

# Neo-Vaishnavism and Caste: The Sectarianism in Question in the Monastic Space of Assam

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## **Abstract**

India, the home to multiple religions, accommodates various sectarian groups within the mainstream faiths with a reformative vision of sensitising its dominant orthodox narratives. Within the religious sphere of Hinduism, Bhakti emerged as a mārḡ that gives rise to personal devotion to God, reliance on monotheism and accepts everyone as equal, fostering a sense of collectivity. The Neo-Vaishnava tradition in Assam is also a prominent sectarian domain within the Vaishnava bhakti and due to the egalitarian approach towards casteism, it has a profound impact over the masses of Assam. Nonetheless, the people of the region are not devoid of caste prejudices. The Vaishnava monastery called sattrā, the harbinger of sectarianism in Assam, itself operationalises casteism on various degrees within its periphery. Among the inmates, the guru-disciple relation is often entwined with caste considerations, yet this relational tie is so bounded by traditional norms that the subtle projection of casteism cannot be understood from the surface. Consequently, the power relations, manifested through hierarchy and discriminations, have been prevailing without major changes in power structures and collective consciousness. Therefore, this ethnographic study attempts to depict the dialectical relation between caste and sect in Neo-Vaishnavism, drawing on the observations, activities and experiences of the inmates of two monasteries.

## **Key words:**

Caste, Sect, Neo-Vaishnavism, Sattrā, Hierarchy, Discrimination.

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## Introduction

Sect is a relatively small religious group that seeks to encompass people of all *strata* who are otherwise not bestowed with equal treatment and social status by the mainstream institutional religions (Wilson, 2019). India being a multi-religious country accommodates various sectarian groups in different religions. Speaking in terms of the major religions, Hinduism consists of three streams of sect namely Vaishnavism, Shaivism and Shaktism which stand on the divinities Vishnu, Shiva and Shakti respectively (Venugopal, 1990). AM Shah (2006) writes that in Hinduism, sect is defined with three Sanskrit terms: *mārg* (literally, path), *panth* (path) and *sampradāya* (tradition transmitted from a teacher to a pupil) which are widely used as synonyms. Similarly, Bhakti is also a *mārg* that cultivates unflinching devotion to God and invites equal participation of all in a collectivity.

In Assam, the medieval saint and social reformer Srimanta Sankaradeva (1449-1568) came under the purview of the Bhakti during his twelve-year pilgrimage in various religious places of India and introduced his own version of Vaishnavism called Neo-Vaishnavism or *eka-sarana-nama-dharma* (Bezbaroa, 2004). The Vishnu worship was already prevalent in Assam but Neo-Vaishnavism brought some important changes in contrast to the early Vaishnavism which could not counter rituals and sacrifice as done in the Hayagriva Madhava temple at Hajo and other places (Nath, 2012). This happened mainly under the influence of Brahminism which evolved in Assam under the royal auspice of the Hinduised tribal Barman dynasty that ruled from 5<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> century A.D (Sharma, 2009). The grace upon Brahminism continued even by the latter dynasties as well. Nonetheless, Sankaradeva's Vaishnavism replaced this complex Brahminical ritualism with a simple way of devotion called bhakti. Sankaradeva wanted to build a platform with a view to integrate the people in a common parlance, enhance the culturality of the common masses and emancipate them by total surrender to God. This resulted in establishing the *namghar*<sup>1</sup> as a public platform for social wisdom, unity and democratic governance in the rural setting. The place with prayer hall along with public participation was initially called as *thān* which eventually developed into the *sattrā* institution (Adhikary, 2014). Thus, these monasteries can be considered as the localised expression of Bhakti sect in Assam.

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<sup>1</sup>*Namghar* is a community prayer hall among the Vaishnava disciples and followers of Assam.

