

Chapter 5

Harekrishna Mahanta and Barangajuli *Satra*: A study of Reformation of *Satra* Culture

Sankardev's Neo-Vaishnavism which has given birth to a new cultural Nationalism was brought forward to the indigenous people with the help of *Satras* and *Namghar*. These social institutions have a major role to play in the preservation and development of culture and language, evolution of Assamese identity and also in the process of nation building. A modern social reformer named Harekrishna Mahanta's effort to spread *Satra* culture is a reflection of Sankardev's vision for a larger Assamese society, a long-cherished ambition that has yet to materialise. Nothing is easily accessible and achievable. To endure a good job, one must have to bear the burden. It was a herculean task for Harekrishna Mahanta to reform society based on the principle of Bhakti Marg, as propagated by Sankardev in the 15th and 16th century. Bishnu Rabha in his kind words encouraged Mahanta that one has to endure a lot of suffering to do a good deed. So, there is no reason one must deviate from his purpose. The greatest works of the world were achieved in the face of great obstacles (Bora, 2015). One of the flag bearers of the Bhakti Movement of India and accomplished Vaishanva Saint, Sankardev through his Neo-Vaishnavism or the Eka-Saran-Naam-Dharma, which translates to trust in one God by chanting and listening to Gods name, created a society of intergroup harmony among the various faith and practices in Assam. Sankardev contributed a great rich literary and cultural effluence in Assam. His cultural and artistic works are unparalleled in the history of India at that time. His efforts can be cited as the first step towards planting the seed of Assamese Nationalism as he brought various tribes and communities under one umbrella by installing Neo-Vaishnavism and later the *Satra* culture in Assam. Sankardev's Neo-Vaishnavism has given birth to a new cultural Nationalism, which brought forward to the indigenous people with the help of *Satras* and *Naamghar*. The *Satras* and *Naamghars* are an integral part of the Assamese society. It has a major role to play in the preservation and development of culture and language, evolution of Assamese identity and also in the creation of nation building. After Sankardev, most of his disciples and people in general carried out his philosophy and teachings.

Of late a little lesser-known devotee of Sankardev from the backward region of Dimakuchi, in Udalguri district, Harekrishna Mahanta can be attributed as progeny of Sankardev. By establishing Barangajuli *Satra* in Dimakuchi, he created an atmosphere of

cultural Nationalism like Sankardev in the region. He enlightened the backward region where people from various tribes and communities are a part of those *Satra*. In this chapter we would analyse mainly about the Reformation of *Satra* Culture highlighting Harekrishna Mahantas' Barangajuli *Satra* and analyse how in the present scenario, the faith, belief, practices and philosophy of the great saint are still in practices and can he be attributed as progeny of Sankardev.

The use of the word "*Satra*" in relation to understanding Vaishnavite institutions appears to be novel in Indian religious history. The word "*Satra*" is used to describe a lengthy session of sacrifice lasting a thousand years that was carried out by sages in the forest of *Nimisa* in the first chapter of the *Bhagavata-purana*. *Suta-Ugrasrava* recited and expounded the complete *Bhagavata-purana* to the assembled sages during the sacrificial session. The *Bhagavata* was recited while people listened to its explanation, which is most likely how the word *sattra* came to be used in Assam. (Sarma. 103) According to Keshavananda Dev Goswami in *Mahapursha Sankardev*, "The word *Satra* is first used in the sense of a sacrifice in the *Satapatha Brahmana*" (152). He further added that a *Satra* is different from a Buddhist temple or a Hindu math. The phrase, however, took on a unique and unusual connotation in Assamese Vaishnavism. An unusual form of institution is the *Satras* in Assam. The location of Sankardev's stay, where he delivered his sermons through communal prayers and religious discussions, became known as *Satra* (152). The word "*Satra*," according to scholars, is utilised in the Vedas. The term "*Satra*" refers to a 13–100-day period of sacrifice according to the *Rigveda*, *Yajurveda*, *Chandogya*, and *Upanishad*, among other ancient texts. According to various Rock Inscription and Copper Plate Inscription the word "*Satra*" refers to a monastery where devotees and worshippers reside and perform Vedic rituals.

S.N. Sarma in his book 'The Neo- Vaishnavite Movement and *Satra* Institution of Assam' translated Kabiguru Baikunthanath Bhagvata Bhattacharya's book 'Sarana-Mallika' stated *Satra* in English as 'That supreme place adored by Gods and Vaishnava where ardent devotees perform duties pleasing to God and where nine-fold Bhakti daily prevails is called *Satra*. '*Satra*' is defined as '*satah sadhun trayate iti traih kah*' in the Sanskrit lexicon, which means 'that which protects the righteous'. '*Satra*' is described by *Chandrakanta Abhidhan* as an Assamese Vaishnavite monastery and sacrificial ceremony. *Satra* is described as "the residential area of the nobles, religious people, a religious institution, and a monastery" by *Hemkosh*, another Assamese dictionary. The greatest Assamese social reformer, Sankardev contributed a great rich literary and cultural effluence

in Assam. His social, cultural and artistic works are unparalleled in the history of India at that time. His efforts can be cited as the first step towards planting seeds of Assamese Nationalism as he brought various tribes and communities under one umbrella by installing Neo-Vaishnavism (Ek Saran Naam Dharma) and later the *Satra* Culture in Assam.

The beginning of the Vaishnavite movement (Bhakti Movement) in the final decade of the fifteenth century marked a new chapter in Assam's religious history. It took about two centuries to firmly get established the Vaishnava faith as the supreme religious sect in Brahmaputra valley (Sarma, 104). It was under Sankardev's chief apostle Madhavdev and others that the *Satra* system started to take its shape in the sixteenth century. The goal of the current study is to ascertain whether Harekrishna Mahanta and his *Satra* culture can socially, spiritually, culturally, and literarily integrate the undeveloped and backward region. In addition, an effort is made to emphasise how the *Satra* culture fosters social harmony and inclusion for all. The purpose of the essay is to highlight Harekrishna Mahanta: as a true disciple, societal integrator, and descendant of Sankardev.

Harekrishna Mahanta: Background: The message of Bhakti Marga with Eka Sarana Naam Dharma as founded by Sankardev, went on throughout each corner of Assam with the dedication and hardship by most of his followers. More *Satras* were established as time went on, and gradually there were some *Satra* chiefs who broke away from the Vaishnava Order's main body, and as a result there arose some minor changes in *Satra* activities. After Madhavdev, this further led to four division or sub-sects within the Vaishnavite order as pointed out by Keshavananda Dev Goswami, which are called Samhatis or Sanghatis. They are-

Purusasamhati: the followers of Sankadeva's grandson.

Brahmasamhati: *Satras* headed by Brahmans and disciple of Damodardeva and Harideva.

Nika-Samhati: Madhavdev's deputies Mathura Das Burha Ata and Badula Padma Ata's
disciple

Kala-Samhati: Followers of Gopala Ata and his disciples like Yadumani and Aniruddha

These sects made an effort to distinguish themselves, although there is essentially little to no difference between them in terms of fundamental beliefs (Goswami, 2007). Following the development of the other sub-sects, *Nika-samhati* appears to have developed into a distinct entity. Although Madhavdev played no part in its development, he is

mistakenly regarded with initiating this sub-sect. Mathuradas Ata and Padma Ata, two of Madhavadev's most devoted and well-known disciple, are acknowledged with founding this sub-sect (S.N.Sarma, 1966). The purified sub-sect became known as *Nika Samhati* when Mathuradas Ata and Padma Ata purportedly organised this branch in strict compliance with the norms and regulations set out by Madhavdev after noticing some deviations and laxity among the adherents of other sub-sects.

