

# Faith, Caste Hierarchy and Exclusion in the Vaishnava Sect in Assam

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## **Abstract:**

Caste has historically been the most significant identity marker of Indian society. This paper will investigate the relationship between caste and sect in the Vaishnava sectarian scenario in Assam. The development of the reformist Vaishnava sects in India since fifth century AD has been founded on establishing an egalitarian religious space. However, very often sects while becoming institutions, adhere to caste affiliations. Hence, this paper attempts to delineate the process of co-optation of sect into localised structure of caste system. Using primary data collected from the field, it analyses how do sects lose their radicalness when placed in a particular social context reproducing the already existing contours of social relations. It looks at how authority and hegemony are reproduced and maintained in such institutionalised sects. Further, it'll discuss how the discriminated communities counter the hegemonic structure through indifference and sometimes with something as radical as conversion to another religion.

**Key words:** Sect, Neo-Vaishnavism, Hierarchy, Caste, Untouchability, Assam

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## **I. Introduction**

Religion has historically been a powerful social force. It shapes and moulds social structure and constructs an individual's habitus<sup>1</sup>. Particularly in the context of sectarian religion, because of the way it is constituted and its specificity of beliefs and practices, it is seen to have a deep impression on the lives of the followers. It is to an extent that, at times it becomes difficult to differentiate one's religious life from their social life. Hindu sects are exclusive in nature. Unlike non-sectarian Hinduism where polytheism is the mode of worship, sectarian Hinduism is constituted by the philosophy of monotheism. These sects are usually centred on particular religious leaders or *gurus* who preach a religious and social life specific to themselves which mark their exclusive nature from the people outside of their sectarian boundary. This paper is an exploration of the sectarian landscape of Vaishnavism in Assam. Majority of Hindu population in Assam belong to Vaishnava faith. Presently, there is no recorded census data on the exact proportion of Vaishnava population in Assam. However, According to District Gazetteers of Assam in 1905, 80% of the Hindus in Assam are Vaishnavites (Sarma 1966:190). The reach and influence of this six hundred years old faith which was the product of greater Bhakti movement in India, has flourished over time and has established itself as a conglomeration of very powerful religious institutions all over the state of Assam. However, the central enquiry of this paper is to find out if all the members of a same sect experience religion in a similar manner or if one's social location determines the specificity of their membership to the sect. Here I engage with the interaction of caste and sect as two equally pertinent aspect of a Hindu social order. This leads to the broader question of this paper which intends to problematize how religion in the contemporary time engages with the idea of modernity. That is to say, how modern principles of rationality, democracy, equality and inclusion are negotiated in the practice of religion as a lived reality. In scholarly discourses, bhakti- which is the foundation of Vaishnava sect under study has been considered the modern version of Hinduism advocating egalitarianism and equal social citizenship, contesting all distinctions and hierarchy that exist in a society. Therefore this paper attempts to delineate the extents to which these attributes of modernity get negotiated in the practice of such faith in institutionalised sectarian space.

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<sup>1</sup> Bourdieu refers to Habitus as "a subjective but not individual system of internalised structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class...", "...These "internalised structures" and "schemes of perception" structure the subject's (shared) world-view and their "apperception" of the world in which they suppose they exist (Bourdieu 1977:86)

## II. Methodology

### **Research Setting**

Present research is located in the Majuli Island of Assam. Majuli Island, known as the 'Vaishnava Hub' of Assam is the second largest riverine Island in the world is located in the Brahmaputra River. In 2016, it was declared as a district; prior to which it was a circle that came under Jorhat district of Assam. There are 248 villages and 0 towns in Majuli. According to 2011 census, the total population of Majuli is 167,304 out of which 23,878 (14.27%) belong to the category of Scheduled Caste (SC) and 77,603 (46.38%) belong to Scheduled Tribe (ST). The population distribution according to religion is as follows: Hindus are a total of 165,699 (99.04%), Muslim population is 592 (0.35%), Christians are 255 (0.15%), total is Sikh is 16 (0.01%), Buddhist 4 (0%), Jain 10 (0.01), Other Religion 524 (0.31%) and No Religion Specified 204 (0.12%).<sup>2</sup>

Majuli is one of the busiest tourist spot in the state because of its heritage and culture. The island has more than 31 Vaishnava monasteries called 'Satra' and have become the heritage and cultural hotspot of Assam. The satras belong to all the four sub-sects called *Sanghati* of Assam's Vaishnavism. However, the satras of the Brahminical sub-sect i.e. the *Brahma Sanghati* are comparatively more prominent, affluent as well as popular. The selected field sites for this research are three satras of *Brahma Sanghati* known as the *Raj-Satra* (Royal Satra); which are: Auniati Satra, Dakhinpat Satra and Garamur Satra. Auniati, a monastic satra was established in 1653 by Ahom King Jayadhdaj Singha. Dakhinpat satra is also a monastic satra. It was established in 1654 by the same Ahom king. Garamur satra, established two years after Dakhinpat, in 1656 by King Jayadhdaj Singha also followed a monastic system till the first decade of twentieth century. Pitambardev Goswami, the satradhikar (head of satra) at that period of time changed this system as his religious vision was more society centric and he believed that a man being a social creature shouldn't be robbed off from his natural urge to be a householder. Another central field site of this research is Jengraimukh area of Majuli which is inhabited by the *Mising* and *Deori* tribes of the Island. It is located in the northern part of the district. Located around 30 kms from central Majuli is area does have any satras and has recently been called the epicentre of Christianity in the island.

### **Research Participants and Process of Data Collection**

Present research is a qualitative research where both primary and secondary sources of data are used. For primary data, the field sites were selected through purposive sampling. The respondents were gathered primarily through snowball sampling. In many occasions respondents were selected on a random basis when the settings allowed. This paper does not disclose the names of those respondents who have denied the permission to do so. Keeping their anonymity protected this paper translates their responses to English with quotation in the required contexts. The method of data collection has been unstructured interviews. It included both personal interviews and focus group discussions. Data is also gathered through observation, both participant and non-participant depending on the setting and the nature of its access. The key set of respondents includes holders of both ritual and administrative offices of the satras, the devotees who live monastic lives within the satra premises and the lay devotees, members of the churches, common villagers, notable writers, journalists and educators from the island and men and women of the young generation (age 20-35).

The primary data are collected in two phases. First was a brief pilot study that I conducted in the year of 2017, in the month of November as part of my M.Phil. thesis submitted Centre for the Study of Social Systems, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. The next phase was for a period of four months from August to November in the year of 2021. The research of this paper is pursued as a part of my doctoral research entitled "Religious life, Authority Structures and Social Hierarchies: A Study of Two Neo-vaishnavite Sub-sects of Assam."

This paper also refers to secondary source of data. It includes books, articles and journals concerning the topic at hand, published both in Assamese and in English language. Government data such as the Census of India is also referred to in the study. Additionally, Along with books and articles, souvenirs, journals and magazines published periodically by various official and non-official organizations belonging to the Vaishnava sect and the Churches are used as references in this study.