Despite such grounded philosophies *sattras* from the early 17th century gradually started changing its course from the fundamental principles of equality and humanism. Wilson (1959) stated that under internal and external social circumstances the sects begin to be inclined towards the ethics of denomination. The problem sometimes lies in the genesis of a sect and at one point of time they become evident to shake the foundational pillars of the sect. The *sattras* in Assam went through similar circumstances. After the demise of Sankaradeva, indignation and disagreement emerged among his disciples on the matter of succession of the order set by their guru. Eventually one after the other the *sattras* clubbed themselves into four different sub-sects or *samhatis* namely, *Brahma*, *Nika*, *Purush* and *Kal*. Out of them, the *Brahma Samhati* was the initiator of this schism which started performing the Brahminical (Vedic) rituals along with the *Vaishnava* devotional practices. This was where the distinctive sectarian ideals of Neo-Vaishnavism were infected and gradually extended to other *samhatis*. In the meantime, the Ahom Kings<sup>2</sup> started expanding its authority over the masses with the help of the *sattras* for which these monasteries began receiving a great variety of royal patronages from ample number of lands to serfs. With the increasing royal aegis, the *Sattradhikars*' (*sattra* heads) urge for power and wealth gradually increased, and they were diluted from their assigned role of creating an equilibrium society. In this critical juncture, casteism caught hold of the mind of these religious pontiffs who, at that time, blindly reproduced the Brahminical caste hierarchy and prejudices to maintain their authoritarian position intake. They continued to get the patronages even during the British regime and the casteist feudal ethics remained unchanged (Sharma, 2008).

The imprints of this changing value system are still prevalent in the *sattras*. In spite of belonging to the same institution there are distinctions between the *sattra* headman (*guru*) and his kins with other inmates (*sishtyas*/disciples) where caste is manoeuvred on various grounds. Although the caste-based differences are not overtly visible as found in the historical writings but an undercurrent of such practices is still observed on some social and ritualistic facets. An emic observation would exhibit how the smell of the traditional caste chauvinism is still kept alive within the monastic space.

## Methodology

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<sup>2</sup>The Ahom dynasty ruled over Assam for around six hundred years (1228-1826).

Caste is a sensitive social aspect to deal within a *sattrra* setting as the revelation of which would bring questions about the very structure of a monastery which emerged as a social institution primarily to build a casteless society. So, we had to proceed very cautiously while entering into the volatile space of caste. It is more visible in the non-celibate *sattrras* where intermarry gives a new perspective of analysing the pattern of caste. Therefore, we chose Bor Alengi Bogiai Sattrra, a non-celibate *sattrra* of Jorhat district of Assam as our primary field of research. This, however, does not deny the presence of caste regulations in celibate *sattrras*, for which we incorporated Kamalabari Sattrra, Jorhat as another integral study area. An ethnographic approach was crucial for understanding the dynamic nature of the field and accordingly finding ways to gather data through observation, informal conversations, in-depth interviews, group discussion and participating in religio-cultural ceremonies. So, as Sociologist J. Douglas wrote, we did not precisely follow the ‘how-to’ rules of research so that the respondents could freely provide us with comprehensive insights regarding the life and conflicts within the monastery (Brewer, 2010).

### **Brahminical Rituals and Authority: A Silent Negotiation**

“We keep our former *gurus* on high pedestal because they knew every verse of Vedas. They can speak well. And these qualities are widespread among the Brahmins and the *Gosains*. They are born out of the mouth of *Brahma*... The upper category is and was upper always. They are upper by blood and lineage...”

The bleak statement and the complacent attitude of a *Burhabhakat*<sup>3</sup> towards casteism made us a little awestruck as it highlights how deeply caste consciousness is ingrained in their life, yet is treated as a taken for granted reality. Venugopal (1990) stated that generally although the reformist sects aim to bring equality and brotherhood among the masses but in practice it too has disparities of rank or status. The Neo-Vaishnava sect of Assam has also been leaning towards caste dogmas under the sway of the *sattrra* institutions and keeping the caste prejudices alive on various degrees within its periphery.

The *Brahma Samhatisattrras* are in the forefront in observing the Brahminical rites, which, however, does not refute the influence of Brahminical temperament over other *samhatis*. In terms of *Purusa Samhati*, K.D. Goswami (1988: 47) wrote, “Observances of Brahminical rites

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<sup>3</sup>The chief of all *bhakats* or the head of each *boha*.

