

## Art and Culture of Majuli: History and Growth

---

### 2.1 Introduction

Majuli a pilgrimage island of Assam is distinguished for its geography, culture and primarily a place where *Vaisnavism* has prospered since fifteenth century (plate-2.1). The island is a paradise of biodiversity of flora and fauna, which is nurtured by vast Brahmaputra River. Majuli is celebrated as the world's biggest river island nestles in the lap of the mighty Brahmaputra (plate-2.2) and also the place of numerous *Satra* Institutions (Vaisnavite monasteries), in which some of the *Satra* celebrated as the most legendary *Satras* of the Assam, caring the heritage of socio-religious culture, and rich traditions of various art and literature, signifies it from the other places of Assam (plate-2.3, 2.4). Majuli has its own inherent features, due to its topographical conditions the island has not been much coupled with the mainland and creates isolated water bounded populated zone. The inhabitants of the island had no often interaction with the main stream society during the Middle Ages. Presently Majuli is a subdivision of the Jorhat District of Assam, (plate- 2.5, 2.6) the old stream of Brahmaputra namely the *Luit* or *Luhit Suti* with a thin stream of water flows north of the island, its eastern stream is called *Kherkatiya Suti* and the western stream is known as *Suvansiri (Subansiri)*, and in the south of the island main Brahmaputra flows which was earlier the course of the *Dihing* and *Dikhow* combined.(Nath: 2009) Therefore the east and the west ends of the island are pointed as the junction and amalgamation respectively of the two channels of the same great river.

The Island has been formed with change of course of the river Brahmaputra as well as its tributaries by time to time. Some more references on the Majuli Island are found in the text of the "Third Division of Assam, Majuli or the Great Island" and in the book "An account of Assam" by Dr. John Peter Wade (1972-93). Majuli then was constituted with thirteen *Chaporis* (tributaries) or small islands were interconnected by channels of communication by boat between the

*Dihing* and *Lohit*, which in reality shaped it into a cluster of islands and in addition to these, numerous smaller island ranged the whole length (plate-2.7,2.8), formed by various branches of the principal streams. Some of these were always overflowed in the season of flood, others occasionally and all possess a section of rich soil above a deeper layer of sand or soft clay As per the Dr. J.P Wade, who was an military surgeon and came along with Captain Welsh, the island was around 160 miles in length and 60 miles in breadth (plate-2.9), but as per the Assam governments revenue records the area was around 1246 square kilometres in 1950, was reduced to 924 square kilometres in 1971 and according to the records of the 2001, unfortunately due to continuous soil erosion it has been reduced to 480 square kilometres. (Wade: 1927)

Majuli got its name in 16<sup>th</sup> century A.D as mentioned in the (*Buranji*) chronicles of Assam, for an instance one of the oldest chronicle '*Assam Buranji*' collected from Sukumar Mahanta stated that the *Moghal* forces battled with the Ahoms in the year of 1634 at the *Majulir Bali* (sand shores of the island), according to *Satsari Asam Buranji* and the *Deodhai Asam Buranji* the term Majuli and *Majali* or *Mojali* casually used to mean the island. Thus *Majali*, *Mojali*, or *Majoli* were the corrupt forms of the Majuli. Subsequent to the census report of 2001 the population of Majuli was 1, 53,400 including schedule castes and schedule tribes and the society consists the castes are *Brahmin*, *Kayastha*, *Kalita*, *Keot*, *Koch*, *Nath-yogi* or *Katani*, *Hadi* and *Sut* and the tribes are the *Mising*, *Deori*, and the *Kacharis* including the non native communities like *Bengali*, *Bihari*, *Marwari*, *Nepali* with some of the Muslim families. (Nath: 2009)

Socially Brahmins occupied the highest social and economic status, only they can become the *Satradhikar* (Head of *Satra*) in royal *Satras*, and the *Bhagwati* or reader of the *Bhagwata*, Moreover the migrated Brahmins from different places are the earliest settlers of the island, it is obscure in the history when the Brahmins first settled here, but it is considerably possible, that these were the first initiators of the Brahmanism in the island. Noticeably according to a story narrated in the Assamese chronicles, an absconded queen of the king *Tyaokhamthi* was given shelter by a local Brahmin when she was set drifting on a

boat on Brahmaputra, however she gave a birth to a son who became later the king, and popularly known as '*Bamuni Konwar*' (Brahmin prince) thus Brahmins made their strong hold in the Ahom court.

Majuli came into the prominence after the fifteenth century due to the Vaisnavite preachers and practitioners who stayed and established *Satras* here, primarily after the holy arrival of Srimanta Sankardeva the pioneering Vaisnavite reformer and Saint, Majuli flourished in significant way (plate-2.10). He entrenched Vaisnavism in the land of Majuli through establishing the first Vaisnavite *Satra* at '*Belaguri Dhuwahat*' in West Majuli, which turned into a place of grandeur for the historic and auspicious, '*Manikanchan Sanjog*' (accumulation between Sankardeva and Madhavadeva), Sankardeva accumulated with his foremost disciple and associate Madhavadeva here and together propelled the new simpler form of Vaisnavism and started the socio-religious and cultural reformation of the place(plate-2.11) and then large number of monastic Institutions and *Satras* has been developed in the island of Majuli. (Neog: 1965)

## **2.2 Sankardeva and the Socio-religious background of Majuli**

Srimanta Sankardeva, a visionary figurine plotter of the Assamese socio-religious culture initiated the Neo-Vaisnavite movement and extended the *Bhakti* movement in Assam, The personality of Sankardeva is highly important in the history of Assam. He was an enlightened genius. He was a prophet, a spiritualist, a preacher, a philosopher, a linguist, a litterateur, an artist and a reformer and all these divine qualities made him a saint. He gave a whole new dimension to Assamese life and culture. The spiritual renaissance of Assam occurred apparently alongside the most brilliant period of the Ahom dynasty.