### **Ethical Considerations**

In the present sociological study, my position as the researcher comes with a nuanced configuration. In the Vaishnavite satras employing an insider-outsider perspective the primary data collection has been conducted. Sharing the same religious, sectarian and linguistic identity qualifies me as an insider; whereas, lacking an active membership, belonging to a different sub-sect and sub-region in Assam, most importantly being a researcher itself bagged me the status of an outsider. The most striking factor that was repeatedly brought up during the course of my research was my position as a 'female' researcher. My access to the field and my process of rapport building was marginally hindered because of my gender. Especially in the Vaishnava

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<sup>2</sup> See, <https://www.censusindia.co.in/subdistrict/majuli-circle-jorhat-assam-2076> accessed on 5th Feb 2022.

monasteries, there were few sites that I failed to get access to because of my gender. Here, it should be reflected that both the concerns of my study, whether Hinduism or Christianity, are male dominant spaces. Participation of the female adherents is not a regular sight. Therefore, entering into a space where the gender I belong to enjoys a second-class citizenship required subtle negotiations with the already existing structures. Balancing this layered identity, the present qualitative enquiry has collected its field data. Religion becomes a sensitive issue to be openly discussed about from a critical lens. Particularly, the field I have engaged with, the religious atmosphere has been facing volatility in the recent times because of the antagonism between the two religious groups. Therefore, protecting the privacy of my respondents by maintaining their anonymity was given the highest priority in this research. It should be pointed out here that the names which are mentioned in the paper were done so after receiving the due permission from the individuals. This paper also declares that prior to the study the respondents were informed about the objectives of the study and were taken full consent from them to use their responses as substantial information later.

### **Bhakti and Its Philosophy of Egalitarianism**

Bhakti has been generally connoted to the form of faith or religiosity which has emerged as loving devotion to a god that transcends the divisions and hierarchies of caste, social class, race and gender. Bhakti is often referred to as a single coherent movement that spread across the Indian sub-continent as a wave of religious reform in Hinduism. Bhakti movement that originated from fifth century AD reached its peak around fifteenth century AD. Historians locate the origin of the movement with the Shaiva Nayanars, a group of sixty three saint-poets of Tamilnadu who devoted themselves to lord Shiva and the Vaishnava Alvars who were devotees of Vishnu between fifth and ninth century AD. It spread all over India even though it started in Tamilnadu of southern India.

It is commonly stated that the initiators of Bhakti were poet-saints where concerns of social reforms, equality of the devotees etc. came along with 'devotion' as the central path to God and salvation in Bhakti religious movements. M.N. Srinivas writes, "While Jainism and Buddhism both started out as protest sects non-theistic in character and rejecting brahminical claims to supremacy, the Bhakti movement grew from within the Hindu fold, and was characterized by a strong anti- hierarchical and anti-ritualistic stand, using local language as against Sanskrit, and was monotheistic in orientation.." (Srinivas 2003: 458). The movement did not only make it possible for men from different castes to talk and lead in religious matters but it also welcomed women to be equal part of the religious public. Venugopal (1990) while talking about reformist sects writes,

"...In the Bhakti sects, membership was not very selective. Discipline was not strictly enforced among the members, and flexibility enabled marginal individuals and groups to enter the sect. In general, the Indian Bhakti sects were populist and provided a forum for the economically and socially disadvantaged. However, populism was not acutely confrontationist. There was a tolerant acceptance of the liminal condition. For many individuals, an emotionally rich Bhakti life was a reward in itself. It meant neither a desire for a better life here and now nor a hope for a remote "after life" bliss. Interestingly, the guru (preceptor) and shishya (disciple) lived in a "dyadic relationship," in the sense that each disciple felt that he was intimately related to the preceptor. Hence, the gurus (living or dead) exemplified personal ties..." (Venugopal 1990: 80-81)

Romila Thapar (1989) in her article *Imagined religious communities* talks about interaction of Bhakti sects with identities like caste. She argues that historically Vedic Brahminism has paved its way to attain supremacy over other religious faith and practices. However, it will be incorrect to say that Vedic Brahminism was devoid of any flexibility. Vedic Brahminism has interacted with dominant local cults and sects and has survived in a refashioned way. However, by the early second millennium A.D. a variety of devotional sects referred to by the generic label of Bhakti had come to form a major new religious expression. They mostly drew on the Puranic tradition of Saivism and Vaisnavism. Thapar (2010) in her another remarkable essay *Syndicated Hinduism* writes,

"The Bhakti sects were up to a point inheritors of the Sramanic tradition in that some were opposed to Brahminism and the Sacrificial ritual, most were in theory open to every caste and all of them were organized in along sectarian lines. They arose at various times over a span of a thousand years in different parts of the sub-continent. They were specific in time, place and teacher and were constricted in cross-regional communication by differences of languages. They did not evolve out of the same original teaching nor did they spread through conversion; they arose as and when historical conditions were conducive to their growth, often intermeshed with the need for particular castes to articulate their aspirations." (Thapar 2010:9)

### **The Socio-religious Landscape of Assam**

The state of Assam, located in the north-eastern part of India is a home of numerous ethnic communities; speaking different languages and dialects, celebrating different indigenous festivals, living in multiple cultural habitus. It is inhabited by a total population of 31,205,576 according to the Census of India, 2011. 61.47% of the total population is Hindus, 34.22% are Muslims, Christian minorities 3.74% are found

among Scheduled Tribe population, Jainism 0.8%, Buddhism 0.18%, Sikhism 0.07% and Animism 0.09% (amongst Khanti, Phake, Aiton etc. communities)<sup>3</sup>. Among the Hindus who occupy the greatest share of Assam's population, a considerable amount belongs to Neo-Vaishnavite sect. According to District Gazetteers of Assam in 1905, 80% of the Hindus in Assam are Vaishnavites (Sarma 1966:190). Lack of census data on sects results in not having an exact percentage of population in contemporary Assam adhering to Vaishnava faith.

According to the Census of India 2011, 6.9% of Assam's population comes under the Scheduled Caste category and 12.4% come under schedule tribe category<sup>4</sup>. The OBC population occupies nearly 65% where 16% come under general category<sup>5</sup>. As the caste enumeration in Indian census is withheld we lack concrete date on number of communities that come under schedule castes. The generic census numbers for OBC and general category of population survey also does not provide the caste composition of Assamese society. Caste in Assam cannot be seen as replicating the northern part of India because of its demographic complexities, since we find an overwhelming existence of Brahmins and Shudras (themselves internally divided into hierarchical sub-groups), but Kshatriya and Vaishyas are comparatively scanty in number<sup>6</sup>. This scenario resemble the southern part of India, as Vincent Smith (1986) argues, how the Hindu theory that mankind is divided into four varnas, or groups of castes—Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaisya and Shudra—was wholly foreign to the southerners as Kshatriyas and Vaisyas do not exist among them<sup>7</sup>. Similarly, Jodhka (2015) while discussing caste and untouchability in Punjab argues that although the principles of hierarchy, purity and pollution are universally recognized as defining features of caste, the dynamics of their existence differs from one region to another.

### **The Democratic Vision of Neo-Vaishnavism: Equality, Inclusion and Notions of a Fair Society**

Neo-Vaishnavism or Eksarana Nam Dharma was propagated in 15th century AD by a saint-poet named Sankardev. He is known with the honorary titles of Mahapurush Sankardev or Srimanta Sankardev. Sankardev was born in 1449 in a *Kayastha*<sup>8</sup> family, to a set of parents who were devotees of Shiva, in *Baro-Bhuyans*<sup>9</sup> family at Bordowa in present-day Nagaon district of Assam. The form of Vaishnavism that Sankardev initiated was part of the larger Bhakti movement that was flourishing in other parts of India. His faith was influenced by Nanak, Kabir, Chaitanya and other Bhakti leaders who sought for a social reform through the path of religion. In medieval Assam, tantric practices in the name of worship were poisoning the religious order. In the name of tantric offerings to Hindu gods, animal as well as human sacrifice was very common. In fact, historians documented that tantric practices also called for sexual exploitation of women, particularly minor girls were raped in the name of devi-puja (worship of the goddess). Shaivism and Shaktism created chaos in the name of beliefs and the supremacy of the Brahmins who performed such rites was established. The locus of Bhakti in Sankardev's thought originated against such exploitative social and religious acts (Neog 1965).