Sankardev's, chief apostle and favourite disciple Madhavdev established most of the *Satras* with commitment and devotedness by some of the *Bhakats*. After establishing the Sundariya *Satra* and later the Barpeta *Satra*, Madhavdev started the tradition of keeping the sacred books written by Sankardev in a thapona (an elevated place or structure; altar) and keeping that in front the *Bhakat* and other devotee chant their daily prayer. The *bhakat* is a supernatural entity who represents a rich oral culture and is also a performer. Changes in body inclinations, speech, and consciousness, as well as the personification of art forms through apprenticeship, are all part of becoming a *bhakat*. The *bhakats* enter the *Satras* young apprentices who abandon their families and learn the custom of devotion and worship. The apprentice must adhere to, internalise, and practise a number of body prohibitions, such as celibacy and personal hygiene, in order to become a *bhakat*. A crucial component of devotion is "purity," which is based on the notion that a clean body equals a clear conscience (Chakraborty, 2019). *Bhakat* is an indispensable part of any *Satra*, *Kirtanghar* or *Naamghar*. He is one who conducts all the religious activities in a *Satra*. Sankardev laid the foundation of his faith on the 'Cari-vastu' four spiritual characteristics of Guru (a preacher), Deva (One absolute: Vishnu-Krishna), Nama (Bhakti with Shravana and Kirtana), and *Bhakat* (satsang, devotee, performer) (Goswami, 2007).

Ages after it was found that in most of the *Satras*, the Mahapurushiya tradition of Eka-Sarana-Naam-Dharma was somewhere in a state of disarray as there was no profound guidelines and regulations. More than hundred years ago, at this instance some of the *Bhakats* and true believer of the philosophy of Eka-Sarana-Naam-Dharma, assembled and started to re-read the composition of all the text of Sankardev and Madhavdev at the Baha (residence of Bhakat) of Harekrishna Mahanta's grandfather. Here we will try to focus about Harekrishna Mahanta, a present day *Satradhikar*, who demised in the year 2021, leaving behind accomplishing the message of *Satra* culture.

It was in the year 1926, Harekrishna Mahanta was born to Sagar Mahanta and Subhadra Mahanta at Na-Baradi of Baradi *Satra* of Barpeta District. His ancestors were from the family of Sri Narayan Das Thakur Ata's family from Rangapani of Goalpara

District (Bayan, 2014). Harekrishna Mahanta's siblings were Brajabala Mahanta (elder sister), Chidananda Mahanta (elder brother), Achyut Mahanta (elder brother), Giribala Mahanta (sister), Pramod Mahanta (brother), Jaidev Mahanta (brother) and Satish Mahanta (brother). He was fourth among his brother and sisters. According to his Kusthi (horoscope, birth chart, janmakundli) Harekrishna was born in 1848 Sakabda, 1333 Bhaskarabda, 877 Sankarabda, 7th of Assamese month Puh, which fall in the Krishna Chaturthi (Sarma, 2020).

When Deba Mishra was the Burha *Satradhikar* (Senior) of Barpeta *Satra*, then Khargeswar Mahanta, one of the Bhakat of Barpeta *Satra* became the Deka *Satradhikar* (Junior) of Barpeta *Satra* in 1937. Khargeswar Mahanta was the brother of Harekrishna Mahanta's grandfather. As the Deka *Satradhikar* was to stay at the Baha alone, so he asked his grandson Chida Mahanta, the elder brother of Harekrishna Mahanta to stay with him, so that he can take care of his grandfather. Along with taking care of his grandfather, Chida Mahanta started his schooling at Barpeta Town M.V. School. After completing his school education, he got an appointment as a school teacher, and had to leave his place. So, in order to take care of the Deka *Satradhikar*, Harekrishna Mahanta willed himself to stay with his grandfather when he was just 10 years of age. At that time, he was studying at Gaija Primary School. He too hoped of achieving his school degree as like his elders, but at the advice of one sub-inspector of schools, he was asked to stay and *Satra* and consider it as his school and attain the knowledge of Sastras. Therefore, he started to stay at the Baha of his grandfather.

While staying with his grandfather, he came to know about the contribution of the great saint Sankardev and Madhavdev, and how they tried to unite the society with Bhakti. He got acquainted of all the Sastras and concept of Neo-Vaishnavism at an early age, moreover, came to know about the *Satra* culture as he started to reside in the *Satra* campus. As mentioned above that the Baha of Khargeswar Mahanta was converted as a hub of reforming the Vaishnavite order of Sankardev, where some of the renowned *Bhakat* and disciple of Sankardev's *Ekasarna Dharma* assembled daily like Gopi Pathak, Lakri Singh Bepari, Bolo Bepari, Hargobinda Peskar, Achyut Sub deputy, Sarbananda Das, Dhoni Bepari and others (Das, 2014). Though he couldn't complete his formal education in school, but his main school was the Barpeta *Satra*, where he not only learned about spiritual knowledge and philosophy, but also acquired the basic knowledge of humanism, which he implied later on. Harekrishna Mahanta taking part on those sitting gained spiritual knowledge and philosophy of Vaishnavite order. At the advice of his grandfather, he started to participate in the rituals of *Satra*, and hereby became a chief Pathak (one who recites

and start the prayer) of the Barpeta *Satra* and performed the 'Choudha Prasanga' (fourteen prayers). Starting with the formation of Barpeta *Satra*, the daily prayers (Nitya Prasanga) of Barpeta *Satra* are divided into morning, afternoon, and night prayers in fourteen different forms of prayers, known as "Choudha Prasanga" (Fourteen prayers) in Barpeta *Satra*, which were developed and started by Mathura Das Burha Ata. After every prayer (morning, evening, and night) Doba, a special large drum, the beat of sound indicates the conclusion of prayers.

After the demise of Khargeswar Mahanta in 1942, Harekrishna Mahanta along with most of the *Ekasarania*, thought of establishing an institution in the *Satra* itself, where the message of Bhakti and philosophy advocated by Sankardev are truly practised. So, in the year 1945, they formally formed an institution 'Sankardev Samaj: Barpeta'. Almost everyone from the believer and follower of *Ekasarana* faith became a part of the institution. Later, within the *Satra* campus of Keuliya Hati, they purchased a land from a keuliya Bhakat and established a study centre which was named as 'Sankardev adhyangar'. The study centre became an important centre of learning and teaching of Sankardev studies, and a new era began with the Samaj deciding to practice the message of Eka-Sarana-Naam-Dharma in true sense. The efforts of Srimanta Sankardev was to eradicate certain superstitious beliefs and practises from Assamese society and following that Harekrishna Mahanta took a bold step in 1945 when he performed the religious rites of the father of Dambaru Deka of Galiahati, with only Naam-Prashanga instead of Shradh performed by Brahmanas, as it was in the Vaishnavite order of Sankardev.. A new form of religious and social upheaval was started by the Samaj rejecting the irrelevant practices as advocated by Sankardev. Again, in the same year, after the demise of their mother, Jagannath Das and Nripendra Nath Das of Nakhandapar, Barpeta decided to perform their mother's Shradh (religious rites) on the basis of Hari-Naam-kirtana and it was the second instance which Harekrishna Mahanta conducted for the eternal peace of the departed soul (Das, 2014). As controversy arose in the locality due to the new form of performing the religious rites for a demised soul, Harekrishna Mahanta carried on with his daily activities as being the Chief Pathak of the Barpeta *Satra*. Sankardev Samaj not only supported Mahanta for his true practice but also, they started to conduct marriages with the Vaishnavite order by rejecting the tradition of Yajna for the couple.

