

CHAPTER -IV

ŚAṆKARADEVA AND 15TH / 16TH CENTURY ASSAM

4.1 Introduction :

The system of keeping regular records of activities and events of contemporary time was introduced in Assam in the thirteenth century. It was happened only after the establishment of Āhom kingdom in eastern Assam. Sanskrit literature, Hindu and Buddhists mythologies and scriptures, inscriptions, accounts of the foreign travellers and Āhom *Buranjis* are the most important source of informations. From the Hindu and Buddhist activities the ancient history of Assam can be known. These works were mostly written in Sanskrit. The kings of Pragjyotiṣa and Kāmarūpa were referred in *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata*. The political and cultural condition were mentioned in the Purāṇas. *Kālikā Purāṇa* was written in Kāmarūpa in the tenth century and it is a very important source of information for the history of ancient Assam. Sanskrit dramas, works on political science, books on medicine and other subjects composed by poets and writers of ancient India are valuable sources of information. The copper plate inscriptions and rock inscriptions, the ruins of temples, the account of Hiuntsang, folklores and many art objects throw light on the ancient history of Assam.

Deodhāi Buranjī, *Jayantīā Buranjī*, *Kachārī Buranjī*, *Assam Buranjī*, *Tunkhungia Buranjī* are the other source of information about ancient Assam. The biographies of the great *Vaiṣṇava* reformers, Śaṅkaradeva. Mādhavadeva and others also offer some important information. All these left valuable accounts which reveal

important information about Assam. In this chapter discussion is made only on the social and educational condition of 15th/16th century Assam.

4.2 : Origin of the Name, Assam :

The North-Eastern part of India now called Assam was known in the epic age as Pragjyotiṣa. In classical Sanskrit literature, e.g. in the works of Kālidāsa, Pragjyotiṣa is also called Kāmarūpa. The first available epigraphic record mentioning the name Kāmarūpa is the *Allahabad inscription of Samudra Gupta*, belonging to the fifth century of the Christian era. A graphic account of the geography of Pragjyotiṣa or Kāmarūpa is to be found in the *Kālikā Purāṇa* (10th century AD) and the *Yoginītantra* (16th century AD), both of which dwell upon the religio geographical history of medieval Assam.

"From the mountain of Kāncana in Nepal up to the confluences of the Brahmaputra, from the Karatoyā to Dikkaravasini, in the north the mount Kanja, in the west the Karatoyā, in the east the *Dikṣu*, in the south the confluence of the *Lakṣa* with the Brahmaputra; this daughter of the mountains, is the territory which all scriptures call by the name Kāmarūpa." Thus the ancient Kāmarūpa embraced besides the districts of modern Assam, the whole of North Bengal including Koch Behar. Raṅpur, Jalpaiguri and Dinajpur.¹

The modern name of the province, Assam is of recent origin. It is connected with the Āhoms or the Shan invaders who entered the Brahmaputra valley in the beginning of the thirteenth century A.D. The tradition of the Āhoms themselves is that the present name is derived from "Asama" in the sense of 'unequalled' or "peerless". They say this was the term applied to them by the native tribes at the time of their

1 Barua, Birinchi Kumar. (2012). *History of Assamese Literature*, P.1.

invasion of the valley. Dr. Banikanta Kakati suggests that 'Asama', 'Peerless', may be a later-day Sanskritization of an earlier form 'Acham; In Tai the root 'cham' means 'to be vanquished' with the Assamese prefix 'a', 'Asam' or 'Acham' would mean undefeated 'Victorious'. "The name of Asam" observes Baden Powell "Is most probably traceable to (the Bodo) 'Ha-com, the low or level country'.²

Chutiyā kings ruled the country east of the Subansirī and the Disāng, with the exemption of a strip to the south and South-east, where several small Bodo tribes enjoyed a precarious independence. Further west, there was a Kachārī kingdom, on the south bank of the Brahmaputra, which probably extended at least half way across the Nowgong district.

"West of the Kachārīs on the south bank and of the Chutiyās on the north bank were a number of petty chiefs called Bhūñās. Each was independent of the others within his own domain, but they seem to have been in the habit of joining their forces wherever they were threatened by a common enemy. The boundary between the tract ruled by these Bhūñās and the kingdom of Kāmarūpa doubtless varied from time to time, a powerful prince would bring many of them under his control, but they would again become independent when the sceptre, passed in the hands of a weaker ruler"³

In the Hindu epics and in *Paurāṇik* and *Tāntrik* literature there are numerous references to ancient Assam, which is known as Pragjyotiṣa in the *Mahābhārata* and as Kāmarūpa in *Purāṇas* and *Tantras*. Its extent varied from time to time when the stories relating to it were inserted in the *Mahābhārata*, is stretched southwards as far as the Bay of Bengal and its western boundary was the Karatoyā. This was then a river of the first

2 Barua, Birinchi Kumar. (2012). *History of Assamese Literature*, P.1.2

3 Gait. Sir Edward, *A History of Assam*. p.-39

order and united in its bed the streams which now go to form the Tistā and Kośī and the Mahānanda. It was held sacred, ranking almost as high as the Gaṅges and its tutelary deity, mermaid goddess named Kauśika was worshipped all over the *Matsya Deśā* or the tract between it and the old bed of the Brahmaputra, which formerly flowed past the town of Mymensingh. In the *Kālikā Purāṇa* it is said that the temple of Kāmākhyā near Gauhati was in the centre of Kāmarūpa and in the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* it is added that the country extended around this temple in all direction for 100 yojanas or about 450 miles. Allowing for exaggeration, this may be held to embrace the whole of eastern Bengal, Assam and Bhutān. In the *Yoginītantra* which is probably a later work, Kāmarūpa is said to extend from the Karatoyā river on the west to the Dikhow on the east and from the mountain of Kanjagiri on the north, to the confluence of the Brahmaputra and Lakhya rivers on the south, that is to say, it included roughly, the Brahmaputra valley, Bhutān, Raṅgpur, Koch Bihar, the North-east of Mymensingh and possibly the Garo Hills.

According to the same work the country was divided into four portion, viz, *Kāmapīth* from the Karatoyā to the Śankosh, *Ratnapīth* from the Śankosh to the *Rupahī*, *Suvarnapīth* from the *Rupahī*, to the Bharali and *Saumarpīth* from the Bharali to the Dikrang. Elsewhere *Ratnapīth* is said to include the tract between the Karatoyā and the Mānas, *Kāmapīth* that between the Karatoyā and the Mānas, *Kāmapīth* that between the Mānas and Silghat on the North bank of Brahmaputra and *Bhadrapīth*, the corresponding portion of the south bank, while *Saumarpīth* as before, is the most easterly tract.⁴

4 Dev Chowdhury, Nabajyoti. (2009). *Punyabhumi Axom* pp-10-11.

4.3 Social Condition of 15th/16th Century Assam :

Prior to *Vaiṣṇavite* movement *Śāktism* and *Tāntricism*, mingled with pseudo *Buddhist* culture were the prevailing religions of ancient Kāmarūpa. These three main cultures blending together induced the general folk to practice religious ceremonials and social functions in various forms as promulgated in the *Tantras*. Kāmākhyā situated in the centre of Kāmarūpa is found in the long past to be a seat of all sorts of *Tāntrik* rituals. In course of time religious rites and social orders reduced to a chaotic state. The mass of the people stooped to a very low and degraded position for want of real exposition of religious intricacies which had been sealed under the impenetrable garb of Sanskrit lore. To uplift the mass from this depth, Śaṅkaradeva set his heart to study the *Vedas*, the *Vedānta*, the *Gītā*, the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and the like so as to expound a proper form of religion and social order.⁵

Resulting in its wide prevalence the *Śakti* worship received a fillip after the composition of *Kālikā Purāṇa* (around 10th century AD) and *Yoginītantra* (later part of 13th century AD) in Kāmarūpa. These two ancient treatises contain the legends of ancient gods and goddesses. It gives a historical and geographical account of the main religious shrines and about the extent of various kingdoms. They dwelt extensively on the rites and rituals of various religions of Kāmarūpa. The discussion on religious texts, *Tāntrik* rituals, *yogic* practices, practice of deceit, illusion, method of sacrifice, their rules of observance and outcome were performed.

⁵ Malakar. R. (1977). *Teachings of Śrī Śaṅkaradeva*. P.I

In the *Kālikā Purāṇa*, emphasis was on the hetero-dox doctrine of the *Tantras* (Indulgence in wine, women, flesh, wealth and coition). Worship of *Śakti* gained its momentum due to these before the 10th century. Because of this heterodox *Tāntrik* doctrine sacrifice of bird, animal and human being during worship of *sakti* gained ascendance. In the phallic form Śiva was worshipped in Kāmarūpa and also in idol form as Mahesh, Dashabhy, Nataraj, Bhairav, Uma-Maheswar and Harihar. To propitiate Śiva the Boḍo, Kachārī, Koch people offered wine and meat. Goats were sacrificed and dancing girls performed dance at the alter in the Śiva temples on Śiva Caturdasi in early Assam.

The copper plates and the architectural remains pertaining to that era prove that *Vaiṣṇavism* was also prevalent during that time. Viṣṇu was worshipped in the form of *Chaturbhūj*, *Dwibhūj* or Salagram Idols of Viṣṇu have been discovered between the seventh-eighth century to the tenth-eleventh century. Viṣṇu was described as the greatest among Gods in the *Yoginītantra* and in the *Kālikā Purāṇa*. During Viṣṇu worship animal and bird sacrifice took place at that time.⁶

The *Tāntrik* rituals and the *Śākta* cult reached their zenith during the period from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century. A common feature at the *Devi* temples were worship of virgin maidens, sacrifice of mithun, offerings of wine, meat, fish and coins. The Tāmreswarī temple in Śadiyā, Vairabī temple in Tripura, Kāmākhyā temple, Vairabi temple to the south of the Kāmākhyā temple, Ugratārā temple, Vairabī temple at Tezpur were the important sites of *Śakti* worship. Scholars believe that for *Śakti* worship and study of *Tantra*, the Kāmākhyā temple situated on the Nilāchal hill was an

6. Goswami, Shobha. *Yugasrashta Mahapurusha Śrīmanta Śaṅkardev*, P.10

important place. The *Tāntriks* worshiped goddess *Kālī* and *Kāmākhyā* as a symbol of creation. The *Tāntriks* consider *Kāmākhyā* as the most important place of worship among, *Kāmākhyā*, *Śrīhatta*, *Pūriaguri* and *Uddiyan*.

