradition it is still marginalised by mainstream neo-Vaishnava followers. I introduce the founder of the Mayamara subject to readers by discussing Aniruddhadeva’s

relationship with his *guru* Gopal Ata. After learning about the neo-Vaishnava philosophy under the guidance of Gopal Ata, Aniruddhadeva became part of a neo-Vaishnava missionary project supervised by Golap Ata. Among others, Aniruddhadeva turned out to be very successful in preaching his religious faith among the subdued communities of Assam.

Mayamaras and non-Mayamaras have different interpretations of the emergence of its terminologies. Mayamara is only considered an accepted term because 'Moamaria' has some negative connotations. This negative connotation raises several questions. I argue that their belief system is still dominated by mainstream hierarchical attitudes. There was never a community called Mayamara. Unification of individuals in order to resist the religious and social oppression of the Ahoms increased dramatically, later becoming a community. I came to the conclusion from my fieldwork experience that the tribalisation of neo-Vaishnava customs and the ignorance of Brahminical dominance are the reasons for exclusion from mainstream neo-Vaishnava society. The irony is that even though the Mayamara subsect is marginalised by mainstream neo-Vaishnava society, there is still a force within their tradition that creates mainstream favoured narratives and maintains an upper class social status.

One crucial aspect is that the religious leaders of the Mayamara tradition have a great deal of respect among devotees. The disrespect of the Ahom royals for the religious leaders of the Mayamara subsect has resulted in the emergence of long Mayamara revolt which eventually destroyed Ahom rule in Assam. I have presented the Barbheti shrine as a symbol of marginalisation and oppression by the Ahom kings. According to me, in the past and present the Mayamara tradition survived in a liminal position between mainstream and indigenous cultures. In addition, the Mayamara tradition has more potential to establish a cross-cultural religious identity between marginalised and mainstream phenomenon within the complex neo-Vaishnava tradition. Majoritarian influence and the liminal position have led the Mayamara tradition into a state of marginalisation. Scriptures are very important spiritual sources for the Mayamara devotees. Neo-Vaishnava devotees who do not follow the Mayamara subsect say that Mayamara scriptures are a source stolen from Sankaradeva. Not acknowledging the indigenous customary association with the Mayamara tradition is a major concern. Some indigenous rituals that were previously adapted by Mayamara devotees are now rejecting its original roots.

I argue that initially Mayamara followers adopted indigenous practices in their tradition. But later they started to downplay them because of mainstream social influence. The process of cultural exclusion may separate groups and create conflicts. I have shown the Mayamara revolt as an example in this regard. Moreover, the blending of Mayamara tradition itself stands as a unique example within the neo-Vaishnava tradition. And it would fit very well with the egalitarian idea of Sankaradeva, as they often call it. The Mayamara sub-sect upholds an egalitarian view to some extent, but it is not acknowledged by mainstream neo-Vaishnava followers. This is something that might lead to a cultural gap if this continues in future.

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SUMMARY IN ESTONIAN

Vastuolud traditsioonis: elatud usund, rituaalid ja muutused Majuli satrates

Kokkuvõte

Kirde-Indias asuvat Assami osariiki on tugevasti mõjutanud hinduismi peajumala Višnuga seotud religioosne traditsioon ehk vaišnavism, millelähtekohad on 7. sajandi Lõuna-India kultuuris. Selle ühe suundumuse moodustab neovaišnava liikumine, mille Assamis algatas Šankaradeva (1449–1568), kes on tuntud kui õpetlane, usureformaator ja pühamees. Šankaradeva juurutas Assami kultuuris munklust, mille keskseks institutsiooniks sai satra ehk mungaklooster. Hiljem arendasid Šankaradeva õpilased satra-kontseptsiooni edasi, tuginedes oma õpetaja ideedele. Aja jooksul on satrate kultuuris toimunud palju muutusi, kuid selle südameks on jäänud askeetlikud satrad, mis asuvad Brahmaputra jõel paikneval Majuli saarel. Selle väitekirja keskmes on vastuolud ja sisekonfliktid nende satrate traditsioonides, mida olen uurinud isiklike kogemuste põhjal. Väitekirja püüab vastata mõningatele teoreetilistele küsimustele, nagu näiteks küsimus sellest, kuidas mõista traditsiooni Majuli satrate kontekstis? Kuidas on traditsioon seotud usundi, rituaalide ja kloostri argieluga?