In the year 1948, while celebrating the 500th Birth anniversary of Sankardev in Barpeta *Satra*, Mahanta's dedication, sincerity and desire to make the celebration a successful one was noticed by the elders of the *Satra*. During this special occasion several

lecture series were held where devotees from all corners of Assam assembled. Among the notable personality who were present were Mahendra Mohan Choudhury, who later became the Chief Minister of Assam and Governor of Punjab, Krishnananda Brahmachari, Istadev Nabish, noted historian Surya Kumar Bhuyan, Upendra Chandra Lekharu, Kaliram Medhi, Harinarayan Dutta Barua (Sharma, 2020; Bharali, 2015). Among all the above in that programme, Gopinath Bordoloi, the first Chief Minister of Assam was also present as stated by Harekrishna Mahanta. It was advocated by many of the scholars that the message of unity among various caste, communities with Bhakti and Eksarana philosophy of Sankardev should be disseminated and promoted not only in Assam but also in India. Mahendra Mohan Choudhury focused that the Eksarania Dharma of Sankardev is confined in the four walls of Barpeta, and only three sub-*Satra* were there at Barpeta Road, Bijni and Udalguri, so it need to propagate. For this a committee was formed named as “Mahapurushiya Eksarana Harinaam Dharma Prachar Samiti, Barpeta” and accordingly in the year 1950, the then Burha *Satradhikar* Chandrakanta Mishra of Barpeta *Satra* offered the title of ‘*Saranacharya*’ to Istadev Nabish and Harekrishna Mahanta and gave the responsibility to promote Eksarana Naam Dharma.

Place and People: Influence of Harekrishna Mahanta

With a dedication to spread the devotion of Sankardev’s ‘Ek Saran Naam Dharma’, Istadev Nabish, the Deka *Satradhikar* of Barpeta *Satra* along with Harekrishna Mahanta went to Udalguri and with the presence and advice of Krishnanda Brahmachari and Mahendra Mohan Choudhury, it was decided to establish a *Satra* at Khairabari in present day Udalguri district. Khairabari was a place which was a society of various caste and community. With the establishment of Railway connectivity from Rangiya to Khairabari in 1922, trade and commerce improved, and the town turned out to be a heterogenous one. Istadev Nabish with the help of the local established a *Satra* at Khairabari, in which he was assisted by Harekrishna Mahanta. Istadev Navish was not only the Marg-darshak (guide) of Mahanta but also maintained a cordial relation with him. Upendra Nath Das, who met Harekrishna Mahanta at Khairabari, writes in his article that, Mahanta always maintained a friendly relation with each and every one who may be his elders or juniors. The *Satra* at Khairabari was opened for all irrespective of any caste, creed or religion. Khairul Rahman who was nicknamed Ruma was also engaged by Harekrishna Mahanta in the activities of the *Satra*. Their voyage began at Khairabari and continued to Barangajuli in Dimakuchi. This location became the hub and focal point of Harekrishna Mahanta's *Satra* activities.

With the help of most of the people of the locality and some contribution from Simson Canning and Mr. Hoque from the tea estate authority of Barangajuli, the Barangajuli *Satra* got its early shape.

One of the noted cultural activists Ratna Ojha in his writing briefed that, while asking Mahanta his purpose of leaving Barpeta and staying here, Mahanta narrated that on the advice and responsibilities given to him by the Barpeta *Satra* to spread the message of Bhakti and enlighten the backward locality, he is here. The resident belonging to various castes, tribes and sub-caste of Balisitha, Ratanpur, Murabari, Muraghat, Bhergaon, Thanapara, Ghograpara, Sushigaon, Sonajuli, Barangajuli, Khairabari etc were his place of service. Mahanta as a devotee of Sankardev mentioned that "only the devotee should come to the place of service, not wait for the place of service to go to the devotee (Ojah 14).

Harekrishna Mahanta's *Satra*:

Here, we'll try to explicate more about Harekrishna Mahanta's establishment of the Barangajuli *Satra* as well as the dynamics and activities that his *Satra* undertook. It might be claimed that Istadev Nabish's founding of Khairabari *Namghar* laid the foundation for Vaishnavite culture and prepared the way for *Satra* culture to start having an impact in the erstwhile Darrang District. Eksarana Dharma's activities expanded gradually throughout the district as few *Naamghar* were established in nearby area. By then Harekrishna Mahanta, with his devotion and in-depth understanding of the Vaishnavite order, emerged as a well-liked figure, which attracted the common people to lean towards the Neo-Vaishnavism. His reasoning and explanation of every query related to the religious persuasion were accepted heartedly.

As Nabish and Mahanta were in an assignment to impart the *Eksarana Dharma* with the fabric of social reformation, their next mission was Barangajuli. Barangajuli is a tea estate in Dimakuchi, which is presently under the Sub-Division of Harishinga, district Udalguri. Presently the tea estate is owned by McLoid Russel Company. It is 60 km east to Udalguri, and the nearest Police Station is at Dimakuchi. Harekrishna Mahanta recommended the establishment of a *Namghar* on the estate after discovering that few people were aware of the formation of a wider Assamese nationalism that was created by Sankardev by merging all sects of people through his *Satra* institution. They urged the tea estate authority to provide a land in the tea estate so that a *Namghar* could be established. The then manager of the Barangajuli Tea Estate, Simpson Canning accepted their proposal and allotted a small portion of land to build up a *Namghar*. The distance from Khairabari

to Barnagajuli is about 25 km. Istadev Nabish and Harekrishna Mahanta commute daily by bicycle and sometime on foot to Barangajuli to carry out their religious duties in the recently built *Namghar*. Everyone, including the tea estate authority, was impressed by Mahanta's commitment, enterprise, honesty, and laborious activities as a result of which they gave him the land to build a *Namghar*. In the year 1951, with active co-operation of Kusha Barua, Upen Bora, Saru Tamuli employee of the estate, the *Namghar* was established in the 19th line of the Tea estate.