The worship of *Śiva* and *Devi* took precedence over *Viṣṇu* worship during the 15th and the 16th century. The practice of *Tantra* and *Indrajal* also flourished during the time. The practice of Hindu *Tantra* and the Buddhist *Tantra* created a dangerous trend in *Kāmarūpa* and people from other states of India were scared to come to *Kāmarūpa*. *Kāmarūpa* became famous for sorcery and magic practised by the *Tāntriks*. The invading Mughals were scared of the inhabitants of *Kāmarūpa*. Mughals believed that someone going to *Kāmarūpa* would never come back as he would be transformed into a goat or sheep by the magic spell of the *Tāntriks*. By the 16th century, the *Śakti* worship and *Tāntrik* practice gradually started to decrease, with the advent of *Neo-Vaiṣṇavite* movement in Assam.⁷

"At the time of the appearance of *Śaṅkaradeva*, the *Śākta* and the *Tāntrik* forms of worship dominated the country. *Śaṅkaradeva*'s ancestors were all *Śāktas*, and one of them was named *Devidas* (the servant of the goddess) because of his devotion to the goddess of the *Śākta* cult. *Mādhavadeva*, *Sankaras* devout disciple and *Bhaṭṭadeva*, another *Vaiṣṇava* saint of the period, were *Śāktas* before their conversion to *Vaiṣṇavism*. The *Kāmākhyā* temple at *Gauhati*, the *Tāmresvarī* temple at *Śadiyā*, the *Pariharesvara* temple at *Doobi*, the *Mahādeva* temple at *Dergaon*, were the main centres of *Śākta* worship in the country and from them spread a tremendous influence over the secular and monastic clergy and all orders in the social scale. In course of time, the *Śākta* forms

7. Goswami, Shobha. *Yuga srashta Mahapurush Śrīmanta Śaṅkardev*. pp. 10.11.

of worship absorbed many of the rites and rituals of the aboriginal tribes and thus gave rise to the fascinating *Tāntrik* cult. *Tāntrik* rituals with many abominable corruptions were also practised in Assam in the centuries before the birth of Śaṅkaradeva. The *Tāntrik* mode of worship consisted of elaborate rituals including occasionally human sacrifices. Magic, *mantra* (the word of power), and other esoteric practices were considered the easiest means of attaining salvation. Whatever may be the efficacy of *Tāntrik* worship as a means of salvation, there can be no denying the fact that it led eventually to moral decadence, social corruption, perversion and blasphemy"⁸

Śaṅkaradeva received a complete text of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* from Puri through Jagadish Misra of Tirhut. A miraculous story is told about his coming across with the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. The *Brāhmaṇ* Pundit Jagdish Misra went to Puri to read out the *Bhāgavata* in the temple of Jagannatha. In a dream, the *Brāhmaṇa* received a mandate from Jagannatha to the effect that he should proceed to Kāmarūpa and read out the *Bhāgavata* to Śaṅkaradeva. Jagadish Misra searched out Śaṅkaradeva at Bardowa and read out the book before him. The *Brāhmaṇa* survived only a year after the mission of reading out all the twelve books of the *Bhāgavata* to Śaṅkaradeva was fulfilled. Śaṅkaradeva then began to study deeply the *Bhāgavata* with its commentary and seriously took up propounding and propagating the cult of *Bhakti*. He immediately set to translate the *Purāṇa* into simple Assamese verse and started to compose many songs, narrative poems and plays on the theme of the *Purāṇa*.

Assam was always a multi-racial, multi-lingual and multi-cultural land diversity in every respect became a grim reality. This type of diversity found expression in the

8 Barua, Birinchi Kumar. (2012). *History of Assamese Literature*, p.19

multiplicity of religious faiths and practices. People of this region were a divided lot on the ground of religious faiths and practices. The common people had no alternative but to profess and practice the faith of their kings. The social structure was feudalistic type. Individual choice was a reflection of what the royalty believed professed and practised.

Every tribal group had its own faiths, rites and rituals. Despite local differences Hinduism was a force which manifested itself in different shades and colours. The general people were either believer in *Śaivism* or in *Śāktism*. Depending upon situations and necessities, they worshipped many god and goddesses and some *Tāntrik* cult.

Though the literary output of the early period of Assam were very meager, it should not lead one to believe that the people of this part at that time were not enlightened. From the epigraphic records it is evident that the kings of early Kāmarūpa were fond of learning and their capitals were the abode of scholars and litterateur. A part from this Kāmarūpa of that period attracted scholars and student from many parts of India. The king Bhāskar Varmā, wrote Hiuentasang, "is fond of learning and the people are so in imitation of him. Man of ability come afar to study here"⁹ The Kamatā king, Durlabha Nārāyaṇa, who patronised poets like Hem Saraswatī, Harihar Vipra and Kabiratna Saraswatī. *Prahlād carita*, the first book in Assamese was composed by Hem Saraswati under Durlabha Nārāyaṇa is ascribed to the 13th Century A.D. Another Kamatā king, who patronised Assamese literature is Indra Nārāyaṇa.¹⁰

In the Second phase, the great epic *Rāmāyaṇa*, translated by Madhav Kandali under the patronage of the king Mahāmāṇikya in the 14th century AD. Mahāmāṇikya

⁹ Bhuyan, S.K. (1956). *Studies in the Literature of Assam*, P.2

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 5-6

was a Barahi king. The Barahis were a branch of the Boḍo-Kachārī people. Mādhav Kandali is undoubtedly the greatest figure in the firmament of the Assamese literature. By translating the great epic *Rāmāyaṇa* it was he who brought Assamese language to a certain level of literary standard and made the path clear to his followers to follow his ideal.¹¹

In the 15th century AD. Assam was experiencing political turmoil with the different principalities fighting to hold away over the entire region. This type of chaos and instability was reflected in the religious sphere also. In this period Assam presented a Kaleidoscope picture of diverse shades and grades of culture. There were people who loosely adhered to *Vaiṣṇavism* or *Śaivism* and there were others who practiced *Śāktism* bordering on extreme *Tāntricism*. The followers of these cults indulged in evil practices like animal and human sacrifices, magical rites, spells and the like. The poor and downtrodden became victims of these ghastly practices.

At this juncture the great spiritual leader, social reformer, playwright and composer Śaṅkaradeva appeared in the social scene of 15th century Assam. Śaṅkaradeva was a multifaceted genius who gave a direction to the chaotic Assamese society by initiating a fresh approach to the existing *Vaiṣṇava* religion which gave rise to a set of new values and aided in social synthesis. The *Neo-Vaiṣṇavite* movement initiated by Śaṅkaradeva in Assam, in later part of the 15th century ushered in a era of socio-cultural reformation in Assam, humanist in content and popular in form in literature as well as in vocal and visual arts. The *Neo-Vaiṣṇavite* movement was at once

11 Bhuyan, S.K. (1956). *Studies in the Literature of Assam*, pp 1-3.

unique in nature but revolutionary in terms of its effect. The uniqueness of this movement lay in the fact that unlike other contemporary cults in other parts of India, Śaṅkaradeva's, *Neo-Vaiṣṇavism* rested not on a discursive reasoning and abstract thinking but gave emphasis on ethnic integration, social reforms and spiritual uplifts through an innovative mode of religious conduct based on indigenous elements of the region. During that time the society of Assam was in a turmoil, fragmented and faction ridden. It was revolutionary in the sense that *Neo-Vaiṣṇavism* in Assam meant a way of life, not only a religious faith. It encircled their social, cultural and religious spheres even as it brought about a change in the very outlook of life. In terms of its unique and innovative character the *Neo-Vaiṣṇavism* of Assam stand out among the different *Bhakti* cults of India. *Neo-Vaiṣṇavism* found expression in the move to create a egalitarian civil society based on the shared values of fraternity, humanism, equality and democracy. This new creed of fact started by Śaṅkaradeva is popularly known as *Eka-Śaraṇa-Hari-Nāma-Dharma*. Śaṅkaradeva preached devotion to Lord Kṛṣṇa or Viṣṇu, the single God.

The ancient kingdom was undergoing a process of political disintegration since the beginning of the 13th century. Prior to and even during Śaṅkaradeva's time there were rise and fall of half a dozen of royal dynasties and kingdoms of small to modern size. Āhoms in the East (a Chinese-Tai race) who invaded in 1228 had captured a large portion of Chutiyā and Kachārī Kingdoms and it was going on.

In the western region, the khen dynasty had given way to the powerful Koch dynasty with a brief interlude of rule for twenty old years by Hussain Shah the Afghan from Bengal. The North East was the powerful kingdom of the Chutiyās. To the south,

the Kachārī ruled from Dimapur and the hills were populated by various tribes who never recognised any outside ruler. In central Assam, there were the minuscule states of the Bara Bhūñā. Bhūñās are a land owning class descended from the Kāyaṣṭhas of Kanauj.¹²

Describing the social conditions of that particular period, Bani Kanta Kakati pertinently mention that The Bara Bhūñās were keeping watch over the broken fragments of the ancient Hindu kingdom like so many wardens of the marches without any overlord. But even their vigils were challenged by the entry of the Āhoms, the rise of the Kachārīs in east and of the Koches in the west. The existence of society was threatened. Moreover society itself was moth-eaten from within and without any sustaining vitality from any external source. The land was infested with itinerant teachers of the *Vāmācāra Tāntrik* schools with their insistence on the philosophy of sex and palate. Amongst religious rites the most spectacular were bloody sacrifices to gods and goddesses amidst deafening noises of drums and cymbal, night vigils on virgin worship and the lewd dances of temple-women.¹³

Assam presented a varied picture of diversified culture in the 15th century. The majority of the people of that period belonged to non-Aryans tribes have their own distinctive manners, customs and religious beliefs and practices. During that time *Śāktism* was also widely prevalent. In the name of religious rites and rituals the followers of *Śāktism* were practicing some evil practices like animal sacrifices and sometimes even human sacrifices. Śaṅkaradeva created awareness among the laymen

12 Puri, B.N. (1968). *Studies in Early History and Administration in Assam*. pp 6-7.

13 Ed. Chaliha, B.P. (1978). *Śaṅkaradeva-Studies in culture* P.12

against these kinds of evil practices in these type of disturbing condition. Śaṅkaradeva unified the common people spreading religious ideas that gave shape to a set of new value and social synthesis in Assamese Society. *Neo-Vaiṣṇavism* of Śaṅkaradeva has used its spiritual propaganda as weapon to fight mainly against *Śāktism* which survives on vulgar materialist outlook. *Neo-Vaiṣṇavism* due to its unique and innovative character that shared the values of fraternity, equality, humanism and democracy takes an important place among the different *Bhakti* cults of India. In Assam the *Neo-Vaiṣṇavite* movement started by Śaṅkaradeva in the first decade of 16th century and reached its climax towards the middle of the 17th century. *Neo-Vaiṣṇavism* started on the theme of working towards the upliftment of the backward classes and minimization of the rigidity of caste distinction. The first attempt of Śaṅkaradeva was to bring the backward tribes, castes and classes into the fold of *Neo-Vaiṣṇavism*. Śaṅkaradeva accepted his disciples irrespective of their caste, tribe, class or religion.

Socio-Cultural Renaissance :

Śaṅkaradeva's *Neo-Vaiṣṇavite* movement created a socio-cultural Renaissance in the later part of the 15th century in Assam. *Neo-Vaiṣṇavite* movement meant not only a religious faith in Assam but also a way of life. It is based on the liberal doctrine of *Bhakti* opened to all classes and castes. *Neo-Vaiṣṇavism* initiated a new change in the socio-educational and religious sphere of the Hindu society and consequential changes in its value system and equality of relationships. To create an egalitarian civil society based on the shared values of fraternity, humanism, equality and democracy is the main motto of *Neo-Vaiṣṇavite* movement in Assam. People was made conscious of removal

of untouchability, unity between different tribes and communities, dignity of women, child care, and noise and water pollution etc.

