

# SECTARIAN DIVISIONS OF SANKARDEVA'S NEO-VAISHNAVISM IN ASSAM

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**Abstract:** The Bhakti Movement popularly called in Assam as Neo- Vaishnavite Movement was launched by Sankardeva (1449-1568AD) and his disciple Madhavdeva (1489-1596AD) in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. They gave Assam Vaishnavism a new interpretation and its distinctive character. The movement headed by Sankardeva was not only a religious reform movement, but also a great social revolution. Immediately after passing away of Sankardeva in 1568AD, division came to Assam Vaishnavism and subsequently it got divided in to four main sub-sects popularly known as samhati or sanghati. This paper is a humble attempt to study the history of the Neo- Vaishnavism in the post- Sankardeva period in general and sectarian division in particular. Conclusion revealed that it was the ideological differences for which Vaishnavism of Assam got divided. In spite of this division, the Samhatis played very important role in spreading and stabilizing the Neo-Vaisnavite Movement in Assam. The sub-sects created a network of Satras throughout the entire Brahmaputra Valley, and practically converted more than half of its population to Vaishnavism.

**Keywords:** Bhakti Movement, Neo-Vaishnavite Movement, samhati or sanghati, Sectarian division, Satras

## INTRODUCTION:

The Bhakti Movement popularly called in Assam as Neo- Vaishnavite Movement was launched by Sankardeva (1449-1568AD) and his disciple Madhavdeva (1489-1596AD) in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. They gave Assam Vaishnavism a new interpretation and its distinctive character. The movement headed by Sankardeva was not only a religious reform movement, but also a great social revolution. Sankardeva introduced a creed, adhering to the main principles of 'Bhakti' which could revolutionise the entire face of the life of the people and lead to the formation of a broader civil society. It made an attempt to unite and sanskritise the diverse castes and tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley which had succeeded to a large extent in forming a culture to be identified later as the Assamese culture. Immediately after passing away of Sankardeva in 1568AD, division came to Assam Vaishnavism and subsequently it got divided in to four main sub-sects popularly known as samhati or sanghati. This paper is a humble attempt to study the history of the Neo- Vaishnavism in the post- Sankardeva period in general and sectarian division in particular.

## Methodology:

The method of this research paper is analytical and historical. For the purpose of the study, major sources of information are gathered from the Assamese Chronicles( Buranjis) and bio-graphical works of the Vaishnava saints of medieval Assam (charit puthi). Secondary sources in the form of articles published by different authors in different newspapers, periodicals, magazines, souvenir etc. and books are also be consulted to supplement the primary sources. In order to find out the picture of the post-Sankardeva Neo- Vaishnavite movement not only the available sources scrutinized carefully, but attempt has also been made to see things as objectively as possible.

## The Neo-Vaishnavism in the post –Sankardeva period:

The history of the Neo-Vaishnavism in the post –Sankardeva period is remarkable not only for the expansion of the faith in different parts of Assam, particularly in Upper Assam but also for the division within the order. Assam Vaishnavism underwent significant changes in the post-Sankardeva times due to internal dissensions and ideological clashes between the preceptors.

Sankardeva could not achieve success in propagating the new faith in eastern Assam due to the ill treatment of the Ahom monarchs for which he left to the Koch kingdom.<sup>1</sup> Madhavdeva also chiefly concentrated his propagation to lower Assam by establishing his Satra at Barpeta.<sup>2</sup> Of course, some distinguished Vaishnava saints, who received initial inspiration from Sankardeva, exercised powerful influence on the people of Assam. These saint-poets moved through the length and breadth of the country, extolling the merits of bhakti and giving discourses to the people on ethics, morals and righteous living and their own saintly life inspired the people and their teachings and his discourses illuminated them.<sup>3</sup>

After the death of Sankardeva , his Neo-Vaishnavism order got divided in to four main divisions called Samhatis. They were Brahma Samhati, Kala Samhati, Purusha Samhati and Nika or Nistha or Nitya Samhati. Thus in spite of its strong and egalitarian foundation, Sankardeva sect failed to continue its strength and unity, and also its socio-political ideology.