Some of the Adivashi Bhakat like Chandru Mahandiya, Teju, Chetu, Binua Urang looked after the *Namghar*. But some strict rules and regulations of the estate authority made it hard for everyone to visit the *Namghar*, as outsiders were not allowed to enter the estate premises. Therefore, it was an urgent need to relocate the *Namghar* nearby (Rajbongshi, 30). Later, with the initiative of Mahendra Mohan Choudhury, then Chief Minister of Assam Bishnuram Medhi allotted 12 bigha of land near by the tea estate for the expansion of Barangajuli *Satra*. (Dalim Pathak 32). Accordingly, the foundation stone of the *Satra* was laid in the year 1952. But at the initial stage it was not that easy task for Harkrishna Mahanta to carry on with his mission of *Eksarana Naamdharma*. He had to face a lot of difficulties and hardship during his journey. Harekrishna Mahanta he himself narrated in his interview that being the area was inhabited by Bodos, Rabhas, Adibashis, Nepalis and others, most of them were unaware of who Sankardev was, and what was his impact and contribution to the Assamese society. He occasionally experienced physical abuse and also received life-threatening attacks. Interestingly Sankardev was mistaken as Shankar (Shiva, Mahadeva) by most of them as well, for which he was abused and criticised. A few others even poured wine (alcohol) into his head as he was reciting Bhagwat and his daily *Naam-Prashanga* (prayer). At that stage he faced mental and emotional harassment, moreover, was in a big financial crisis to continue with his service. He continued with his charitable work for others, nevertheless, and never wavered from his goal.

Lakshminath Bezborua coined the term 'Manikanchan sanjog' when Sankardev met with Madhavdev, which fostered the Vaishnavite Movement in Assam. Moreover, the meeting of Madhavdev and Mathuradas Burha Ata was a revolutionary and epoch-making incident of Vainavite history, Harekrishna Mahanta's meeting with Bishnu Rabha, can also be considered as one of the most salient features of Harekrishna Mahanta's Vaishnavite journey. The encouragement and support which Mahanta received from Bishnu Rabha, motivated for the future course of his journey. Rabha inspired Mahanta by saying, "there has to be a major *Satra* here, you have to accomplish the task at hand, avoid being worried,

no one is going to harm you, everyone is going to embrace and welcome you” (Saikia, 51) Moreover, while attending the meeting of Mahapush Srimanta Sankardev Janmajayanti, as appointed speaker held at Barangajuli *Satra* in the year 1965, Bishnu Rabha mentioned that, “ a sapling has to encounter multiple obstacles before becoming a big and fruitful tree-sometimes cattle eat it, sometimes children breaks its leaves and twigs. Overcoming all these barriers, when the sapling turns into a big plant, everyone enjoys its fruit and blessing” (R. Das 41). Overcoming all the difficulties, Mahanta continued his journey and gradually the Barangajuli Srimanta Sankardev *Satra* got its complete looks in the year 1983 by developing all the necessary requirements for *Satra* (Rajbongshi, 30). Thereafter he established thirty three *Naamghar* in those areas and tried to bind the society under the banner of *Eksarana Naamdharma*. It must be noted here that, the first person to whom Harekrishna Mahanta offered Sarana under Vaishnavite Culture was Tilak Sadhu, a person from Adivasi Community, who worked at the nearby tea-estate. Thereafter he offered Sarana to some of the villagers of Rangagaon (Sharma, 2020). Mahanta was called ‘Ata’ by everyone as a mark of respect.

Under the Barangajuli *Satra*, the first *Sakha-Satra* (Branch) which Harekrishna Mahanta established was the Balisitha *Satra* located at the Balisitha village. A villager of Balisitha village Sambaram Boro was highly fascinated with the works of Harekrishna Mahanta. Coming to know few things about the message of Srimad Bhagwat, he decided to take *sarana* but was hesitant as he might be an exclusion from the Bodo society. Mahanta inspiring him said that “when the inhabitants of the hamlet realise the importance of Bhakti through discovering the path of light from darkness, perhaps everyone would embrace Sankardev's principles” (Rajbongshi 33). Hearing all about the importance of Sarana, in the year 1971 Sambaram took Sarana under Harekrishna Mahanta and his home became a centre of Sankardev studies. But elders of the village soon excluded Sambaram from their society. But Sambaram continued his prayers and the Bhagwata path, hearing the greatness of the Bhagwat Path some of the elders became curious to know about the Vaishnavite culture and its importance. Sooner coming to know about Sankardev's doctrine known as Ek-Saran Nama Dharma, which translates to "believe in one God," namely Vishnu. Eka-Sarana, also known as total surrender to God through chanting his names such as Hari, Rama, Krishna and so on, implies total surrender of the mind, body, and ego. Because he believes that presenting them with what is good, rather than fighting what is bad, is the most effective way to transform a people's religious and spiritual lives. With it some of the elders of the village Topo charan Bodo, Urgaw Boro, Dipak Boro, Prem Boro, Pradip Boro

and few others took Sarana under Harekrishna Mahanta. As more people started to embrace Vaishnavism, Mahanta decided to establish a *Satra*, and with the support of local people Balishitha *Satra* was established, which became a Sakha-*Satra* of Barangajuli *Satra*. Sambaram Boro, as he was the first from the Bodo community to take sarana under Harekrishna Mahanta, so he was closely related to the Mahanta and gave his best contribution which boosted *Satra* activity. Mahanta once asked Sambaram to find a boy who was maybe involved in the *Satra* activity and to watch after Mahanta personally. Because there were no other responsible boys, Sambaram volunteered his son Niranjan Boro, who was 9 years old at the time. Sambaram and his family members hoped that under Harekrishna Mahanta's mentorship, Niranjan would not only be able to finish his schooling but also emerge as a man of integrity and virtuousness. So, under the shadow of Mahanta, Niranjan Boro right from childhood till the heavenly abode of Mahanta stood beside him. At present Niranjan Boro took the responsibility as *Satradhikar* of Barangajuli *Satra*.

In the year 1987, Dadhi Rabha of Purani Bhergaon village indicated his willingness to accept Sarana under Harekrishna Mahanta and had an informal meeting with Sambaram Boro, who described the benefits and importance of Sarana in a person's life. Thereby Dadhi Rabha became the first person from Rabha community to embrace Eksarana Naam Dharma. Later, at this particular village a *Satra* was established by Mahanta, who considered it as second Baikuntha-Puri Dham. Sambaram Boro and Dadhi Rabha were regarded as his right and left hand in his mission of religious preaching and social reformation (Niranjan Boro, 3). With his laborious effort and dedication altogether thirty-three sakha-*Satra* were established in the surrounding forty two villages of the district which is inhabitant of multiple caste and community including Assamese, Bodo, Rabha, Adivashi, Bengali, Nepali, Garo and others. For achieving it, Mahanta had to face various obstacles and adversity. By covering the surrounding villages sometime on foot and sometimes on bicycle, he visited the villages and tried to know about the well-being of them. He often realises the infliction of pain on them and why it causes. Lack of education, and economic backwardness was what he felt as their cause of pain. Moreover, integrity among various tribes and community was lacking. They haven't been able to receive attention from the present social system. Realizing that until and unless the society is not organised properly in a systematic way then, their suffering and agony could not be erased. Therefore, in every village wherever he went, he asked the villagers to casually assemble in the courtyard of *Namghar* or a common place, where first he discusses about harvesting rice, agricultural activity, plantation, animal husbandry, weaving, cottage industry,

economic development, social evils and others (Kakati, 31). Public awareness helped to spread a cohesive religious philosophy that assisted in the development of society's new values and social amalgamation. Later, he explains them about the essence of Bhagwat and *Eksarana Naam Dharma*, as strengthening the humanistic connection between Vishnu worship and humanism is essential for fostering a healthy society. We also need to modify the way our Vaishnava gurus lived their lives to fit with modern idealism, religious philosophy, and changing social norms. The way we think about and work towards the welfare of humans will undoubtedly change. This kind of religious consciousness will undoubtedly make us beautiful from the inside out and guide us to where we need to go. When a person's heart is beautiful, life is beautiful. With the aid of a beautiful life, it is possible to improve our interpersonal and societal ties.

