

## CHAPTER II

### ***BHAKTI* MOVEMENT IN INDIA**

The term *Bhakti* (devotion) is familiarly related with the Hindu religious system. This word is derived from Sanskrit term *bhaja* whose literal meaning is ‘to adore’ or ‘to love with respect’. In the religious or devotional literature the word is used to mean “unquestionable faith and utter devotion to God”. Thus in general the meaning of *Bhakti* is devotion to God or *Bhagawan* or Almighty.

In Indian caste system, untouchability and ritualism were the main factors of originating the *Bhakti* Movement. In the *Bhakti* cult, the main objective is to uniting human soul with God, devotion was the pivotal point. The *Bhakti* movement refers to the theistic devotional trend that emerged in medieval Hinduism as well as in Sikhism. *Bhakti* movement originated in 7<sup>th</sup> century in South India and spread towards north. It swept over East and North India from the 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards, reached its zenith between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century.

#### **2.1 Emergence of *Bhakti* Movement in India:**

Emergence of *Bhakti* Movement in Indian society is caused by some social factors which were practicing during that time. These factors were as mentioned below-

The Modern Indian languages except the Tamil language had reached its recent stage from 10<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> century through various stages as Tamil language is the only ancient one. At first, *Bhakti* literatures were written by the propagators in Tamil only. At that time Vaishnava Poets from Alwar and *Saiva Bhakta* poets of North India began to write story on childhood of Lord Shri Krishna. Though Sanskrit is the mother of

majority of Indian languages, yet it was not easy to understand by the common sects of people at that time. So, story and poems were written in different modern Indian languages all over India which were easy to understand for the common sect of people of that time. From this the Vaishnavite faith influenced the common people of India.

In ancient India as well as in recent era, the lower class people were always dominated by the upper class in socio-religious aspects. Though the lower class people were followers of Hinduism, yet due to poor economic condition they were unable to perform religious activities like the upper class as those were more expensive. So, gradually they converted them to Buddhism which is very simple to follow. Then Saint Shankaracharya came forward to save the Hindu religion and he conducted a tour from North to South and West to East. He motivated the followers of Buddhism to adopt Hinduism again by convincing them that Lord Buddha is the part of Lord Vishnu. In this way during his time, Vaishnavite religion came into existence.

After converting to Hinduism, among those followers, several controversies occurred like faith on different Gods, not to follow the *Veda* and *Upanisada*. So, during that time the Vaishnavite saints propagated the thread of Vaishnavism to re-unite the followers of Hinduism.

As the upper caste people of that time usually belonged to rich family, so they had no any major problem to perform the rituals. But it was not easy for the poor people due to economic condition. So, the Vaishnavite saints of that period motivate the common sects of people to adopt the Vaishnavism in which it is very easy to perform the rituals in a low cost.

When the Mughals began to rule over India, then some Hindu people converted themselves to Islam. But among the Mughals some people were against this. So, the Vaishnava saints with the help of those people modified the Hindu religion and thus the Vaishnavism came into existence.

In the Hindu religion, chanting of holy prayers were usually written in Sanskrit which was very tough for the common people. But in Vaishnavism all these were written in simple Indian language. So, the people felt attraction to this religion. (Sarma, 2014:18)

According to Hinduism, the three functions of universe i.e. conception, protection and devastation are personified in Brahma the creator, Vishnu the preserver, and Maheswar, the destroyer or transformer. Bhagawata Purana explains that greatest benefit can be achieved from Vishnu, called the “all pervading one” or ‘one who is present everywhere’. In Vaishnavite tradition, Vishnu is the supreme God, worshipped directly or the incarnations (ten *avatars*), principally Rama, Krishna, Narayana or Vasudeva. His followers are called Vaishnava(s) or Vaishnavites. The word Vaishnavism included into English language in 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In Mahabharata, the worship of Vishnu in ancient India was well documented. *Bhakti* movement was originated in Alwars of South India in 7<sup>th</sup> -10<sup>th</sup> century. Bal Gopal was the God and they prayed in front the God by performing dance and song. Alwars were considered as incarnations of Lord Vishnu himself. Later on the great Vaishnava renaissance was started by Saint Ramanuja (1017-1137AD) of Tamilnadu, Basava (1106- 1167AD) of Karnataka and Namdeva (1270-1350 AD) of Maharashtra.