The term Samhati was employed in the sense of groups of Assam Vaishnavism of the schism of the order. We find the use of the word only in the post- Sankarite Vaishnava literature. It was probably derived from the word 'Sanghattana' which means joining, unification or cohesion.<sup>4</sup> It is sometimes compared to that of the Buddhist 'Sangha' but its relation to Samhati does not appear to be very close.<sup>5</sup> The word was used particularly by the later group of biographers with various forms like Samghati, Ghati or even Samhati.<sup>6</sup> Subsequently, the term gained its momentum from the time of Madhavdeva's demise. The subgroup of Damodardeva, another senior follower of Sankardeva, and a contemporary of Madhavdeva, came in to existence in times of Madhavdeva. Damodardeva's ambition to the headship of the order after the death of Sankardeva was the driving force that led to organize and

propagate a definite schism known as Damodari or Damodariya. In early biographies, this division was never termed as Samhati and we find the word sampradaya or simply samprada instead of Samhati.<sup>7</sup>

Dvarikanath Dvij, has tried to explain the evolution of Samhatis in a fantastic or mythological way.<sup>8</sup> He has mentioned only three Samhatis, viz., Brahma, Kala and Purusha.<sup>9</sup> The evolution of the Nika Samhati, however, has been narrated by him separately.<sup>10</sup>

### **Background History:**

Sankardeva did not nominate any one among his disciples to succeed him to the headship of his order till the close of his life when he nominated his dearest disciple Madhavdeva to the seat of the headship. But that too was almost in private, not even known or intimated to his eldest son Ramananda who was with his father during the last days of the saint.<sup>11</sup> All biographical works maintain that both Madhavdeva and Damodardeva came into clash immediately after the death of Sankardeva who died at Koch Behar in the year 1568. Declining to accept the authority of Madhavdeva as the head of the order, Damodardeva built a separate Satra, initiated disciples, and became its acharya i.e. the adhikar and sheltered refugees from the Satra of Madhavdeva.<sup>12</sup> It is further stated that in a face-to-face debate between the two stalwarts, Damodardeva not only rejected the authority of Madhavdeva to head of the order, he also asserted that he had no obligation even to Sankardeva as he was not established by him as the head of the sect.<sup>13</sup>

### **Brahma Samhati—**

Damodardeva's ambition to get the headship of the order after the demise of Sankardeva led to the first division of the Vaishnava order. The death of Sankardeva brought in its trail the question of succession to the headship of the order. Sankardeva had nominated Madhavdeva as the spiritual successor, instead of nominating his sons. It is seen that criterion of the nomination was neither high birth nor relationship, but the spiritual accomplishment, scholarship, organizing ability or personality of the nominee. Madhavdeva who used to move with Sankardeva like a shadow, and therefore, was intimately known to the Guru than any of his disciples.<sup>11</sup> It is narrated in the biographies of Sankardeva that when his son Ramananda approached his death-bed seeking spiritual instruction, the saint is said to have directed his son to approach Madhavdeva on whom all his spiritual strength and energy devolved.<sup>12</sup> But immediately after he had taken the charge of Guruship, a section of the Vaishnavas under Damodardeva seceded from the order disowning Madhavdeva's leadership. That was the beginning of the process of schism. Damodardeva even did not go to attend the sradha ceremony of Sankardeva, which was held at Patbausi under the leadership of Madhavdeva.<sup>13</sup> Madhavdeva, accused him of harboring excommunicated people, and Damodardeva denied any obligation on his part in this regard, and at the heat of the moment even denied the authority of Sankardeva's Bhakti-Ratnakar.<sup>14</sup> This was too much for Madhavdeva to bear, and he declared a division between himself and damodardeva.<sup>15</sup>

Damodardeva founded a new sect of Vaishnavism which came to be known after his own name i.e. Damodariya.<sup>16</sup> Damodardeva severed all connection with Madhavdeva and introduced some smarta rituals, the outward show of which attracted many Brahmins as well as a large section of the common people to his side. He is said to have introduced worship of minor gods and observances of Vedic and Brahmanical rites.<sup>17</sup>