The social condition was one of the gloom and catastrophe during 15th/ 16th century. The land from very early times was inhabited by people of different ethnic groups with their own distinct customs and beliefs. The situation arising out of this conglomeration of aboriginal tribes side by side with those belonging to the *Brāhmaṇical* order must have been worsened when endeavours were made to bring these tribes under the pale of the *Brāhmaṇical* social order. The society was vitiated by too many castes and creeds which ate into the vitals of the society. The social scene was in a state of turmoil before and during the time of Śaṅkaradeva.¹⁴

Having studied all the works of *Vaiṣṇavite* literature Śaṅkaradeva transformed them into Assamese so that the Assamese people with little literacy could understand them and practice *Vaiṣṇavism*. Śaṅkaradeva prepared dramas known as *Aṅkīyā Nāṭa* for audio-visual demonstration for the purpose of educating the illiterate people. So no other people of this region has been able to exert influence on the people as Śaṅkaradeva. He is adored here as an *Avatāra* of Viṣṇu. The people of Assam cannot think of the Assamese nation and its culture without him.

Śaṅkaradeva's time may be regarded as the middle age of Assam. In Assam the middle age started with the 15th century A.D. and lasted upto 1826 A.D. when the Britishers took over the administration of the state. This time reference must be taken into account in discussing and evaluating Śaṅkaradeva's progressivism. Again to assess

14 Bora, Suresh Chandra. & Kalita, Biswajit. (2013). *Śaṅkaradeva studies*, P.2

the present plight of his religion also we are to take into account the present socio-economic situations.

The Assamese middle age is marked by the end of tribalism and the start of feudalism. The tribal-communistic pattern of society began to dwindle at Śaṅkaradeva's time and the advent of a new society with rising middle class was ushered in. Śaṅkaradeva, himself belonging to and hailing from an upper middle class family being a son of a feudal lord and an off spring of a prestigious Baro Bhūñā clas, contributed a lot to inviting this new era¹⁵.

It is learnt from different sources including the extant bio-graphics of Śaṅkaradeva of the period that the political situation of Assam was in complete turmoil. During that time Assam was divided and disorganized by the rise and fall and the frequent conflict among the different political powers like Kachārīs, Koches, Āhom, Chutiyās etc. The social condition was worsened by the absence of social cohesion. Religious condition was also worsened by the absence of religious tolerance, intolerance and fanaticism which was prevalent everywhere. The *Kālikā Purāṇa* and the *Yoginītantra* present a different picture of the religious conditions and the religion of the 15th/ 16th century Assam. Different types of worships of various gods and goddesses were performed, animal sacrifice was a common phenomena. Human immolation also took place to satisfy gods or goddesses. The traditional rivalry between the *Śaivas* and *Śāktas* reached its zenith. As narrated in the *Kālikā Purāṇa* the horrible injunctions

15 Sharma, Nilima.(2008). *The Philosophy of Śaṅkaradeva An Appraisal*, P. 384.

connected with flesh, wine and women indicate to the moral degradation of the society.

Mādhavadeva described the chaotic situation of Assam in his *Nāma-Ghoṣā*

*they have no purity in food and sex,
have fallen from caste and clans,
they move about in disguise of saints
spoiling solemn vedic ways.*¹⁶

Śaṅkaradeva's religion was based on democratic principles and tolerant spirits. Śaṅkaradeva kept no distinction between caste and creed, between the rich and poor and between the high and the low. In this manner Śaṅkaradeva wanted to make the society a classless one.

His pupils included men of all classes of the society. There were several *Brāhmiṇ* and *Śūdra* pupils of Śaṅkaradeva including *Garo, Bhutia, Nagā, Kārbī (Mikir)* and fisherman etc. His famous pupils were Mādhavadeva, a Kāyastha, Dāmodaradeva, Sārvabhaūmadeva and Puruṣottamadeva, trio *Brāhmiṇs*.

The *Vaiṣṇavite* movement of Assam initiated by Śaṅkaradeva in the closing decades of the fifteenth century of the christianera is remarkable for its many sided contributions to the cultural history of the land. Within two hundred years since its inception it spread over the entire Brahmaputra valley and parts of modern Koch-Bihar which then formed a part of Kāmarūpa. With the disintegration of the Koch kingdom, its western part comprising modern Koch-Bihar gradually lost contact with the rest of Assam and subsequently became a part of Bengal. Śaṅkaradeva, Mādhavadeva and Dāmodaradeva who may be styled as *Trimūrti* of Assam *Vaiṣṇavism*, died in Koch-

¹⁶ Nāma-Ghoṣā, Mādhavadeva, v.295.

Behar enjoying the patronage of the then reigning kings. The movement brought in its wake a literary and artistic renaissance in Assam.

About the time when Śaṅkaradeva was born, Assam was in a melting point socially, politically and religiously. Since the beginning of the 13th century, this ancient kingdom was slowly undergoing a process of political disintegration and prior to and even during the time of Śaṅkaradeva there were rise and fall of about half a dozen of royal dynasties and kingdoms of small to moderate size. The emergence of the Tai-Āhoms sometime about 1228 A.D., however produced some political equilibrium in the eastern part of the land. This new force set its first foot holds in and around the modern district of Sivasagar, gradually expanding towards the west at the cost of the local princes. In the mean time, a class of independent feudal chief, the Bara-Bhūñās exercised political and administrative authority over a whole stretch of land in the central and the western half of Assam and ruled in comparative peace over the broken fragments of the erst-while Kāmarūpa kingdom, surrounded by the newly emerged Āhom kingdom in the East, the Kachārī kingdom in the south-east and the Koch kingdom in the west. Finally, however, they fall down one after another and were absorbed in by the formidable powers surrounding them.

Returning from long 12 years pilgrimage, Śaṅkaradeva, waged a relentless crusade against *Śākta* worship and *Tāntrik* practices. Śaṅkaradeva's stature grew to its full height against the spiritual barrenness of *Śāktism*. Śaṅkaradeva vigorously launched the *Vaiṣṇavite* Renaissance with utter contempt for cant and supreme faith in the spirit. Śaṅkaradeva enjoined adoration of one God and named this new faith *Eka-Śaraṇa-Nāma-Dhrama*, the religion of supreme surrender to the one and that one is Viṣṇu. Viṣṇu in the form of Nārāyaṇa manifests himself in various incarnations from age to

age. Kṛṣṇa is the most beloved incarnation of Viṣṇu. Śaṅkaradeva says. "These is one God and one devotion and there is none". The surrender to the one is very rigorously enjoined in Śaṅkaradeva's religion. In *Eka-Śaraṇa-Hari-Nāma-Dharma*, the worship of other gods and goddesses is strictly prohibited. Śaṅkaradeva said that a “*Vaiṣṇava* should not worship any other gods temple nor should he partake of offerings made to any other god. *Bhakti* would be vitiated by such fickleness”.

***Bhakti* and Śaṅkaradeva :**

The *Bhakti* movement was a widespread event of medieval Assam that embraced the whole of Assam. The word *Bhakti* means single minded devotion and love to one God. The *Bhakti dharma* was initiated by Śaṅkaradeva. Śaṅkaradeva's *Bhakti dharma* was against untouchability and inequality. Śaṅkaradeva's *Bhakti dharma* was to set up a society based on the liberal policies. Śaṅkaradeva basically was a religious preacher and social reformer. *Eka-Śaraṇa-Hari-Nāma-Dharma* preached by Śaṅkaradeva is a monotheistic faith (The faith of chanting the holy name of Lord Kṛṣṇa in complete surrender unto him alone based on the basic thought of *eka deva eka seva eka vine nahi keva* (One God one shelter, none else but one). To worship the only God is Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa.

Śaṅkaradeva initiated *Eka-Śaraṇa-Hari-Nāma-Dharma* in the later part of the 15th century. During that time the socio-religious condition of Assam was deteriorated to a great extent. The Social life of Assam was darkened with great prevalence of superstitions, social evils, corruption and *Tāntrik* practices. In Tāmresvarī temple of Sadiyā, Kāmākhyā temple of Kāmarūpa and in many other places these practices were in its zenith.

“The exaltation of *Bhakti* in Śaṅkaradeva’s religion is well shown by the following passage in his translation of the *Bhāgavata*— “People interpret the *Bhāgavata*”, says Śrī Kṛṣṇa, “according to their own whims. They find sanction for everything except *Bhakti*. Some make it out that the *Vedas* inculcate ceremonials, sacrifices, gifts, and oblations, others that the *Vedas* prescribe the worship of smaller gods, pilgrimages, and bathing in scared water, others again, that the supreme bliss comes through knowledge. Their interpretations are coloured by the dominant attributes of their minds. But know thou this, oh, my friend, I am not accessible through knowledge, nor through penance nor through renunciation, nor through gifts. I am not accessible by *yoga* nor by knowledge, I am accessible by *Bhakti* alone”.¹⁷

Śaṅkaradeva did not confine himself only to preaching the *Bhakti* cult but established at the same time a new social order in Assam by removing superstition, corruption, hatred, ignorance, untouchability, social disabilities, inequalities between man and man and other social evils. Śaṅkaradeva gave the regenerated Assamese people literature, drama, poetry, songs, dance and music which have attained the status of a distinct school and entwined the community with unity and oneness. Śaṅkaradeva tried to wipe out untouchability and to establish equal rights of all castes and communities.

Śaṅkaradeva’s message of democracy was primarily expressed through his *Bhakti* religion where he stressed that the realization of God was not the monopoly of a limited few. But it is within the reach of all those strove for it. The *Nāmghar*, the most important institution which Śaṅkaradeva gave to Assam is even today run on the

17 Barua, Birinchi Kumar.(2012). *History of Assamese Literature*. P. 20.

democratic principle. All the villagers having a voice and hand in its management. *Nāmghars* door are open to all, irrespective of their caste and race are allowed to participate in its cultural activities which adorn and ennoble life. It is a common practice in the *Nāmghar* to recognize individual ability and talent disregarding other considerations. When a man is preferred as a *Sūtradhāra* to enact the *Aṅkīyā Nāṭa*, as *Gāyana* or *Bāyana* to conduct congregational music. It is not for his social status but for his attainments in the respective spheres.¹⁸

The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, the *Bhāgavadgītā* and the *Sahasra-nāma* section of the *Padmapurāṇa* are popularly considered to be the authorities from which Śaṅkaradeva accepted the main articles of his faith, namely, *Satsaṅga* (The assembly of *Bhakatas*) as a means of *bhakti*, *ekaśaraṇa* (shelter in one God, ViṣṇuKṛṣṇa, *ekaśaraṇa* alone), and *nāma* (*Kīrttana* of prayer, as the main form of devotion). While the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and the *Bhāgavadgītā* and other *Viṣṇuite Purāṇas* and texts also have been adopted into Assamese or cited as authorities by the *Vaiṣṇava* writers. The writings of Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhvadeva and a few other works approved by them or the order provide the gospel and have a canonical authority. The *BhāgavataPurāṇa* and *Bhāgavadgītā* alone among Sanskrit works are used in ceremonial readings. In the explanation of these two books, the *Bhāgavata-bhāvārthadīpikā* and ‘Subodhinī’ commentaries of Śrīdhara Swami have been used from the beginning with such slight moderations as may be found necessary to suit the peculiar tenets of the faith.¹⁹

18 Neog, Maheswar, Śaṅkaradeva, preface. p.II

19 Pathak, Dayananda. & Neog, Pranavsvrup. (2004). *A Creative Vision, Essays on Śaṅkaradeva and Neo Vaiṣṇava Movement in Assam*. Pp. 48-49.