In the fifteenth and sixteenth century many sects of Hinduism were exists in the cult of Assam. The most popular forms of religion among these various cults and faiths were *Tantricism*. Assam was the prominent centre of *Tantricism* in ancient times. In a way the medieval period was trounced by *Śāktism*, *Śaivism* and *Tantricism*. The spiritual world was in chaos and the worship of the mother Goddess '*Sakti*' as the source of the supreme and divine energy was the

principle practise of *Tantricism*. It was imbued with various superficial practices akin to *Brahminical* cults, caste discrimination, offerings, enchanting, animal sacrifice and even human forfeit also. Under such circumstances, Sankardeva was emerged as a foremost mentor who initiated the Neo-Vaisnavite movement and extended *Bhakti* cult in populace to stabilize the spiritual world of Assam. In his *Bhakti* movement he included the people of all the social and economic levels, casts, creeds and other ethnic groups of Assam like *Khasi*, *Miris*, etc. To propagate his ideology Sankardeva introduced *Satras*, *Namghar*, or *Kirtan Ghar* as prayer hall which was a democratic institution for social changes and developments. Lord Krishna or Vishnu was considered the supreme power and the absolute saviour, "Single God and human kind" was the prime objective behind the whole ideology. (Das: 1953)

He visited all the major pilgrims, shrines and the sacred places of Hindu beliefs, met the famous saint Kabir and Chaitanya Mahaprabhu in northern India and dedicated his entire life for socio-religious improvements of society, Sankardeva devoted himself to organize his religious order and spread the simpler and purified form of Vaisnavism as a prime fanatical preacher. Under these experiments and practices of the socio-cultural reformation, some quite unique practices like congregational prayers, theatre, music, dance, painting and others has been incorporated and developed by Srimanta Sankardeva to reach up to the maximum people belongs to the every class of the society. After fifteenth century these practices became more significant and achieved the grades of art forms, which prevalently established as the regular practices of the *Satras* and artisans of the island of Majuli and played a vital role to satisfy the creative and artistic urge of people. Moreover these art forms developed parallel to the time with various techniques and mediums of visual representations, to gratify and spread the spiritual ideology among the society and succeeded to adjoin the people under cultural and religious harmony. (Neog: 1965)

Neo-Vaisnavism of Assam is quite dissimilar, compare to the other *Bhakti* cults of India in terms of its unique and innovative character, as it has been not only succeeded to reform and create an egalitarian civil society based on the

collective values of fraternity, justness, humanism and enlightenment through knowledge but create an environment of literature art and culture for the upcoming generations (plate-2.12). This new wave of faith and statement of belief popularly regarded as the *Eka-Sarana-Nam-Dharma* (Faith on the name single of God) which centralized in devotion to a single God that is Lord Krishna (*Eka Sarana*), who can be worshiped solely by chanting through his various names. Srimanta Sankardeva acknowledged the *sravana* and *kirtana* modes of *Bhakti* or devotion as prescribed by the *Bhagawata-Purana*. They are accessible to each and every creed of the society, highest and lowest, men and women alike, irrespective of birth, caste or status and no rigid ritualistic laws has to be followed by the devotees in this cult. (Borkakoti: 2005)

The birth date of Sankardeva has not been mentioned clearly in the early biographies and other contemporary works *Buranji* (Assamese chronicles) but some of the later biographies of the eighteenth century suggests two dates, are 1449 A.D and 1463 A.D. between this is 1449 accepted more reliably (E. Gait: 1863). Sankardeva was born in a rich and influential family at *Aliphukuri* near *Bardowa* in the district of Nagaon. His father Kusumbara Bhuya was the Chief of the Bhuyas (Siromani Bhuya) a dominant personality but unfortunately child Sankardeva lost his family in the early age subsequently Sankardeva sent to her grandmother *Khersuti* to look after the child. Sankardeva was an outstanding student and well versed in Sanskrit and took his education under the guidance of Mahendra Kandali. As mentioned in *Kathaguru-Charita*, Sankardeva have studied almost all the subjects like the *Bhagwata Geeta*, the *Vedas*, the *Upnishads*, the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata purans*, *kavyas*, grammar, and lexicon etc. Sankardeva was married at the age of twenty but soon his wife past away, and Sankardeva got detached from the worldly associations. (Neog: 1980)

Sankardeva started his first pilgrimage at the age of thirty two and covered almost all the important places of India namely Jagannatha (Puri), Vrindavan, Mathura, Varanasi, Prayaga etc. And during his excursion he naturally came in contact with the various scholars and Saints of the different parts of India, and the influence of the Vaisnavite cults of Ramanuja, Madhavacharya, Nimbaraka,

and Ramananda has been certainly left an impact on him, even though the connection and contribution of Jagannatha (Puri) has been extraordinarily mentioned in the biographies, and stated that a copy of *Bhagwata-Purana* was received by Jagadisha Misra from Puri. This shows a close connection of Sankardeva with someone at Puri. Considering the Jagadisha's appraisal on the *Bhagwata Purana* he realised that this work is extraordinary and inimitable and he became conscious about the *Bhakti* of Lord Krishna and sensed that surrendering the soul and preaching the acts of Krishna among the people is the true meanings of faith and only way to elucidate. Consequently after the twelve years Sankardeva returned home with a fanaticism and visionary aspiration and all the occurrences and orientation of the long pilgrimage of Sankardeva made him to commence the mission of reform the religious set-up of the Assam.

Sankardeva now dedicated himself to propagating the preaches of *Bhagwata* and the new faith of Vaisnavism, According to *Kathaguru-Carita* and the *Bardowa-Carita* Sankardeva organised a dramatic performance '*Cihna-Yatra*' including the representation of Painting on Backdrop including appropriate Dance and Music, sacred in Nature, various musical instruments which utilized in the performance were made especially for Sankardeva, different kind of *mridingas* (conical drum) made by the native potters and the cobblers collectively, and the several varieties of 'cymbals' (*manjira, khutital, bartal*), instrument of copper and bell metal were also made as per his direction.(Neog: 1980)

The painting done by Sankardeva on '*Tulapat*' (cotton made Paper) represents the *Vaikuntha* (the abode of Lord Vishnu). The whole drama was a composition of seven sections and processed continuously one by one with *Sutradhara* (depicter) and single form Vishnu (Character) on the stage. The *Bardowa Carita* stated that the performance sustained up to seven days continuously and owed all the success and spectators were mesmerized by the show, due to this lot of people from all the classes and creeds of the society influenced and started to follow and join him. Preaches and efforts of Sankardeva now brought out a positive change in the religious outlook of the people of Assam. In this course, the unique method he applied was propagation of *Bhakti*

through Literature, Drama, painting and Music as he composed short *Bargit* Lyrics, Longer *Kirtana* Lyrics, *Sutradharas*, recreated parts of *Bhagwat Purana* into Assamese and different kinds of poetry, which was never used before anywhere with such a approach. *Kirtana*, Mass prayer, and dramatic performance became his corresponding aids and towards the amplification of this, Sankardeva wrote *Kirtan-Ghosa* and established *Kirtana-grah* and *Namgrah* (prayers halls) initially at *Bardowa*, these institution became the active junction of Vaisnavism and soon the Vaisnavite Organization of *Satras* and *Namghar* scattered in all over the Assam.