and idol worship are also to be found in this *Samhati*.” Bor Alengi Bogiai *Sattra of Purusa Samhati* is one such monastery to conduct these rituals for ages. Performing the sacred-thread ceremony, typically called *upanayana* or *logun-diyani*, by the *Gosains* is a significant ritualistic step to distinguish them as twice-born caste like that of the Brahmins. While raising this question, the *Sattradhikar* responded stating that Sankaradeva too wore sacred thread, and it is essential for an individual to receive this for embodying the principles of monastic Vaishnavism. Although no historical evidence is found regarding this claim, it is possible that Sankaradeva and his followers, irrespective of their caste background, donned sacred thread for recognising and classifying them as gurus while leading the Neo-Vaishnava movement. Durkheim (1995) too talked about initiation being an essential character of a religion for stepping into the sacred world from profanity. While everyone in *sattra* receives initiation, it cannot be equated with sacred thread ceremony as the latter carries Brahminical method of normalising caste discrepancy and categories. According to a respondent, *lagun* is actually ‘*na-gun*’ (nine central qualities) like calmness, truthfulness, kindness, patience etc. and the threads have total eighty-one sub-qualities, which are termed as *yonga* sutra. So, going by this statement if we consider the greater spiritual and practical purposes of the sacred thread, then Sankaradeva and his followers had won these qualities and wore the thread. However, despite living in the same institution the lower caste inmates would never wear it and when inquired the *Sattradhikar* stated, “They do not have those qualities to wear it.” These remarks are reflective of the sense of superiority traditionally ingrained in the minds of the upper caste gurus who have been rationalising the caste hegemony by standardising the interpretations of ritual knowledge. In this context, Shah (2006) argued that the lifestyle of the lay members of any sect is highly ritualistic and they navigate their life through ritual practices only. The everyday life of the *bhakat-vaishnavas* in *sattras* also reflects the same, but whether every ritual existed right from the beginning of the movement is quite questionable. For instance – observing the firm position against complexities and extravagances of Brahminical rituals, it can be assumed that Sankaradeva might have opposed *homa yagna*<sup>4</sup>. But the *sattras* are stringent in following these rituals which goes against Sankaradeva’s negation towards the Vedic rituals (Bora, 2013).

Sankaradeva’s *nama-dharma* being founded on guru-disciple relation, a hierarchical socio-religious system was part of the preaching and embodying process. But this hierarchy was

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<sup>4</sup>A sacred-fire ceremony that acts as a witness to the unity. It is also believed that only holy fire disintegrates all blood relations of a girl from her family, kins and forefathers.

systematically institutionalised by distinguishing the roles and the rituals of the inmates based on their caste categories. On occupational ground Cantlie (1984: 246) wrote, “The *Brahmans*, *Ganaks* and *Kayasthas* do not plough with oxen, although they can perform other agricultural operations without losing caste.” Being *Kayastha* by caste, the same trait is seen among the upper caste category, as neither the *Sattradhikar* nor his kinsmen get directly involved in such activities. Besides, the rites of initiation called *sarana*, *bhajana* and *malabostu*<sup>5</sup> further facilitate in keeping them on a higher pedestal where they are the custodians of the whole process. Drawing on Durkheim’s (1995) understanding of sectarianism, it could be understood how initiation is the foremost criterion for attaining a sect membership for any devotee that separates an initiated person (*saraniya*) from the uninitiated (*asaraniya*). The initiated person is to surrender himself/herself to four principles (*cāri-vastu*) which together constitute the core of bhakti, namely, *guru* (religious instructor), *deva* (God), *nām* (name) and *bhakat* (devotee) (Cantlie 1984). Though every sub-sect has one primary element out of these four, the guru plays a vital role as he shows the disciples the wretchedness of life, and how it can be overcome by taking shelter in the feet of God (Neog, 1963). Since he guides the proselyte in this journey of attaining salvation, Bhakti gives special emphasis on showing devotion and servitude (*dasya*) towards the guru. Therefore, historian Amalendu Guha said that *bhakti* rather projects the master-serf relation as found in the feudal model (Nath, 2011). And in the post-Sankaradeva period when Brahminism was expanding under the royal patronage, the importance of guru became more prominent and it is continuing till date. This is how the *Gosains* being the guru category remain in the higher position through the initiation rituals, and the *Sattradhikar* and the elderly kins have kept the rights of initiating others. At Kamalabari Sattrā, only the *Kayastha* *Sattradhikar* and the Brahmin *Burhabhakat* could offer initiation. Durkheim (1995) commented that sacred things are often tended to be assigned by the rank for maintenance of hierarchy. The initiation rites are thus bounded among the upper caste only to ascertain the class-caste positions between guru and their disciples.