In the hearts of various communities, faith was created, and the first chapter of social transformation emerged. In the caste-based society, Sankardev spread his Bhakti regulation based on the idea of universal brotherhood. In addition to abolishing caste systems, Sankardev placed more emphasis on personal cleanliness—both inside and out—as well as proper social behaviour. This was done to promote social harmony in society. Harekrishna Mahanta also emphasised the spiritual equality of all men and asserted the dignity of man in society regardless of birth or social standing. In addition to fostering brotherhood and togetherness, he aimed to end the social evils and unite the society by taking name of *Ek saran Ek deva*. Hereby he established various *Satra* and *Namghar* which are listed below.

Sakha-*Satras* under Barangajuli Srimanta Sankardev *Satra*: 1) Balisitha 2) Purani Bhergaon 3) Sonajuli 4) Thanapara 5) Murakhat 6) Tanglagaon 7) Ratanpur 8) Hanhini 9) Bengbari 10) Nangbha (Tangla Jalah) 11) Baroghoria 12) Habigaon 13) Bhelapara 14) Batabari 15) Bhalukmari 16) Balisuwa 17) Ghograpar 18) Oubari 19) Ghogapar 20) Kalikhola 21) Rajagarh 22) Naubandha 23) Barampur 24) Uttar Barampur 25) Maja Suburi 26) Bengabora (Outola) 27) Murabari 28) Milanpur 29) Barakhat (Kukurakata) 30) Dharamjuli 31) Khairabai 32) Harishinga 33) Tangla (town). The latest edition in this list is the (34) Deusunga *Satra*, near Bogamati which was inaugurated after the demise of Harekrishna Mahanta, located at Baska district bordering Udalguri district. This newly formed Sub-*Satra* at Deusunga is inhabitant mostly of Nepali and Garo community. Earlier, a committee was formed “Srimanta Sankardev Sakha *Satra* Samittee” which amalgated all the *Satra* as Sankardev *Satra*. According to eminent *Satra* Institution scholar Bapchandra Mahanta, not all members of each class are equally advanced, hence *Satra's* primary

objective is to look after the progress all of the backward classes. In the common language, both the learner and the instructors are referred to as Bhakat or Bhakata (devotee) (Bap Chandra Mahanta, 245). From this viewpoint, Harekrishna Mahanta under his *Satra* treated his institution as a training centre of social system.

Social Transformation:

Here it will be analyse how Harekrishna Mahanta's social transformation began and to what extent he was successful. The Neo-Vashnavite Movement not only confined to religious and cultural reforms, but it also focused on raising social and educational awareness among the masses. From Tangla to Barnadi, and Bhergaon to Bhutan hills, almost 500sq. km area was in a dark age as there was dearth of educational institution. Many difficulties plagued society, including illiteracy, religious turmoil, and the practice of social evils, consumption of intoxicated substances and others. Only a small percentage of the population, mostly from the elite classes, had access to education. The public remained in a state of ignorance and illiteracy. Harekrishna Mahanta was a *Satradhikar*, who was also an educator in his unique style. He recognized the terrible state of the society and decided to embark on a literacy mission. Even though Srimanta Sankardev's followers were a tiny minority among the vast illiterate masses, he and his followers worked hard to spread knowledge and wisdom on their own unique methods. Researchers could investigate why Sankardev and his successor, or other sects of Vaishnavism, did not covered this part of Bhutan's foothills for preaching *Satra* Culture. Sankardev's last foothold was at Rowta, Udalguri district.

Barring a few Lower Primary School, there was no scope for any higher education for the underprivileged children who wished to continue their studies. Moreover, there were not any religious institution, other than a few scattered temples mostly in a depleted state, which can impart philosophical knowledge to the people. But there were some churches in the tea estate belonging to multinational business houses. Keeping this in view, Harekrishna Mahanta and some of the good humanitarians in a dedicated effort established a primary school named as Sonajuli Sankardev Prathamik Vidyalaya in 1958. Keeping the effort continuous, he established another High School in 1962 named Sankardev Mission High School, which is now upgraded as Higher Secondary School. Mahanta believed in the saying of *Srimad Bhagwad Gita*, “Nahi Jnyanam Sadrish: PabitrmihaVidyate”, nothing is more Holy in human life as Holy the Knowledge is. Moreover, with the patronage of the great educational enthusiastic personality Harekrishna Mahanta and also

with the utmost support of the local people, the Dimakuchi College was established in the year 2002. At the early stage the classes were held at the ‘Sankari Kala Kristi Unnayan Bhawan’ located in the Barangajuli *Satra* Campus. Another important contribution in the educational sector of Mahanta was the establishment of the Ramai Kachari Library. He felt it necessary that in mere imparting formal educational system can’t enlighten the students, they need to explore various texts to attain a complete knowledge. Moreover, during that period curriculum books and other relevant books were not easily available in those remote areas. So with the donation of books by some people and under his patronage the library was established. It must be mentioned here that, while taking a video interview with Harekrishna Mahanta during my research period, he repeatedly mentioned that all the educational institution which are mentioned above got nurtured in the *Satra* campus of Barangajuli. Though presently all those institutions got its own campus with Government affiliation, but the journey started from the *Satra* itself. At the *Satra* campus, irrespective of caste and religion, he provided space and food for the candidates appearing for the Board examination. Another notable contribution of the *Satra* was that, with the initiative of Mahendra Mohan Choudhury, a total of 12 Bighas of land were allotted to the *Satra*, of which 2 Bigha was donated by the *Satra* to Sankardev Prathamik Vidyalaya and another 2 Bigha was donated to Sankardev Mission High School, which are both adjacent to the *Satra* campus. Even though Harekrishna Mahanta had only received elementary schooling, one of his distinguishing characteristics was his familiarity with the Vaishnava Sastra and Puthis. He was well-versed in the Bhagawata, Kirtan Ghosha, Naam Ghosha, and other religious works, and he exhorted his disciples and the populace at large to read and recite not only religious scriptures but also additional relevant socio-cultural works. His effort in provincialisation of those institution was another notable contribution for a noble cause. We can therefore claim that Mahanta was more focused on societal and educational initiatives while simultaneously being very engaged with all the devotional activities of the *Satra*.

Harekrishna Mahanta’s sole aim was to enhance the common masses with spiritual consciousness of *Ekasarana Dharma* and make them familiar with the Sankari culture and bind the society in a single thread of unity in diversity. Lakhminandan Bora in his article at *Pathadrasta* mentions that Mahanta was a person of charity, full of love and goodwill towards others. A person who dedicated his life for the welfare and betterment of others and so that everyone can lead a healthy and peaceful life. Bora, quoted a Sanskrit sloka in this regard:

Paropakaraya Falanti Vrksah
Paropakaraya Vahanti Nadyah.
Paropakaraya Duhanti Gavah
Paropartha Midam Sariram.