The second phase of his journey started with a small jerk due to the clash between the *Bhuyas* and *Kachris*. This constrained the *Bhuyas* to break away from the place and Sankardeva had to consequently shift to the place *Dhuahata-Belaguri* in Majuli. Afterwards Sankardeva initiated his practises of religious reformation through propagation of Neo-Vaisnavism and the process of congregational prayers, chanting the name of Lord Krishna, and preaches of *Bhagawata*, dramatic performance, sacred and religious discourses engrossed by his narrative method of simplicity and dissemination of *Bhakti* and Faith and by this numbers of followers and disciples turned out towards him with the passage of time. Virtually a step ahead *Dhuahata-Belaguri*, of Majuli has become the witness of the most favourable event which certainly gave a thrust to Sankardeva's *Vaisnavism* was the accumulation of erudite apostle Madhavadeva in 1522 A.D. (Neog: 1965)

Madhavadeva was earlier a believer of *Saktism* and well versed in *Sastras* (Classic Sanskrit literature) but after a long discussion between Sankardeva and Madhavadeva, he realised and convinced ultimately Madhavadeva with the thoughts of his veteran Sankardeva and he requested Sankardeva to accept him as apostle. Nonetheless Madhavadeva detached from everything and devoted himself solely into the *Bhakti* practices, propagation of *Vaisnavism* and his guru. By this Sankardeva became more strengthen and acknowledged Madhavadeva his proper associate and a soul mate. Madhavadeva attained the qualities of an erudite scholar, laureate, and singer,

through this propagation of Neo-Vaisnavism also attained strength in terms of broadcasting and performance. This accumulation is popularized as the “*Mani-Kanchan Sanjog*”, combination of pearl and gem.

Sankardeva actively rendered numerous of works and took initiatives during the stay of *Patbausi* at Barpeta district of Assam, to propagate the Neo-Vaisnavism and uplift the society he formed several sacred scripture, converted the *Bhagwata-Purana*, *Bhagwata X Adi*, *Bhagwata* 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> parts (*skanda*) into Assamese vernacular, so that it can be easily understood and read by the common people, particularly by the marginal ones. He created ‘*Kirtan-Ghosha*’ for congregational prayers and chanting the name of *Hari* (God), and wrote the popular Manuscript *Anadi-Patan*, the *Bali-Calana*, the *Kurukshetra*, the *Nimi-Nava-siddhi Samvada*, the *Ramayana*, *uttara-Kanda*, including the lyrics of the *Bargits* and other *sutradharas*.

This period of Sankardeva has been considered as the peak of the mellowness of his doctrine and Sankardeva compiled his treatise, “*Bhakti-Ratnakara*” influenced by *Bhagwata-Purana*, *Bhagwata Gita* and the other *vedantik* scriptures. He was the inventor of one act plays known as *Ankiya-nat*; he himself composed the Six *Ankiya-Nats* in *Brajabuli* (combination of Maithili and Assamese) language and also developed the technique and methodology of theatrical Performance. (Pathak: 2008)

Most of the Biographers of Sankardeva who wrote about him are seems to be in chaos about the date of his birth, but they all are unite on the date of his demise, as per the most trustworthy among them ‘*Daityari Thakur*’ Sankardeva’s soul left the body, in the evening of the second day of the bright half of the lunar month, that is 1568 A.D or (1490 *Sakabda*). Consequently it is around hundred and nineteen years of an adequate and spirited life he has lived, However, his deeds, thoughts, initiatives, kindness and doctrine is still breezing in the culture of Assam.(Sarma:1989)

Contribution of Sankardeva to the Assamese society is immeasurable and cannot be sensed in a single itinerary. It was a multifaceted phenomenon of religion, literature, theatre, performance, adoration, celebrations and various

other art forms like painting, music, dance, architecture and so on fruited later, which not only changed the socio-religious perception of the society, but also moulded the whole cultural behaviour of the every individual and the mass. Nevertheless, he was the one who realised first in that period in Assam, that a true believer and a real soul-capitulated being only can realize the supremacy of knowledge and consciousness which is independent of any creed or caste. On the other hand, a Brahmin with less or no devotion and compassion will never achieve it. It was next to impossible to establish this ideology, particularly in Assam of that period, which is a cauldron of mixed races and various beliefs and society of heterogeneous nature including *Saivism*, *Saktism*, *Tantrism* including, various other tribal faiths. And last but not the least he was the only visionary who thought about the institution of 'Satra' and established first, which is not only accomplish the religious urge of the devotees but congregate and prosper the culture as well as social aspects of the society since five hundred years. (H.M Das: 1946)

### **2.3 Neo-Vaisnavism and the Cultural genesis of Majuli**

Majuli the celebrated land of *Satras*, socio-religious harmony and cultural genesis, has been always cherished the rich cultural life since the medieval period. Though, before also it was always been a populated area with less density of diverse kind of creeds but its culture and history could not be proficient to marked in historical writings, or almost obscure in the history subsequently being an isolated island and water locked place, it has been utilized by the Ahom kingdom as a detention centre and they used to accommodate revolting and rebellion thoughts and concerns particularly *Vaisnavites* here, as a result from the beginning of 13<sup>th</sup> centaury Majuli became the protectorate of the Vaisnavite preachers and practitioners and after the holy arrival of Srimanta Sankardeva the pioneering Vaisnavite reformer and Saint, it flourished in significant way. He rooted Vaisnavism in the land of Majuli through establishing the first *Vaisnavite* institution or 'Satra' at *Belaguri Dhuwahat* moreover he accumulated with his foremost Disciple and Associate Madhavadeva here and together propelled the

new simpler form of Vaisnavism and initiated the socio-religious and cultural reforms of the place and consequently, a large number of monastic Institutions and *Satras* has been developed in Majuli, it is considered that around sixty five number of *Satras* were activated in the Majuli before the massive earthquake of 1950, but now they are only left about the one-fourth part of the former ones. Nevertheless, they are still holding the flag of the live culture of Assam and satisfying the religious and cultural urge of the society.

Neo-Vaisnavism has been conceptually architected and implemented by the Saint Srimanta Sankardeva aiming to teach and uplift the social periphery objectively, for that he started preaching with congregational prayers, lectures, performance etc. (Rajguru: 1988 ) accessible to each and every one as per the limited available resources came across at the time, sometime under the shade of a tree, and other gathering places, but it has been institutionalised partially with the establishment of the first *Satra* of *Belaguri Dhuwahat* at Majuli. Sankardeva had continued his practices later on in *Patbausi* which is considered as the mature period of Sankardeva's Neo-Vaisnavite deeds. But it has been formulated gradually as it seems today, by the successors and disciples of the sect, after the demise of the Sankardeva.