Damodardeva's act of seceding away from the main body has been described by almost all the biographers of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva. Harideva, another Brahmin disciple of Sankardeva is also said to have started a new schism afterwards.<sup>18</sup> The followers of Damodardeva and Harideva claimed independence and later on these two groups are connected as falling under the Brahma Samhati.<sup>19</sup>

### **Characteristics of the Brahma Samhati-**

The Brahma Samhati comprising two sub sects (Damodari and Haridevi) and consisting of the most affluent Satras of Assam is naturally the most influential of the Samhatis. Most of the Satras affiliated to this samhati are headed by Brahmins, though non-Brahmin heads are not altogether negligible.<sup>20</sup> Some Satras affiliated to this Samhati developed fully the monastic characteristics.

Brahmanical rites and rituals are observed in this Samhati side by side with devotional practices.<sup>21</sup> Some of the prominent Satras of this Samhati are said to have administered even tantric diksha.<sup>22</sup> Again, some Satras of this order admitted diksha after initiation or ordination (Sarana). It is to be noted that in Sankardeva's faith, there is no diksha, and instead of that the process of ordination is called Bhajana, not diksha.<sup>23</sup>

Some followers of this group have tried to establish a link between this samhati and the Vaishnavism of Bengal saying that Damodardeva was initiated by Chaitanya himself. But religious teachings and practices by Damodardeva widely differ from those of Chaitanya.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, the early biographers of Damodardeva, viz. Ramaraya and Nilakantha have indirectly acknowledged the indebtedness of Damodardeva to Sankardeva.<sup>25</sup> The Brahma samhati lays special emphasis on Deva (God) than the other three fundamental elements (vastu), viz. Guru, Nama and Bhakta. So they encourage the necessity of worshipping the idol of Vishnu and sala-grama-sila, the stone symbol of Vishnu Narayana, in their Satras. In the later period, this sub sect preceded one step further when the worship of other god and goddess are also tolerated.<sup>26</sup>

**Principal Satras of the Brahma samhati-** The total number of Satras affiliated to the sub sect of Brahma samhati is more than hundred in the entire Brahmaputra valley and the number of disciples is larger than those of any other sub sect.<sup>27</sup> The most important Satras of this sub sect in western Assam is Patbausi established by Damodardeva himself. Vyaskuchi Satra established by Bhattacharya comes next. The other notable Satras in western Assam of this sub sect are Govindapur (established by Bhagavandevi), Loca (established by Arjundevi), Khudiya (established by Gopal Mishra).

The most influential and affluent Satras of eastern Assam are Kuruwabahi, Auniati, Dakhinpat and Garamur established by Vamshigopaldevi, Niranjandevi, Banamalidevi and Lakshminarayan respectively are popularly known as chari Satras. They are

also called as Rajaghariya chari Satras (Satras those received royal patronage from the Ahom monarchs). Banamalideva is supposed to have introduced the system of Tantric and Puranic diksha in addition to the usual sarana system of Assamese Vaishnavism.<sup>28</sup> The Satras established by Yadumanideva, a disciple of Damodardeva who accompanied Vamsigopaldeva to eastern Assam and by his sons, are Adhar, Mahara etc.

The most important Satra of the Haridevi sect is Maneri established by Harideva himself. The other notable Satras of this sect are Bahari, Bainakuchi, Jagara etc.

### **Other three Samhatis-**

Madhavdeva outlived Sankardeva by twenty eight years and during this period he carried on the proselytizing activities as well as the cultural traditions initiated by his Guru.<sup>29</sup> But immediately after the death of Madhavdeva there grew three more subsects within the main body of the order. It is known from the different Vaishnava sources that Madhavdeva did not nominate anybody to succeed him as the supreme religious head. At the same time, there was none among the principal disciples who could command an unflinching allegiance from all sections of devotees. Damodardeva had already seceded during the life time of Madhavdeva. Narayandas Thakur Ata, the friend and colleague of Madhavdeva, was then too old to shoulder the responsibility of keeping together the different sections of the devotees. Naturally, the disciples found themselves divided in to three sections under the leadership of Gopal Ata alias Bhawanipuria Gopal Ata, Purushottam Thakur and Mathuradas Burha Ata respectively.<sup>30</sup>