“Trees give fruit for charity, rivers flow for charity and cows give milk for charity, that is, this body is also for charity.” (Sanskrit Bhuvan)

Bora, further compares him with that of Pitambar Dev Goswami, *Satradhikar* of Gormuriya *Satra*, a renowned social reformer. As like him, Mahanta also taught his disciple to be economically vibrant by indulging in agricultural activities, to fully dedicate mind and soul in their devotion to God, to serve and volunteer themselves in service to mankind, to boost knowledge by imparting education and going through the religious text of Neo-Vaishnavism to enhance spiritual excellence to attain Moksha. (L. Bora 17)

Mahanta was a true representative of Sankardev's message of interfaith harmony among the various ethnic groups and diverse religious traditions. For him, there is no difference between castes or social classes; everyone is treated equally. Similar to other well-known individuals who frequently mention that Mahanta shares his food with everyone and dines with everyone who visits his *Satra*, which once I noticed when visiting the *Satra* that he not only dines with everyone but also never pays attention to who the cook is or what their caste is. For him the word untouchability is not found in his dictionary, as he firmly believed that whoever comes to the Sarana of Satriya culture, their caste, creed is abandoned forever. Although Bishnu Rabha referred to him as *Satradhikar*, he never shown any pleasure or considerable joy in thinking so. He regarded himself as a Bhakat, and whenever visitors came to his *Satra*, he would first bow to them and touch their feet, this is the way he greets his visitor. Everyone is equal in his eyes, and anyone who enters the *Satra* is regarded as a Bhakat.

Following Sankardev's example, Harekrishna Mahanta's message of love and forgiveness inspired people to join in the exquisite lyricism of the Satriya Dance, Naam-Prashanga, Diha Naam, and Bargeet. By inviting teacher and trainer from Barpeta and other places, he provided training and workshop to the young generation to learn and practice the cultural activity of *Satra*, like reciting the religious texts, to learn musical instrument like Taal, Khol and Nagara, dance form like Satriya Nritya, Bhortaal, to sing Bargeet, Satriya song and even Bishnu Rabha song and Jyoti sangeet. As Sankardev contributed the society with varied form of cultural activities, sought that everyone stay attached with the

cultural form because it illuminates the heart. Harekrishna Mahanta also discovered that commoners were particularly attracted to cultural performances and activities. The diverse Satriya customs, such as the Satriya Nritya (dance), Bargeet (devotional song), Khol (dhol), Nagara (drum), Tal (cymbal), and Naam-prashanga (standing dancing prayer), are particularly well liked by the local tribal people. The liberal and moral attitudes of the *Satra*, which did not practise caste, class, or gender discrimination, drew people from other castes as well as from other tribes, fostering regional cohesion and integrity. He enlightened the destitute area culturally where members of numerous tribes and communities are part of the *Satras*. Cultural events as designed by Sankardev were therefore frequently held in order to draw many followers into the spiritual fold. Thereby the general population became attracted towards Eka Sarana Naam dharma and as a result, it's influenced in infiltrating religious teachings into common people's thoughts. Mahanta whole heartedly, respected the traditional cultural activity of the tribals. He never interdicts anyone nor asked anyone to forbid their own identity. We have noticed in all the occasion of the *Satra*, how tribal women perform the Vaishnavite cultural performances in their own traditional costume. Participation in the cultural activity irrespective of class, caste, creed, community provides a healthy atmosphere of brotherhood and integration among all sects of people. Keeping that in view, Mahanta also wanted to unite the people in the sense of Cultural Nationalism.

One of the major achievements of Mahanta was his formation of 'Karma-Bahini' (a voluntary work Force). The members of this *karmabahini*, which consists of both males and females of all ages, are so well-behaved and disciplined that they can look after thousands of people by providing snacks and meals, setting up arrangement, resolving their issues, and other duties. They volunteer their voluntary service not only for *Satra's* events but also whenever and wherever they are needed, lending a helping hand to those in need (Malakar, 17). Mahanta's goal was not only in concentrating the values of Sankardev's religion and culture but also in the advancement of the society he focused more. Most of the places became a hub of illicit liquor, people became addicted to alcoholism, gambling and narcotics which not only effects the mental and health consciousness but also leads to unpleasant arguments, quarrel by making the environment and surroundings irksome. But by finding sanctuary, individuals adopted the way of life modelled by the Mahapurushas' values. Today, the scenario is almost different. At most villages, where *Satras* were established, people became spiritually aware of those things and deserted themselves from any intoxicating things. Mahanta realizes that, when a man is spiritually elevated, the social

environment automatically changes, and societal prejudices are eliminated. So that a uniform order may be built in society, man needs certain principles to guide him in life. Therefore, he emphasised the need for man to adhere to social norms so that the illiterate and backward can be socialised. They will learn the value of knowing one another as well as the spirit of brotherhood and cooperation as a result of this. Moreover, the sakha-*Satra* or the *Namghar* which he established in most of the villages serves as both centres of religious and cultural practice and tried-and-true tools for boosting and bringing together the larger Assamese community. In fact, in every household who ever took Sarana under Harekrishna Mahanta, they set up a small *Namghar* in their courtyard. So, it might be considered as a great social advancement under the patronage of Harekrishna Mahanta.

For eight decades, Mahanta has been steadfastly working to establish the true form of Sankardev's ideology by bringing together various castes and tribes with the creation of *Satras* and *Namghar* in the undivided Darrang district. Mahanta was a great visionary, he realised that in the future course of administrating the *Satra*, it needs to be economically stable. First, he started to raise dairy cattle in the *Satra* itself, so that the milk can be produced, and the excess milk can be sold out, by which it was spend for the daily activity of the *Satra*. Thereafter he started pineapple farming in the campus, which also turned out to be beneficial for the *Satra*. One of the managers of the tea-estate, Rajat Dutta provided a helping hand as asked by Mahanta, when he recommended to start tea garden in the remaining land of the *Satra* campus. Thereby necessary arrangements were done to start the tea garden and tea sapling were planted which generated income for the *Satra*. Furthermore, Mahanta was equally conscious of women empowerment. He inspired the womenfolk to move to the cottage industry and weaving industry. The model of '*Atmasahayak Got*' (Self-Help Group) which is now fostering, was way back given a thought by Harekrishna Mahanta. He urged the womenfolk to create a Self-Help Group so that they collectively can work together and become self-dependent (Kakati, 31). Mahanta did not only confined himself with all this, he was also associated with various socio-religious organisation and institution also. He supported and inspired the awareness campaigns against witchcraft and human trafficking that were being held by numerous organisations. There are a few cases of human trafficking in the area, and throughout those awareness campaigns, he pleaded with the impoverished not to fall victim to traffickers. Additionally, after his demise, there was an occurrence of a witch hunt in the village of Simaluguri. But it must be included here that in both the incident, the victim's family were not adhered to *Ekasaran Naam Dharma* as propagated by Sankardev. Harekrishna Mahanta

toiled in the shadowy corners for many years, bringing the unorganised society together by his hard work and sacrifice.