The conscientiousness of Neo-Vaisnavism has been leaded by Sankardeva's foremost apostle Madhavadeva by looking after and managing all the activities of the Barpeta *Satra* and Damodardeva of *Patbausi Satra* with the same objective of Sankardeva to make the religion less ritualistic and simpler for every one as the Brahmins and elite classes were exploiting the innocents on the name of religions, rituals and God. Succession to the pioneers, Damodardeva further flourished the Neo-Vaisnavism by creating his own section and then progressively by efforts of the other leaders specifically Gopaldeva and Purshottam Thakur, grandson of Sankardeva formed respectively their own sections ultimately Mathuradas (Burha Ata) disciple of Madhavadeva, after him formed his own segment by maintaining the original features of the sect. These sections have been known as the '*Samhati* or *Sanghati*' (sub sects) will be discussed comprehensively in the next chapter of the study. Though naturally it

seems that Neo-Vaisnavism has also represented by some of the different aspects of sub sects but they all were propagated with the basic ingredients and objectives of the Neo-Vaisnavism of Sankardeva, undoubtedly for progression. (Sarma: 1989)

The time has also come when the movement was deteriorating its effect in the main lands of Assam, in the midst of sixteenth century after passing away the leading mentors, but the proficient emergence of Aniruddhadeva, who was the disciple of Gopaladeva and initiator of the '*Kal Sanghati*' sub sect, returned back in 1601 A.D from *kaljhar* to his native place at *Narayanpur* situated on the north bank of the Brahmaputra and started preaching here and consequently succeeded to took back the movement in its flow increasingly, later on he proceeded to Majuli and established a *Satra* here and continued his practices adjacent to a lake called the *Moamari-bil* , habitat of *Moamariya* or *Kaivarta* people who lead their life by fishing of *moa* fish in the *Moamari* pond, they are the same who played a significant role in *Moyamaria* revolution in 1769. Later on Vamasigopaladeva disciple of Damodardeva and Madhavadeva, however with some of the initial challenges succeed to establish Kuruwabahi *Satra* on the intersection of the Brahmaputra and *Dhansri* River with a competent objective to achieve the patronage of the Ahom Kingdom as it would be an inclusive advantage to the expansion of the Sect, Vamasigopaladeva authorized his disciple Misradev before he died, later Misradev somehow, had to struggle with the royal annoyance and passed away in the royal custody leaving Jayharideva as in charge, but jaiharideva also died soon leaving Niranjandeva in the mean time King Jayadhwaj singha of Ahom kingdom who solemnized in 1648 A.D. has got inclination towards Vaisnavism due to recommended by the astrologers to refurbish some natural calamities and misdemeanour of the past of his forerunners, determined to donate a grand Monastery with all the royal grants and aids, thus he invited head of the Kuruwabahi *Satra*, but for the sake of panic and safety concerns of the son of Misradeva has not been sent to the royal court by her mother as Misradev wad died in royal custody, ultimately Niranjandeva, In charge cum *Bhagwati* (Reader of texts) of the *Satra* has been received by the

royal court, and King became his disciple and rewarded him as the *Satradhikar* (Head Preacher) of a splendid new *Satra* known as *Auniati Satra* at Majuli in 1653-1654 A.D. Moreover around two years later king established two more grand *Satras* of the same *Sanghati* in Majuli are *Dakhinpat* and *Garamur Satra*. Accordingly Majuli has been excelled as a pilgrimage of the Art and culture, and Neo-Vaisnavite cult. Still these pioneering *Satras* including two other *Dakhinpat* and *Garamur* and many important *Satras* of Majuli are involved in the weaving of socio-religious harmony, colourful culture and vivid Art forms initiated by the great Saint Srimanta Sankardeva and then Madhavadeva. (Sarma: 1989, p-79)

#### **2.4 Philosophy of Neo-Vaisnavism**

The ideals and objectives of the Neo-Vaisnavism reclines in the thoughts of Sankardeva, whereas Sankardeva seems to be concerned more about to put forward a simpler method of devotion and faith which can be grasp by everyone equally in spite of a whole philosophy of religion, he was basically a reformer rather a philosopher and on the other hand, the varied and less learned society of the place was much in a requirement of a reformation compare to whole new stream of a systemized philosophy or religion and this was absolutely clear in the perception of Sankardeva, cohesively he indulged himself for the cause of amalgamating the whole society in devotion and faith though the other reformers of the *Bhakti* cults of India for a instance Ramanuja and Vallbhacarya dedicated themselves to formulate a system of philosophy on the basis of classical Sanskrit scriptures. But in Assam it was neither the priority of Sankardeva nor that of his successors, as their motto was of an all-inclusive incorporation of faith and stabilizing the society. Nonetheless it cannot be concluded that the faith and Neo-Vaisnavism of Sankardeva and then Madhavadeva was been solely reluctant to the theological discourses while the treatise like *Baktiratnakara*, *Bhaktiratnavali*, *Namghosha*, *Bhaktiviveka* can be included in the course of philosophical thinking though these are not absolutely based upon the abstract rationality and established branch of theology since all are the compilations and transcriptions of *Bhagwata Purana* and other *Vedanta* texts. (Neog: 1965)

The Neo-Vaisnavism of Sankardeva and his successors pursued principally the *Bhagwat Purana* and *Bhawat Gita* and predominantly the *Bhagwat puranas* was being in deliberation as it considered the extract of absolute knowledge and one can be proceed towards salvation through the ultimate affluence of *Bhagwata Purana*. As per Maheshwar Neog elucidation of *Bhagwata Puranas* in *Bhakti-Ratnakara* of Sankardeva can be kept adjacent to the Sridhara-Swami, (who emerged as the tenth saint of Vaisnavism succession to Shankaracharya of Govardhan Math at Puri and might be considered as a persuasion of '*Bhagwata-Bhavartha-Dipika*' as Sridhara being a Vaisnava, comes out from the form of Vaisnavism to *Advaitism* objectively to make it adequately acceptable by *Advait* followers, and combining it with sensationalism of devotion and *Bhakti*. Similarly Sankardeva also propagated Neo-Vaisnavism in a simpler way to make religion adequately acceptable to one and all. (Neog: 1965, p-224)

The soul of Assamese Neo-Vaisnavism has always lies in the selfless devotion and human kind therefore Lord Krishna has been honoured as a prime authority to attain the attribute of knowledge, wisdom liberation and Salvation, it is primarily expected by a Vaisnavite devotee to surrender oneself his karma and Atman (whole and soul) towards Lords Krishna with deep devotion as thy is the only source of supreme knowledge. (Barua: 1952)