### **Kala Samhati-**

The Kala samhati owes for its origin to Gopal Ata (1541-1611 AD) of Bhawanipur. The followers of this samhati claim that the founder of this branch was nominated by Madhavdeva as his successor. Gopal Ata was one of twelve apostles (Dharmacharyas) nominated by Madhavdeva. Gopal Ata established a Satra at Kaljhar, a place situated at a few miles distance from Bhawanipur where he died in 1611 AD at the age of seventy.<sup>31</sup> The name of the samhati might have come from the name of this original Satra.

Gopal Ata nominated twelve Acharyas to preached the message of the Bhakti in different parts of the Brahmaputra valley. The notable branches of the Kala samhati which greatly contributed to the development of the sub sect are Dihing, Mayamara, Gajala and Ahataguri. The Mayamara or Moamariya branch of Satras founded by Aniruddhadeva and the Dihingiya branch of Satras founded by Yadumanideva deserve special consideration for their historical importance.

### **Characteristics of the Kala Samhati order-**

The main feature of the Kala samhati is that it keeps absolute faith in the Guru. To the followers of this sub sect the Guru is God in human form.<sup>32</sup> It is stated that Gopaldeva brought to the forefront the doctrine of guruvadu. That the followers of this subsect did not bow their heads to any one but their gurus.<sup>33</sup> For the liberal view in religious matters, some sort of esoteric observances probably entered in to the sect in the later times.

The next important fact to be noted is the softening of the rigour of caste distinction. Though the practice of inter-dining and inter- marriage were not prevalent, yet no distinction was made between one disciple and another on grounds of caste.<sup>34</sup> According to Aniruddhadevar Carita, Aniruddhadeva, a Kayastha by caste, used to cook food and serve meal to all devotees who resided within the Satra compound of Gopal Ata.<sup>35</sup> But this reference does not prove that inter-dining was actually in vogue.<sup>36</sup> According to B.C. Allen inter- marriage is prevalent amongst certain castes and sub-castes religiously attached to the Mayamara branch of the Kala samhati . He writes : “The majority of the Matakars are Ahoms, Chutiyas and Doms, but there are certain members of the Kalitas, Keots and Koches amongst them . All these castes except the Doms inter- marry”.<sup>37</sup> This statement of Allen was vigorously contradicted by followers as well as by the the head of the Mayamara Satra.<sup>38</sup> It is a fact that inter- marriage or inter-dining is not prevalent in any of the Vaishnavite sects. But it is also a fact that the Kala samhati is more liberal in its attitude towards these social problems.<sup>39</sup> A Brahmin , simply because of his birth , does not receive a higher position or status in their sectarian assemblies than a non – Brahmin.

Another important feature of this samhati is that the influence of Brahmanical rituals has been reduced to a negligible position. Even the Brahmins affiliated to this sub-sect did not perform the Vedic sandhya or mutter the gayatri mantra.<sup>40</sup> But the Brahmin disciples of this samhati vehemently denied it.<sup>41</sup> The upper class Hindus of this samhati are seen to observe the vedic rites even today.<sup>42</sup> Brahmanical rituals have not been uniformly cast off by all sections of its disciples, but the sphere of their influence have been limited to unavoidable rites like those of marriage and death.

The next feature to be noted is that this samhati is primarily responsible for bringing to the fold of Vaishnavism the tribals and socially backward communities and thus giving them an opportunity to satisfy their spiritual urge.<sup>43</sup> It is easy to follow devotional practices attracted many people to this group and therefore, the number of disciples of this samhati increased by leaps and bounds.<sup>44</sup>

Lastly, the sub-sect is characterized by the absence of practices of telling beads of rosary and image worship. The Guru is considered to be the image of God and therefore the religious heads of the Mayamara Satra have been designated as murti (image). Aniruddhadeva , the founder is called Adya –murti (the primal image ).