The easternmost region was ruled by Chutiyās who worshipped Kālī in the form of Kecaikhāiṭi (The eater of raw flesh) to whom human sacrifices were also offered. The south east was under the Kachārīes who practised their own tribal rites and customs. The regions on the both side of the Bhrahmaputra to the west were ruled by the Bhūñās. The western region of Assam was ruled by Koches. The Kochs followed their tribal religion till they were finally absorbed in Hinduism subsequently. The rest of the Brahmaputra valley was under the Āhoms who practised their own customs and culture. The Hindu community also was not in the uniform religious platform. They practised the creeds of *Śaivism*, *Śāktism* or *Tāntrism* and *Vaiṣṇavism* in various forms. Thus the rise and fall of several dynasties within a period of two centuries created a chaotic condition in political and religious atmosphere in Assam.²⁰

During the 15th/16th century, *Vaiṣṇavism* became a spiritual and social movement covering the whole of India being led by a galaxy of saintly poets and preachers like, Śaṅkaradeva, Tukārām, Śūrdas, Mīrābai, Kabīr, Caitanya, Jayadeva and others. These saints not only preached the ideas of *Vaiṣṇavism*, they also crusaded for the cause of equality, fraternity, communal harmony and social peace and thereby ensured their place in the hearts of the people.²¹

Vaiṣṇavism prior to Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva was confined to a limited number of people. *Śākta* religion was the most common and pre dominant one in Assam. *Śaivism* was another very popular cult in Assam alongwith *Śāktism*. Esoteric Buddhism in the form of *Vajrayāna* began to gain ground secretly from the 9th century onwards. Thus

20 Sharma, Nilima.(2008) *The Philosophy of Śaṅkaradeva An Appraisal*, pp.2-3

21 Das Pathak, Lakshmi. (2016). *Neo Vaiṣṇavism in Assam, Śaṅkaradeva's Thrust on love*, p. 452

Tantrism, both Hindu and Buddhist types was prevalent and the worship of various gods and goddess with elaborate ceremonies, both esoteric and exoteric was also very popular. Monothism and *Bhakti*-cult of *Vaiṣṇavism* did not thrive for want of proper atmosphere and a leader, although the belief in one supreme God was not altogether alien to the learned section of the people.²²

Neo-Vaiṣṇavite movement started by Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva, Assam was in a state of socio-political turmoil. During 14th and the 15th centuries Assam was inhabited by heterogeneous groups of people mainly Chutiyās, Kachārīs, Bhūñā, Koch and many others speaking different languages and dialects and following diverse shades of cultural and religious life.

Śaṅkaradeva was not only a propagator of *Neo-Vaiṣṇavism*, he was also a great social reformer of Assam. The aim of his faith was to write the Assamese society by eliminating all social prejudices. He always fought hard against untouchability and casteism prevailed in the 15th century. He made his religion accessible to all irrespective of caste and creed.

To eliminate casteism and untouchability from the society Śaṅkaradeva accepted his disciples from all communities. It is described in the *Bhāgavata* as under.

kirāta Kachārī khāsī gāro miri.
yabana kaṇka govāla
asama mulūka dhobā ye turuka
*kuvāca mleccha caṇḍala.*²³

22 Chaliha, Bhabaprasad.(2014). *Early Vaiṣṇavism and the Neo-Vaiṣṇavite Bhakti Movement in Assam, Mahapurusaṃjyoti*, vol –XIV. P. 25

23 Srimadbhāgavata, Mahapurāṇa, ii, 53

The place was a centre of *Śaiva* and *Śakti* worship from the earliest times. Even then, forefathers of Śaṅkaradeva and other Bara-Bhūñās were said to be *Śakti* worshippers. Debased form of Buddhism (Crypto-Buddhism) also infected the society and stray traces of it is yet to be found in some remote corners of Assam, particularly among some people in the form of *Gopidhara*, *Barseva*, *Rati Khowa*, etc. Other people also have their own creeds and faiths which might have been numerous and varied from tribe to tribe.

In the 15th century the Hindus of India were in a great social quandary. *Tantricism* in its naked form accompanied by animal sacrifices and other vices got the upper hand. Superstitions prevailed under cover of religion. Casteism was dominant. A bulk of the population was treated as outcastes and untouchables. The all pervading God was substituted by debasing ceremonials and superstitious people started forgetting what real religion was.

Śaṅkaradeva has left a permanent mark on the religious, social, literary and cultural life of Assam. Śaṅkaradeva's *Bhakti* derives inspiration from the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* and the practice of its teachings blossomed in the north-eastern part through his personality.

Śaṅkaradeva integrated by his preaching and practice the different castes, religious groups and races living in various parts of Assam, whether in the hills or in the plains, whether they belong to one linguistic group or the other, whether they came from one each kingdom or the other. Assam was during that time divided into three different

sovereign kingdoms and everyone of them was enjoying complete independence in all respects.

4.4 Educational Condition of 15th/16th Century Assam :

Due to lack of sufficient materials and scattered fragmentary nature of data have desisted someone to undertake a probe into the educational condition of Assam from the thirteenth century to the eighteenth century. However, a fairly good account of education and learning prevailing in medieval Assam could be obtained by stitching together fragmentary information lying scattered in different literary and other records.

Towards dissemination of learning Education was mainly manned by private individuals and concerns, but royal patronage was occasionally extended to scholars for their erudition and contribution. Education was imparted through formal or institutional and hereditary mood or acquired through the medium of professional guilds or *Khels*. In different branches of learning like literature and poetics, grammar, philosophy, astrology, astronomy, *smṛtis* was given as the formal or institutional education in *Tols*, *Catuṣpāthis* and *Pathāśālās* manned by *Gurus* or *Adhyāpakas* who were well-versed in the branch and they used to teach. In the other mood of imparting education generally related to arts and crafts that were transmitted on medium of professional guilds or *khels*. This type of education or training did not have any formal curricula or training courses. The new comer gradually acquired the necessary skill by serving as an apprentice. The professional artisans were classified into *khels* during the Āhom rule and members attached to each *khel* were given settlement in the same locality. The trainees learnt the hereditary craft under the guidance of the seniors generation after generation. Artisans and craftsman generally resided in the same locality, it was easier

to develop their skill in craftsmanship. Sometimes the members of a particular *khel* did not reside in clusters in many places. They lived scatteredly. The Āhom kings did not have any standing army. In different branches the different *khels* connected with the military affairs imparted training to the *paiks*. To introduce innovation in skill and production in the existing crafts and to start new crafts the Āhom kings and the Koch kings occasionally imported artisans and craftsman from Bengal and other Muslim ruled areas. Muslims practiced exclusively some of these crafts like filigree and embroidery works.

The tradition of oral education was also prevalent among the villagers which was handed down from generation to generation. Besides stories of heroic deeds, moral virtues and lofty ideals depicted in the epics and *Purāṇas*, the grand-mother used to tell folk-tales having moral values. The part played by the village *Kathakas* or *Bhāgavtīs* in disseminating religious and moral ideals through recitation and narration of *purāṇic kāvyas*, both Assamese and Sanskrit versions cannot be ignored.

Teen aged boys students were only allowed to reside in the teacher's compound. Therefore after having learnt the rudiments of education at their homes these students probably came to reside with the teacher. But those students who attending schools from their own homes could start from the initial stage of learning of the three Rs. At the age of six or seven the junior students were sent to *Tols* after the *Vidyārambha* sacrament. Literacy among the *Brāhmiṇs* was almost cent percent. The *Brāhmiṇ* students constituted the highest number because the *Vidyārambha* was considered a must for them. The *Kāyasthas* are the next literate community because the profession of becoming scribes and maintaining accounts demanded literacy to a certain degree.

The *Vaiṣṇavite Śāṅkari* Institutions mainly the affluent ones patronized by king and nobles maintained schools for teaching boys of the disciples and devotees during the late medieval times. The monastic and semi-monastic having celibate monks residing within the *Śāṅkari* Institutions campus, recruited boys in their teens to train up as future monks to discharge various functions connected with the institutions. Tols managed by *Śāṅkari* Institutions taught *Vaiṣṇavite* scripture and lores. It also taught other branches of Sanskrit learning according to the capacity and qualification of teachers. There were some *Vaiṣṇavite* scholars cum preachers who were also reputed teachers. Bhattadeva while serving as the head of the Vyaskuchi *Śāṅkari* Institutions taught a large number of students coming from various parts of Assam. According to *Gurulīlā* by Ramaraya hundreds of students received education from Bhattadeva.²⁴ Even now a few *Śāṅkari* Institutions like Auniati, Dakshinpat are maintaining Sanskrit tols for the education of the novices residing in the monastic campus.

Formerly the *Śāṅkari* Institutions were the training centres of arts and crafts. Provisions for training existed in those *Śāṅkari* Institutions where celibate monk or devotees resided. Senior experts taught the trainees in vocal and instrumental music mainly in the art of playing in *mridaṅga* and *khol*. The trainer in the instrumental music is called *Bāyana* and that in the vocal music is *Gāyana*. These trainer were also called *oja Upādhāya*. In the traditional manner the young entrants were taught the varieties of devotional dances of classical and semiclassical nature. In their off time the celibates used to engage themselves in cultivating some crafts of wood, cane, ivory, clay and other materials. Senior monks used to impart their expert knowledge to juniors who

²⁴ Gurulīlā v. 921, Sarma, S. N. *A Socio-Economic and Cultural History of Medieval Assam*, p. 162

generally resided with them. The seniors gave knowledge and discipline and also help to gain proficiency in music or craft to juniors. Because of the changing taste of people and owing to the increasing popularity of machine-made goods some of the crafts practiced in *Śaṅkari* Institutions were gradually abandoned.

The ambitious students who wanted to acquire higher education in different branches of Sanskrit learning used to go to Navadvipa, Baranasi, Tirhut and other centre of education. The medieval biographies testify to students going outside Assam for higher education. King Naranārāyaṇa and his brother Cilaraya of Koch dynasty had their education in Baranasi.²⁵

Kaṇṭhabhūṣaṇa of Maguri village in Kāmarūpa also studied under one Brahmānanda of Baranasi.²⁶ Bhaskara Vipra went to Tirhut to have thorough grounding in the *Vedānta* philosophy while Asurari Bhattacharya was educated in higher Sanskrit learning in Navadvipa.²⁷ Raghunath Mahanta an important writer of the seventeenth century states in the calophon of his *Satruṅjanya kāvya* that his grand father Kṛṣṇanatha become an erudite scholar having studied Nyāya and *Vedānta* in Navadripa.²⁸

Almost all the branches of Sanskrit learning were taught to students of medieval period. The Kāyastha were required to have knowledge of maintaining accounts and scribal procedures. It is attested by Rāmcarāṇa and Daityārī Thākura; two of the medieval biographers of Śaṅkaradeva that Mādhavadeva and Rāmcarāṇa received

25 *Darrang Rājvaṁśāvali*, vv 265-268, Sarma. S.N. Socio-Economic and Cultural History of Assam.