Sankardeva states that there is only one absolute dictum of life by which it gets factual destination and that is service and devotion of Lord Krishna. Madhavadeva also simultaneously proclaimed the importance of pure enlightenment in life through his distinguished work *Nama-ghosha* and explained how one can appreciate God inside own self, as God bounded with each and every constituent particle of the universe and it can be achieved by the holy grace of the Lord Krishna only through devotion. Sankardeva in his doctrinal work of *Bhakti-Ratnakara* suggested that one has to come out from the worldly belongings and possessions to attain knowledge and self recognition, illusion of the worldly affairs always exerts a pull towards it, but only devotion and meditation to Lord Krishna makes possible to one and all to achieve the absolute

knowledge or pure liberation by his grace only. Moreover Sankardeva and his sect also gave equally importance to deeds (Karma) in life as we all beings take birth for karma and everything is bonded with that as Pleasure and pain, self cause and charity, achievement and punishment. Certainly our deeds will be only whether superior or awful, leads us towards the according destination, but Sankardeva asserts if one can be able to honestly dedicate his deeds and devote own self to supreme authority, including own egotism then one may be able to achieve thy grace of supreme knowledge. Therefore the Neo-Vaisnavism of Sankardeva sect in a extract, appraises that, the absolute devotion and self surrender towards the God including execution of all the deeds on the name of God, human kind and parity is the ultimate goal of human life and this can be only assure the path of self enlightenment and salvation. (Sarma: 1989) On the basis of the above philosophy the phenomenon of the Neo-Vaisnavism extended with the great efforts of Sankardeva and Madhavadeva.

## **2.5 Neo-Vaisnavism and Expansion of various Art forms in Majuli**

Neo-Vaisnavism particularly evolved in Majuli after the arrival of Sankardeva, he stayed in the island for more than twenty years and ushered the wave of Neo Vaisnavism. Through his unique practices of congregational prayers and preaching he established *Satra* institution in *Belaguri* at Majuli, and it became a nerve-centre of Vaisnavism, where the Saint Sankardeva stayed, preached, conducted congregational prayer and religious discourses, It was more like a mission, or institutionalization of a sacred philosophy to make the religion simpler and approachable to everyone and to dissolve the levels of casts and creeds in worship and establish love, amity and integrity among the society. Large number of Vaisnavite literature has been created to support the movement by Sankardeva, his erudite disciple Madhavadeva and forth coming pontiffs. Moreover they distinctly composed enough number of songs, dramas, verse, recitations, prose and miscellaneous works in the context. Sankardeva's lyrical writings of *bargits* song and sacred songs, narrations of *Harishchandra-upakhyaana*, *Rukmani-harana*, and version of *Bhgwata purana*, *Bhakti-pradipa*,

*Nimi-nava siddhi-samvada*, *Anandi patan* and many more are the admirable pieces of sublime moreover he created various kinds of plays popularly *kaliya-damana*, *Keli-Gopala*, *Vipra-Patni-Prasada*, *Parijata-Harana* and *Rama-Vijayana* in Sanskrit language as well as in *brajavali* dialect, known as *ankiya-nat* or *yatra*, all these are still practised and appraised in various occasions inside and outside the *Satras*, and achieved distinct values in spreading the Neo-Vaisnavite ideology. Madhavadeva also composed numerous of *Bargits* to depict the activities of Lord Krishna's childhood pranks and different kind of plays popularly known as '*Jhumura*' including numerous pieces of dramas mainly *Chor-dhara*, *Pimpara-Guchuwa*, *Bhumi-Lutowa*, *Bhojana-Vyavhara*, *Arjuna-Bhanjana*, *Brahma-mohana*, *Bhusna-harana*, *kotora-Khelowa* and *Rasajhumura*. Nonetheless his masterwork *Namaghosa* undoubtedly is an adequate contribution to Assamese thinking and religious literature. (Sarma: 1989, p-161)

The tradition of creating literature and poetry by both the masters inclined the onward generations and cautiously It became a desirable aptitude for the appointment of the *Satradhikars* (Head of the *Satra*) that, they had to justify their quality of writing dramas, literature and composition of songs as per the pioneering Masters, and this excelled the creation of Assamese drama and literature. Numerous styles and variations of songs, dance, drama and poetry became trend of the epoch. Though the traditions of dance and theatre can be traced before the Sankardeva period but the way this art has been urbanized and utilized to promote the neo-Vaisnavism is extraordinary, whereas distinct art forms has also achieved the height of excellence and popularity, simultaneously the movement has also benefited in terms of communicating its ideology in interesting and Artistic manner.(D.Nath: 2012) The *Satriya* dance form of Assam has developed in the Neo Vaisnavite monasteries characteristically religious in nature achieved the status of Classical dance in India. And according to *Daityari Thakur* eminent biographer of the period, Sankardeva himself use to organise the *Oja-pali* performances for chanting the devotional prayers, parallel to this several other dance forms like *Sutradhara-nritya*, *Natuwa-nac Rasa-nritya*, *Cali-nac*, and *krisna-nritya* earned the popularity in surge of the Neo-Vaisnavism.

To propagate the schema of Neo-Vaisnavism the Dramatic performances celebrated as *Bhaona* introduced by Sankardeva. He inscribed the worship songs in the form of *Kirtana*, Dramas in the form of *Bhaona* which depicts the events from the classical scriptures Mahabharata, Ramayana, and *Bhagawata*. Subsequently various one act plays narrated by Sankardeva and Madhavadeva and other Vaisnavite poets had become the part of tradition through the performance of *Ankiya-nat*, as a result the *Bhaona* and *Ankiya-nat* performances, sprouted from the movement not just merely to depicts the religious aura subtly but also became a plethora of creativity and aesthetic pleasure for the spectators. Besides these other art form like wall and panel painting, Manuscript painting, wood carving and mask-making were developed altogether with movement and lot of other minute and major creative forms has also been found its position cohesively, like stage decoration, backdrop Painting, Costume designing, and most astonishing in this course are the Masks, worn by the actors who plays different roles of Deities, *Asuras (horrifying demons)*, various animals and other inhumane and superhuman characters. (Sarma: 1989)

Art of the manuscript painting largely developed in seventeenth and eighteenth century is not at all far behind in the depiction of religious worth and to promote the neo-Vaisnavism, whereas number of illuminated manuscripts are still preserved in the various *Satras* of Assam, and almost all of them are based upon the Vaisnava themes as well as the wall paintings of the *Satras*. On the other hand art of wood carving was uniformly flourished parallel to the phenomenon, as to give faces to the idols, adorn the thrones and seats. Finely carved wooden images of Vishnu, Narayana, Vasudeva, and different incarnated forms of Vishnu, and the other miscellaneous forms of art like puppetry, bamboo craft and wood craft were not only reflected the religious idols subtly but played a primary role to adorn the interiors as wall panels, shrines, prayer halls, as well as the exteriors like window frames, door frames and wall reliefs. Large number of such adorable pieces of art and craft has been procured in the various *Satras* of Majuli and Assam. (Bhuyan: 1956)

Neo-Vaisnavism progressively paved the strong roots of cultural heritage and socio-religious reformations in Majuli through the various *Satras* and Vaisnava monasteries, spread all around the island though it was much higher in the number as compare to present date, around sixty five *Satras* were established during the patronage of Ahoms since sixteenth century to nineteenth century, due to that Majuli has been considered as the '*Etaka Mahantar Than*' monastic pilgrimage of religious people (Goswami: 1996).