Bora (2015) argues that Sankardev was against Brahminism and not against Brahmins. He paid due respect to the Brahmins with humbleness who held high positions in the then Assamese society but he was against the arrogance Brahminism upheld. Brahminism is a way of life; it's an exercise of power by a section of society through legitimate coercion, considering themselves superior than others socially, morally and ideologically. Sankardev was against hijacking of the religious sphere by one group of people that is the Brahmins and making other groups passive recipient of it. Sankardev's charisma managed to create a successful movement which reached all corners of medieval Assam or Kamrup rajya. His influence was greater in the eastern part of Assam as the Koch dynasty which ruled that part of Kamrup was influenced by Sankardev and

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3 Source: <https://www.census2011.co.in/data/religion/state/18-assam.html> Accessed on 15th Feb 2022

4 Source: [http://censusindia.gov.in/Tables\\_Published/A-Series/A-Series\\_links/t\\_00\\_005.aspx](http://censusindia.gov.in/Tables_Published/A-Series/A-Series_links/t_00_005.aspx) Accessed on 15th Feb 2022

5 Information gathered from the source: <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/quota-assam-obc-association-meets-manmohan/article18463959.ece> Accessed on 7th Feb 2022

6 See the book by Pranav Jyoti Deka 2013, *Caste, Tribes and guilds*.

7 Vincent Smith quoted in Kumar (2016)

8 The social position of Kayastha population has been a matter of debate. In some places in Northern India and Bengal Kayasthas are considered Kshatriya. In Assam the historical location of the Kayasthas creates a dicey understanding as many regard them as sat-sudra or lower castes which lower social status. However, during Koch and Ahom Kingdom as well as British Raj the members of Kayastha caste had been very active in administration who claimed to have been brought by the rulers from Bengal. During pre-colonial Assam, Kayasthas had held positions of chieftains and during British periods they had contributed in the service of census. Cantlie (1984) discusses anecdotes of British census officials about the social conundrum of being a Kayastha in Majuli island of Assam. The families associated with business or clerical occupations claimed to be Kayasthas but groups in the village did not acknowledge their claim. Therefore, the social position as well as the status attached to the Kayastha caste in Assam is debatable. However, historical accounts inform us that during Sankardev's time, being Kayastha was associated with belonging to a caste from lower echelons of the Assamese society. The Brahmins would disregard the Kayasthas as polluted caste holding low rank in the ritual hierarchy.

<sup>9</sup> The Baro-Bhuyans were warrior chiefs and landlords (zamindars) in the region of medieval Assam and Bengal who maintained a loosely independent confederacy. The system of Baro-Bhuyan confederacy was a very important functionary of the erstwhile Kamarupa kingdom that covered all of Assam, North Bengal and large portions of Bangladesh (Baruah 1997).

his charisma. Even though Koch king Naranarayana was not proselytized by Sankardev; the king honored him and offered him a position close to royal headship. Sankardev is said to be a regular attendee of King Naranarayana's court and was not stopped from propagating his teachings at any level. Challenging brahminical Hinduism and introducing an alternative to it was not appreciated by the Brahmin class. The dare to question that social class, who had until now been keepers of faith, created discontent among the Brahmins. Some of them used their confidence and power shared with the kings to persecute Sankardev and his followers. The rulers of Koch dynasty provided Sankardev with safety and security from the persecution of Brahmin-Ahom kings nexus. The relationship between the Brahmin class and the newly proselytized Vaishnava class was in perpetual conflict even when it was only the ideology of Brahminism and not the Brahmins that was attacked from Sankardev's end. This antagonism still persists and in fact has developed deeper ramifications in contemporary Assamese society.

Rejecting Vedic and esoteric rites of worship, Sankardev introduced a form of faith which advocated for simple mode of worship and believe in only one god. His form of faith was pantheistic i.e. believe in omnipresence and omnipotence of a single supreme power of divinity. Neo-Vaishnavism called for believe in Vishnu with his all other avatars as the supreme deity but with no shape and form. This form of monotheism abandoned idol-worship, unlike all other forms of Vaishnavism across the country. The four main pillars of Neo-Vaishnavism were, Guru- reverence towards a Guru, or spiritual preceptor, Deva- worship of a single God; Nam- the chanting and singing the name and the qualities of God and Bhakat- the congregation of devotees. It attempted to replace elaborate rituals in the name of god with a simplistic form- just uttering the name of god that is Nam. Sankardev's strong opposition to Vedic rites was not only to stop animal and human sacrifice, but also to open the platform of worship to common people (Neog 1965). The hitherto existing form of Vedic Hinduism allowed only certain castes and groups to the world of religion. The elaborate rituals not only demanded higher social status but also sufficient wealth to afford the offerings. Such requirements confined the platform of religion to only one section of society depriving the rest. Therefore, Sankardev introduced a religious arena open to all caste, class and gender. He believed that in the eyes of god every believer is equal and hence social distinctions in the name of caste and class are unnecessary. His religion invited all the social groups, specifically the lower castes, women and the tribes who were kept away from the religious order by Brahminical Hinduism. To establish a faith common for all Sankardev democratized the source of religious knowledge. He translated the Sanskrit texts to vernacular language so that the possession of sacred knowledge did not only stay with the Brahmins. Women and lower castes who were not allowed by the Brahmins to have access to sacred texts now could reach them through these vernacular translations (Bora 2014).

Sankardev's religious principles were not strictly disciplinary. It did not demand full regulation of the devotee's life. Unlike many other sects, Neo-Vaishnavism did not focus on celibacy as a path to salvation. The Hindu Varnashrama system was for him unnecessary to attain the blessings of god. The complicated structures of Vedic Hindu system were abandoned and an effortless path was shown. Sankardev himself was a grihasthi that is a householder who married twice (Saikia 2016). Some of his devotees did leave their householder life to join Sankardev in spreading the Vaishnava movement all over Kamrup but it was not an absolute necessity for being a Neo-Vaishnavite. Sankardev did not insist on symbolization of his faith through tilak or any other physical imprints to mark their distinction from the rest. The South Indian Vaishnava devotees are marked by their pattern of vertical tilak on their forehead. Neo-Vaishnavites were not instructed to any such activities to enforce their unique identity. It is said that Sankardev preached his followers under the shade of trees and did not feel the need of luxurious space for preaching. However, he did introduce a new form of sacred space to replace the ritualistic spaces like temple. Such physical structures are known as Namghar which implies prayer (Nam) and house (ghar). Namghar is also known as Kirtanghar which is now a common establishment in every Assamese town and villages. The rationale behind constructing a prayer hall was to create a common space for all the devotees to sing prayers to god in congregation. He established the first Namghar at Bordowa in Nagaon district. There is also a Namghar in Puri of Orissa district, near the Jagannath Temple where Sankardev extended his preaching. The significant feature of the Namghar was it did not have an idol or a picture of the god. Sankardev's Vaishnavism revered Vishnu with no physical form and therefore it marked a stark distinction from the Hindu temples as well as other forms of Vaishnavism in the different parts of the country. The Namghar is a rectangular hall which consists of nave and aisle. The nave is the platform where the disciples sit on the ground. The aisle holds the shrine where the central book of prayers is kept. The shrine is called Guru Asana, meaning seat of the Guru. Namghar was a symbol of egalitarianism. It reflected the kind of social arrangement of uniformity that Sankardev envisaged for the greater Assamese society. It is argued that Sankardev let his Muslim disciple Chandasai to lay foundation of a Namghar in eastern Assam to highlight the all-encompassing nature of his faith. Sankardev's idea of Namghar invited everyone, believers from all castes, tribes and religions to sing in praise of god. In the later years, Namghar also became a space for production and reproduction of educational, political, cultural and developmental debates and discussions.