In India, a number of religious leader of great endowment appeared on the horizon, bearing the messages of *Bhakti* to the people; Ramananda of Allahabad (1440 AD), Kabir from Varanasi, Sankardeva of Assam (1449 AD), Nanak from Lahore (1469 AD) Vllabhacharya of Telegu community in the South (1479 AD) Chaitanya of Bengal (1468 AD), Mira Bai from Rajasthan (1498 AD) and Tulsidas from Rajapur in Uttar Pradesh (1532 AD) were the prominent.(Phukan, 2010:21-22)

## **2.2 Main features of *Bhakti* Movement**

The main features of Vaishnavism in Indian society have some aspects like in the different direction of India, there has observed the common features such as belief in one God though they are known in different names, *Bhakti*, extreme love and devotion, the only way of salvation, repletion of true names, self surrender, criticize of rituals ceremonies and blind faith, elimination of idol worshipped by the saints, open minded about delimiting religious matters, caste discrimination, need a *Guru* (path finder) for guidance and advocated by some, discussion on religion in local or original languages and travelling from place to place for propagating the religious messages. (<http://www.historydiscussion.net>)

“ The Neo-Vaishnavite movement initiated by Sankardeva in Assam was a part of the large pan – Indian resurgence of *Bhakti* (unflinching devotion) in medieval India that spanned nearly a little more than centuries from the devotional cult of Alwars of Tamilnadu to the teaching of Ramanuja, Nimbarka, Madhavacharyya, Vallabhacharyya, Chaitnaya, Kabir, Guru Nanak and others while it was basically a reaction against the excess of sacerdotal religion, the spirit of new ideas manifested itself in an overall social change almost unprecedented in its scale in the history of

Assam. Sankardeva was an extraordinarily gifted man widely travelled, well versed in traditional Sanskrit learning, poet, playwright and musician par excellence. (Neog, 1988:1)

### **2.3 Sankardeva and Vaishnavism in Assam:**

Sankardeva's ancestors entered Assam around 1350 AD through the western route of Assam as emissaries from Dharmanarayana of Gour to the Kamata king Durlabhanarayana. Durlabhanarayana settled them with land and men, and the title Bhuyan or Bhuiayn which was merely the equivalent to landlord, and had nothing to do with caste. Each Bhuyan was independent than the others within his own domain, but they joined forces when threatened by a common enemy. Chandivara, the ablest among them, was made their leader. A man of enterprise, he was as well versed in the scriptures as in the art of warfare. He earned the good will of the Kamata king when he outsmarted a scholar from Nadia, Bengal, in debate in the royal court.

Chandivara and a few other Bhuyans later moved to east and finally settled at Bardowa in Central Assam, ruling individual principalities or tracts of land. Being their leader, Chandivara had the title "Shiromani Bhuyan", meaning overlord or holding supremacy over many Bhuyans. The tradition of learning continued through the generation. Sankardeva's father, Kusumbar, was known in his time as a scholar of some repute. (Phukan 2010:15)

Saint Sankardeva was born in 1449 AD at Alipukhuri of Bardowa, Nagaon. Sankardeva's father, Shiromani Kusumbar Bhuyan believed in Lord Siva and worshipped him. So he named his son as Sankar, an offer to him from the God. There are some supernatural events often happened from the time of Sankar's birth, viz. the

statue of Chandadevi broke in their house, automatically hundred lighted lamps in front of the statue put out, some musical instruments i.e. *Ghanta* (bell), *Khol* (drum), *taal* (cymbal) played automatically and some animals loudly shouted (Katha Garu Charit). Sankardeva's mother died within 5 months of his birth and his father Kusumbar died in 1457 AD. He was brought up by grandmother Khersuti and Chandari and Madhabi (step mother). Sankar enjoyed a gay wildly childhood, he spent his time grazing cattle, hunting birds and deer, swimming and playing.