Composite and Civic Nationalism through a belief System:

Nationalism can manifest in various forms, depending on the context, historical background, and cultural factors of a specific nation or community. One is the Civic nationalism, which is based on shared values, citizenship, and a commitment to the political institutions and principles of a nation. It focuses on inclusive civic identity, where individuals of diverse backgrounds can become part of the nation by adopting its common values and ideals. Civic nationalism emphasizes equal rights, democracy, and civic participation as the basis for national identity. Contrarily, composite nationalism acknowledges and values the variety of cultural, linguistic, and ethnic identities that exist within a country. While appreciating and valuing each group's uniqueness, it aims to bring these disparate identities together under a more expansive national identity. While facilitating the expression and preservation of varied cultural and ethnic traditions, the emphasis is on upholding a sense of togetherness and belonging among all participants. The Bhakti Movement in India played a significant role in promoting the concept of a composite society, emphasizing religious tolerance, inclusivity, and unity among diverse communities. The movement, which emerged during the medieval period, sought to transcend the barriers of caste, creed, and religious differences, promoting a sense of harmony and coexistence among people of various faiths. Several aspects of the Bhakti Movement contributed to the idea of a composite society. Some of the fact-finding which signifies some important attribution of Harekrishna Mahanta, like how he popularises his institution, the process of executing his mission and why he is admired by all. Firstly, the majority of Sankardev's co-workers were married, with the sole exception being Madhabdev. Despite his repeated requests for Madhavdev to marry, which Madhavdev ignored. Sankardev is believed to have suggested on various occasions that celibacy could be recommended for those with saintly character and a natural indifference to materialistic attraction. Later some *Satradhikar* and Bhakats maintained celibacy, but in recent few decades, exception is Harekrishna Mahanta, who maintained celibacy and adhered the message of Sankardev in true sense. Moreover, Mahanta lived a simple life. Comfort and luxury were a total no for him. His dressing comprised of three parts, a dhoti, a vest and a Sador or Seleng. He remained bare-foot, and only once while visiting Puri, he wore sandals. He lived a very straightforward life and was a very simple man. Furthermore, greatness

cannot exist in the absence of simplicity, goodness, and truth. Through his teaching and simple way of life, he attracted people from lower socio-economic strata.

Secondly, his spirituality, the journey which started at the age of 10 and ended at the age of 97, a man dedicating more than eight decades of commitment to serving God with complete devotion and making an attempt to provide his people with a disciplined and honourable life that is illuminated by spiritual consciousness. During this long journey, not a single day did he skip reciting the religious verse and chanting prayers for everyone's prosperity without fail. The greatness is that he never had shown any greed or interest for any materialist world, other than spirituality and devotion. Whoever offers any donation or gift, he uses it for the *Satra* purpose and distributes the kind offered to him among the needy villagers.

Thirdly, it is already stated that, how difficult it was for Harekrishna Mahanta and Istadev Navish, who facing all the difficulties overcame the hardship and established Vaishnavite order in the foothills of Bhutan. The society was a heterogeneous one with habitant of diverse ideologies and faith. Disintegration, superstition, gambling, alcoholism, underdevelopment, illiteracy, poverty and many other problems constituted as a dark age of the region adjoining Barangajuli. However, Harekrishna Mahanta believed that it was possible to create a perfect society by illustrating the correct route through the word of Sankardev. He opened the door to everyone without making any sort of distinction based on caste, creed, community, or religion. Among its residents, he upheld absolute equality, which attracted the common people. He repeatedly said that his main agenda is to unite the society with the same thread of *Eksarana Naam Dharma* as done by Sankardev, so that composite integrity remains among all. As already elaborated, by taking numerous steps he tried to bring a social reformation and awaken the people from darkness and show the ray of light. Moreover, the *Sarana* (submission to one God) did not require any complicated ritualistic procedures, vocabulary, or theoretical complexity. Anybody could purge themselves of all heavenly sins by merely reciting the name of Rama, Krishna & Hari. After acquiring the spiritual value, gradually most of the tribals and Adivasi family, the social evil started to eradicate from the society.

Fourthly, another aspect of his was the cultural activities by which he tried to bond the society culturally. Prior to the arrival of Harekrishna Mahanta, the community was unknown to the *Satra* Culture. They were not aware of Sankardev's extensive cultural contributions, which included the Ankiya Naat, Satriya Nritya, Bir Naam, Bargeet, and many more. But Harekrishna Mahanta frequently held showcase sessions to draw attention

to the *Satra* culture in order to familiarise people with it. Workshop were conducted, tribal people learned and adopted the cultural creation, mostly Bargeet and Naam without any hesitation. He also popularized the Deul Utsav (Holi) as like Barpeta *Satra*, which also created a feeling of brotherhood. However, one crucial point needs to be highlighted here: he never urged the tribes and other communities to compromise on their unique indigenous identities. We observed that indigenous people, notably Bodos and Rabhas, always wore their traditional clothes while participating in cultural and social activities of the *Satras*. Additionally, they adhere to the custom of wearing the Assamese *fulam gamocha* in the neck during visiting the *Satra*, and it highlight the uniqueness of integrity among all.

Fifthly, Harekrishna Mahanta being served as Pathak in his early days at Barpeta *Satra*, where there was strict restriction for the women and girls to enter the *Manikut* (the main place of worship), though they can enter the *Satra* campus and take part in the religious congregation by sitting in the outside corridor of the *Kirtanghar*, but Harekrishna Mahanta was very much critique about it, and he didn't imposed any such restriction in his *Satra*. This shows how liberal and messenger of equality without gender discrimination he was.

Lastly, right from the days of Sankardev, *Satra* and *Namghar* are considered as the soul of *Eksarana Naam Dharma*, *Namghar* plays an important role in social reformation. *Namghar* served the twin aim of being a congregational site for the religious and sociocultural communities in most Assamese villages. Harekrishna Mahanta after the establishment of Barangajuli *Satra*, he went on to establish 33 sub-*Satra* not only in the Udalguri District but to the neighbouring Baska district as well. In order to maintain spirituality and devotion to God, which purifies the mind and soul, he encourages people to gather in *Namghars* and *Satras*. Additionally, it creates a sense of social harmony so that all sects of people can come together and forget their differences. Amalgamating all those *Satras* with common thought and concept, means amalgamation of all diverse community under the umbrella of social equality and integrity and also cultural unity. Moreover, with his capacity to accumulate support from the Barangajuli tea-estate authority and government machinery to foster the *Satra* Institution was not that an easy task. With his enormous hard work and dedication, he was able to promote Neo-Vaishnavism. The combination of all these created a new society, where peace and development prevailed.

The last four decades, starting from 80's we are aware of how the situation of Assam has gone through with agitation, violence, insurgency, ethnic clashes, extortion, displacement etc. which almost crippled the social system, economic deterioration, cultural

discrimination, political rivalry hampering peace and development. The most affected part was the present BTC (Bodoland Territorial Council) area. But being a part of BTC, Barangajuli remained free from all that violence and enmity. An exemplification is that, some youth during those disturbed phases, diverted from the mainstream and went on to join rebel group. Harekrishna Mahanta showed them the path that life is not about violence and hatred. Under his inspiration those youth returned back to the mainstream and now they are taking *Sarana* under Mahanta, dedicates their life for the welfare of the society erasing social discrimination and social evils.