Thereby, role of Namghar in Assamese social life has been multifaceted since its introduction in the community. Namghar can be considered the first physical expression of Neo-vaishnavite movement which laid the foundation of institutionalization of the Vaishnava faith in Assam being a physical reflection of Vaishnava principles. Towards the end of Sankardev's life, the process of institutionalisation of Vaishnavism began. With celibate devotees living in and around Namghars, the idea of a structured physical space for the preservation of Vaishnava faith and culture came in. A system similar to a monastery developed which came to be known as 'Satra'. The term Satra is derived from the Sanskrit word Sattra mentioned in Bhagvata Purana. In Sanskrit literature the word has been used in two senses, firstly, in the sense of an alms-house and secondly, in the sense of a sacrifice lasting from a few days to a year or more<sup>10</sup>. Satra in the context of Neo-Vaishnavism resembles more with the latter meaning of the term. Satras became not only places for religious practices, but also as an abode for cultivation of art and literature, crafts and paintings, music and dance.

### **Split of the Sect into Four Sub-sects and the Indispensible Role of Caste**

Sankardev lived for one hundred and nineteen years and during his lifetime he established Vaishnavism as an integral part of Assamese society. However, after the demise of the saint, the succession of authority turned out to be a challenging question. The *religious community*<sup>11</sup> that was built experienced a drift in its beliefs as well as its organization. It will be useful to recall Weber (1978), here when he spoke about routinization of charisma. When a charismatic authority passes away the heir of his throne is transposed to someone else where charisma is not the sole determinant of it. There are different factors such as selection, election etc. which come into play. Such ethical conundrum results in feuds over who deserve to take the headship. Before his death, Sankardev chose his beloved disciple Madhavdev over his own son to endow the leadership of the movement. Madhavdev's devotion and commitment to the vision of creating an egalitarian religious and social order was tremendous. Sankardev could identify his effort and felt there is no one better suited to take the responsibility of the project of Sankardev's lifetime. However, selection of Madhavdev as the heir created tension and disappointment among Sankardev's other disciples. It was unacceptable for them to pay their reverence to him as he was their co-disciple with equal status until then. Along with clash of ego, disagreements broke out among his disciples over a number of ideals and principles that Sankardev held as the backbone of the movement. Some of such disagreements are internal differences of faith and practice regarding Vedic rites, idol worship, and spiritual superiority of the Brahmins and so on. Sankardev's few Brahmin disciples refused to accept the lead of Madhavdev who was a non-Brahmin and happened to be the first ones to break away from the movement. Among them, Damodardev along with his comrade Haridev established their own satras in the Majuli district of Assam based on their reworked version of Brahminical Vaishnavism. They brought back idol worship and Vedic rituals into the scene and introduced a form of Vaishnavism distinctly different from the original one. The satras under them acquired the identity of Damodariya satra and Haridevi satra. The former is more far-reaching and deeper in its influence than the latter. Both these streams together later on, came to be known as Brahma Sanghati. Damodardev was aware of the wrath of the Brahmin class who believed in Veda against the brand of religion that Sankardev propagated. Him being a Brahmin all his life before taking shelter at Sankardev's faith did not keep him quite at peace with such antagonism. Madhavdev continued the same Vaishnavite principles that his guru has taught and hence, Damodardev upon incongruity of power and praxis claimed complete independence from Sankardev's Vaishnavism and established a stream of Vaishnavism which did not prohibit nitya (everyday) and naimittika (occasional) duties of Brahmins. This encouraged more and more Brahmins to get initiated into the Vaishnava fold (Sarma 1966). The superiority of Brahmins over all other caste had historically existed and hence, this Vaishnava sub-sect in no time became a powerful form of faith and worship particularly in the eastern Assam. Damodardev contributed hugely to the expansion of satra as an institution. The first properly structural Satra that Damodardev established under the aegis of King Lakshminarayana was in Cooch Behar. It is said the Damodardev was the first one to introduce a system of tax in cash or in kind to be paid to the satra by its disciples for its functioning (Nath 1989). Although Damodardev sent in his disciples all over Kamrup to spread his faith, the hub of Brahma Sanhati is in Majuli district of Assam where the most affluent and proclaimed satras of contemporary Assam is situated. The number of satras under Brahma Sanghati exceeds hundred and the number of devotees is larger than any of the other sub-sects. The immediate reference to Vaishnavism and satra in the popular discourse both national and international goes directly to these powerful satras of Brahminical tradition where no traces of Sankardev's

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<sup>10</sup> P. V. Kane cited in Sarma (1966)

<sup>11</sup> Weber in his book *Sociology of religion* (1964) argued that a reformer along with his disciples and followers in time forms certain kind of social relationship based on social action which ultimately takes the impression of a community. However, not every prophecy succeeds in building a religious community. It is built through routine and continuous teaching of prophet's principles. It is important here to mention that Weber considered the religious reformers of Hinduism are not similar to prophets. Reformers are those who do not bring new doctrinal revelation but preaches parts of the original doctrine that suit their religious contention. Prophets on the other hand bring new revelation.

original tenets are found. Some scholars claim that this sub-sect of Neo-Vaishnavism is also influenced by Bengal Vaishnavism as earlier Damodardev is said to be a devotee of Chaitanya.

Sankardev's decision of choosing Madhavdev, instead of his own son Ramananda created dissatisfaction within his own family. Hence, his grandson Purushottam Thakur, established a different order splitting away from Madhavdev which came to be known as Purush Sanghati. Purushottam Thakur wanted to make Neo-Vaishnavism as legacy of his lineage (Saikia 2016). The succession of the power was expected to be hereditary. However, Purushottam thakur was only six or seven years old when Sankardev passed away and his father Ramananda died after a year or two following Sankardev's death. Madhavdev had been working with Sankardev as his right hand for years and hence he succeeded Sankardev to carry on the movement. Early biographers also mention that Madhavdev acknowledged Purushottam as the real heir and was just acting as a representative in the interim period till he reaches the age of religious maturity. In fact, Purushottam Thakur received his early education under Madhavdev. Madhavdev was a charismatic saint, poet and a guru, very well versed in religious texts. His influence became deeper after he took the lead. He produced his own literatures out of which the book of prayers named Nam-ghosha became a sacred book just next to Sankardev's Kirtan-gosha. The glory of Madhavdev was celebrated by his disciples so much so that for some time Sankardev's importance started fading. This was one of the reasons that pushed Purushottam to break away and form a new sub-sect which would consider Sankardev as the only guru of Vaishnavism in Assam. All other disciples of him no matter how impactful were to be considered mere representatives or proselytizing agents of Sankardev. The family-pride and the feeling of superiority that sprung from it led to discontent between Purushottam and Madhavdev. Purushottam Thakur wrote a new book of prayers named No'-Gosha to replace Madhavdev's Nam-ghosha. Therefore, Purush sanghati demanded undivided attention to Sankardev as the only guru with no one else as an alternative to him. One of Sankardev's main principles i.e. Nam (chanting the name of god through prayers) was adopted with absolute sincerity by this sub-sect and consequently has produced two significant forms of Nam which are part and parcel of Vaishnava occasions in contemporary Western Assam. The two forms are- Paal Nam (chanting prayers throughout the night) and Thia Nam or Uth Nam (chanting prayers in rhythmic movements of legs and hands). However, this sub-sect did not deny image worship and Vedic rituals and hence it is called a hybrid version of Sankardev as well as Damodardev's principles. Therefore, the differences of Purush sanghati with Brahma sanghati is very narrow (Sarma 1966).