Askeetlikel satratel on traditsiooni kujundamisel peamine roll, ehkki selles kultuuris võime eristada mitmeid tasandeid. Hinduistlike usudogmadega on läbi põimunud hierarhiline kastisüsteem, mis avaldub ka assami munkluses. Satrate traditsiooni jätkavad eelkõige ülematesse ja keskastme kastidesse kuuluvad neo-vaišnava usklikud, kes ühtlasi esindavad Assami rahva kultuurilist põhihoovust. Satrate kontekstis võib traditsiooni (*parampara*) all mõelda mineviku usuliste postulaatide ja praktikate jätkamist, kusjuures selle kandjad eitavad järjepidevalt muutusi. Neo-vaišnava traditsiooni kujundab eelkõige institutsionaalne religioon ja hinduistliku enamuse ideoloogia, samuti on seda mõjutanud kristlik misjonitöö. Rituaalset käitumist võib tõlgendada kui suhtlemist Jumalaga. Rituaalne performatiivsus hõlmab ka müütide esitamist tantsu, näidendi ja muusika vormis. Usklike argielus on tähtsal kohal rituaalne puhtus, mida püütakse päevast päeva järgida. Ometi tekivad idealiseeritud rituaalse täiuslikkuse ja argielu vahel lahknevused.

Et tänapäeva usundit paremini mõista, tuleb tunda Assami ajalugu. Piirkonnale on läbi aegade olnud iseloomulik paljude keelte ja kultuuride koospüsimine. Assami folkloor on polüvokaalne, kuid tänapäevale on eriti iseloomulik see, et erinevad kogukonnad otsivad oma juuri jaeripäraseid identiteete. Ajalooliselt hõlmas Assam geograafiliselt märksa suuremat areaali. Rahvusliku eneseteadvuse tõus ja identiteediotsingud on viinud Assami jagamisele erinevate osariikide vahel.

Piirkonna religioosne pluralism on ajapikku taandunud, sest alates 13. sajandi algusest pääses ajapikku domineerima braahmanlik hinduism. Briti koloniaalvalitsuse perioodil (1858–1947) edendati ka kristlikku misjonit ja ristiusust sai

hinduismi kõrval teine oluline institutsionaalne religioon. Ometi on Assam jäänud multikultuurseks ja ükski religioon pole teisi kõrvale tõrjunud.

Eelnevat uurimislugu tutvustavas väitekirja osas olen peamiselt käsitlenud neid töid, mis on minu uurimusega kõige otsesemalt seotud. Varem on põhjalikult uuritud Šankaradeva elulugu ja tema filosoofilisi vaateid, samuti satra kui institutsiooni teket ning ajaloolisi arenguid. Minu töös on uuenduslik satra traditsioonide sisemiste vastukäivuste ja lahkheide käsitus, mis põhineb minu isiklikel kogemustel. Olen analüüsinud Majuli tsölibaatsete satrate elanike argielu ja tavasid ning neis toimuvaid muutusi. Olen arutlenud ka kastisüsteemi üle ning uurinud satrate suhteid Majuli saare misingi põlisrahva kogukonnaga. Olen kirjutanud selle folkloristlikust vaatepunktist lähtuva töö, mõeldes eelkõige rahvusvahelisele lugejaskonnale. Et olen alates varasest lapsepõlvest kasvanud üles ühes Majuli satras, saan pakkuda etnograafilisi sissevaateid satra-kultuuri, mis on teistele uurijatele jäänud kättesaamatuks.

Neo-vaišnava traditsioonis austatakse ainult Jumal Višnut ja tema kehasusi. Keskne mõiste on bhakti kui pühendumine ülimalle Jumalale. Bhaktis loetakse kokku üheksa teed ülimal Jumala juurde. Need on (i) *śravana* – Jumala nimede loendamine; (ii) *kīrtana* – Jumala nimede retsiteerimine; (iii) *smarana* – Jumala nimede meelespidamine; (iv) *arccana* – ohveramine; (v) *vandana* – Jumala olemuse analüüs; (vi) *dāśya* – Jumala orjalik teenimine; (vii) *sakhitya* – Jumala ja usklite vaheline sõprus; (viii) *padasevana* – teenistus Jumala jalge ees; (ix) *ātmanivedana* – ego täielik alistumine. Neist üheksast vagaduse vormist kuulutas Šankaradeva ainult kuulamist (*śravana*) ja retsiteerimist (*kīrtana*).