This led to legitimisation of the designation of *Sattradhikar* as a feudal lord, which in turn strengthened the caste-based guru-disciple relation and the designation of head-priest remained in the hands of *Kayasthas* and *Brahmins*<sup>6</sup>. In both our fields, the *Sattradhikars* and their predecessors are *Kayasthas* only and it is a common scenario almost in every *sattrā* of

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<sup>5</sup>Various stages of initiation taken over time to become a renouncer and surrender oneself to God.

<sup>6</sup>In *sattrā* institutions *Kayasthas* and *Brahmins* generally write surnames like *Mahanta*, *Goswami*, *Adhikari* etc.

Assam. Addressing the *Sattradhikars* as *pravu iswar* (Lord God) by the disciples and the followers rather validates this feudalistic caste relation. It is to note that the designation of the *sattra* head was never a hereditary vocation; rather it was selected on the basis of one's merit. According to sources, only Barpeta Sattra used to hold election for deciding their head but the post has been occupied merely by Brahmin pontiffs for centuries (Nath, 2011). So, there is no assessment of one's personality or leadership capacity before handing over the responsibility, and a lower caste inmate has never been given an opportunity to be considered in this regard. Thus, caste operates on ritual and structural manner and the disciples are made to accept it to be virtuous to show honour to age-old rules and maintain its sanctity without peeping into the caste elements covert underneath the system.

In this authoritarian tradition clustering is another subtle yet important expression of casteism seen in the *Sattriya* life. In the regional pattern of ranking people live in the relative standing of clusters and it is also a common scenario in all Hindu sects lived by the gurus and the disciples. At Bogiai Sattra there are only two caste groups— *Kayastha* and *Koch* – along with a Brahmin family. There is a possibility that from the very beginning of its formation the *sattra* had carefully set its caste boundary where no one below the *Koch* were allowed to settle in. Also, it was observed in many household *sattras* that the guru and his relatives' houses are usually built next to one another by making a distinct cluster of its own. Similarly, in celibate *sattras* too, the *bhakats* would prefer to bring boys from upper castes only. While interacting with a Brahmin *bhakat* of Kamalabari Sattra he said that *Bamun*, *Gosain*, *Kalita*, *Koch* and *Keot* can join their *sattra*, but *Ahom*, *Chutia* and other castes are not welcomed as “they do not belong to us”. While receiving a request, it is an essential precondition to know his caste and *gotra* (lineage) before finalising their decision of receiving that boy. So, because of living in *bohas*<sup>7</sup> the physical clustering may not be overtly visible in celibate *sattras*, but the maintenance of preferential casteism does exist within their households.

Here, it is also noteworthy to understand that while *bhakat* is a generic term for all devoted *vaishnava* monks regardless of their social categories, in colloquial terms only the disciples are called *bhakat*, while the guru and his kins are referred to as *Gosain*, the lord. So, this might be a means to distinguish the caste group of gurus from others and sustain the clusters between them alive. In practice, there is no community called *Gosain*. The gurus are addressed

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<sup>7</sup>*Bohas* are residential homes of the *bhakats* in celibate *sattra*. All *bohas* are connected to each other with one roof and a long verandah unlike the individual houses.

like this as they serve as a guiding light on the path of *bhakti*. Instead, Sankaradeva entitled his chief disciples as *Mahanta* under whom *nama-dharma* was preached. So, the surnames like *Mahanta* and *Adhikary* used to be religious designations only. However, later on when the *sattra* headship was made to move within the cycle of *Kayasthas* and *Brahmins*, these became titles for the gurus and their kins. Even then, they refused believing the fact that their ancestors might have people of non-Brahmin or tribal origin as Sankaradeva made no distinction of caste and creed while creating his disciples as gurus (Cantlie 1984). Nonetheless, both *Mahanta* and *Gosain* are used alternatively in the common parlance although none of them are name of their caste. Besides, after Sankaradeva, the superiority of the Brahmins as religious authority became so influential that the *Kayasthas* also pretended to be Brahmins by assuming the *Goswami* surname (Nath, 2011). Bapuram Deva, the first *Sattradhikar* of Bogiai Sattra, was also a *Kayastha* by caste but except the current and the previous *Sattradhikar*, he and his successors had entitled only *Goswami* or *Deva Goswami* as their surnames. Thus, despite the headship be open to all, it remained confined among the upper castes only.