One of the twelve apostles of Madhavdev named Gopal Ata formed a sub-sect specialized for proselytizing lower castes and tribes. Gopal Ata's ancestors lived around an area inhabited by tribes with their close-proximity to nature. These were the tribes characterized by animism, hunting and alcoholism. Gopal Ata realized that to bring these people into the Vaishnava fold one needs to rework on certain teaching of the sect as they would not comprehend the nuances of it. He simplified the version of Vaishnavism for them and sent his disciples all over the state to proselytize lower castes and tribes in large numbers. His disciples established many satras across Assam. In eastern Assam, the Brahmin gurus of Brahma sanghati were not ready to initiate the so-called savage communities to their fold and therefore, Gopal Ata's new sub-sect named as Kala Sanghati became very popular among the people belonging to lower ranks in Assamese society. He established a permanent satra in Kaljhar. The notable branches of Kala Sanghati which contributed to the development of this sub-sect are Dihing, Mayamara, Gajala and Ahataguri. The former two are remarkable branches in the history of Assam as they actively participated in the political front during Ahom rule. It is said that Kala sanghati, among all the sanghaties of Neo-Vaishnavism, has been the most radical with respect to the original teachings of Sankardev. It upheld Shudra- Vaishnavism which differed in terms of their procedures of initiation, the relationship between co-disciples etc. (Basu 1970: 242).

The indispensable principle of this sub-sect is guru-bhakti. Devotion to guru is considered the ultimate act of a devotee and guru is given equal platform to that of god. This sect demolished Brahminical supremacy in the matter of religion and rejected higher status of Brahmins in the societal sphere. Historically, it has accommodated diverse social groups and tribes such as Morans, Kacharis, Chutiyas etc. However, they do not provide initiation to women as women are expected to be devoted to their husbands and hence double allegiance to Guru and the husbands at the same time can't lead to Bhakti; as argued by the satradhikar of Telpani satra (Sarma 1966). Image worship is strictly prohibited in this sub-sect as the guru is considered the image of god. They do not carry out any of the performative arts of Neo-Vaishnavism and construct their Namghar north-south wise<sup>12</sup> without a manikut. This fold of Neo-Vaishnavism has been credited for contributing to the process of 'Hinduisation' of various tribes which hitherto practiced animism (Saikia 2013). Cantlie (1984) in her work on Assamese religion and caste, invoked British census reports on Assam and gave accounts of initiation by a vaishnava guru called 'Gosain' was the first step in the gradual transformation of a tribe into a caste. The Gosains played the role of Vaishnava missionary in the Brahmaputra valley.

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<sup>12</sup> Namghar of all other sub-sects are directed towards East.

The last order that took shape after the split of all previous three is known as Nika Sanghati. The word Nika means clean or pure. The three sub-sects that had been formed adopted hybrid versions of Neo-Vaishnavism. This sect is also known as Mahapurushiya sect. They mixed conventions of their founders gurus with that of Sankardev's albeit in varying degree which indicated 'pollution' of the original movement. Therefore, Madhavdev's disciples particularly Padma Ata and Kesav Ata of eastern Assam and Mathuradas Ata of western Assam together contributed to forming a sub-sect which would have no elements outside of Sankardev and Madhavdev's ideals. However, it should be noted that Nika sanghati considers Madhavdev as their immediate guru and Sankardev as the guru of the guru. Thereby, the relationship of the disciples with Sankardev is indirect. To maintain the purity of the sect these religious leaders introduced strict rules and regulations for the followers. Eventually, this sub-sect came to be known for its exclusive attention to cleanliness of body and mind and its stringent rules and code of conduct to reach that purity. Such orientation had also laid principles of cleanliness in everyday life such as not to be eaten food prepared by others, taking bath before eating anything, washing the pieces of cloth every time before wearing etc. Worship of images and idols of the deity is strictly prohibited in this sub-sect. The central object of worship in this sub-sect is the sacred scriptures- Kirtan-ghosha and Nam-ghosha. Nika sanghati became the most popular Vaishnava sub-sect in western Assam proselytizing more than half of the population to the Vaishnava fold. One of the notable satras of Nika sanghati in eastern Assam is Kamalabari satra established by Badala Ata and in western Assam is BARPETA satra established by Madhavdev himself. Because of its insistence for strict compliance to codes of conduct rules of commensality and endogamy is visibly laid and expected to be observed by the followers of the sub-sect. This implies marrying within the sub-sect and not accepting cooked food from anyone who does not belong to the same order. It will not be untrue to state that such form rules regarding dining and marriage are also expected from the members of other sub-sects. However, this strict boundary maintaining practice of Nika sub-sect with far lesser flexibility than the other sub-sects makes it a closed caste like social formation (Sarma 1966).

Therefore, we see that Vaishnavism in Assam is not a monolithic form of faith. Although their central doctrine of believing in one god that is Vishnu is commonly shared, their detailed principles, ways of worshiping, social conventions and their manifestations differ. The questions of caste and class, the importance of social positions play such an indispensable role that the novelty of the saint Sankardev's preaching didn't remain intact and after his demise it immediately split and evolved as a composition of four sanghatas: Brahma Sanghati, Purush Sanghati, Kala Sanghati and Nika Sanghati. The relationship between the four sub-sects is not overly violent. However, their differences in beliefs and practices especially their devotion compliance to different gurus always maintain an air of tension between them. It can be seen that in public events where religious heads of satras belonging to different sub-sects are invited, the invitations are usually rejected. In fact, even when they arrive at the public space shared by other heads there usually arises conflict over who sits where, who precedes whom (Saikia 2016).

### **The Brahminical Sub-sect of Neo-Vaishnavism: The Satras and their Way of Life**

The Brahminical sub-sect or the Brahma Sanghati of Vaishnavism in Assam has the highest number of Satras and the largest proportion of disciples. Among them, there are four Satras which have been the most influential religious institutions throughout history; where are: Auniati, Garhmur, Dakshinpat and Kuruwabahi out of which the first three are situated in the Majuli Island and Kuruwabahi is in Golaghat district of upper Brahmaputra valley. These satras are called Raj-satras or the royal satras as they were established by Ahom Kings. My field work covered the three Satras located in the Majuli Island. It is noteworthy that Majuli Island is called the Satra-Nagari (City of Satra) of Assam or the hub of Vaishnava culture as it has numerous satras belonging to all four sub-sects. The Vaishnava crafts and culture preserved in the island makes it an international tourist destination. Satras of Brahma Sanghati in Majuli are the most powerful and affluent satras. They all recognize themselves as Damodariya Satra and consider Damodardev as their main Guru. These satras are an amalgamation of Vedic rituals and Vaishnava tradition.

