

## MARGINALISATION, REVOLT AND ADAPTATION: ON CHANGING THE MAYAMARA TRADITION\*

BABURAM SAIKIA

PhD Student

Department of Estonian and Comparative Folklore

University of Tartu

Ülikooli 16, 51003, Tartu, Estonia

e-mail: saikia.baburam2@gmail.com

### ABSTRACT

Assam is a land of complex history and folklore situated in North East India where religious beliefs, both institutional and vernacular, are part and parcel of lived folk cultures. Amid the domination and growth of Goddess worshipping cults (*sakta*) in Assam, the *sattra* unit of religious and socio-cultural institutions came into being as a result of the neo-Vaishnava movement led by Sankaradeva (1449–1568) and his chief disciple Madhavadeva (1489–1596). Kalasamhati is one among the four basic religious sects of the *sattras*, spread mainly among the subdued communities in Assam. Mayamara could be considered a subsect under Kalasamhati. Aniruddhadeva (1553–1626) preached the Mayamara doctrine among his devotees on the north bank of the Brahmaputra river. Later his inclusive religious behaviour and magical skill influenced many locals to convert to the Mayamara faith. Ritualistic features are a very significant part of Mayamara devotee's lives. Among the locals there are some narrative variations and disputes about stories and terminologies of the tradition. Adaptations of religious elements in their faith from Indigenous sources have led to the question of their recognition in the mainstream neo-Vaishnava order. In the context of Mayamara tradition, the connection between folklore and history is very much intertwined. Therefore, this paper focuses on marginalisation, revolt in the community and narrative interpretation on the basis of folkloristic and historical groundings. The discussion will reflect upon

\* This article is a revised version of the paper I presented at 16th Annual Conference of the European Association for the Study of Religions (EASR) in Bern, Switzerland (June 17–21, 2018). This work has been supported by Estonian Research Council grant project PRG670.

I express my gratitude to Professor Amy Allocco (Elon University, USA) and Professor Ülo Valk (University of Tartu). I am thankful to all my informants for sharing their profound knowledge with me. My thanks also go to those who helped me in many ways to conduct my fieldworks. Some important names are Sadanandadeva Goswami, Burho Gaonburha, Upen Das, Kadam Das, Krishna Saikia, Dinanath Baruah, Jadab Borah, Tirtha Bhuyan, Mukundananda Chandradeva Goswami, Dhaniram Saikia, Latu Saikia.

the beliefs, ritualistic aspects, and myths of the tradition. Fieldwork materials will be employed to discuss the tension between local practices and mainstream neo-Vaishnava influence.

KEYWORDS: change • *sattra* • Mayamara • marginalisation • narrative

## INTRODUCTION

The dichotomy between institutional religious traditions in India is a crucial factor to consider when it comes to marginalisation. Amidst the multicultural complexity of Assam, majority-influence is widespread and privileged compared to minority traditions. The influence of traditional religious practice in India can be expressed, as also pointed out previously by Indologists, as ‘great tradition’ vs ‘little tradition’ on the basis of behaviours. However, both these types of tradition interact constantly.

The progressive penetration of *bhakti* (devotion) into orthodoxy reflects the mutual interaction between the so-called “Great Tradition” (i.e., in the context of Hindu culture, it is generally characterized as Sanskritic, Aryan, Brahmin, male-dominated, northern, elite culture) and the “Little Tradition” (i.e., generally characterized as non-Sanskritic, non-Aryan – i.e., ‘Dravidian’, village, tribal – non-Brahmin, southern, popular culture) (Rodrigues 2017 [2006]: 245).

‘Great traditions’, which are sometimes manipulated by social hierarchies, seem to be dominant over little ones, often trying not to acknowledge their folk roots. This exclusion leads the ‘little traditions’ into marginalised positions. “Marginalisation as a concept is often equated with social exclusion, the systematic relegation of someone or some group to an inferior, less powerful and less influential position in society” (Guzy and Kapaló 2017: 1). Marginalisation in the neo-Vaishnava tradition of Assam is a systematic social practice in which caste dominated by Brahminic ritual plays a crucial role. It exists at various levels both within and outside of the groups and subgroups. Here, the focus is on the Mayamara subsect, which comes under the umbrella of the neo-Vaishnava or Assam Vaishnava tradition, locally known as *eka-sarana-nama-dharma* (‘religion devoted to one God’ i.e., Vishnu and his manifestations).