### **Principal Satras of the Kala Samhati-**

The Satras of Kala Samhati are mainly confined to central and eastern Assam. Twelve Satras, as we have said before, were established under the auspices of Gopaldeva; six of them were presided over by Sudra Mahantas, and six by Brahman Mahantas. These are (a) Bahbari and Dihing of Bar Yadumani, (b) Mayamara of Aniruddhadeva, (c) Gajala of Saru Yadumani, (d) Ahatguri of Sriram Ata, (e) Khoura Mouchar of Ramachandra, (f) Haladhiati of Narayana, (g) Nogariya of Sanatana, (h) Habung of

Paramananda, (i) Charaibahi of Murari, (j) Kathpar of Purushottama, (k) Doloipo Satra of Sanatana (Brahmin) and (l) Ikarajan of Ramcharana.

Dihing, Mayamara, Gajala and Ahataguri are the notable branches of the Kala Samhati.

### **Purusha Samhati-**

The Purusha Samhati derived from the name of Purushottam Thakur , the eldest grandson of Sankardeva.<sup>45</sup> After the death of Madhavdeva, Purushottam, the eldest grandson of Sankardeva claimed the apostolic seat on the ground that he was the real successor of Sankardeva. There after, he started to propagate the faith on a separate line, which, in course of time, came to be known as Purusha samhati. Purushottam Thakur regarded Sankardeva as the only guru of the faith and give more importance to nama element of the four fundamental things (vastu).<sup>46</sup> Thus name of the samhati owes its origin to Purushottam Thakur. The orthodox circle of this group explains that the term Purusha is derived from Purusha Narayana , who is supposed to be its first initiator. Others holds that the name is derived from Mahapurusha , the honorific epithet applied to Sankardeva . According to them, Sankardeva is said to be the initiator of this group. But probably this is not true, because during the time of Sankardeva the samhati division of Assam Vaishnavism did not come in to existence. Purushottam and Chaturbhuj, the grandsons of Sankardeva are considered as founders of this samhati.

### **Characteristics of the Purusha samhati-**

According to the Vaishnavite tradition; the Purusha samhati lays special emphasis on Nama which is one of the four fundamental elements in the practice of devotion. Chanting and singing in praise of God and meditating on His various names and forms are considered acts of special merit according to this sub-sect. This is why the Satras of this sub-sect developed various ways and modes of singing or chanting congregational prayers, such as pal-nama (chanting prayers in succession throughout night), uthana-nama (chanting of prayers with rhythmic movements in standing posture) etc. The followers of this sub-sect observe Brahmanical rites and in most of the the Satras affiliated to this sub-sect, images of Vishnu are to be found.<sup>47</sup>

Thus though it lays special emphasis on Nama, it does not deny the necessity of image worship and Brahmanical rites. Viewed from this point, the gulf of difference between the Purusha and the Brahma samhatis is very narrow.

Another important feature is that though this group gives much emphasis on Sankardeva as the only guru and lays special importance on nam-kirtana but Madhavdeva also occupies the same exalted place as that of Sankardeva.<sup>48</sup> Both of them are considered equal ; as the popular term 'dujana guru' (the two gurus ) is generally used to mean them.<sup>49</sup>

Finally, another remarkable features of this sub-sect that, the Satras of this order have their Brahmin disciple till today.<sup>50</sup> This is the only instance in Assam where Brahmins continued to be disciples of non- Brahman Gosain. Once some non- Brahman Gosain had to face the royal oppression from the king Rudra Singha for administering religious ordination to their Brahman disciples.<sup>51</sup> But the tradition has been still retained by the Satras of this sub-sect in spite of such acts.