Since the beginning, these numerous *Satras* of Majuli serving as the learning centre and active institutes of various Assamese classical dance and music forms and cultivating Assam's cultural and creative urge and established the long tradition of Satriya culture. The tradition of *Satra* institutions established under the ideology of Neo-Vaisnavism ws been thoroughly responsible for shaping and stabilizing the Assamese society for the last five hundred years and developed as the centre of the spiritual and cultural milieu of the society. The ideology of Neo-Vaisnavism itself conceptualized and architected the buildings of the '*Than*' and '*Satra*, and vivid art forms significantly literature, poetry, music, dance and theatre, writing and painting manuscripts, Painting, mask making, wood-carvings and many others developed through the years and instinctively connect the devotees and whole society with spiritual environment and wove the culture of the place. (Choudhury: 1966)

## **2.6 Important Festivals and Ceremonies of the Satras of Majuli**

Majuli as the land of *Satras* has been cherished the rich cultural life since the medieval periods, and the people of the land is entirely intermingled with the religion particularly *Vaisnavism* and the *Satras* of the place. Almost all the customs, functions and festivals are monitored by the *Satras* even *Bihu* a secular festival is also cooperated and organised by the inmates. Among these *Palnam*, *Ras-lila*, *Janmastami*, *Barsik-Bhaona*, and *Bihu* are the popular ones.

**PALNAM:** Is the religious festival organised by the *Satras* of Majuli, especially of *Auniati Satra*, *Palnam* is a combination of two words, '*Pal*' means turn by turn,

and 'Nam' means congregational prayer or chanting the name of God. Consequently *Palnam* means organising the continual congregational prayers (plate-2.13) or chanting the name of God from the text of *Bhagawata*, *Kirtangosa*, and *Namagosa* by the 'Bhakats' devotees of the *Satra* in rotation (plate- 2.14).

**RASLILA:** Majuli has earned the adequate fame for the classical Performing arts and among these the *Raslila* or *Krisna Lila* (demeanour of lord Krishna) is the exceptional. The *Raslila* is the story of the life of Lord Krishna presented in form of Performing art with music and dance and it had great influence on the spectators, spiritual life and people of Majuli (plate-2.15). It was introduced by *Srimanta Sankardeva* who did not merely narrated a detailed chapter on *Ras-Krida* but also composed a drama of *Keli-Gopala* and performed himself at Patbausi in Barpeta. *Raslila* is an annual festival celebrated on the (*Purnima*) full moon day in the month of October and November during the autumn season and largely celebrated by the highest number of the people both inside and outside the *Satra* community (plate-2.16,2.17). Performance of the *Raslila* is a combination of various artefacts as variety of musical instruments, music and dance, including masks and paintings and all this creates an ambience of whole Assamese classical musical and dance performance. (Nath: 2012)

**JANMASTAMI:** Is celebrated as birth day of Lord Krishna, observed on the eighth lunar day of the dark fortnight in the month of *Bhadra* (August). It is celebrated with full enthusiasm almost by all the *Satras* and the villagers including *Missing* and *Deori* tribes even by non Assamese community of the island. *Janmastmi* is a two-day celebration however some of the *Satra* and local people performed it for single day followed by offering *Puja*, holding the (plate-2.18) *Nam-prasanga* (congregational prayer), *Vrat* (Fasting) and performing the drama portraying the birth of the Lord Krishna, the devotee inmate of the *Satra* recite the *Krishna janma Kanda* (narration of the event of birth of Lord Krishna) from the *Kirtan Ghosha* of Sankardeva (plate-2.19).

**PHALGUTSAV YATRA:** can be compare with a popular Hindu festival 'Holi', celebrated almost each and every part of India, according to the Assamese chronicles *Phalgutsav* was initially introduced by Sankardeva at his birth place at Bardowa 'Than' situated in Barpeta *Satra*, at present comes in modern Nagaon district. *Phalgutsav*, *dual-Yatra* or generally termed as *Phakuwa* celebrated in the month of *Phalguna* (February - March) consequently called *Phalgutsva* it is believed that Lord Krishna played colour (*Rang* and *Abir*) with *gopis* (beloved female devotees) and fellow friends at his birth place *Gokula*, hence it is a festival celebrated enthusiastically playing with colours. Sankardeva portrayed this event in his writings 'Bargeets' and Madhavadeva (plate-2.20) narrated the event how Lords Krishna plays colours 'Rang' or 'abira'. Whereas the *dual-yatra* compiled by two words 'dual' means temple like decorated house enshrined with seating image of Lords Krishna and 'Yatra' means procession, so *dual-yatra* is a procession of Lord Krishna's idol sitting inside the temple like house observed by *Satra* and community (plate-2.17). During the procession all the natives offer the prayer and offerings and play colours. (Nath: 2010, p-182)

**Barsik Bhaona or Bar-sabha:** observed as the celebration of annual drama performance while all the performances are firmly religious in nature, and based upon the life story of Lord Krishna (plate-2.21). The festival follows the grand congregational prayer reading of *Bhagwata*, distribution of *Maha-prasad*, and performance of the *Bhaona* (Vaisnavite theatrical performance) goes up to whole night (plate-2.22) the various musical instruments like flute, harmonica, *manjira* and most importantly 'Khol' a form of conical drum, it is interesting that *Bihu* is popularly alleged, festival of 'dhol' and *Bar-Sabha* is festival of 'Khol'. In general the festival has been organised in the month of May and June but flexibly sometime last week of April or in starting week of July also and eagerly participated by all the native people and organized by almost each and every village except some of tribes.