26 Dvija, Bhuṣana, *Śrī Śaṅkaradeva* vv 1425-26

27 *Rāmānanda* vv. 778, 1338

28 *Satrunjaya* p. 564

vocational training in the profession of maintaining accounts and other allied subjects called *Kāyastha-vṛtti*.²⁹ Though the list of subject taught to Śaṅkaradeva by his teacher Mahendra Kandali as enumerated in the *Katha-guru-carita* cannot be wholly accepted, yet the list gives a rough idea of the subjects taught in Assam. The list is exhaustive enough but overlapping in respect of certain subjects. Subject mentioned are four *Vedas*, *Vedāntas*, *Nirukta* *Chandas*, *Smṛti*, *Mīmāṃsā*, *Nāya* (*Tarka*), *Pratyabhijñā* (*Tarkadarsana*) eighteen *Purāṇas*, *Mahābhārata*, eighteen *Samhitās*, *Vyākaraṇas*, *Tantras*, *Kośas* (Lexions) for detail vide³⁰. Earliar biographers like Daityārī and Bhushan Dvija have mentioned grammar, lexion, epics and *Purāṇas* and some other religious works.³¹ They have not mentioned the study of the *Vedas* and systems of philosophy. It is difficult to accept that the *Vedas* and so many subjects were taught to Śaṅkaradeva by Mahendra Kandali. In fact, in ancient and medieval India the study of the *Vedas* was not open to all. It is also hard to believe that Mahendra Kandali could master all the subjects and works mentioned in the *Kathā-Guru-Carita*. To show the vast learning of Śaṅkaradeva the narrator of the voluminous biography included all the subjects and books known Assam during that time. It is beyond doubt that Śaṅkaradeva left his teacher Mahendra Kandali's Tol as an erudite scholar. It amply proves that teaching in some branches of Sanskrit learning was efficiently given by competent scholars. At the same time it must be admitted that the study of the *Vedas* was limited, even if it existed. Especially after the sixteenth century A.D. we do not come across any

29 Kathā-Guru-Carita, p. 62, *Daityārī* v-951

30 Ibid, p. 28

31 Daityārī, p.75, Bhuṣana, p. 50

reference in literature to the teaching of the *Vedas* in the medieval period. The study and teaching of the *Vedas* was not totally extinct in the early medieval period could be inferred from the *Smṛti-Ratnākar* of vedacarya of the 14th century where he states that he was well versed in the *Vedas*. The very title vedacarya speaks eloquently of his mastery over the *vedic* literature (*tasyatmajah sarvagunanuraktah svajanesu Śāktah akhendarpani vasanti yasmin vedadisasrani varani kincit.*)

Being the foundation course in the study of Sanskrit, the study of grammar and lexicon was imparted universally in all Sanskrit schools run by the *Brāhmaṇa* Pandits. Other specialised courses of study were undertaken after having gained sure footings in these subjects. *Dāmodaracarita* of Nilakantha Dasa gives a list of works which the religious preachers studied while at his Tols. The lines are quoted below:-

Kṛt-Kārikā ādi yata vyākaraṇa padhila yata dhātu proyoga śabada sadhilanta cari veda caidhya śāstra samaste padhila Gītā Bhāgavata sastra samaste jānila.

Before the composition of *Prayogaratnamālā*, a lucid Sanskrit grammar by Purusottama Vidyavāgīśa, a court scholar of the Koch king Naranārāyaṇa (1540-1584), the *Kalpa Vyākaraṇa* by Sarvadharmacari with gloss by Durga Simha was popular in Assam. The seventeenth century medieval biographers have mentioned this work while narrating academic attainments of a few scholars. *Mugdhabodha*, another grammar, was also prevalent up to the seventeenth century. The other existing grammars gradually went out of use in Tols and Chatra-Śālas with the writing of the *Prayoga-ratnamala*. The *Amarkośa* and the *Medini* were usually prescribed to students for committing to memory.

The *Dharma-Śāstra* or the *Smṛti* was an important branch of study in which Assamese scholars and students were interested. It is in fact a distinct school of *Smṛti-Nibandhas*, known as the *Kāmarūpī Smṛti-Nibandha* developed from the eleventh century onwards in Assam. "Kāmarūpa like many other places of India is guided in matters of law by its own literature on the subject existing from ancient times which forms, therefore, a separate school in that; sense".³²

The *Vedānta*, especially the *Advaita Vedānta* was the next important branch of study in which teaching was carried. The *Svalpa-matsyapurāṇa*, *Angirasa-saṃhitā* and the *Kālikāpurāṇa* important works of the 10th -11th centuries, contain passages which shows authors' familiarity with the *Advaita Vedānta*. Narayan Sarvajna has supported the absolute monism of Śaṅkaracarya in his commentary *Manvartha-Vivṛti*. Nilambaracarya's commentary on the *Viṣṇupurāṇa* leans towards Advaitism, Damodara Misra in his commentary on '*Hastamalakastotra*' of Śaṅkaracarya has interpreted *Vivartavāda* with profound insight.³³

Nyāya and the *Mīmāṃsā* philosophy received equal attention of the scholars. We come across names of kings and *Brāhmaṇa* scholars in early inscriptions who were proficient in different branches of study. Nilambaracarya introduces himself as an expert in all branches including the *Mīmāṃsā* and *Nyāya*. In fact the digest writers were well versed in the *Mīmāṃsā* and *Nyāya* philosophy. Illustrating certain situation Mādhava Kandali, the celebrated translator of the *Rāmāyaṇa* gives ample proof of his knowledge of the *Sāṃkhya* and the *Nyāya* philosophy. There were a number of poets

32 Barpujari, H.K., *The Cultural Heritage of India*, p. 373

33 Sastri, Monoranjan, *Asamar Vaiṣṇava Darsanar Ruprekha*, p. 691

having the scholarly epithet *Kandali* like as Madhava Kandali, Ananta Kandali, Śrīdhara Kandali, Ratnakara Kandali, Ruchnath Kandali who were may be conferred this title *Kandali* for their proficiency in the *Nyāya* philosophy. A well known *Vaiṣṇava* poet of the sixteenth century, Ananta Kandali, categorically states in one of his self introductory passages that he received the title '*Kandali*' in a scholarly dispute for showing his mastery in the *Tarkaśāstra* (debate). It may be mention in this connection that there is a well known work on the *Nyāya* philosophy by Sridhra called *Nyāya-Kandali*. Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva, the two great *Vaiṣṇava* saint, poets became all-round scholars having studied in local Tols manned by native teachers. The *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, the *Gītā* and the *Bhakti-Ratnavali*, the three important works of the *Vaiṣṇava* cult were rendered into Assamese prose in the last decade of the sixteenth century by Vaikunṭhanāth Bhāgavata Bhattacharya. He was a profound scholar in the *purāṇic* literature as well as proficient in the *Vedic* lores as evident from his citation from the *Upanisads*. In fact, the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries produced a galaxy of Sanskrit scholars who preferred to write in Assamese for the benefit of the masses in spite of their sound knowledge in Sanskrit language and literature.

In some of the teaching institutions of this locality Astronomy and Astrology the two important subjects were regularly taught. Pragjyotiṣa, the land of eastern astrology, indicates that these two allied sciences were assiduously cultivated from ancient times. The existence of Navagraha temple and the ruins of sun temples of Suryapahar at Goalpara and at Bamunipahar of Tezpur indirectly prove that the study of astrology and astronomy received the attention of a class of scholars. The Daivajña caste, a class of *Brāhmaṇas* in Assam, exclusively devoted themselves to the study of *jyotiṣa*. *Jyotiṣa*

was one of the popular subject of study in Assam. It is proved beyond doubt that the large number of manuscripts on this subject recovered from different places and preserved in different manuscripts libraries. The royal courts regularly maintained astrologers and they were sometimes assigned the task of rendering *jyotiṣa* works to Assamese. King Naranārāyaṇa engaged Śrīdhara to translate *Khaṇḍasadhya* to Assamese. The court poet of Rudra Siṃha and Śiva Siṃha, Kavirāja Chakrabarty translated *Bhāswatī* to Assamese. Services of astrologers were requisitioned in times of war and emergency to calculate auspicious moment for attack and defence and to suggest remedial measures to avert crisis. Astrologers were first stationed at the court of Āhom monarch in the capital. Later on the officers serving in lower Assam had trained astrologers attached to their staff. The part played by Achutananda Doloi in the battle of Saraighat is too well known³⁴. *Doloi* and *Khari* titles were given to expert astrologers. We come across a number of *Daivajnas* in the medieval chronicles and biographies, who by their proficiency in astrology and astronomy earned reputation and appreciation of people³⁵.

The study of the arithmetic is borne out by the fact that under the orders of king Naranārāyaṇa, the *Lilāvātī* a treatise on Mathematics of Bhāskarcarya was translated by Bakula Kāyastha. This *Lilāvātī* was also rendered into Assamese by Kaviratna Dvija. The work teaches arithmetic divided into nine different sections, viz, addition, subtraction multiplication, division, cubes, cube-roots square and square-roots and *San̄kalana*. For land surveying the later part of the work is devoted to measurement.

³⁴ Deodhai, *Asam Buranji*, p.162

³⁵ Deodhai, *Asam Buranji*. pp.163-173

Cuḍāmaṇi is another work on the subject of arithmetic. Bakula Kāyaṣṭha was mentioned as his predecessor by the writer and therefore must have flourished in the seventeenth or the eighteenth century. The work was written for teaching the Kāyaṣṭha students and it could be inferred from the colophon. *Aṅkar-Ārya* by one Kasinātha is the fourth work deserving mention which deals with the four fundamental processes of arithmetic and then teaches *daśamaṁsa* i.e. fractional sums. It deals with measurement of lands, squares and square-roots also. There was a system which was known as *Subhankari*. It gives simplified methods of addition, subtraction, multiplication and division of several digits. These methods helped in setting results orally. One Subhankara Kāyaṣṭha was the originator of these methods and for this reason these simplified methods are known as *Subhankari*. The peculiarity of these works is that almost all of them have used verse as the medium³⁶. There was also a system of working out sums prevalent among the Kāyaṣṭhas of Assam which is generally called Kaytheli system. This system was used in maintaining accounts and working out arithmetical sums quickly.