Auniati Satra was established in 1653 by Ahom King Jayadhar Singha. This is a monastic satra where the head is appointed through consensual selection and disciples are sorted into two kinds: "Bhakat" i.e. the male disciples who live inside the satra premises embracing a monastic life and the "Sisya" who live outside the satra premises. These are the followers scattered all over the state. Bhakats are the disciples who are admitted to the satra in their early age, mostly when they are at the age from four to nine. The often used term for this is 'daan' i.e. donation. Young male children are donated to the satra by their family for spiritual development. It is also believed that donating a son to the satra brings blessings to the family. These children then are taught to live a Vaishnava way of life and given lessons not only on religious scriptures but also are nurtured through Vaishnava cultural expressions such as music, dance, theatre, art and the like. Similarly, another royal satra Dakshinpat satra is a monastic satra where we find two kinds of disciple. Established in 1654 by the same Ahom king, Dakshinpat Satra follows succession of religious heads through descent. However, the head, who is called the Satradhikar, can't be a householder. Therefore, his brother marries and his eldest son becomes the heir when



the time of succession arrives. Garamur satra, established two years after dakhinpat, in 1656 by King Jayaddhaj Singha also followed a monastic system till the first decade of twentieth century. Pitambardev Goswami, the satradhikar at that period of time changed this system as his religious vision was more society centric and he believed that a man being a social creature shouldn't be robbed off from his natural urge to be a householder.

The satras function in a very systematic way in every aspect; from day to day rituals to ceremonial events, from administrative to its economic structure and from spiritual to its social expressions. Satras claim that they have been following the rules and customs that were instructed to them by the royals at the time of their establishment. And hence, we see that these satras still follow a system of collecting tax from their disciples for sustenance. The system of collecting tax from the members in the form of money, grains, clothes and other essentials is an organised affair. The authority structure of the satra has a fixed hierarchy of positions which will be discussed at length in the next section. Among those positions there is a position called raj-medhi to which number of bhakats are appointed based on the size of disciples' population. These raj-medhis are allotted cluster of villages and where they go and stay for ideally two-three months. This collection occurs annually and sometimes once in two years depending on Satra's convenience. Few assistants accompany them in their visit who then go and inform the village heads about raj-medhis' arrival and stay. Villagers then go and pay their dues to the raj-medhis as a sacred tax believing that this would bring well-being to their families. It should be mentioned here that there is no fixed tax that is demanded from the disciples. The disciples pay their sacred tax based on their capacities. According to the satra inmates, rendering physical labour to the maintenance and functioning of the satras by their disciples who are given satra land to live and form villages, is also a prominent feature of this institution. This system has been a continuation of Ahom kingdom's 'Paik' system where adult and able males, called Paik were obligated to provide service to the state and form its militia in return for a piece of land for cultivation owned by the kingdom. Apart from the goods and services collected from the disciples, Satras also survive on the revenue they receive from their massive land holdings. Satras were gifted thousands of acres of land by the Ahom kings, part of which was acquired by the government of independent India through Land Ceiling act 1976. Satras receive a compensation amount annually from the government based on the amount of land that they had to hand over. Apart from these permanent modes of income, satras also receive occasional donations from the government as well as political leaders and others during their important religious ceremonies. It is to be noted that Garamur Satra discontinued this system of tax collection under the aegis of satradhikar Pitambardev Goswami as he believed that it imposed a heavy burden on disciples, particularly the poor and the downtrodden. Therefore, we can see that satras depend greatly on its disciples for its survival.

Hence, it can be inferred that the affluence of these institutions depends on the number of disciples they contain and hence the process of proselytization is very rampant in them. Some argue that some satras, in the contemporary time, focus on increasing the number of disciples to expand their might rather than stressing on disseminating religious knowledge to the followers. Similarly, for many disciples to acquire the status of a disciple of an affluent satra becomes more important for marking their position in the society rather than actually learn the religious doctrine. This is a debate that can be taken out perhaps elsewhere. This paper attempts to delineate the convolutions of being a Vaishnava devotee in Assam vis-à-vis one's caste location, taken up in the following section.

### **Casting Caste in the Sectarian Landscape: Faith, Identity and the 'Other'**

A pertinent feature that I as a researcher discovered in the field is that among the Vaishnavas of Assam the question of caste is perceived in two structural schemes. The overarching mode of caste differentiation is based on a dualistic system of caste, composed of Brahmins and the non-Brahmins. All the non-Brahmin communities are colloquially categorised as Shudra. This category of Shudra includes all the castes (Jati) and the tribes (Jan-jati) who are not Brahmins. This opposing category is often referred to while talking about ritual hierarchy and the superior position held by the Brahmins. The second mode of acknowledging caste is boundaries drawn between the particular jatis they belong to. The numerous jatis that the category Shudra is comprised of have their own schema of hierarchy and difference. The dynamics of maintaining and violating these boundaries among these jatis is contextual and many a times fluid in nature. Devotees argue that with the changing time, many people from these communities let go of one or two small traditional customs if it doesn't challenge the greater social order. The colonial census on the caste and tribes of Assam shows most of the castes in Assam was modelled through Hinduization of tribes. Tribes such as Ahom, Koch, Chutiya etc. were converted to castes but they were clubbed in the lower ranks on the caste hierarchy that is with the Shudra caste and sub-castes. They, however, were little elevated from the position given to the untouchables by the Brahmins. It should be noted that mostly, the position of a caste was determined through its distance from the Brahmin or the twice born castes. The Shudra castes from whom Brahmins used to accept water such as Kalitas occupied higher position in the hierarchy than the ones from whom Brahmins refused water (Cantlie 1984). The character of caste, therefore, is dualistic in the scenario of Assam which is also reflected in the Vaishnava

religious order. Instead of a four ladder Varna model, what we find is a central dichotomy in Assam that is between Brahmins and Non-Brahmins. This prominent existence of caste boundaries in the social order outlines the structure and processes of the Vaishnava sect in Assam. Although ideally sectarian religion claims all of a devotee's identity, replacing his previous identities with a new one which is defined by his reverence to a single god and a guru as the medium; in Indian social parlance manifestation of a sectarian identity get intermingled with one's caste identity and form a complex web of social relations. Vaishnavism in Assam which began with a mission to create a democratic platform for the believers eradicating caste and other social distinctions failed to reach its founding goal.

However, surrendering in front of caste structure and forming a hybrid sectarian landscape is not only specific to Vaishnavism in Assam. M.N. Srinivas (2003) argued that Bhakti movement was no doubt a powerful social force and has brought in new turns in the religious sphere in Hindu society. However their attack on caste had always remained an ideological one. Caste in the form of occupational jatis was a very intricate phenomenon of village India. Mere ideological contestation could not possibly eradicate the caste distinctions and social production of labor. If anything could bring any change, however little that might be, was an alternative mode of production that would not depend on caste.