### **Principal Satras of the Purusha Samhati-**

The four main Satras of Purusha Samhati are Narowa, kowamara, Dighali and Chamaguri. They are together called as 'Bardowa group of Satras' or 'Nati Satras'. Francis Hamilton, in his An Account of Assam, puts Salaguri and Kowamara separately and omits the Dighali Satra in his list.<sup>52</sup> On the other hand, Maniram Dewan, rightly put these four Satras together in one group.<sup>53</sup> In central Assam, the word 'Chari Sattriya' means these four Satras and not the four Satras of eastern Assam, which is called 'Bamuni chari Satra' or 'Raj Satra' as against the 'Mahapurushya Chari Satra'.<sup>54</sup>

The other principal Satras affiliated to the Purusha Samhati are – (a) Bar- Barajaniya Satras or Bar- Bareghariya Satras i.e., Satras established by the twelve principal disciples of Purushottam Thakur, (b) Saru Barajaniya Satras or Saru- Bareghariya Satras i.e., Satras established by the twelve principal disciples of Chaturbhuj Thakur and Satras established by disciples of Kanaklata, the wife of Chaturbhuj. The Bar- Barajaniya Satras are Korchung Satra of Keshava, Punia Satra of Parashurama, Ratanpur Satra of Paramananda, Chatamiya Satra of Vasudeva, Gomotha Satra of Rama Vipra, Gomotha Mahara Satra of Krishnaram, Elenji Satra of Bapu Krishna, Chupaha Satra of Krishnacharana, Thakariyal Satra of Kamalalochana Saud-kuchi Satra of Haricharana, Bengena-atि Satra of Murari, and Kath Satra of Puroshottam.<sup>55</sup> The Saru- Barajaniya Satras are Sungapar Satra of Kanai, Nachanipar Satra of Ramhari, Belsidhi Satra of Sanatana, Banganya Satra of Hari Vipra, Salaguri Satra of Ratnakar, Gobhir Satra of Joykanai, Bihimpur Satra of Govinda, Haldhiati Satra of Mukunda, Suvaria Satra of Joykrishna, Bharuwal Satra of Vishnudeva, Kawoimari Satra of Gopinatha and Ujaniali Satra of Kanu.<sup>56</sup>

Satras established by disciples of Kanaklata are Patiyatari of Sri Haricharana, Nalatiya of Gopinath Dvija, Michimi Satra of Joyhari, Kantari Satra of Raghupati Dvija, Patkatiya Satra of Sriram, Baralimariya Satra of Atmaram, Dhendol Satra of Mohan, Abhaypur Satra of Manpur, Kalshila Satra of Ananta, Koupatiya Satra of Joykrishna, Kakilagram Satra of Sankhanath, Kothargram Satra of Paramananda, Khedapariya of Govinda and Kamalbari Satra of Gopala.<sup>57</sup>

### **Nika Samhati-**

The Nika samhati has come in to existence much later than the other three samhatis.<sup>58</sup> The very name Nika (pure, clean ) points to the conclusion that it originated immediately after the formation of other three sub-sects. The Nika Samhati possibly derives its name from the fact that its adherents pay great attention to rules of outward cleanliness and other formalities. It is also known as Nitya Samhati.<sup>59</sup> The necessity of organizing a cleaner sect arose when other sub sects appeared to have gone somewhat astray from the original path chalked out by the first two Gurus. Therefore, Padma Ata who was the youngest of Madhavdeva's chief disciples and who was also saddled with the responsibility of the religious headship in eastern Assam, thought it necessary to evolve a proper code of conducts for the Vaishnavas. So, some modern writers like to trace the origin of this Samhati to Padma Ata only.<sup>60</sup> However, Padma Ata got immediate response from Mathuradasa of the Barpeta Satra who was also no less anxious to purify

the sect by laying stringent rules and conduct of life.<sup>61</sup> They were also helped by Keshav Charan Ata , a close companion of Padma Ata throughout the latter's religious career. These three , viz, Padma Ata , Mathura Ata and Keshav Ata may be considered the trio of the Nika Samhati .