The research has been carried out by implementing methods such as interview, participant observation and documentation. It is the outcome of two periods of fieldwork conducted in 2017 and 2018 in Assam, in some areas including Bishnubalikunchi *sattra* (Lakhimpur district), Naharati shrine (Lakhimpur), Dinjoi *sattra* (Tinsukia), Barbheti (Jorhat), Katanipar *sattra* (Sivasagar) and Majuli.

## EKA-SARANA-NAMA-DHARMA AND ITS SCHISM

Sankaradeva, the founder of Assam Vaishnavism, was a multifaceted cultural leader whose religious reforms introduced major social changes in Assam, accommodating devotees from various backgrounds including communities who were traditionally marginalised within the social sphere because of their caste status. Maheswar Neog (1965: 201), a well-known Assamese scholar of Sankaradeva has written that

he made a temple [...] near his official headquarters at Bardowa, and this institution became the nucleus of the Vaishnava organisation, which later spread throughout the three Assamese states of Asama, Kamarupa and Koc Behar in the form of regional establishments called *sattra*, and numerous village temples.

This was carried out by the devotees of Sankaradeva after his demise. Likewise, it grew into a fully-fledged institutional set up under the initiatives of Sankaradeva's main disciples including Madhavadeva (1489–1596), Damodaradeva (1488–1598), Harideva (1493–1568), and Gopal Ata (1540–1611). Satyendranath Sarma (1966: 39), a scholar of neo-Vaishnava movement, has mentioned that at the beginning “with the spread of liberal Vaishnavism, more and more tribes were brought within the fold of Hinduism and consequently social and religious cohesion among the communities gradually developed”.

Sankaradeva nominated Madhavadeva as the next head of the order on the basis of his quality that it was not what Damodaradeva wanted. Damodaradeva protested by not attending the annual death rites and general congregation of guru (teacher) Sankaradeva. According to biographical sources “Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva contain the incident of Damodaradeva's act of seceding away from the main body” (see Sarma 1966: 67). Neog (1965: 129) mentioned that

Madhava, moreover, accused him of harbouring excommunicated people, and Damodara denied any obligation on his part in this regard, and in the heat of the moment even denied the authority of Sankara's *Bhakti-ratnakara*.<sup>1</sup> This was too much for Madhava to bear, and he declared a division between himself and Damodara. A schism was thus admitted into the Order.

Due to these events, *sattras* have been classed into four sects, popularly known as *samhati* ('association'). There are narrative variations and disagreements among the devotees of different sects regarding the emergence of *samhatis*.

Damodaradeva and Harideva, both of Brahmin descent, worked together for the promotion and the propagation of **Brahmasamhati**. It is believed by the followers of this sect that Brahmasamhati originated from the creator God Brahma. However, some neo-Vaishnava followers who do not belong to the Brahmasamhati sect have another narrative, i.e. that Brahmasamhati emerged because Brahminic<sup>2</sup> dominance was to be maintained over 'others' attributing caste, priesthood, and image worship as their highest priority. From the point of view of the maintenance of authority and ritual practice, the *samhati* could be called the Brahminic group of the neo-Vaishnava order. This, however, does not mean that there is no Brahminic supremacy within other neo-Vaishnava *samhatis*.

**Nikasamhati** was constituted by two disciples of Madhavadeva, namely Badulapadma Ata (born 1546) and Mathuradasa Burha Ata (1490–1596). The devotees of this sect adhere to, and prioritise the value of, ritual purity or cleanliness more than other neo-Vaishnava sects. *Nika* is an Assamese word for remaining 'pure' or 'clean'. Worship of any kind is prohibited in this sect. However, they pay ritual tribute to the *Bhagavata purana* scripture (one among the 18 great Puranas of Hinduism, which focuses on devotion to Lord Krishna), which is kept in the heart of the prayer hall. Chanting the names of God replaces image worship (*murti-puja*) in the context of Nikasamhati *sattras*. In

addition, maintaining celibacy, as upheld by Madhavadeva, the chief disciple of Sankaradeva, has an important place in this *samhati*.