### **Hierarchy to Humiliation: The Cycle of Discrimination**

Louis Dumont, in his discussion on caste, opined that hierarchy is the fundamental social principle of caste in which one group of caste subordinates the other through the means of discrimination and humiliation. Hierarchy, for him, is not simply ranking or grading, rather the elements of the whole are ranked in relation to the whole. So, the whole is based on the hierarchical coexistence of two opposite elements, where both elements contribute to the sustenance of the whole. His notion of purity and impurity thus coincides each other to validate the hierarchy between upper and lower castes, where Brahmins would protect their ‘purity’ by distancing themselves from the ‘impurity’ of lower caste (Dumont, 1991; Pathak, 2018). Here, it is important to understand how, in the making of hierarchy and discriminatory practices, caste works more as a social experience than merely as a social practice. So, it cannot be only in the mind but it is displayed and experienced the way people see, hear, taste, touch and smell. Each of this sensorial experience becomes the representative and the signifier of caste. It is best manifested in terms of food practices as it involves all senses together and especially in Indian context eating thus leads to an act of social experience. However, this social experience of eating becomes more significant in caste practices as it keeps two types of prohibitions – what type of food to eat and with whom to eat (Guru and Sarukkai, 2019). Bhakti wanted to do away with

these very notions of caste but the *sattras*, the central domain of *Bhaktism*, rather exhibit a theocratic nature of caste hierarchy.

The rites of initiation are very much associated with food practices and the degree of prohibitive norms become increasingly rigid and ritualistic with every higher stage of initiation. Although the rites of initiation are same for everyone, a *bhajaniya*<sup>8</sup> *Gosain* does not take food cooked and served by a lower caste inmate having the same entitlement of *bhajaniya*. In this regard *abhajaniya* *Gosain* woman said, “It is about hierarchy. Since we have guru-disciple relation, we do not take food from them.”. In social occasions like feasting only *Gosains* would do the cooking and serving. In such manufactured caste norms, designed to maintain the social boundaries between ‘us’ versus ‘them’, the lower caste inmates also seem to go with the flow. They also follow the prohibition rules and refrain from doing social cooking, feeding and eating together. It shows how these food practices are experienced through physical touch and proximity, and the caste purity being preserved by avoiding prohibited ways of contact, such discriminatory food behaviour is retained sincerely. It is worth mentioning that the guru-disciple relation is based on a unique humanitarian principle - *Sish putra*, *beej putra* – which means the disciples would become just like guru’s biological children after receiving the initiation. However, the field observation rather manifests a dichotomous relation between the initiation ethics and its practical applications.

A keen observation of behavioural interaction would show that such discriminatory treatment is also a form of humiliation subtly expressed in many other grounds. Time and again the lower caste inmates and disciples are made to internalise their impurity and inferior social status while visiting the upper caste households. It has remained as a customary practice that such visitors would clean the utensils after having food. Recalling her experience after marriage one 35-year-old woman said, “It was awkward. We don’t have such things at our place. You have to wash the utensils. See how uneasy that moment was for me! As a newly married bride I was completely shocked at this behaviour.” It shows how deeply humiliation is being experienced yet remains unaddressed due to their complacent attitude. This disparity is clearly visible as *Kayastha* and Brahmin guests are barred from doing the cleaning rule. On top of that, the inmates’ subordinate social position is exhibited through unequal sitting arrangements as well. They would never sit equally on the chair unless in a rare case they are asked to sit along with

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<sup>8</sup>Those who have obtained *sarana* and *bhajana* are called *saraniya* and *bhajaniya* respectively. They are to maintain certain rituals in daily life as prescribed by their gurus.

them. Such demeaning acts are so subliminal in everyday life and facilitating in routinising the caste hierarchy that it cannot be traced unless minutely monitored. During an informal conversation a 58-year-old Gosain woman made a sweeping remark, “Today the *bhakats* do not hesitate to sit on the chair. It was not like this before.” Her remark shows a sense of contempt and disappointment on losing the traditional superior social position by the changing progressive attitude of the lower caste inmates. It also shows how they consider it as their right to enjoy the caste privileges and expect others to remain naïve for safeguarding their supremacy. However, the educated and the men of reputation are offered equal seating even though they belong to lower castes. Thus, one’s well-off social and economic status are noticeable factors for mitigating the humiliating treatment and nullifying the lower caste identity.