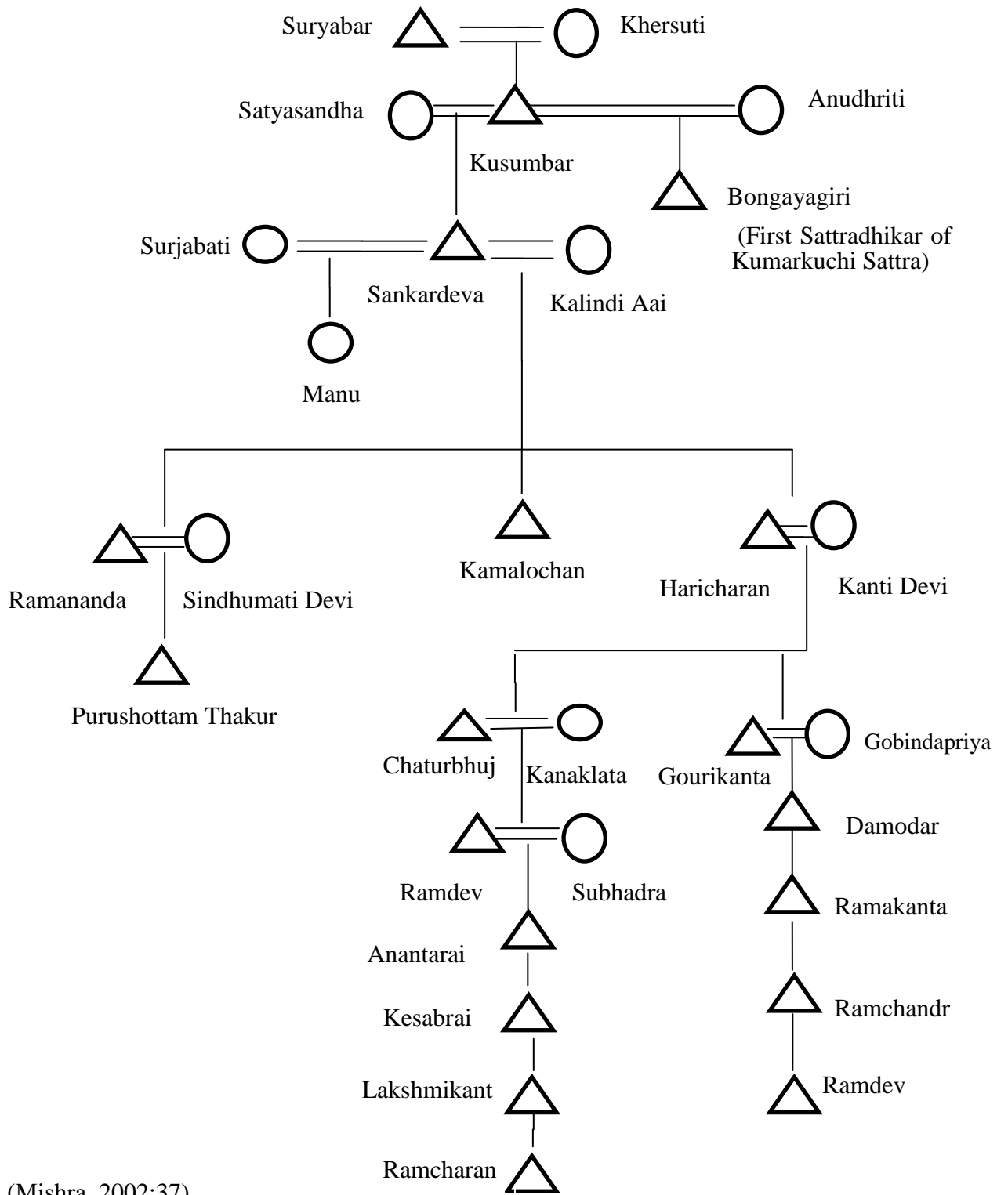
In 1462 AD (1383 *Saka, Bhada*, Thursday) his grandmother admitted him into a village *tol* (a pan Indian educational institution) under Mahendra Kandali by offering one basket of rice, one rupee, a clothe. Mahendra Kandalli was known as Kalap Kashari Bhattacharjya and the title Kandali was provided by Koch king. Sankar studied attentively and captured easily the subjects he taught and in a few days he became better than other students. Sankardeva wrote the book Haricharan Upakhayan on the basis of four elements of *Bhakti* viz. *Naam* (prayer), *Deva* (a spiritual God), *Guru* (religious teacher) and *Bhakata* (disciple).