**Bihu:** *Bihu* is the most celebrated festival of the whole Assam and regarded as the National festival of Assam observed thrice in a year namely *Bohag Bihu* (*Rangali Bihu*) observed in the month of April, *Kati Bihu* in the month of October, and *Magh Bihu* in the middle of January. Among them, *Bohag Bihu* is popular as '*Rangali Bihu*' is the most popular and observe integrally by the each every fraternity of casts and religion of Assam with full of passion. *Bihu* is a Secular festival and in Majuli also it is celebrated as other places of Assam except a bit tint of *Vaisnavism* for an instance the *Bohag Bihu* started with the Sacred Bath (*Snan*) followed by bathing and feeding of the cows, as cows are very affectionate to Lord Krishna, recitation of the verse and prose from the religious scriptures (*Bhagwata*) portraying the Activities of Lord Krishna and Radha, occasion of *Bihu* starts with the Congregational prayers in the Namghar (Prayer hall of *Satra* ) and then performance of *Bihu* songs and dance with all folk Musical instruments like *Gagana* (Bamboo Instrument) flute, *pepa* (Buffalo-Horn) and Most importantly '*Dhol*' (cylindrical Drum), by the teams of Young males members of the village (plate-2.23, 2.24). Subsequently *Magh bihu* is celebrated on the day of '*Makar Sankranti*' or *Sankranti* also popular by different names in all the other parts of India, in Majuli it celebrated as the close of the season of harvesting of the winter crops mainly *baou* and *Sali* (a kind of Rice) and availability of enough stock of various food items like milk, curd, butter, rice, fish, vegetables, fruits, *gur* (jaggery) and different nuts and spices consequently after harvesting the festival has been celebrated as refreshments and nourishments. *Pitha* is the identical and delicious edible of *Magh Bihu* popular in all over Assam. (Nath: 2012 p- 186)

## **2.7 Conclusion**

Majuli as a celebrated island of Brahmaputra distinguished for its rich cultural heritage of numerous of *Satras*, for which island has been emerged as the land of socio-religious and Vaisnavite reformation since sixteenth century. Srimanta Sankardeva the pioneering Vaisnavite reformer and Saint propagated the Neo-Vaisnavite movement through establishing the first Vaisnavite *Satra* at

'*Belaguri Dhuwahat*' in West Majuli and then large number of *Satras* has been developed in Majuli. These institutions represented the threshold of simpler, more accessible and less ritualistic form of devotion compare to existed complex Hindu ritualistic religion. It was embedded with faith and devotion as there was no idol worship and rituals. "Single God and human kind" was the prime objective behind the whole ideology and the philosophy of Sankardeva's Vaisnavism lies in the selfless devotion and salvation. Lord Krishna has been honored as the prime authority to attain the attribute of knowledge, wisdom and ultimate realization. Sankardeva acknowledged the *sravana* and *kirtana* modes of *Bhakti* or devotion based upon the *Bhagavata-Purana* and extended the *Bhakti* cult in populace, for which Sankardeva, Madhavadeva and later pontiffs created plenty of literature. Moreover they distinctly composed enough number of songs, dramas, verses, recitations, prose and miscellaneous works in the context like Sankardeva created *bargits* (sacred) song, narrations of *Harishchandra-upakhyana*, *Rukmani-harana*, and version of *Bhgwata purana* as *Bhakti-pradipa*, *Nimi-nava siddhi-samvada*, *Anandi patan* including various kinds of plays namely *kaliya-damana*, *Keli-Gopala*, *Vipra-Patni-Prasada*, *Parijata-Harana* and *Rama-Vijaya-nat* in Sanskrit language as well as in *brajaveli* dialect, known as *ankiya-nat* or *yatra*. Madhavadeva also composed numerous of *Bargits* to depict the activities of Lord Krishna's childhood pranks and different plays widely known as '*Jhumura*' including number of dramas namely *Chor-dhara*, *Pimpara-Guchuwa*, *Bhumi-Lutowa*, *Bhojana-Vyavhara*, *Arjuna-Bhanjana*, *Brahma-mohana*, *Bhusna-harana*, *kotora-Khelowa* and *Rasajhumura* and his masterpiece treatise *Namaghosa*. Undoubtedly all these works are adequate contribution to Assamese thinking and religious literature.

Neo-Vaisnavism was a multifaceted phenomenon based upon the epics, purans and Bhagwat-Gita, sprouted the religion of faith, literature, theatrical performances, adoration, celebration and Various arts like painting, music, Classical dance, architecture and so on(plate-2.25), which changed the socio-religious perception of the society and molded the whole cultural behavior. As a

result Majuli has been cherished the rich socio-religious and cultural life since the medieval periods, and the people of the land is entirely intermingled with the religion particularly *Vaisnavism* and the *Satras* of the place and almost all the customs, functions and festivals are coordinated by the *Satras* in which *Palnam*, *Ras-lila*, *Janmastami*, *Barsik-Bhaona* and *Bihu* are the popular ones simultaneously Majuli serving as a place of active institutes and learning centre of various Assamese *Satriya* dance(plate-2.26), music and art forms which vibrantly nurturing the Assamese culture.