Šankaradeva maailmavaade polnud etnotsentriline, vaid ta tugines Indiat ühendavatele õpetustele. Ometi on tema vaadetes unikaalseid jooni, nagu näiteks kriitiline hoiak kastihierarhiate ja braahmanite ülemvõimu suhtes. Komplitseeritud rituaalide üleküllust asendasid lihtsustatud riitused ja pühakirja ettekirjutuste asemel järgiti rahvapäraseid kombeid. Assami vaišnava usk põhineb monoteismil ja patriarhaalsusel; naistega seostub rüvedus. Noortel usklitel on raske kohaneda satrate rituaalse elu ja askeesiga, mis tekitab vastuolusid ja piirab noorte vabadust. Tegelikult elus on noortel raske järgida ka tsölibaadi reegleid. Religioosne traditsioon on aga autoritaarne. Oma uurimuses olengi keskendunud traditsioonil põhinevate normatiivsete ettekirjutuste ja tegeliku elu vajaduste vastuoludele.

Satra-kultuurile on iseloomulik oma ja võõra vastandamine, võttes aluseks selliseid kategooriaid, nagu religioon, sugupool, kast ja nahavärv. Tänapäeval on globaliseerumise mõjul need vastandused hakanud nõrgenema ja mitmed varem rangelt järgitud tavad on muutumas. Internet pakub noortele uusi teadmisi, mis varem jäid neile kättesaamatuks. Arvestada tuleb ka tänapäeval valitsevaid materialistlikke huvisid, mis on takistuseks traditsioonil põhinevate teadmiste edasiandmisel ja nende väärtustamisel Majuli satrates. Ometi on satrate välisilmes tänapäeval rohkem toretsevaid dekoratsioone kui kunagi varem.

Satra on ka hinduistlikul mütoloogial põhinevate etenduskunstide taimelava. Mungad on kandnud neid traditsioone, mille mõte on vahendada usklite suhet Jumalaga. Nüüd on aga hakatud eristama rahvapärast ja klassikalist kultuuri, mis on põhjustanud rahvapärase marginaliseerimist ja allasurumist, sest klassikalist

satrate kunsti peetakse kõrgkultuurina tähtsamaks, kui madalaks ja kergekaaluliseks peetud rahvakunst. Ometi on Šankaradeva neovaišnava liikumisel ikka olnud tugev seos Assami rahvakultuuriga. Hinduistlikku usku vahendati paljuskõnekeeles ja rahvapärases vormis ning see polnud kaugeltki normeeritud ega õpetuslikult fikseeritud, nagu see kipub olema institutsionaalses hinduismis. Olen seisukohal, et tänapäeva Assamis valitsev neo-vaišnava ideoloogia ei sobi kokku varasemate traditsioonidega, kus uskumussüsteemide vahele ei tõmmatud jätku piirjooni, vaid need olid omavahelistes harmoonilistes suhetes. Nüüd on Assami vaišnava liikumisest saanud ühiskonnas domineeriv jõud, mis esindab riiklikult toetatud Hindutva ideoloogiat. See on tekitanud usulisi konflikte ning hakanud ohustama Assami põlis- ja väikerahvaste kultuure. Niisiis on tänapäeva Assami ühiskondlikus elus palju konfliktset, mis ei sobi kokku varasema folkloori ja usundilooaga.

Satrate autoritaarset positsiooni toetavad kõrgematesse kastidesse kuuluvad braahmanid. Kunagi varem pole nende side satratega olnud nii tugev kui tänapäeval, mil domineerivad parempoolsed, natsionalistlikud hindu poliitikud, kes propageerivad hinduistlikku maailmavaadet. Minu välitööd Majuli satrates tõid esile, et usklike tegelikud kogemused ja institutsionaalsed usupraktikad ei ole omavahel vastavuses.

Satratega seostub Assami kultuuris palju positiivset, nagu näiteks nende hinnatud roll lastekodude ja heategevate asutustena. Kuid teaduslikus uurimistöös ei saa mööda vaadata nendega seotud vastukäivustest. Käesolevas väitekirjas püüdsin heita valgust neile vastuoludele – mitte niivõrd sotsiaalkriitilisest perspektiivist, vaid käsitledes satra-kultuuri folkloorseid aspekte, mis on pidevas muutumises nagu Assami ühiskond ja poliitiline süsteem tervikuna.