Sankardeva was a saint-scholar, poet, playwright, social- religious reformer and a figure of importance in Vaishnavite religious history of Assam. He is widely credited with building of past cultural relics and deriving new forms of music (*bargeet*), theatrical performance (*Ankia Naat Bhaona*) and dance (*Satriya*), literary language (Barjvali). Besides, he has left an extensive literary works, poetry and theological works written in Sanskrit, Assamese and Brajvali. The Vaishnavite religious movement he propagated, *Eka Saran Nama Dharma* or Neo- Vaishnavite religion, influenced two kingdoms i.e. Ahom and the Koch kingdoms of the then Assam and to a lesser extent of North Bengal. This influence spread even to some kingdom founded by

Bharat Singha and consolidated by Sarbananda Singha in the later 18<sup>th</sup> century which endorsed his teachings. At present, in Assam his literary and artistic contributions are considered as living traditions. The religion he preached is practiced by a large population, and *Sattras* (monasteries) continue to flourish and sustain his legacy.

In Assam, Sankardeva's cultural contribution is unique 1. He clearly and boldly established the supremacy of Lord Krishna by propagating a strict monotheistic doctrine, 2. He successfully fought against the elaborate and costly rituals and replaced them by simple religious practices, 3. He brought to the forefront the ideal of desire less devotion (*Niskama Bhakti*) in place of religious observation actuated by desires, 4. He recognized the equality of all castes at the spiritual level and boldly asserted that devotee belonging to the lowest social stratum is superior to the Brahmin without faith and devotion, 5. He ushered in a period of literary revival and cultural renaissance, 6. He laid the foundation of the *Sattra* institution which subsequently ministered to the spiritual and cultural need of the people so much". (Sarma, 1999: 172)

**Fig.1. Genealogical Chart of Saint Sankardeva**



(Mishra, 2002:37)



#### 2.4 Sankardeva's view on Vaishnavite religion:

In his first pilgrimage, he became interested and acquired knowledge on Vaishnavite religion in Shrikhetra and after coming back he established *Naamghar* or *Sattra* to propagate the Neo Vaishnavite religion in Assam. Generally Saint Sankardeva gave importance on the following aspects to propagate the Vaishnavism in Assam-

“Shri Krishna Charitra” (Character of Shri Krishna) is the main feature of *Bhakti* religion which was founded by Saint Sankardeva. He did not deny completely the existence of other God and Goddesses but he considered Lord Krishna as *Param Purush Parameshwar* (supreme God). Among the Neo Vaishnavite saints, there is no difference between Shri Krishna and Shri Ram. In Neo- Vaishnavite religion, ‘*Bhakti*’ (devotion) is considered as summumbonum. In the view of Sankardeva, *Bhakti* is superior to *Mukti* (freedom) and belief is standing behind *Bhakti*. Sankardeva gave importance in *nitya naimitik* (daily activities) works and travelling.

Saint Sankardeva did not prefer *madhur bhab* (emotional love). He gave importance in *baatsalya* (parental love) and *daasatta* (Obedience to God). In this regard, according to Suniti Kumar Chetarjee, “The amoral and antisocial ideal of the figure of the *parakiya* has always had the risk of bringing in eroticism and even moral turpitude and this was carefully avoided by Sankardeva.” (Sharma 2014:5)

The main scripture of Neo Vaishnavite *Bhakti* religion are Sankardeva's Shrimat Bhagawata and Shrimat Bagawata Puran. Sankardeva did not keep place for *Jag – Jagya* (a ceremony in which oblations are offered) in his religion. He also believed in *Naam* (prayer), *Deva*, (a spiritual God), *Guru* (religious teacher) and *Bhakata* (disciple) are the main subjects of his religion. If there is no connection among this four in the

mind of a person, he never attach with *Bhakti* (devotion). The main aim of his religion is to uplift the social and spiritual sentiment of the distressed people of society. He wanted to universalize love, affection, brotherhood, in the society through his *Bhakti*.

In his religion all people are equal in status and there is no discrimination in caste, sex, religion colour and community. (Sarma, 2014: 28)

## **2.5 Development of *Sattras* and division of *Samhati*:**

The Vaishnava religious movement propagated by Shrimanta Sankardeva evolved the institution of *Sattras*. The institution of *Sattras* brought a total change in the Assamese society by creating a new community irrespective of caste and creed and gradually it was assimilated in the Assamese society.