The Neo-Vaishnavism Movement of Sankardev leads to development of Assamese nationalism in Assam. By establishing *Satras* and *Namghar* by him and his followers, the concept of Bhakti in the sense of *Ek Sarana Naam Dharma* was spread to every nook and corner of the region. From there onwards various *Satras* were established by Sankardev's chief disciple Madhavdeva, Damodardeva, Harideva, thereafter by Ram Ata, Gopal Ata, Banamalidev, Badula Padma Ata, Narayan Das Ata, Gobinda Ata, Mathura Das Burha Ata and many more. In such *Satras*, the *Satradhikar* (*Satra* Chief) has a significant role in both promoting religious activities and serving as a spokesperson for social, cultural, and economic change. The majority of them played a significant part in protecting the *Satra* culture via intense dedication and labour. Sankardev and Madhavdev could never have predicted that their liberal humanism would be limited to the *Namghar* and *Satra*. However, after centuries, there remained a shortage of dedicated leaders who could carry forth Sankardev's ideology and bind the society in a single rope of *Eksarana Dharma*. The initial simplicity and austerity of the *Satra* Institution soon gave way to a desire of power and prestige. As a natural result of this acquisition of power and riches, began to find a foothold in the dealings of the wealthy *Satras* (Sarma, 1966). This led to creation of lobbyism, groupism for power and pride, which impact was seen in the commencement of divisive social fabric. The lower classes and the disadvantaged gradually felt a significant impact in later stages since they were denied equality and dignity in the *Satra* system, which was governed by Brahminical authority. The door for conversion to Christianity among the lower caste and tribes in particular was opened by the failure to address the issues and suffering of the lower and destitute class. (Das, 25)

After Sankardev, his followers and disciple Madhavdeva, Gopaldeva, Damodardeva, Harideva, Vamsigopaladeva during the medieval period can be considered as Great Integrators of the Assamese society. Despite the division in the order during the first quarter of the seventeenth century, the neo-Vaishnavite movement peaked in the

middle of the century. There were several Vaishnava gurus employed at the time to spread the movement's beliefs. However, these galactic Vaishnava leaders were no longer in the midst of the movement by the century. Consistently, *Satras* expanded, primarily by the family members of the forefront disciples, which proved beneficial in bringing all villages and tribal areas under the influence of *Satras*. However, the mushroom growth of *Satras* cannot be viewed as being for the true purpose of Sankardev's creation of Assamese society; there were other motives, such as earning money & power and also obtaining special social recognition and power. Additionally, in some cases, animosity regarding the issue of succession among family members prompted the other member to create *Satras*. As a result, rather than promoting the Vaishnavite Movement in its genuine spirit, personal gain and gaining royal favour and position became its primary goals (S.N.Sarma, 192). This changed the direction of the entire episode's basic ideological deviation. The concept of casteism, which Sankardev was adamantly against, started to reappear as some *Satradhikar* began to provide excessive traditions. In Assam's socio-religious and cultural life, it brought about some undesirable change. As soon as each and every *Satra* started to function in accordance with the whims of their own *Satradhikars*, the religious rites, rituals, practises, and beliefs of the followers differed from *Satra* to *Satra*. In most of the *Satras*, the post of *Satradhikar* began to be hereditary, and it was unofficially reserved for the upper-class Brahmans. Significantly, Brahmanical rituals and practises began to flourish in the *Satras*, and it became a hotbed of discrimination against lower castes and tribals. As a result, tribal people who accepted the Vaishnava religion were denied equal rights and status in Assamese Hindu society. With the arrival of British regime in Assam, the introduction of modern education provided an opportunity for all individuals, regardless of castes or creeds, to benefit from it. Furthermore, the establishment of a printing press by Christian Missionaries and the production of news periodicals in vernacular languages aided in the creation of a new consciousness among the people. The educated lower caste began to recognise the societal ills in the traditional socioreligious system. They could understand the essence of the priestly class's exploitation and dominance over them. The nature of this exploitation was cultural rather than economic or political. Moreover, the modern era of Sankardev biography began with Lakshminath Bezbaruah's biographical works. He was primarily responsible for awakening interest in the Vaishnava movement, which already went on to a new form. It was the pioneering literary works of Bezbaroa and others that drew people's attention to Sankardev's message of oneness and integrity, which he spread centuries ago. Later Pitambar Deva Goswami of Majuli, a great social reformer

in the early 20th century was a great integrator. He made numerous changes to the *Satra* system and did not adhere to the concept of caste. He spread the Vaishnava religion to all social classes, regardless of caste or creed, in both the lowlands and the hills. Pitambardeva Goswami actively participated in the freedom struggle when other *Satra's Satradhikars* maintained good relations with the British administration for their own gain. And in the present day it is none other than Harekrishna Mahanta who with his hard work and sacrifice can be considered as a great integrator of the late 20th and early 21st century.

But as like Sankardev, who integrated various caste, creed, tribes and community and thereby unified the people under the shadow of Bhakti, that kind of amalgamation of every sects of people can't be compared in recent time by any individual or institution. Here we want to justify that at present, in Udalguri at the foothills of Bhutan, one individual, following the true path of Sankardev, made an effort to unify various tribes and community under the umbrella of *Eksarana Naam Dharma* and by it, he brought a revolutionary change in social, cultural, economic and spiritual spheres in the district. He was the *Satradhikar* of Barangajuli *Satra* and we can consider him as progeny to Sankardev. Thus, the sapling has developed into large trees. We have seen recently how violence, political turmoil, mayhem, agitation have turned the State unrest, but it is noteworthy to see that those places near the *Satra* in the Udalguri district have remained untouched from violence and unrest and it was only for the feeling of oneness among all the tribes and communities that it happened and also we can say for the social and cultural reform by Harekrishna Mahanta through his *Satra* institution. The greatest example of *Samannay* (unity & integrity) presented for all of us by Harekrishna Mahanta before his demise, was by nominating Niranjan Boro as the new *Satradhikar* of Barangajuli *Satra*, Niranjan Boro happens to be the first *Satradhikar* of any *Satras* of Assam from Bodo Community in the 600 years of *Satra* Culture. The present society, which is turning divisive, but it is only through culture that we can integrate it. So, it can be said that a new era of socio-cultural sustenance and integration through the *Satra* culture of Harekrishna Mahanta is reached.

Some of the award and title conferred upon Harekrishna Mahanta:

In the year 2006, Srimanta Sankardev *Satra* central committee conferred the title of 'BhakatSiromani' to Harekrishna Mahanta for his lifelong contribution in social upliftment and expansion of *Satra* culture. In 2007-08 recipient of Silpi Pension from Govt. of Assam. In 2009, Puri Project of Sankardev Mission conferred him the title of 'Aata Purush', later

in the year 2009 Asom *Satra* Mahasabha conferred him with '*Satra* Ratna' title. In the year 2011 he was awarded the 'Bhagwan Buddha National Fellowship Award. In the year 2012, Mahanta was also awarded 'Gormuriya Pitambar Deva Goswami National Award'. Later in the year he was also awarded 'Apurba Prernarna' award by Apurba Singha Nyas. In 2018, he was conferred 'Madhavdev Bota' by Sundariya *Satra* of Barpeta. The Assam Government also conferred him with the Kalicharan Brahma Award, 2018. 'Birangana Smarok Bota' 'Barpeta Bota', 'Udalguri Ratna' are some of the awards conferred on him in the recent years.