According to the followers of **Purushasamhati**, the term *purusha* means the ultimate reality – i.e., *Brahman* (a Vedic concept that connotes the ultimate reality in the universe). However, a number of neo-Vaishnava devotees, both inside and outside of the sect, claim that it became known as Purushasamhati because it was succeeded by Purushuttam Thakura, who was the eldest grandson of Sankaradeva himself. Image worship of various incarnations of Vishnu and the observation of Brahminic rites are also prominent in this *samhati*.

Gopal Ata (1540–1611), a disciple of Madhavadeva, introduced a sect within the neo-Vaishnava order called **Kalasanghati**. There are a couple of narratives on the history of the name. Firstly, according to two of my informants, Gopal Ata – popularly known as ‘ocean of stories’ among his disciples for his illustrative narrating and storytelling qualities – established his first *sattra* at a place called Kaljhar, from where he started preaching his faith, because of which his order later came to be known as Kalasanghati. Secondly, *kala* means ‘time’; the sect is said to have moved along with the demand of the time irrespective of caste, creed and hierarchy in society. However, another, third, explanation, given by Sarma (1966: 70), is that “followers of the other three sects sarcastically called it *kala* or *kal* (extreme, black, dangerous) keeping in view the left-handed esoteric observances supposed to be prevalent in this sub-sect”. In Kalasanghati, guru occupies the supreme position among the devotees. These three distinct explanations of the sect give it a cause of its own that cannot be put out of the discussion.

The division of the neo-Vaishnava tradition into four distinct *samhatas* matters for followers because it separates one from another in terms of the ritualistic and ideological dimensions. This categorisation is a reality because of disputes about authority and power, despite the fact that the four categories all come under the umbrella term of *ekasarana-nama-dharma*. It could be argued that Sankaradeva’s religious teachings never centralised with any one of the sects mentioned above. Social dominance and hierarchy were being brought into practice after the demise of Sankaradeva even though it was meant to be eased at various levels. Hierarchy and authoritarian implication had led the socio-religious system introduced by Sankaradeva to segregation, which pushed the weaker sections of the neo-Vaishnava order into a marginalised position. Therefore, the intermixture of tribal and non-tribal populations alongside their traditions have been losing attention to the centralised section of the Brahminic neo-Vaishnava tradition in Assam. The Mayamara group of *sattras* have become victims in this regard.

#### MAYAMARA: THE LEGENDARY BEGINNING

The Mayamara subsect came into being under the leadership of Aniruddhadeva, who preached the faith among the tribal communities and converted many people to the neo-Vaishnava order. Aniruddhadeva came to meet Gopal Ata in 1598. Referring to one biography called *Hagiography of Anirudhadeva and the Mayamara Sattra Lineage* my informant explained that Gopal Ata had a reverie about Aniruddhadeva’s desire to come to his *sattra* (FM: 2017). So, he ordered his disciple Narayan Thakur to pave a new road from the river Porola to Kaljhar *sattra* in order to welcome his new devotee.

When Aniruddhadeva arrived on the riverbank, he offered reverence to the new way but walked on along the old one. Since then, Aniruddhadeva became a devout devotee of his guru Gopal Ata. It is mentioned in a biographical account of gurus that Gopal Ata, as the priest of Kalasamhati, once deputed 12 principal disciples and sent them to different parts of Assam to spread the neo-Vaishnava religion among the people. As a result, they established *sattras* all over Assam. These *sattras* persisted over time and became important centres. Among them, a non-Brahmin proponent Aniruddhadeva became very successful in preaching his religious faith among the subdued groups and contributed to the growth of his Mayamara subsect. Among others, Mayamara and Dihing<sup>3</sup> *sattras* became most notable.

Aniruddhadeva started preaching his faith first at his birthplace, Vishnubalikunchi *sattra* in the Lakhimpur district of Assam. During the time of the establishment of Vishnubalikunchi *sattra* in 1601 the surrounding places were mainly dominated by Goddess worship and Indigenous religious practitioners. Vishnubalikunchi was the only place that practiced the neo-Vaishnava faith in that surrounding region at that time. In 1606 the *sattra* had to shift to Naharati, which is about 9 kilometres south of the present Bihpuria in Lakhimpur district. Aniruddhadeva planted trees called *nahar* (*Mesua Ferrea*) around a place that came to be known as Naharati. He became known as a man with magical power and a successful preacher, who could influence many devotees. Therefore, finally his school of religious faith came to be known as Mayamara. Narendra Nath Dutta (1992: 204), a scholar of Assamese literature, stated that to attract the unprivileged classes and tribes, Aniruddhadeva and other gurus of the Mayamara subsect had to reconstruct or change some rules and regulations.