“In Sanskrit literature the word *Sattra* is used in two senses, firstly, in the sense of an alms house and secondly, in the sense of sacrifice lasting for a few days to a year or more. The later sense was the proper cause for the nomenclature of the Vaishnavite institution of Assam. In the Bhagawata- Purana, the word *Sattra* was used to denote a long session of sacrifice of a thousand years of duration performed by sages in the forest of Nisima. In course of the sacrificial session, Suta-Ugrasrava recited and explained the entire Bhagawata –Purana to the assembled sages. This process of reciting and listening to the exposition of the Bhagawata most probably gave currency to the word *Sattra* in Assam. Sankardeva probably initiated his movement by reciting and expounding stories from the Bhagawata- Purana, to a band of the followers who clustered around him to listen to his religious discourses. The part played by Sankardeva reminded the listeners the part played by Suta-Ugrasrava in the assembly of holy sages in the forest of Nisima. The fact that a sacrificial session known as *Sattra* proceeded concurrently with the act

of expounding the Bhagawata, easily led people to believe that a *Sattra* as a holy association where the Bhagawata used to be discussed were identical. Under this impression devotees began to term an assembly where the Bhagawata used to recite as a *Sattra*. The etymological meaning of the word is an association or a sitting (sad + tra) or an instrument which help to liberate the noble (sat+tra) must have supplied additional weight to form the above notion about *Sattra*. The word *Sattra* naturally became *Sattra* in Assamese” (Sarma, 1999: 143- 144)

*Sattra* is the place where devotional prayers are offered to the supreme God by the followers of Vaishnavism. It is the place where the devotees offer various kinds of service for the satisfaction of God and the nine kinds of *Bhaktis* are pursued every day. It is an organization where the Vaishnava reside are engaged in the *Nama Kirttan* of Lord Krishna. This holy place is popularly known as *Sattra* in entire Assam.

The first *Sattra* was opened by Saint Sankardeva in his birth place Bardowa, Nagaon in 1493 AD. During his extensive travels across Assam, Sankardeva opened many *Sattras* in the Bramhaputra valley ie. Singari *Sattra*, Darrang in 1516 AD, Routa *Sattra*, Darrang in 1518 AD, Kumurakata *Sattra*, Darrang (1518 AD), Giladhari *Sattra* (1519 AD), Bhalukaguri *Sattra*, Darrang (1519 AD), Bhagpur *Sattra*, Goalpara (1519 AD), Gangmou *Sattra*, Lakhimpur (1518-1523 AD), Kangkini *Sattra* (1523 AD), Dhuwahata Belguri *Sattra*, Majuli (1524-1542 AD), Gazalasuti *Sattra*, Kamrup (1542-1543AD), Kapala *Sattra*, Kamrup (1543 AD), Chinpora *Sattra*, Barpeta (1543 AD), Kumarkuchi *Sattra*, Barpeta (1544–1543 AD), Patbaushi *Sattra*, Barpeta (1546 AD), Palangdibari *Sattra*, Barpeta (1546 AD), Sankarghola *Sattra*, Goalpara (1550-1551 AD), Tamranga *Sattra* (1550-1551 AD), Garhira *Sattra* (1550 –1551 AD) and in Kockbehar of West Bengal which was once part of Assam. There he established Srigruru Thaan

(1551-1552 AD), Katakuta Sattra (1564- 1568 AD), Madhupur Sattra (1566–1568 AD), Bhela Sattra (1551-1552 AD). Later Madhabdeva, Damodardeva, Harideva and other saints established many *Sattras* at different directions of Assam. These institutions gradually expanded and they become centre of cultural activity. (Borah, 2012:205)

The *Sattra* Institutions established by Sankardeva were at nascent stage and developed step by step by his disciples. The present system of financial and administrative structure was not found at that time. The *Sattras* had improved in structural and organisational aspects from the mid of 16<sup>th</sup> century to second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century due to the efforts of Saint Madhabdeva and Saint Damodardeva, who were followers of Saint Sankardeva. In the third phase, *Sattras* started receiving increased royal patronage. This had brought them a sound economic support. Because of the organizational modification brought by the *Sattra* management, it had acquired some elements of bureaucratic organisation. The modern stage began with the annexation of Assam by the British. During the British rule, they faced some minor troubles in propagation of religion due to the acts of the Christian missionaries. After independence, the institution of *Sattra* had faced the problem of adjustment. The modern values make them a rural institution by curtailing its' number of functions.