Such discriminatory treatment has reached the community space of worship as well and escalated towards the cultural activities of *namghar*. Appreciating the *Purusa Samhati*, Goswami (1998) stated that the relation between guru and disciples are very cordial there and in the theatrical performance disciples, irrespective of their caste, are given important roles based on their aptitude. Our field experience at Bogiai Sattrā rather provided a relatively contrasting image. For instance – the lower caste inmates might be gradually getting important roles in *Bhaona*<sup>9</sup> and *Raas*<sup>10</sup> performances, but the leading roles are always played by the *Gosains*. During the scarcity of upper caste boy in the *sattrā*, they would bring someone from another *sattrā* but the Krishna roles are never given to lower caste boys. Such biased approach of selection shows how the sacredness in performance is also shaped by traditional caste dogmas.

Srinivas (2004) during his village studies found that such caste-based disparities and disputes are an integral characteristic of Indian village system and it is well evident in monastic space as well. Bogiai, which being a Vaishnava monastery was supposed to bring harmony in society, split into two divisions with two separate *namghar* for each section. Although the crack mainly appeared on a matter of observing funeral ceremony, it also indicates the outburst of a piled-up anger among the oppressed inmates against the discriminatory privileges of the upper caste group. So, the inmates are becoming more aware of their social strata rather than living as a community and the fundamental arguments of bhakti and monastic *vaishnava* identity have remained unattended.

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<sup>9</sup>*Bhaonas* are theatrical performances combined with music, dance and acts to depict Hindu mythological stories.

<sup>10</sup>*Raas* festival (*Rasa Mohotsav*) is a state festival of Assam to show the stories of lord Krishna’s life.

## From Guru to Disciples: Casteism in Transmission

AM Shah's (2006) discussion on Indian sects shows that though casteism is produced from upper caste minds, all members of a sect eventually come under its influence and the categorical caste consciousness turns into a collective consciousness. The *sattras* inmates being lived and habituated with the structural mechanisms of caste dispositions also get influenced by some upper caste traits and inherit them as markers of monastic social identity. The larger Hindu society, Ambedkar (1916) stated, itself is structured on the basis of Brahminical ideals and objectives in which caste consciousness controls people's everyday life. So, it is evident that every community, coming under the purview of Hindu social system, would invariably align towards casteism on different levels and its members get affected by this temperament. Being born or brought up in the sacred space of *sattras* and identified as *Sattriya bhakat-vaishnavas*, the inmates typically enjoy the privileged social position and tend to maintain that hierarchy to distinguish their social identity. Therefore, following the gurus' path, other inmates also consciously proceed during social interactions and avoid both physical and emotional proximity. "We cannot take food from *Kaibartta* but there is no problem with *Kalita* or *Brahmin*" – this blunt remark of a young boy during an informal group conversation made us realise how casteism is being inherited from the childhood itself without understanding its repercussion in identity formation and social relations. However, having such attitude is quite apparent though as other inmates, especially the elder ones, despite their lower caste category within the monastic sphere entail similar casteist outlook towards socially backward castes.

During a conversation an elderly *bhakat* tried defending it saying that they avoid eating with *Mishing*<sup>11</sup> and other tribal people as they eat garlic, onion and meat items. "No matter how far you teach them religious stuffs, they will not get changed. How can you then invite them to sit together and have food?", he stated. It must be kept in mind that the *sattvic* dietary practice is itself an upper caste narrative as they traditionally lead a life devoid of labourious manual tasks and a simple vegetarian diet would help them to maintain a healthy body and mind. So, the respondent's food choice rather exhibits his caste consciousness and the idea of physical and social hygiene being curated by the caste Hindus. Further, a *Burhabhakat* added that *sashtr* suggested to keep eye on one's bread and organs because diseases like AIDS would occur because of intermixing of people. So, he finds it justified to marry people of same bloodline

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<sup>11</sup>An indigenous community of Assam mostly inhabited in Majuli, Dhemaji and other upper Assam districts.