Generally on hereditary lines the science of medicine (*Āyurveda*) was taught and practiced. *Vaidya*, *Kavirāja*, *Bejbarua*, *Bhisak* etc were the nickname of medicine-man. The village quack was known as *Bej*. Excepting the *Bej* who occasionally administered herbal medicine and sometimes resorted to incantation generally practiced the Ayurvedic system of medicine. Teaching was generally given on the hereditary lines. Students from outside the family circle were also taken. They were required to serve the teacher as an apprentice for a few years. Reading of the pulse-beating, symptoms and prognosis of diseases, process of preparation of medicine, application of medicines

36 Goswami, H.C. *Descriptive Catalogue of Assamese Manuscripts*, pp. 6-7, 78-9, 93-7

according to symptoms and all other necessary knowledge for a successful practitioner are gradually taught to the students. In preparing medicines and diagnosing diseases the Bhavaprakasa, *Sargadhara Paddhati*, Cakradatta and a few other authoritative Ayurvedic works were used by the Āyurvedic practitioner of Assam. They have been using some medicines from early times which are used nowhere in India. For instance the *Nagarjuna* pill used in stomach-trouble is peculiar to Assam. The *Nagarjuna* pill is an indigenous product. The *Bejbaruas* and *Kavirājas* of Assam called the *Āyurvedic* works as *nidana*. The later Āhom kings maintained royal physicians (*Bejbarua*) having the status of a Barua with necessary privileges. Nagarjuna, Cakradatta, Madhavakara and Sarangadhara were the main authorities on which the Assamese *Ayurvedic* physicians mostly relied on.³⁷

Besides the *Ayurvedic* practitioners, the unlettered village *Bej*, administered herbal medicine (*Vanaushadhi*). They transmitted their knowledge on hereditary lines. Some of the herbal medicines prescribed by these *Bej* were highly efficacious. In Medieval times the veterinary science of medicine also received due attention. The *Hastī-Vidyāraṇava* a treatise on the elephant, dealing with its nature, characteristics, disease and requisite medicine was written by Sukumar Barkaith and minutely illustrated by Dilwar and Dosai during the reign of king Śiva Simha. It is also held by scholars like KK Handique and Manoranjan Shastri that Pālakāpya the author of *Hastayurvedā* hailed from Kāmarūpa and his hermitage was located in the North-Eastern region but work is based on Sambhunath's *Gajendra-Cintāmoṇi*.³⁸ Another

³⁷ Chaudhury, P.C. *History of Civilization of Assam*. P. 381

³⁸ Handique, K.K. *Yasastilaka Monoranjan, Vaiṣṇava Darsanar Ruprekha*.p.11

important work on the veterinary science *Ghorānidāna* of the same period. In this work description of several types of horses, their diseases and cures are discussed.

Another important means of treatment of diseases was incantations (*mantra*). These may broadly be divided into four categories. *Dharaṇī-mantra*, *Karati-mantra*, *Birajāra mantra*, *Vyādhir mantra*. *Dharaṇī-mantra* is used in the treatment of snake-bite. *Karati-mantra* is used in diseases generally accompanied by pain and allied ailments. *Birajārā mantra* was used in driving out evil spirits, *Vyadhir-mantra* was used in other diseases. Kāmarūpa was known as the land of *Tantras* and *Mantras* throughout India. Even at present there are innumerable *mantra-puthis* both on the treatment of disease and the casting of magical charm are available. In all incantations, Kāmākhyā *Dhanvantari* and other gods are invariably invoked. Incantation are muttered by whipping the diseased part of the body with *vihlangani*, a kind of wild fern. The *Mantras* are known by various names, viz, *Gu-Karati*, *Brahma-Karati*, *Rama-Karati*, *Jarjarā mantra*, *Birājara mantra*, *Narasimha-mantra*, some of these were used to drive away evil spirits or casting spell on persons and to remove evil effects of black magic and charms.³⁹

The *Śaṅkari* Institutions as well as its village wing *Nāmghar* served as an important media of mass education. The *Bhāgavati* (The expounder of the *Bhāgavata* and other *Vaiṣṇavite* scriptures in Sanskrit) and the *Pāthaka* (recites and expounder of metrical versions in Assamese) contributed to the diffusion of ethical and religious learning among the mass people by reciting and expounding scriptures. By raising questions and objections they cleared doubts among the listeners. In the traditional

39 Goswami. H.C. Op.cit. 60f, 65f 119f, 151, 161-69

learning the religious congregations in *Śaṅkari* Institutions and *Nāmghars* in which prayer services, recitation and exposition of scriptures, both Sanskrit and Assamese were frequently held enlightened the general people to a considerable extent.

Students were required to exhibit their proficiency in their subjects in the scholastic disputes usually held on ceremonial occasions in different tols and catuspathis. It was a custom in western Assam to hold such disputes on occasions of purificatory rites (*Ādya-Śrādhā*) performed on the eleventh or thirteenth day of the death.⁴⁰ Ananta Kandali one of the noted *Vaiṣṇava* poet, of the sixteenth century states that he received the title *Kandali* in a scholarly dispute on the *Nyāya* philosophy (*tarkata lobhila nāma Ananta Kandali*). We have instances in the medieval biographical literature where reputed scholars accompanied by their students used to visit royal courts and learned institutions challenging local scholars to scholarly duels. In scholarly disputations the victorious parties or persons were rewarded with prizes. Caṇḍīvara, the grandfather of Śaṅkaradeva and the great poet reformer himself had to accept the challenges of scholarly filibusters on more than one occasion,⁴¹

"Some of the late medieval kings like Naranārāyaṇa and his heroic brother Sukladhaja were erudite scholars, Sukladhvaja wrote a learned Sanskrit commentary on Joyadeva's *Gītāgovinda*. Amongst the Āhom kings Rudra Siṁha, Śiva Siṁha, Jayadhvaja Siṁha and Rajeswara Siṁha are known for their poetic ability, literary interest. Jayadeva is known to have composed some lyrics. Rudra Siṁha's Śiva-purāṇa speaks eloquently of his scholarship. Śiva Siṁha not only patronized poets and scholars

40 Goswami, Pratap Ch.. *Jivansmriti aru Kamrupi Samaj*, pp. 39-44

41 Daityāri, Kathā-Guru-Carita, p. 14.

but personally composed some lyrics. Rajeswara Simha is said to have composed a play named *Kīcaka-Vadha*".⁴²

It is worth mentioning that *Śaṅkari* Institutions and *Nāmghars* served as disseminating centres of *Vaiṣṇavite* learning. The *Śaṅkari* Institutions were in many cases also training grounds of arts and crafts. In some *Śaṅkari* Institutions notably in those where celibate monk or devotees resided the provisions for training new comers existed. In a number of *Śaṅkari* Institutions this training and cultivation of arts and crafts are still practised. The senior experts taught the junior trainees in varied types of vocal and instrumental music, mainly in the art of playing in *mṛdanga* and *Khol*. The trainer who trained the juniors in the instrumental music is called *Bāyana* and who trained in the vocal music is called *Gāyana*. These trainers are also called *Ojā*. Different types of devotional dances of classical and semi-classical nature were taught and are being taught in the traditional manner to the new entrants.

Celebrates used to engaged themselves in cultivating some crafts of wood, cane, ivory, clay and other materials in their off time from devotional duties. Senior monks practicing the above crafts used to impart their expert knowledge to their juniors who generally resided with them to acquire not only the religious knowledge and discipline but also to gain proficiency in some branch of music and crafts. Due to the increasing popularity of machine made goods and also because of the changing taste of people some of the crafts practiced in *Śaṅkari* Institutions are being gradually abandoned.

The writing materials of medieval Assam that some writings were incised in stone slabs and others in Copper Plates to make them permanent. The Royal inscription

42 Sarma, S.N. (2001) *A Socio-Economic and Cultural History of Medieval Assam*.p.174

were generally incised in stone slabs and in copper plates. *Sañchipat* i.e. bark of agora tree was the (*Aquileria agullocha*) usual material on which writing was done. It required a laborious process of curing, seasoning and polishing the preparation of barks before they could be used for writing. For writing manuscripts the use of agora bark has been in prevalence from early period. There was one manuscript written on agara barks among presents, sent by king Bhaskaravarma (7th century) to Harshavardhana of Kanauj. According to the size of the volume the size of the bark leaves prepared. Sometimes contents were reproduced with miniature paintings along side the text. Sometimes folios were decorated with floral borders. *Tulāpāt* made by pressing cotton pulp was also for writing or copying manuscript but such manuscripts are less durable than those written on *Sañchipat*.⁴³

Śaṅkaradeva was in firm believed that good conduct is one of the most important things to be considered in order to build a perfect and suitable society. To elevate the mass people through good education was the chief concern of Śaṅkaradeva. Śaṅkaradeva advocated for an idealistic view of education which bears also pragmatic and spiritual elements at the same time. From pragmatic point of view it is so far as their ethical teachings are concerned. From spiritual point of view it is so far as their religious teaching elevates the spirit from the material plane to the higher spiritual state. Bodily culture was given emphasis besides ethical and religious education. Śaṅkaradeva himself showed examples of practicing *Yoga* for physical strength and vigor. Śaṅkaradeva tried his best to attract the mind of the masses towards artistic creations for

43 Gait, Sir Edward. *History of Assam*, appendix

all round development. Śaṅkaradeva emphasized on art as necessary part of education. Śaṅkaradeva opined that education should be imparted in vernacular.

Religious as well as ethical elements have occupied the most prominent positions in the different educational plans made by the great Indian thinkers. To a great extent, Śaṅkaradeva's concept of good education coincides with the views of the great thinkers of the present time.

Śaṅkaradeva neither thought of king's patronage in spreading *Vaiṣṇavism* nor initiated the king into *Eka-Śaraṇa-Hari-Nāma-Dharma*. Śaṅkaradeva wanted the rulers to show equal respect and behave to all people. The underlying motive was that Śaṅkaradeva wanted the rulers to imbibe a secular among the masses.

There are sufficient reasons to think that Śaṅkaradeva had a vision of a secular state. The aim of secularism is that no particular religion in the state should receive any state patronage.⁴⁴

Formal Education :

Regarding the system of formal education it is more or less followed the ancient Indian pattern laid down in the *Manusmṛhitā*. *Arthaśāstra* and other *Dharmaśāstra*. Early Assam inscriptions prior to the thirteenth century provide the people with some information regarding scholarship and erudition of the *Brāhmaṇ* favoured with land-grants. This type of inscription also throw light on the scriptural knowledge and the qualities of the donor kings and their predecessors. The *Vedas*, *Vedāṅgas*, *Smṛtis*, the

44 Ghosh, N. *Secularism, Society and Law in India*. p.4

different school of philosophy, grammar with its auxiliary branches, literature and poetics were studied seriously. Some kings also were erudite scholars having poetic ability to compose verses. It is unfortunate that the study of the *Vedas* gradually waned and in the later medieval period students seeking knowledge of the *Vedas* had to go outside centres of the *Vedic* learning. The *Vedic* learning was taught in Assam though the number of teaching institution of *Vedic* literature was very much limited.

The formal education imparted in *Tols*, *Pāthśālas* or *Chatrasalas* was not wide spread as to cover all sections of people in the society. It was mainly confined to the *Brāhmaṇas*, the *Kāyasthas*, the *Kalitās*. They were the upper stratum of the society. The number of students belonging to other castes was extremely limited though the students of other castes were not debarred from admission to schools. The parents and guardians of other castes students were not aware of the fact to have education of their sons and wards due to the lack of their own education. Education appeared to have been the privilege of the male child. The educated as well as well-to-do families managed to teach their female child at home to read and write though they did not attend schools. Medieval *Carit puthis* or biographical works of religious preachers furnish information of educated women who played important role of their respective sects in the society. Kanaklāta, grand daughter-in-law of Śaṅkaradeva and wife of Caturbhuja Thākura, Bhubaneswarī, daughter of Harideva of the Haridevi sect and Padmapriyā, daughter of Gopāl Ātā all are noteworthy figures in the *Vaiṣṇavite* history. They all belong to the early part of the seventeenth century. Chou-shing, an Āhom queen of the sixteenth century could write the Tāi-Āhom script with fingers of her feet. Pramathesvarī, a queen was a great patron of learning. It is not known whether she was formally educated or

not. But from the keen interest she had shown in literature and poetry it can be assumed that she was not uneducated.