It should be noted that Brahmins were not the original inhabitants of Assam. They initially migrated to the North-Eastern regions from other parts of the country because of the agricultural advancement of that region. Not only Brahmins but few other caste Hindus too entered the region for agriculture. Some scholars argue that Brahmins did not engage in agriculture at all. Brahmins associated agriculture as a lowly and polluted occupation. Therefore, Brahmins migrated for spreading their beliefs and practices; to replace animistic practices of tribal population with Vedic Hinduism. It was other non-Brahmin groups who migrated along with Brahmins engaged in agriculture and settled in (Gait 1906). In the later phases, Brahmins were also brought by the kings of Koch kingdom and Ahom kingdom to 'civilize' their animist population and teach them the 'progressive' way of worship. The kings relied on the Brahmins for spiritual as well as astrological guidance. Brahmins mastery over seeing the unseen and having an upper hand in connecting with the gods quickly made them significant as well as powerful part of the kingdoms. The kings gifted the Brahmins with acres of land to settle in and advise the dynasty with their spiritual knowledge (Nath 1989). That is how the sacred and the secular came together to form a society which was absent before the influx of the outsider. Much like how Meitei society in Manipur gained caste-like character after the interference of Brahmins in the social and the political order, Assam too experienced growing social divisions and hierarchy with distinctions among social groups. The Brahmins always occupied the superior position as they were considered the groups who possessed progressive way of life in comparison to the tribes who were the original inhabitants of the land.

### **Understanding Distance, Interaction and Hierarchy in the Brahma Sanghati**

Brahma Sanghati in Assam's Neo-Vaishnavism is founded on Brahminical principles and stands quite different from the actual teaching of Neo-Vaishnavism. However, in the contemporary time religious life and cultural contributions of this sub-sect is held as the face of Assam's Vaishnavism, albeit somewhat misleadingly. Although the cultural heritage of these satras in terms of Satriya dance, music, Bhaona (a form of drama introduced by Sankardev) etc. are meticulously preserved and incessantly taught, learnt and performed by the bhakats, their socio-religious countenance raises few pertinent questions. Therefore, it becomes important for a researcher to dive deeper and highlight the complexities that exist in the religious order. The central feature of Sankardev's Vaishnavism was to reject idol worship and pray to a formless god. However, in the satras of Brahma Sanghati idols of different male gods are placed in the sanctum sanctorum. The daily ritual performed in the satras of this sub-sect is a combination of Brahminical and Vaishnava rites. The elaborate Vedic rites of worship begin at dawn where the idols are bathed, worshiped and offered 'bhog' (devotional offering of food). This ritual is performed by a head priest who is given the title of 'Bor-Pujari' assisted by one or two sub-priests who are called 'pujari. These positions are conferred essentially to Brahmin bhakats.

After this Brahminical ritual the central door of satras' sanctum sanctorum is closed and Vaishnava form of prayer i.e. Nam-Kirtan is performed. It should be noted that some satras of this sub-sect do not use the books of prayers written by Sankardev and his disciple cum heir Madhavdev. Dismissing religious significance of the founder himself in these satras is argued to be a product of rigid Brahminical superiority that they maintain. Their subtle and many a times outright rejection of Sankardev and Madhavdev as their gurus is a reflection of their caste position i.e. Kayastha. The satras of Brahma Sanghati accept leadership of Brahmin pontiff alone. This hierarchy is maintained in the arrangement of the entire authority structure in the Satras. The Satradhikar who occupies the top of hierarchy always belongs to the caste of Brahmins. Usually all the positions pertaining to rites and rituals are given to Brahmin bhakats. In Auniati Satra, the helpers of Satradhikar who help him in preparing his food and cutting betel nut are also Brahmin bhakats as the Satradhikars do not accept anything edible from the hands of non-Brahmin people. This play of ritual hierarchy and question of protecting the purity of a Brahmin also is reflected on the physical distance the satradhikars maintain from their disciples.

The satradhikar appears before the disciples during particular hours of the day and at a particular place which is constructed for them make appearances before the devotees. The seats in that set-up is carefully placed which keep a considerable distance between the guru and the disciples. The disciples bow down in front of the guru and the guru throws flower petals as sacred offering of god to the devotees to avoid any physical contact with the recipients. In the administrative positions we find few non-Brahmin bhakats, however, they are never from the lowest ranks of the hierarchy. These are usually the ones whose castes occupy the highest positions in the non-Brahmin category.

In the monastic satras, I found that admission of bhakats also displays the question of caste and untouchability in the Vaishnava order. Aunitiati Satra has around three hundred bhakat inmates and Dakhinpat satra has around one hundred fifty inmates. However, not a single bhakat belongs to the castes at the lowest end of the hierarchy such as Kaibarta, Dom or out-castes or tribes such as Mising, Bodo etc. When enquired about their exclusion from the religious field of the satras, the inmates responded with a justification of maintenance of purity through food habits. The elderly bhakats who have lived in the satra premises for more than three or four decades said that apart from living a satriya (belonging to satra) way of life learning and performing religious teachings on a daily basis, what one consumes in the form of food is also equally important to maintain the purity of one's identity as a Bhakat and to keep the sanctity of the satra as a sacred space. It will be necessary to elaborate here about how food is cited as the most crucial factor to justify caste distinctions. Although vegetarianism is not imposed on all the Vaishnavites, the choice of vegetarianism is given a higher moral platform in the satras. For ecological reasons, people of Assam have historically had fish as one of the primary foods. Therefore, consumption of fish is a non-controversial aspect for the disciples, even within the premises of the satras of Brahma Sanghati. However, poultry such as chicken and animal meats such as pork and mutton are considered polluting food and hence restricted to be consumed by the Bhakats who live inside the satras and sishyas who live outside these monasteries. The general assumption is that a person after becoming a Vaishnava through the ritual of 'Xoron' should live a certain form of life maintaining the purity of mind and the body. However, the satra cannot watch on a day to day basis if the followers are following the instructions given to them at the time of formal proselytization ceremony. But, lives of the Bhakats bounded inside the satra premises can be maintained as the tenets of their faith expect them to. Satras are suspicious about the castes and tribes who eat prohibited food such as chicken, pork etc. at their homes as part of their cultural order in the sense that if their children are admitted to the satras as Bhakats there is a possibility that even though they would have to give up polluting food inside the satra, when occasionally they go to their own homes and visit their family they would consume those food as part of their local custom. This act of them would pollute the atmosphere of the satra and their bhakat-hood would lose its authenticity. Therefore, rules of commensality are strictly maintained in the satras. Outside the satra space, among the devotees in Majuli similar caste distinctions are observed in terms of inter-dining. Not only Brahmins do not accept food from those who fall outside their caste, all the non-Brahmin jatis too don't share food at least socially. This doesn't always indicate a hostile or an antagonistic relationship between them. These norms are accepted as the founding principles of the society as a whole. However, in many instances, respondents from the lower castes and tribes have expressed their experience of humiliation because of their exclusion from the sacred affairs of the satras, whether total or partial. In the following section I will discuss the ramifications of discriminatory practices that are practiced in and through the satras with anecdotal pieces from the field.