Photo 1. Naharati shrine, Lakhimpur. Photo by the author.

Mayamara followers, and non-Mayamara followers who belong to different sects, have different interpretations of the words Mayamara and Moamaria. Sadanandadeva Goswami, deputy head of Vishnubalikunchi *sattrā*, informed me that Mayamara is the only acceptable term, as Moamaria is considered derogatory. Regarding the origin of the name, he told me the following story:

The Ahom King Pratap Singha [1603–1641] came to know about the magical power of Aniruddhadeva, but he did not believe in his magical skill. Over time the king had become curious and decided to examine Aniruddha's magical skill at court. One day the king invited Aniruddhadeva to visit without telling him why. Aniruddhadeva came to the court. Upon his arrival, the king told him that he would observe Aniruddha's skill in magic. According to the king's order, his officials brought one big clay pot and had placed it in the middle of the royal court. The clay pot was covered with white cloth. The king asked Aniruddhadeva to say what was inside the pot. Aniruddhadeva became confused for a while then replied that there was a dangerous snake [*kal-sarpa*]<sup>4</sup> inside. Once the pot was opened to check, a big cobra came out even though the pot was meant to be empty. Then the cobra moved to bite people. The king was shocked and became afraid of the cobra. Finally, on the king's request, Aniruddhadeva stopped his magic trick. The king praised him for his magical skill and had called him *Mayamara-mahanta*, meaning one who has the power to control or kill illusion. Since then, his sect came to be known as Mayamara. (FM: 2017)

This story presents Aniruddhadeva's esoteric power in creating and controlling the illusion in front of the king. However, the cobra itself, as part of nature, has the power to retaliate against disrespectful and violent human behaviour. According to one interpretation (FM: 2018), by calling it *kal-sarpa* Aniruddhadeva did not necessarily mean cobra. He meant facing a time of danger. But eventually a cobra came out of the pot to save him from danger because of his spiritual power.

While I was doing my fieldwork at Naharati shrine I interviewed some locals who do not belong to the Mayamara shrine. Dhaniram Saikia told a story that reveals the reason why the community came to be known as Moamoria:

One day Gopal Ata came to invite Madhavadeva to perform an auspicious ritual known as *Harikirtan*<sup>5</sup> at his place, called Bhabanipur. On his request, Madhavadeva came with some of his devotees and performed *Harikirtan* accordingly. After the completion of the ceremony, Gopal Ata and his devotees were sailing down a river on a boat to assist Madhavadeva to get back home. Suddenly the weather got cloudy and windy, and it was about to rain. Gopal Ata became afraid, thinking that guru Madhavadeva would get wet if it rained. So, he advised Aniruddhadeva to think about a solution. By reciting some magical *mantras* with the help of his sacred text, Aniruddhadeva stopped the rain by asking Varuna [the rain deity] to help. When Madhavadeva came to know about this he was shocked at Aniruddha's behaviour. Eventually Madhavadeva said, by doing this you already have lost the dignity of being my devotee, therefore you both cannot accompany me any more on my boat journey. While hearing this, devout devotee Gopal Ata and Aniruddhadeva followed their guru's order and got off the boat in the middle of the river. But Aniruddhadeva applied his magical power through which he was able to reduce the

water level to less than knee high even though it was a very deep river. After they were left in the middle of the river, they met some fishermen on the river bank who were struggling to catch fish. Aniruddhadeva called them to the place where he was standing and advised them to put their net nearby. Eventually, the fishermen were able to catch a variety of Indian carplets, more than their daily need. They were very impressed and started to realise his magical power. They gave both of them a shelter and slowly many people from their community were attracted towards Aniruddhadeva's magical power and the faith that he preached. Since then, the number of his devotees has increased day after day. Aniruddhadeva first preached his faith among people whose main activity was catching fish, specifically Indian carplets. As a result, they later came to be known as Moamoria.<sup>6</sup> (FM: 2017)

Although there is more than one version of both stories available among the local people, the moral of the story remains consistent. One part of the Moamoria story can be found in Assamese folklorist Lakshminath Bezbaruah's (1914: 149–150) book that covers stories originally available in biographical accounts of gurus. It seems that the later part of the story is someone else's addition. The Moamoria story, however, suggests two feasible interpretations. First, Madhavadeva's anger is because of his Vishnu-centred monotheism, which does not support his devotees if they call on other deities for any purpose. Therefore, the use of magic, and involvement with another deity was not acceptable to Madhavadeva. Second, it is a violent attempt to stop a natural weather process, which no one has the right to do. The separation of Gopal Ata and Aniruddhadeva from their guru brings a religious transformation to their own lives as well as the lives of the riverine community.