which again ascertains his prejudiced perspective on the concept of hygienic blood based on one's caste background. Moreover, the fear of bearing the social stigma also does not let them go for intermarries. The few intermarries seen so far among them happened against the family consent and the family members feel ashamed to openly speak about it. Like that of the *Gosains*, the same treatment is shown to these couples right from the temporary ostracisation to the rituals of bringing the woman into their caste. So, the caste conditioning is similar except that the couples do not go through much trouble as observed in the case of inter-married couples of the upper caste families. According to a respondent, the lower caste inmates can marry only from the *Koch, Kalita, Ahom, Chutiya* and *Keot* castes, and they no need to conduct the purification ceremony (*udharani*) for such inter-caste marriage. A 30-year boy out rightly said, "I won't intermarry. I will marry from the equal or else cancel the plan of marrying." These instances affirm how being nurtured in the same social milieu for generations, the conservative values get transmitted from one social category to the other and create an antagonistic worldview towards liberal life choices. It reiterates what Ambedkar (1916) stated that as long as caste exists in Indian society, Hindus will continue to defame intermarry and evade social intercourse with lower strata.

### **Stratifications: Narrowing but Enduring**

Turner, while analysing Ven Gennep's concept of liminal stated that liminal activities are anti-structure which try to overthrow the normal cultural conventions. It may invert the established social order but does not subvert it (Carlson, 2018). Sects also attain this phase of alteration where the members tend to move out of the cultural cohesions and critique the orthodox social system (Shah, 2006). In terms of Bhakti sect, though casteism is undeniably a harbinger of social stratification in the society but it is not stringent like before. Despite being the practitioners of the *Sattriya* traditions, the young bunch of inmates has witnessed more exposure through modern education, technology and frequent contact with the socials beyond the monastic space. Hence, the social boundaries set by the orthodox social structure are rather an obstacle to their self-directing lives and they question back the system for ensuring their individual rights as modern humans. A young upper caste inmate criticised the hypocrisy of some inmates who secretly consume both alcohol and non-vegetarian items yet refuse to accept food from lower castes in the name of being *sattvic*. He is ashamed of his *Gosain* identity for all the paradoxical nature of his predecessors and the fellow beings stating, "The traditions which we follow do not

mean for any good in today's time. If you are eligible, you should deserve anything no matter which caste you belong." Not only in the context of eating but such critical and liberal outlook can be seen in other aspects as well. Referring to a *Gosain* daughter-in-law, a lower caste woman said, "That day she took me to the kitchen. It felt really good." So, while empathy and equality to human dignity is expressed, anyone would prefer such socialisation. As a result, this unprejudiced outlook has eased the process of assimilation among the inmates.

In terms of inter-caste marriage while it is considered unlawful by the *sattras*, the newly married couples tend to get family acceptance relatively sooner than the earlier times. Nonetheless, the moderate attitude towards intermarry does not imply total consent upon it. On the other hand, the lower caste inmates are no longer subservient to gurus like before. After being suppressed and victimised for decades, they have started reacting against the caste-based discriminations. With growing academic and financial self-sufficiency, they have acquired the confidence to speak up against any form of prejudice. In cultural activities also the lower caste inmates and disciples have started getting preferences based on their potential. Even then, although the gradual change of atmosphere is leading to better inclusiveness, the external appearance of assimilation reflects rather a shady image of the reality. Of course, the degree of oppression is getting lessened but people are not yet entirely freed from the deep-rooted prejudices. Talking about the structural hierarchy of *sattras* - it still circles among the upper caste and they have remained privileged on the social ladder availing all the religio-cultural resources. So, amid the narrowing disparity the influence of caste over them is yet to disappear.

## **Conclusion**

This study unveils the complex and often paradoxical relationship between the ideals of Neo-Vaishnavism and the realities of caste-based practices within the monastic sphere. While Sankaradeva envisioned to build a democratic society inculcating the ethos of inclusivity, devotion and equality, its later institutionalization rather led to the reproduction of Brahminical temperament. Consequently, what once emerged as an egalitarian space of Bhakti and reformism, came to be shaped by feudal and caste-based distinctions, implanted through hereditary leadership and discriminatory practices. However, the study also uncovers growing signs of transformation in the recent past particularly among the younger generation. Instances of community participation, inter-caste interactions and reflexive outlook towards traditions indicate a slower but gradual narrowing of stratification.

The sattra, once a site of spiritual democracy and cultural dissent, today stands at a critical juncture. The ongoing tensions between authority and equality, orthodoxy and contemplation continue to cast shadow over the lived experiences of the inmates. So, if the fundamental ideals of spirituality, unity and democracy are to survive meaningfully in the contemporary context, this monastic space would require genuine structural reforms and profound shift in its collective consciousness.

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