### **Construction of the 'Other': Humiliation, Boycott and Conversion in the Majuli Island**

S.N. Das, a man in his late 70s lives in a remote Kaibarta village in Majuli. The man is known in Majuli for being an extraordinary educator and his other contributions to the society, especially his community. He has received many awards as an excellent Mridanga<sup>13</sup> player. Retired as the principle of a higher secondary school, he spends his time writing down his theoretical knowledge of Mridanga as he is apprehensive that his expertise is going to die with him. He belongs to the Mayamora fold of Vaishnavism as his caste identity suggests. All the villagers of the adjoining Kaibarta villages in that area are disciples of Mayamora satras. Brahma Sanghati doesn't proselytize people from their caste and they have historically been treated as untouchables. The geographical distribution of caste-based villages gives testimony to the strong physical segregation of different castes. My evocation of the topic of caste left that old man delighted yet sad. He said he was glad that someone finally asked him how does it feel to be a Kaibarta in an island where Brahminical Vaishnavism dominates. Das responded "bohut opomanito holu, ore jibon" (Felt so humiliated, all my life). With multiple sighs and pauses he narrated his ordeals with the satras of Brahma Sanghati and how one gets reminded of his social position every time he is in a public setting in the Majuli island. He mentioned getting invited to certain meetings and gatherings held in the satras where he received invitations as one of the notable persona in the society. He added that he had to be quality-educator, a social worker and an artist to be invited to

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<sup>13</sup> The Mridanga is an Indian percussion instrument. This instrument is an indispensable part of Mayamora sub-sect of Assam's Vaishnavism.

those meetings, whereas some people just had to be Brahmins to be an invitee. I was informed by few public figures of Majuli including this old man flashing out glimpses of this life to me that these gatherings in the satras have a specific sitting arrangement. The front seats are given to Brahmin disciples irrespective of one's age, whereas the people from the lower castes are asked to occupy the seats towards the back. When prasada is distributed, Brahmins are offered prasada on brass or copper plates whereas lower castes receive prasada in disposable plates made of banana leaves or paper. Such visible discriminations leave the ones belonging to the lower castes humiliated in many occasions.

A man in his early 40s came and sat on the veranda where I was conversing with S.N. Das, and sat down not interrupting our chat. In one of Das's long pauses, the man began talking, "Baideu beya napobo moi majote xumale. Osorote xunilu apuni satrar onyayr kotha janibo bisari amar gaoloi ahise, xeibabe moi aahilu mur obhigyota jonau buli" (Ma'am please don't mind I entered into your conversation abruptly. I heard you have come to our village to know about how the satras discriminate us, I want to add my experience here.) He adds that he works as a contractual labour and he was selected as one of the workers for setting up water supply in the Dakhinpat satra. As every affair happening inside the satra needs the approval of the satradhikar, the list of contractual worker reached the satradhikar for final signature. Upon knowing that there is a worker belonging to Kaibarta community in the list, his name was cut off. The narrator lost a source of his livelihood because of his caste identity. There was another instance when a candidate who had applied for a post of Sanskrit teacher in the tol (Traditional form of school) inside Dhakhinpat satra was rejected on caste grounds despite qualifying all the criteria mentioned in the application. The word of the mouth was that Brahmins Bhakats refuse to learn a sacred language such as Sanskrit or intake any form of knowledge from a lower caste person.

While older generations have lived with such exclusionary practices without protesting, the younger generation exhibit distaste for the satras as institutions and often speak up against the historical discrimination. Their way of not accepting the hegemony of the satras is seen in their non-participation in any public events held by the satras, not taking the formal initiation to the fold, showing indifference to the robust influence of satras over society and out rightly challenging the problematic practices. A general response that I gathered from the young respondents from the lower castes and tribes who are in the age group of 20-35 is that they don't bother about the legitimacy of the satras and the leadership of the gurus.

The most striking counter attack that the tribal population in Majuli has offered to the satras is conversion to Christianity. Although the population of converted Christians is small, the issue of conversion has become the biggest issue of the island. This process has occurred in the north-eastern part of Majuli named Jengerai and its surrounding villages sharing its border with Lakhimpur district. This area is entirely inhabited by Mising community and has suffered from neglect of the mainland state and the rest of the island in terms of developmental projects till date. As Majuli has always been referred to as the hub of Vaishnavism, entrance of a foreign religion has been considered as a challenge to Majuli's heritage and culture. However, the population of Mising community who has converted to Christianity has never been members of Vaishnava community. They have been practising animistic faith ever since. They were never proselytised by the Satras because of their social location. My respondents informed me that no bhakat or satradhikar ever set foot in this area because it is believed that coming in contact with even the shadows of these tribal people would contaminate a Vaishnava's being. Although, because of the fear and antagonism against the proliferation of churches, in the recent times, one or two satras have constructed handful of namghar in this part of the island, however, they are hardly seen being functional like typical namghars do. Few bhakats and satradhikar visit those namghars once in a while, hold meetings with only select few, and arrange Nam-kirtan and leave. There are other Hindu cults and organisations like Sankar sangha, Krishnaguru etc. have also entered this region to convince people to enter the Hindu fold. However, Mising population both converted and non-converted have an affinity to Christianity because of their philanthropic contribution to the community. This region is the most effected region during flood; people lose their shelter, livestock and livelihood every year because of the wrath of Brahmaputra river in the rainy season. Christian missionaries entered Jengerai in the early 1980s with NGOs that helped people to relocate, provided food and shelter. Then in 1985 they established St. Paul's School to provide education to his poor and the downtrodden. A community that has never seen the light of proper education was given rebirth by establishing a dedicated school for them, one of my respondents recalled. He was also one of the first to convert to Christianity in the mid-80s. He also stressed that the missionaries didn't force anyone to convert to receive the benefits of education, health, flood-relief and the like. If conversion, as claimed by the satras, had been a result of bribes from the missionaries and greed of the community, Christian population would have been very high. Presently the percentage is not even 2% of the entire missing population in Majuli. The official data of St. Paul's school in October 2021 shows that there are around fifteen hundred students; however, only about 300 of them are Christians. Narratives gathered from the respondents also suggest that it is not only because of the developmental initiatives of the Christian missionaries that make Christianity appealing for the community; it is also the attitude of them towards the community that seems inviting. The burden of untouchability that this community has been bearing for centuries is lifted by the missionaries when they are not treated with any

discrimination pertaining to the idea of purity and pollution. A respondent stressed on the point that the fathers of the churches don't ask the missing people to give up their traditional attire and food habits to enter the church. On the other hand, Vaishnavism demands a certain form of lifestyle that would mean giving up traditional customs and adopting a different form of lifestyle. The people belonging to the Mising tribe do not wish to lose their indigenous way of life for a religious status. Therefore, we can find multiple manifestations as response to the hegemony of the satras and the practice of caste and untouchability in the Majuli Island.

### III. Conclusion

Caste as an enumerable category might be a colonial construction, but caste as a phenomenon and as a practice has existed in the Indian sub-continent since time immemorial. It has taken different shapes with new social formation across societies and reincarnated itself in various avatars; but caste is something that one has failed to do away with. M.N. Srinivas, in the context of Bhakti Movement argued that it failed to make a dent in the caste hierarchy because, an ideological attack on caste which is not backed by a mode of social production and which ignores or violates caste-based division of labor, is completely inadequate (Sharma 2014). The fate of Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam, perhaps also encountered the same. The foundation of the movement –equality, brotherhood and social as well as ideological emancipation of the lower castes remained an unfinished project. Caste ideals of endogamy, commensality, ritual purity and pollution and hierarchy found new tunnels to creep up which then rooted themselves deeply in the structural as well as everyday plane of satra life. Caste has always been a living reality in Indian social life. It expresses itself in numerous ways. It's a powerful social force so much so that movements like Bhakti, which succeeded to mobilize huge number of devotees to their fold, could not sweep away caste as they primarily envisaged for. An academic engagement of serious kind is hence in need of the hour to assess the dynamics of faith, sect, caste and social change and conflict in contemporary Assamese society in particular and the larger Indian society in general.

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