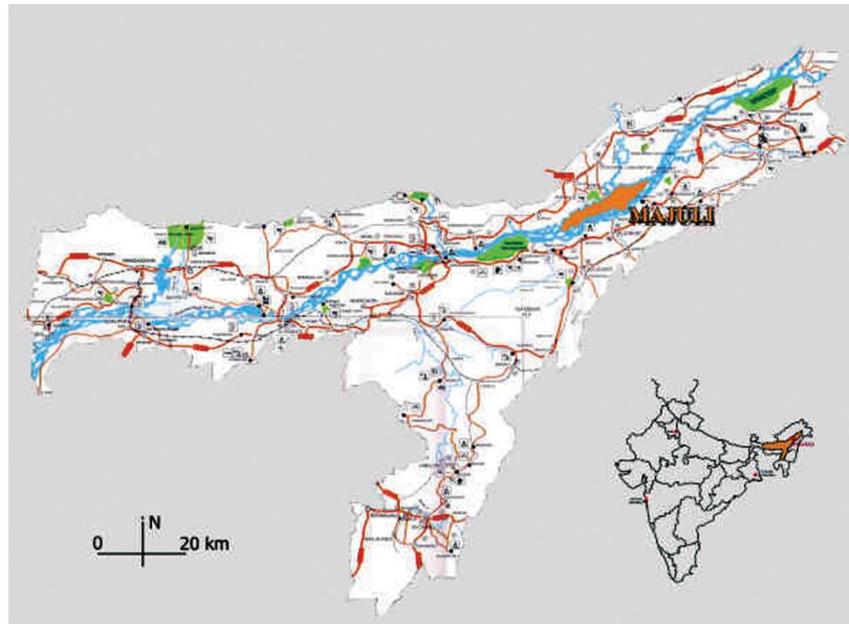


Plate 2.1 Map of Majuli, Assam



Plate 2.2 Water route from Jorhat district to Majuli



Plate 2.3 Flora & Fauna, Majuli Island



Plate 2.4 Topographical view, Majuli



Plate 2.5 Nimati Ghat of Jorhat district



Plate 2.6 Scenic landscape of Majuli



Plate 2.7 Erosion on the shoreline, Majuli



Plate 2.8 Soil erosion on the river banks, Majuli

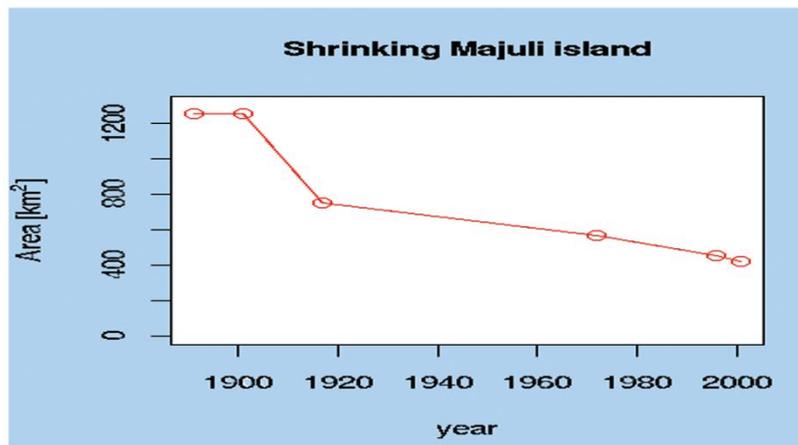


Plate 2.9 Shrinking area of Majuli with time



Plate 2.10 Influence of Vaisnavism , Majuli



Plate 2.11 Natural and Peaceful environment of the island



Plate 2.12 Palnam festival, Majuli



Plate 2.13 Palnam festival in Auniati Satra, Majuli



Plate 2.14 Practise of Raslila festival, Majuli



Plate 2.15 Raslila Performance



Plate 2.16 Raslila Performance, Majuli



Plate 2.17 Janmastami Prasanga, Majuli



Plate 2.18 Performance on Janashtmi, Majuli



Plate 2.19 Phalgutsav, Majuli



Plate 2.20 Phalgutsav dual-yatra



Plate 2.21 Barsik - Bhaona performance, Majuli



Plate 2.22 Bar - Sabha, Majuli



Plate 2.23 Bihu Festival



Plate 2.24 Bihu celebration, Majuli



Plate 2.25 Classical Satriya Dance Form

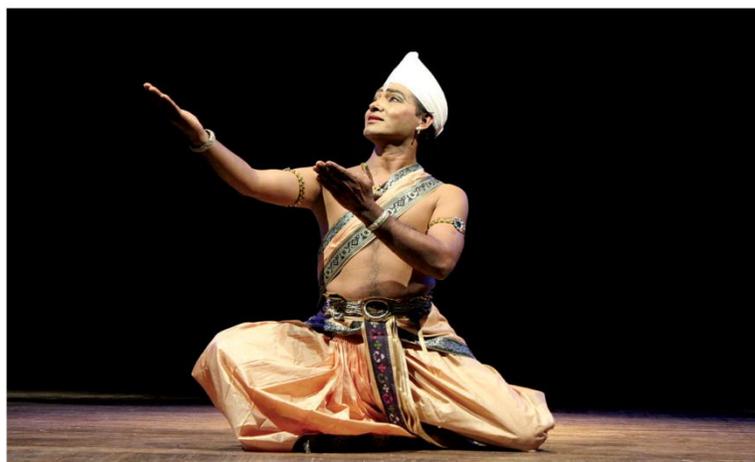


Plate 2.26 Classical Satriya Dance Form

## Reference

Barua, B.K, 1969, *A Cultural History of Assam*. Gauhati, p-78

Barooah, D.P. 1979, (ed-in-chief) - *Assam District Gazetteers*, Goalpara Dist. - Govt. of Assam p- 64

Barua, K. L., 1984 *Readings in Culture and History of Assam*, Kamarup Anusandhan Samiti, Assam, p-38

Bhuyan S.K, 1956 *Studies in Literature of Assam*, p-11, 12

Bhuyan.A, *Socio-Cultural and Political Role of the Namghar in Assam, Towards Freedom*, Kolkata, 2007 p-16

Borkakoti, Dr.S.K, *Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankaradeva*, Bani Mandir, Guwahati, 2005 p-49

Chaliha, B.P., 1978 *Sankardeva - Studies in Culture*, *Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha*, Assam, p-12

Choudhury, P.C 1966 *The History of Civilisation of the people of Assam to the twelfth century A.D* p-410

Das, H.M., 1953 *Contribution of Srimanta Sankardeva*, Gauhati, p-8

Ibid, p-11

Gait, E.A, 1967, *History of Assam*, published by Lawyers Book Stall, Gauhati, p-289

Goswami P.C, 1996 Essays on Sankaradeva, Forum of Sankardeva Studies, published by Lawyers Book Stall, Guwahati, p-p-2

Hazarik, B.B, Roy S.B,, 1990 Assam District Gazzetteers, Kamrup District. Government of Assam p-628

Nath, D., 2009, *The Majuli Island Society, Economy, and culture*, anshah publishing house, Guwahati p-2

Ibid, p-11

Nath, D., 2012, *Satra Society and Culture Pitambardeva Goswami and History of Garamur Satra*, DVS Publishers, Guwahati p-179

Ibid, p-182, 186, 198

Neog, Maheshwar, Cultural Heritage of Assam, Omsons Publications, New Delhi, 2004 p- 56

Neog, D., 1962 New Light on History of Asamiya Literature, Xuwani Prakasan, Dispur, Guwahati, p 17

Neog, M., 1965 *Early history of the Vaisnava Faith and Movement in Assam Sankardeva and His Times*, LBS Publications, Gauhati, p-103,110

Ibid, p-98, 107, 115,118

Ibid, p-222, 224

Rajguru.S 1988 *Medieval Assamese society 1228-1826*, publish by Pankaj Kr. Rajguru Asami Milanpur, p-260

Pathak, N.C., 2008 *Assam's History and Its Graphics*, Mittal publications, New Delhi p-73

Sarma, S.N., 1989 *The Neo-Vaisnavite Movement and Satra Institutions of Assam*, Gauhati, p-27, 41

Ibid, p-161,294,296

Sarma P.C 2010 *Heritage of Kamakhya on Nilachal Hills*, Vivekanada Kendra Institute of Culture, Guwahati, p-31

Wade J.P, 1927, *A Geographical Sketch of Assam, 1800 A.D* incorporated in *An Account of Assam*, Allen, Lakhimpur p-159