GLOSSARY

The following glossary is based on terminology in Assamese. Therefore, the spelling of some concepts differs from Sanskrit-based traditions

- ai*: goddess related to pox
aldhora: an assistant devotee at sattras
accara: a ritual rule of conduct
apesarasabah: a ritual dedicated to spirits of heaven.
arccana: the act of offering
atmanivedana: the act of complete self-surrender
bahi: “socially excluded”, a state of ritual impurity and social exclusion
bak: a fish-eating spirit
bathou: five principles of ethnic religion of the Bodo community
bej: magician, sorcerer
bhakat: devotee
bhakti: devotion/devotional activities
bharata-varsha: another name for India
bhogi: enjoyer
bhajan: second and the final phase of initiation in sattra traditions
bhajania: those who have received the second phase of initiation
boha: devotees’ residence
borgeet: (‘great song’) poetic composition of Vaishnava devotional song
brahman: the supreme power of the Godhead
brahmin: so-called high *varna* in the Hindu social structure
burha-bhakat: the senior most devotees
chandala: the lowest of the low caste in Hindu belief
caritpath: oral hagiographical narrative
caritputhi: written text of a hagiographical account
dasyabhava: slavery feelings towards God
dasya: serving God with an attitude of a selfless slave
diksa: traditional teachings including initiation rituals
eka-sarana-naam-dharma: religion of the One God (Vishnu) where chanting the name of that God is the ultimate form of worship
gamosha: traditional Assamese rectangular piece of auspicious cloth
grihastha: married man, head of a household
gunas: three mental qualities in Hindu belief
guru: spiritual master
guruasana: seat of the *guru* or the deity
guruseva-thai: place of worship
hati: rows of devotees’ residences in a sattra
Hindu Raksha Sena: a Hindu right-wing organisation for the protection of Hindus
hindutva: an ideology promoting the hegemony of Hindus in India
hindutvavadi: followers of *Hindutva* ideology

homa: Vedic fire ritual
jakhini: female spirit of harmful nature
jalkuwari: female water spirit
jivatma: soul of living being
jnana: knowledge
kalita: highest of the *sudra* castes. However, among *kalitas*, *bar-kalitas* are considered the highest *sudra* caste in Assam ranking below *brahmin*, *ganak*, and *kayastha*.
keot: belongs to *sudra* low status sub-caste. *Keot* is said to be a corruption of *kaibarta* (fishing community)
kirtana: the act of chanting the names of God
koch: a Tibeto-Burman linguistic group in Assam and Meghalaya
kayastha: in Assam a class of *sudras* including *kalita*, *mahanta*, and *keot*
karma: work, action
kaliyuga: the last of the four Hindu world ages
kevaliya: celibate
karapat/batsora: main entrance gate of a *sattr*
loghon: ritual fasting
mantra: incantation, religious and magic formula, often chanted in Sanskrit.
Mantras are of different kinds, such as meditative, productive, preventative.
manikut: separate room at a *namghar* (prayer house) meant for deities to reside in
maya: illusion
moksha: salvation
mukhloga: *mukh* – mouth; *loga* – touch. A magical concept of evil eye and harmful word
mukti: salvation
murti-puja: image worship
nama: essence of the name of God
nirguna: without physical quality or without distinction
nirguna brahman: supreme Brahman as Absolute God
padasevana: the act of serving the feet of the God
pancaratra: five nights
paramatma: the ultimate reality of God, divine aspect of human soul
paramaisvara: ultimate God
prasad: a type of spiritual vegetarian light food which is consumed by Hindu devotees after ritual worship
pracharak: propagator
sadhana: meditation
samhati: sect
samskara: Brahminic lifecycle ritual
saguna: with desire
saguna-brahman: immanent form of Brahman, Brahman with qualities of *gunas*
saj-phura: purity-impurity
sattras: a group of neo-Vaishnava Hindu institutions or monasteries
sattradhikar: head of a *sattr*

sarana: initiation
saranagati: initiation
saran: the first initiation in the sattra context
shaiva: related to Lord Shiva
shakta: a devotee of Goddess/shakti or traditions connected to the Goddess/shakti
shakti: power or primordial energy associated with the Goddess
shastra: group of Hindu texts
sisya: disciple of a *guru*
smarana: the act of remembering the holy names of God
sravana: the act of listening to the names of God
suva: deep vows of impurity mostly related to a deceased person, extreme impurity
suvapatani: a designated place outside a house to throw ritually impure food
sakhitya: establishing friendship between the God and devotees
sattriya: related to sattras, a dance form that emerged from the sattras
sanatana-sanskriti: Hindu culture
tantric: an adherent of tantrism
tilaka: religious mark worn on the forehead
udash: celibate/renunciate
vad: ism/doctrine, outlook, worldview
vaishnava: related to Lord Vishnu, a devotee of Vishnu
vandana: philosophical analysis of God's nature
vrata: religious vow
yajna: Vedic sacrifice
yantra: mystical diagram, instrument in meditation

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