*Sattras* include the members – *Satradhikar* (the head of the *Sattra*), *Deka Satradhikar* (the deputy *Adhikar*), *Bhakat* (devotees staying inside the *Sattra* premises) and *Sishya* (lay disciples). *Satradhikar* is the religious head and spiritual guide. During his absence, *Deka Satradhikar* looks after the duties. *Bhakats* are also devotees but it is properly applied to those who lead the life of celibate within the *Sattra* premise. Lay disciples are called *Sishyas*.

Being centre of learning and cultural activities, the *Sattras* have a *Naamghar* or *Kirttanghar* (prayer house) and the *Manikut* (sanctum sanctorum). *Sattradhikar* lives in the main house and the *Bhakats* live in rows of huts. In the *Naamghar*, a person from any caste can take part in the prayers and distribute *Prasad*. Young people learn *Satriya* music, dances, painting, carpentry and handicrafts. Presently, majority of the *Sattras* have guest house complex. Some major *Sattras* have set up schools across the state. *Bhakat* have won Sangeet Natak Academy awards for *Satriya* dance and music.

Most of the Assamese families are affiliated to this custom; every young man of the Vaishanava families must have his initiation before he gets himself married. The *Naamghar* is a place of community festivals, public theatre, woman's association, and a seat of justice. A few larger *Sattras* have own land, including tea estate. Many *Sattras* get annual grants from the state and central governments.

After the death of Saint Sankardeva, the *Sattras* of Assam were divided into four sects known as *Samhatis*. Each of the *Samhati* came into existence under the chief followers of Saint Sankardeva viz. Damodardeva, Gopal Ata, Purushottam Thakur, Mathuradas Burha Ata and Padma Ata. Though these sects follow the Vaishnavite, yet some special rules were introduced among the followers. But all the sects follow the ideal of *Guru, Nama, Deva and Bhakat*. The main course of formation of four *Samhatis* is the different ideology among the next generation of Sankardeva. The *Sattras* of Assam fall under the four *Samhatis* i.e. *Bramha Samhati, Kal Samhati, Purush Samhati* and *Nika Samhati*

**2.5. a. *Brahma Samhati*:** The founder of *Brahma Samhati* is Saint Damodardeva. This sect is also known as *Damodariya*. In general in the *Sattras* under the *Brahma Samhati*,

*Sattradhikar* are selected from Brahmin Families. But in some cases, the non Brahmins are also selected. It gives basic importance on *Deva* among the four ideal. The main feature of this *Samhati* is the worship of the idol Lord of Vishnu. But gradually the followers began to worship the other gods and goddesses also. Some important *Sattras* under *Bramha Samhati* are Auniati Sattr, Dakshinpat Sattr, Garmur Sattr, Kuhuabahi Sattr and Maneri Sattr.

**2.5. b. *Kaal Samhati*:** The founder of this *Samhati* is Gopal Ata. According to some scholar the name came from the place Kaljar where Gopal Ata established the first *Sattr*. The main feature of this *Samhati* is the followers of this *Samhati* recognize Sankardeva, Madhabdeva and Gopal Ata in same line. Due to the revolutionary nature, besides the Brahmins, Kalita, Matak, Maran, Kaibartas also joined in this *Samhati*. The followers of this sect fought against the *Ahom* ruler which is known as Moyamoria war in Assam.

**2.5. c. *Purush Samhati*:** The founder of this *Samhati* is Purushottam Thakur, the grandson of Saint Sankardeva. The word *Purush* is coined from the word *Mahapurushiya*. The followers of this sect recognize only Saint Sankardeva as the supreme. *Nama* is considered as basic ideal among the other three ideal like *Guru*, *Deva* and *Bhakat*, so in this *Samhati* importance gives on *Nama Prasanga* besides worship the Lord of Vishnu.

**2.5.d. *Nika Samhati*:** After the creation of above mentioned three sects another sect, *Nika Samhati* emerged. The founders of this sect were Mathuradas Burha Ata, Padma Ata alias Badula Ata Keshab Charan Ata. *Nika* means pure, the basic purpose of this is to purify the body and mind. They usually do not take any food item from the other sect

and never eat betel nut before bath. In this *Samhati*, Madhabdeva is considered as Supreme one but Saint Sankardeva is recognized as the Master of the Supreme. The main important *Sattra* under this *Samhati* is Barpeta Sattra established by Madhabdeva.

**Fig 2 Divisions and Founders of Samhatis**