The *Gurukula* system, which enjoins pupils to reside in the house or in the compound of the teacher's residence was followed in Assam. Sometimes the economically sound villages constructed and maintained schools. In case of traditional system of learning the practice of staying with āchārya or addhyapaka was common till recent times. The students hailing from distance places were accommodated within the residential compound of the teacher. Students of neighbouring areas are generally attended their classes from their own residence. The students who resided with their teacher usually helped the *Guru* family in household activities. There was no tuition fee. Students residing within the residential compound of the teacher were maintained by the teacher if they come from distant places. But those students homes were in nearby places usually brought food staff, principally rice from their house. Residential students lived a simple and austere life performing day-to-day religious duties and serving the teacher in assigned works.

Tols or *Pāthśālas* remained closed on all religious occasions as well as on *amavasyā*, *ekadaśī*, *puṇimā* days. No teaching was given on in auspicious days like occurrence of earthquake, lunar or solar eclipse or when some calamity occurred. Students generally used to sit on the ground over which mats of *kusa* grass or reeds were spread. According to *Manu-saṁhitā* it was the duty of the students to serve the teacher at his bath, to massage his body and to do work that is pleasing and beneficial to him. Besides performing devotional works in the morning and evening the student was to do daily routine of offering fuel to the sacred fire, going round for alms. The students

were bound to obey the prescribed rules about dress, food and drink. Students should be restrained in thought and speech and strictly avoid adornment and amusement. Students behaviour should be respectful towards seniors and restrained in the presence of women. The pupils of the medieval period, they lived a disciplined, simple obedient life while staying in the teacher's campus one type of symbolical begging was practised in the month of *Caitra* (March-April). The students used to approach house holders for money or rice by uttering benedictory slokas for the good of house holders.

According to the late P.C. Goswami, the students of *tols* and *Pāthśālas*, used to elect one monitor called *Bara* in each school whose functions were to maintain discipline and allot works to students for the cleanliness and up keep of the school house. Students showing special proficiency were some times entrusted with the task of teaching in the lower standard. Such students were called *Ojā-Chātra*. Śaṅkaradeva was such a *Ojā-Chātra* in the *Tol* maintained by Mahendra Kandali,⁴⁵ Śaṅkaradeva studied in the *tol* of Mahendra Kandali who, as attested by the *Kathā-Guru-Carita* taught him several branches of Sanskrit learning. Similarly, Mādhavadeva was educated in the school maintained and taught by Rājendra Adhyāpaka at Baṇḍuka.⁴⁶

The *Kathā-Guru-Carita*, also mentions *Chatra Śāla* manned by Yadavendra Ādhyapaka at Srihātī near Hajo.⁴⁷ It appears from the narrations of the *Kathā-Guru-Carita* that occasionally inspection of *tols* or *Chatra Śālas* was made by higher officers regarding the working of these institution . The above work records that one

⁴⁵ *Kathā-Guru-Carita*, p. 26

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p 62

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 321

Raghavendra Bhattacharya took Mahendra Kandali to task for sparing Śaṅkaradeva from washing the floor of the school.⁴⁸ Mukunda Adhyāpaka's school contained more than hundred students⁴⁹. Then there is a reference to another Adhyāpaka, Dhaneśvara in whose school establishment Padma Ātā was a guest for four days.⁵⁰ In the *Chatra-Śāla* of Devadatta Adhyāpaka, Mādhavadeva noticed students loudly drilling aphorisms and rules of grammar which promoted the saint to compose a verse of the *Nāma-Ghoṣā*.⁵¹ The biography of Niranjandeva, the founder of Āuniātī Śāṅkari Institutions, mentions a few *Tols* on the north bank of Brahmaputra.⁵² The above instances noticed in medieval literary works prove beyond doubt that the traditional system of learning was widely prevalent.

King Rudra Simha (1696-1714) is said to have established a number of schools at different places of his kingdom and also patronized a number of students to study at important centre of learning outside Assam. According to H. Barbarua, Rudra Simha tried to establish school in many places of his kingdom.⁵³ It may be noted that a few kings of medieval Assam were adequately learned in education. Naranārāyaṇa and Śukladhvaja of Koch dynasty studied Sanskrit for a few years in Varanasī. The latter wrote a learned commentary in Sanskrit on Jayadeva's *Gītā –Govinda* called *Saravatī*. According to Khan Choudhuri Amanualla king Lakṣmīnarāyaṇa the successor of

48 *Kathā-Guru-Carita*, p.26

49 Ibid., 561

50 Ibid., p. 542

51 Ibid., p. 195

52 Sarma, T.N. *Auniati Satra Buranji*. p.128

53 *Gait*, Sir Edward. *History of Assam*, p.181

Naranārāyaṇa, was a learned scholar in Sanskrit. According to Darrang Rājavarṃsavali Naranārāyaṇa and Sukladhavaja were profound scholars in grammar, *Mīmāṃsā*, *smṛiti*, *Nyāya* and *Purāṇas*. They studied in Varanasi for several years under a scholar named Brahmananda. The *Kathā-Guru-Carita* corroborates (168) the statement of Bhuṣaṇa Dvija, a biographer of Śaṅkaradeva, that the officers of the court of Naranārāyaṇa were ordered to speak in Sanskrit at the time of attending the court. He writes *Sanskṛita vine keho kotha na kahaya samanya kathako save Sanskrit kahaya* (Nobody speaks in any other language other than Sanskrit. Even ordinary matters were expressed in Sanskrit.

Scholars & Titles :

Scholarly titles like *Sarasvatī*, *Kavi-Sarasvatī*, *Kavi-ratnasarasvatī*, *Kaviratna*, *Kavirāja*, *Kavirāja-cakravartī*, *Siddhanta-vāgīśa*, *Bhāgavata-Bhattacharya*, *Vidyā-Pancanana*, *Kavi-Sekhara* were conferred on poets and erudite by kings and learned bodies. To the students of medieval Assamese literature these titles were familiar. Autobiographical statements and colophons of literary and scholarly works sometimes reveal the circumstances and occasions on which such titles were conferred on poets and scholars. A few instances in support of the above statement may be cited here. King Naranārāyaṇa conferred the titles *Rāmsarasvatī* on Aniruddha Dvija, the great Mahābhārata scholar, *Vidyavāgīśa* was conferred on Puruṣottama Bhaṭṭacharya, the grammarian and *Siddhantavāgīśa* was conferred on Pitambara Bhaṭṭacharya, a great Smṛti scholar. Similarly king Rudra Siṃha honoured Rāmānārāyaṇa, his court poet with the title *Kavirāja Cakravarty*. King Mahāmaṇikya honoured Mādhava Kaṇḍali, the eminent poet of the fourteenth century with the epithet *Kavirāja*. Haricarana received a few honorific names and titles like Ananta Kandali. Bhāgavata Bhaṭṭacharya, Candra-

Bharati from learned bodies. For his scholarship in Mahābhārata and for his poetic ability Aniruddha alias Rāmasarasvatī was called Bhārata Bhuṣṇa and Kavichandra. The residents of Baranagara honoured Vaikunthanatha Bhaṭṭacharya with the title Bhāgavata Bhattacharya for his proficiency in expounding the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. He was also honoured with the epithet Kaviratna by the elites of Barnagar for his proficiency in the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa*. The cases cited above are enough to prove that scholars and poets received due respect from kings, patrons and learned bodies. Dvija Bhuṣaṇa, the biographer of Śaṅkaradeva, mentions titles of scholars of his time, such as *vidyavāgīśa*, *Kaṇḍali*, *Kavirāja*, *Kaviratna*, *Vidyānidhi*, *Vidyā Pancanana*.

Aim of Education:

Scholars are of opinion that the individual attainments, states and social service and a preparation for the realization of higher ends in life were the main objects of education in medieval Assam. The aim of education in medieval Assam was the moral and spiritual development of the people. The *Vaiṣṇavite* movement had given more stress on the moral and spiritual development of the people and aim for the attainment of the goal. It was introduced among the people of different culture. Singing, dancing, painting, playing of musical instruments were some means for the education during that period. At that time though the most of the people were quite ignorant of reading and writing majority of them were conversant with the teachings of the epics, the *Purāṇas* and other religious books. It is only because of the temples, the *Nāmghars* and the *Śaṅkari* Institutions, there were people to read the books and to explain the contents to them.

Dr. S.K. Bhuyan rightly points out: “There grew in Assam, what we may conveniently term *illiterate literacy* of a form unknown in any part of India. An Assamese villager of the older type still carries this tradition about him; and if we can make him speak freely we shall see that he possesses a fair acquaintance with the general contents of the epics and the *Purāṇas*.”⁵⁴

Pītāmbhar Dvija in his work, *Usaparinaya* writes:

*sri bhāgavata kathā amṛta madhumai/
sunile pātaka khande bighini dura hai//
hena madhumatta kathā kahe dhira jane/
suni pitāmbare hena gunē mane mane//
sloka bandhe byakta kathā vyasa ṛṣi mukhe/
rachilo pāñchālī yena buje sarva loke//*⁵⁵

The facts narrated in the *Sri Bhāgavata* are like nectar and honey, the hearing of which removes sins as well as obstacles. Hearing such honey like sweet facts the mouth of learned and steady persons Pītāmbhar began to think, then rendered it into *Pāñchālī* verse (in Assam), which was first expressed into Sanskrit verse from the mouth of Vyāsa. So that all can understand)

Religious circles always attempted for the spiritual and moral development of the people. The political circles always laid more stress on making every individual dutiful, patriotic, intelligent and self-dependent with a high sense of self-prestige. It is

54 Bhuyan, S.K. (1956) *Studies in the Literature of Assam*. p.12

55 Sarma, S.N. *Usa-Parinaya*, ed. Dvija, Pitambar,

the chronicles composed during the Āhom period which inspired the peoples with these ideals. The nobles and the high officials of the court, though some of them were not lettered, were dutiful, truthful, intelligent and of imposing personalities. Further, the administrative system kept all people from the highest officer down to the *Pāik*, informed of the political situation of the state. The people were very much interested in the news of Gargaon, the capital of the Āhoms. The court politics was freely discussed in the village through the lips of the periodic servitors (*Pāiks*). This made them politically very conscious and helped them a great deal in taking their decision at any moment of critical situation or rising into prominence by their superior knowledge and efficiency.⁵⁶

Institutions of Education:

In medieval Assam the responsibility of imparting education was mainly the concern of the *Brāhmaṇas*. Education was imparted in the *Guru-gr̥has*, that is the houses of the *Brāhmiṇ* teachers were the institution. About the educational institutions in early Assam, scholars are of the opinion that neither epigraphs nor literature supply us with definite information regarding the existence of regular schools, except the *Guru-gr̥ha* the Sanskrit *Tolas* and village schools provided by the *Agrahāras*. The rulers of the early Assam created and patronized such *Agrahāras* for the maintenance of *Brāhmaṇas*. Those *Brāhmaṇas* who were provided with *Agrahāras* maintained village schools and were keen in discharging their six fold duties, one of which is *Adhyāpanā* (teaching).⁵⁷ During the medieval period also, we have been that the *Guru-Gr̥ha* were