### **Characteristics of the Nika Samhati-**

The founders of this sect evolved a set of conducts and rules for their followers which were meant to purify Vaishnavas in body and mind. For its exclusive attention to cleanliness of mind and body, the subsect came to be known as Nika or nikka i.e., pure. The followers of this sub-sect are required to observe strict discipline in respect of food, dress and manners and in all religious matters. They never partake food prepared by others, never take even a betel-nut without taking bath and never put on a piece of cloth that has not been washed or dipped in water daily. Even fuel is sprinkled with water before it is actually put in to fire. These conducts of everyday life are uniformly followed in all Satras affiliated to the Nika Samhati.<sup>62</sup>

The second noticeable feature of this section is that its followers consider Madhavdeva as the Guru of the sect, while Sankardeva is regarded as the Guru of their Guru and as such, their relation with Madhavdeva is immediate and that with Sankardeva is indirect.<sup>63</sup> Every neophyte of this sub-sect is required to owe allegiance to the name of Madhavdeva.<sup>64</sup> Thus the position of Madhavdeva is more important than that of Sankardeva in their religious hierarchy.

Another important characteristics of this Samhati is the negative attitude towards the practice of image worship. The worship of the scripture is a marked feature of this Samhati though the worshipping a scripture is also present in the Purusha and the Kala Samhatis, it is more prominent in the Nika Samhati.

### **Principal Satras of the Nika Samhati-**

The most influential Satras in western Assam affiliated to the Nika Samhati is Barpeta Satra established by Madhavdeva himself. Mathuradas Burha Ata was nominated by Madhavdeva to remain charge of the Barpeta Satra. On the other hand the most influential Satras in eastern Assam affiliated to the Nika Samhati is Kamalabari Satra established by Padma Ata. The other important Satras of this Samhati are Barjaha Satra of Keshav charan Ata, Sundaridiya Satra of Ramcharan Thakur, Khatara Satra of Govinda Ata, Chamaria Satra of Bar Vishnu Ata, Dhopguri Satra of Lakshmikanta Ata. The Madhupur Satra of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva is also belongs to this Samhati.

### **Relation between the Samhatis—**

The Neo- Vaishnavite Movement and the Satra Institution of Assam<sup>65</sup> states that – ‘ the history has not mentioned any friction between the different sub-sects of Vaishnavism in Assam. Rather a spirit of co-operation and harmony marked the relation between the different sub-sects throughout the history of Vaishnavism in Assam.’ But this can not be accepted as authoritative. At the initial stage, the relation among the four sub-sects was not so cordial. During the period between 1770-1790 AD, the Mayamara sect of the Kala Samhati in a fit of religious frenzy and political intoxication tried to dominate over the follower of other sub-sects , which affected the relation with other sub-sects.

It can not , however , be denied that there are a few spurious biographical works written in the names of Madhavdeva, Bhattacharya and Krishna Bharati in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries; they contain vilification against Vaishnavite saints of opposite subsects. Adi-carita, Sat-sampradaya-katha and Santanirnaya , supposed to be written by Madhavdeva , Bhattacharya and Krishna Bharati respectively , contain sectarian vilification which is usually rare in the earlier biographical literature. But its effect on the relation of the sub-sects was negligible.<sup>66</sup> Satras of different sub-sects expanded and thrived side by side without mutual antagonism.<sup>67</sup>

On the other hand some orthodox Gosais of the Purush Samhati do not agree to sit together and dine with the Gosais of the Kala Samhati. Their social relation with the Kala Samhati is discouraging.<sup>68</sup>

Accounts of conflict even on minor points are recorded in the Charit Puthis of their respective subsects. For example, the Thakur Charita, a biographical work on the life and works of Purushottam Thakur , mentions a quarrel between Mathuradas and Narayan Thakur considered Sankardeva as the Guru of the sect, where as Mathuradas contended that Madhavdev was the real Guru of he sect and considered Sankardeva to be an incarnation.<sup>69</sup> Similarly , Purushottam did not acknowledge Madhavdeva as the successor of Sankardeva.

### **Conclusion:**

Thus, according to some scholars, Vaishnavism in Assam got divided in to four sub-sects mainly due to the question over the headship of the apostolic seat. The sub-sects founded by the above apostles differed in outward religious observances, but the fundamental teachings did not differ very much. But we can say that it was the ideological differences for which Vaishnavism of Assam got divided. In spite of this division, the Samhatis played very important role in spreading and stabilizing the Neo-Vaisnavite Movement in Assam. The sub-sects created a network of Satras throughout the entire Brahmaputra Valley, and practically converted more than half of its population to Vaishnavism.

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