56 Bhuyan, S.K. (1956) *Studies in the Literature of Assam*, p.15

57 Choudhury, P.C. (1959). *The History of Civillisation of the People of Assam*. pp. 404-405

the main institutions for imparting education. There were *Brāhmiṇ* scholars who maintained *Tolas* at different places patronized by the local people. It was the custom, till recently in vogue, that the *Brāhmiṇ* boys were educated about *Nitya-Naimittika-Karma* and other rites and rituals by their fathers at home. The educational institutions maintained by the *Brāhmanas* were known as *Tolas* or *Chhātra-sāls*. From biographical works we know that a number of *Chhātra-sāls* existed in Assam, at the time of Śaṅkaradeva. Śaṅkaradeva himself was reading in such a *Tola* under Mahendra Kandali at Bardowa.⁵⁸ Mādhavadeva was reading under one Rajendra Adhyapak at Bāndukā.⁵⁹ There was another *Tola* or *Chhātra-Sāl* under one Jādavendra Bhattāchāryya at Srihāti on the north bank of the Brahmaputra.⁶⁰ From the biographies it is learnt that the places such as Hājo, Vyāskuchi, Koch-behār, Ratnapur were centres of education in medieval Assam.⁶¹

Patron of Education :

King Naranārāyaṇa of Koch-behār was a great patron of education. Sanskrit and other elementary subjects in vernacular were assiduously studied in his kingdom. Rāibāhādur Guṇābhirām observes that king Naranārāyaṇa highly encouraged the spread of education in Kāmarūpa. Books on arithmetic in vernacular language came to be written by the Kāyastha and Kalita scholars under his auspices. But in upper Assam, as stated by Guṇābhirām, there was no educational institution even in the capital up to the reign of the king Śiva Simha. Of course, there were individual scholars called

58 *Kathā-Guru-Carita*, p.25

59 *Ibid.*, p.62

60 *Ibid.*, p. 321

61 *Ibid.*, Introduction

Adhyāpaka in the courts of the kings or under the patronage of the nobles. The Adhyāpakas taught students at different places also. It was the Bar-Rajā (queen Phulesvari, consort of king Śiva Simha) who first established a *Pathasala* at the capital where education was mainly imparted in Sanskrit. There were no institutions to impart education through the vernacular medium. The only subject which was taught through the medium of the vernacular was arithmetic. This provision was mainly meant for those who were intended to be engaged in the census work.⁶² There are references in the biographies that *Brāhmiṇ* scholars coming from other parts of India imparted education to people. For instances, one Kalāp Chandra Dvija, coming from Navadvīpa of Bengal, established a *Chhatrasal* under the patronage of Satananda, father of Dāmodardeva, one of the chief *Vaiṣṇavite* preceptors of Assam. Dāmodardeva himself was a student of Kalap Chandra Dvija in his *Chhatrasal*.⁶³

The *Vaiṣṇavite* epoch brought about a tremendous intellectual awakening in the state. The preachers were responsible for educating the masses. The daily routine of the *Brāhmiṇ* preachers, as mentioned above, included teaching also. We have referred to above the routine of the daily works of Bhattadeva and Banamālideva, who daily taught students for a certain period. It was the regular feature of the major *Śāṅkari* Institutions to maintain *Tola* under reputed scholars to impart education to students. Students from different parts of the state flocked around the *Śāṅkari* Institutions for education.⁶⁴

⁶² Barua, G. (1875). *Assam Buranji*, pp. 242-243

⁶³ Das, Nilakantha. (1972). *Śrī Śrī Dāmodardeva Caritra*, pp. 26-27

⁶⁴ Journal of the University of Gauhati, Vol-II, No. I, p.116

There are references that students from Assam went to acquire proficiency in different branches of knowledge to the all India reputed centres of education, such as Navadvīpa, Mithilā, Vanaras etc. On the other hand scholars from these places also came to Assam at different times, in the medieval period, to hold scholarly discussions with the reputed scholars of Assam.⁶⁵ It cannot be said with authenticity whether there was any authority to inspect *Chhatra-Śāls* and to advise the teachers on important matters. From certain references it can be only surmised that there were probably learned representatives from the public to inspect the *Tolas* or *Chhatra- Śāls* and to advise the teachers on important matters, now and then. From the biographical works it is learnt that one Raghabendra Bhattacharyya, after having received a complaints from the students mildly rebuked Mahendra Kandali, the teacher of Śaṅkaradeva, for going against the existing social rule in his *Tola* when the former paid a visit to it.⁶⁶

Student :

It is evident that the principles of the *Varṇāśrama Dharma* were not strictly adhered to in Assam. From the biographical records, it is learnt that the educational institutions were cosmopolitan in character and admitted pupils from all castes.⁶⁷ It is seen that there was no age-bar for admission. Śaṅkaradeva himself was admitted into the *Chhatra-Śāls* of Mahendra Kaṇḍali at the age of twelve.⁶⁸

65 *Kathā-Guru-Carita*, 10, 194, 557, Darrang Rajvamsavali, Verses, 266-267

66 *Ibid.*, p. 26

67 *Kathā Guru Carita*, Introduction – P-II

68 *Ibid.* p.25

Old pupils was also interested in acquiring knowledge. From the biographical records it is learnt that one old disciple named *Budha-Ātā* showed a keen desire to join the school. From another instance recorded in the bio-graphical works, it is learnt that Bhavānipurīā Gopāl Ātā made Lakṣmaṇ Ojah remember the entire book XI of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* without the aid of slate and pencil.⁶⁹

Honorarium for Teachers :

It is not known about the honorarium or tuition fees of the teachers. The royal patrons provided with all substantial aids to the teachers who were under their patronage. The honorarium was managed with voluntary contribution from students and the public for the teachers of the other *Chhatra-Śāls*. According to the traditional custom, the pupils were provided with lodging in the campus of the teachers house. The students were to look after the house-hold activities of the teacher so long as they remained in the *Chhatra-Śāls*. After completion of the study the students were required to offer a lump-sum honorarium to the teachers which was managed from public collection. Śaṅkaradeva was also provided with a hut that was lying vacant in the compound of the house of Mahendra Kandali.⁷⁰

In the Nowgong grant of kind Balavarma (10th century A.D.) it is said that the king granted land to one *Srūtidhāra*, who attained proficiency in sruits on the day of the equinox.⁷¹ These are two equinoxes, during the courses of a year; one in the month of *Asvin* and the other on the las day of the month of *Chaitra*. According to M. M.

⁶⁹ *Kathā Guru Carita*, pp. 310, 270

⁷⁰ *Idid*. p.25

⁷¹ Bhattacharyya. P.*Kamrupa Sasanavali* p.79

Dhiresvar Bhattacharyya, the last mentioned equinox, i.e. the *Chitra-Vasuba Sankranti* was considered auspicious for making grants and gifts. Therefore, it is believed that the grant was issued on that day⁷². The teachers started education of the students formally on an auspicious day. After the students were admitted, the guardians, as a mark of respect and honour, offered a few gold or silver coins and some daily necessities, such as cloth, rice, etc to the teachers.⁷³

Curriculum of Studies :

In the *Darrang Rajyamśāvali*'s it is stated that Sārva Bhauma Bhaṭṭacharyya, the royal priest of the Koch kings was a versatile scholar having mastery over the four *Vedas*, the fourteen *Śāstras*, *Smṛties*, *Vedāngas*, 64 fine arts, the *Purāṇas*, the *Trantras* etc. Kāmarūpa became a well-known centre of *Tāntricism* in India. In the medieval period, the study of *Tantras* became a special feature of the learning. From the Gauhati grant of Indrapala, it is learnt that *Tantra* was a subject to be studied at that time and king Indrapāla himself was a conversant in the lore⁷⁴ called *Yoginītantra* and *Guptamoni* and *Guptasara* of the Āhom period bear testimony to the study) of *Tantra* during the medieval period.⁷⁵ As revealed, in the biographical works, the syllabus of books read by Śaṅkaradeva under Mahendra Kandali, was very wide. It included a large number of works including the four *Vedas*, fourteen sastras. Eighteen *Purāṇas*, the

72 Bhattacharyya. P.*Kamrupa Sasanavali*. p.87

73 *Kathā-Guru Carita*. p.25

74 *Ibid*. p.407

75 Sarma, S.N. *Asamia Sahityar Itibritta*. p. 164

Mahābhārata, the fourteen *Vyākaraṇas*, the eighteen *Kāvyas*, the eighteen *Kosas* etc.⁷⁶

Sanskrit was studied mainly in the *Tolas*.

Examinations :

For want of materials nothing can be said regarding the system of examination. There was no examination system like as modern one to judge the efficiency or ability of the students. It was determined only by the teachers and scholars of the court granting them recognition after the completion of their studies. The teachers granted recognition by holding a *samāvartana* ceremony to those students who were considered to be well versed in their respective subjects. The students had to prove his efficiency in his subjects among the court-scholars. The students were sometimes tested by their teachers by holding some tests. One day Mahendra Kandali, the teacher of Śaṅkaradeva, asked his students to compose a verse in the class; none but Śaṅkaradeva alone could compose to the entire satisfaction of his teacher.⁷⁷ students competed among themselves in making verses off hand orally and this was a popular intelligent test in those days.

It was a custom that the reputed scholars tried to justify their proficiency by defeating their rival disputants in the scholarly discussions held in the courts of the kings or in the assembly of learned gatherings. The victory of a scholar in such a discussions brought fame and enhanced his reputation in the society.⁷⁸

Spread of Education :

The *Vaiṣṇava* Movement and patronage of kings contributed towards uplifting the cultural level of the people. Though the educational institution were not wide-spread

⁷⁶ Lekharu, U.C. *Kathā-Guru-Carita*, p. 28

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* p. 25

⁷⁸ Rajguru, S. *Medieval Assamese Society*. P-393

in medieval Assam. The *Vaiṣṇava* movement and kings patronage helped in creating a favourable condition of learning which Bhuyan termed as 'Illiterate literacy. During the Āhom rule it was indispensable for every Assamese gentleman to have a knowledge of the *Buranjīs*.

The vast majority of the village people living at a distance from capital were enlightened with a sort of education in the form of information or news. This made the people politically more conscious and enabled them to put up with any sort of political emergency that arose in the country. That the different subjects such as engineering hawk training, military training, medicine etc. were studied by different guilds of the people are evident from the treatises that were written under the management of the Āhom Government. There were treatises compiled under the Āhom Govt. describing the procedure to be followed by different guilds or professions while doing their duties, as well as treatises laying down the duties of princes and rules of precedence at the court and they functions of the various officials.⁷⁹

The *Vaiṣṇative* movement, besides making the general people conversant with the contents of the epics, *Purāṇas* and other religious scriptures, taught the arts of singing, dancing, the playing of instruments etc. through cultural activities.⁸⁰

79 Bhuyan, S.K. (1956). *Studies in the Literature of Assam*, P-13

80 Rajguru, S. (1988). *Medieval Assamese Society*, P-394