Both stories are crucial to consider, as the storylines have their own supernatural and nature–culture dimensions. The Moamoria story is not accepted by the Mayamara devotees because it has a negative connotation towards their religious preceptor. When I tried to investigate the negative meaning of the story, I did not receive clear answers from several informants. Is it that they do not want to be associated with this story because the guru is being neglected by Madhavadeva for his stand against monotheistic principle? Is it because the story is being attached to a group of so-called outcastes and marginalised people who subsist on fishing? Or is there an attempt to eliminate the Indigenous colour and elements of the faith? The answer of a few informants is a combination of 'yes' and 'no'. However, I argue that their belief system is still dominated by mainstream hierarchical attitudes even though they claim to be open to accepting Indigenous practices. Mayamara or *matak*<sup>7</sup> is a term used in an identical sense to address the disciples of Aniruddhadeva. Regarding the epithet of the community, historian Edward Gait (2013 [1905]: 60) explained:

Their designation is said to be a nickname given to the original disciples of Aniruddhadeva, who lived near a lake, where they caught large numbers of the fish called *moa*. It may also perhaps be connected with the circumstances that Aniruddha is reputed to have owned a celebrated book on magic.

Some of my informants revealed that before the Moamaria rebellion<sup>8</sup> there was never a combined and large community called Mayamara, as there is today (FM: 2018). Unification of individuals in order to resist the religious and social oppression of Ahom rule increased hugely, later becoming a community.

The religious amalgamation and adaptation of the Indigenous cultural practices of the Mayamara helped to popularise their beliefs among the oppressed. The settlement of Mayamara *sattras* are located near the tribal areas, or near to socially low status populations. From my fieldwork experience, I concluded that the acceptance of tribal culture or the tribalisation of neo-Vaishnava customs, and the ignorance of Brahminic dominance are the reasons why the Mayamara subsect remained excluded from mainstream *sattras*. There is a branch of Mayamara *sattras* called Tipuk with which many Moran<sup>9</sup> devotees have been associated in this branch of the *sattras*. They had previously worshipped goddesses like Kechaikhaiti<sup>10</sup> and sacrificial practices were a crucial part of their rituals. After accepting the neo-Vaishnava tradition, they added their sacrificial ritual to the Vaishnava tradition with some reform, and these practices continue among them today. From the historical point of view, it could be said that the Mayamara revolt also had negative repercussions among some mainstream Assamese populations, and this never changed. The irony, however, is that there is a force even within the Mayamara community who believes in and creates narratives to maintain the upper-class social status, some details of which will be given later in the discussion.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PRIESTHOOD

When I was interviewing the priest of Vishnubalikunchi *sattra*, one village head called him on the phone to get instructions relating to an incident (FM: 2017). A couple had fought with each other and eventually the wife attempted to commit suicide. She was rescued by the villagers during her attempt, but they deemed the couple's act guilty. As a result, villagers decided to keep them aside from the society as a punishment and they were not allowed to take part in any social events. In the meantime, the couple's daughter was pledged to a puberty marriage. According to the social rule, the puberty marriage of a girl should be celebrated in the presence of village women in a ritualistic way. So, as a mediator, the village head tried to accommodate the excluded family in the society by seeking religious instruction from the *sattradhikar*.<sup>11</sup>

Hearing his query for instruction, the *sattradhikar* looked at the *sruti* instructions<sup>12</sup> and said that the accused have to organise a religious rite to be absolved of the crime. The rite should include a prayer and rituals. After the prayer, the organiser will reveal the crime or sin that they had committed. Eventually, the priest will ask them to promise not to commit any crime in future. Once they make the promise, the accused will be accepted again as a devotee in the society as before. The gathered devotees will accept offerings of meal that should be given by the householder.

This interview suggests that the *sattradhikar*, also called guru, has a crucial place and a great deal of respect among the devotees of the Mayamara tradition. During the Moamoria revolt, the famous slogan among the warrior devotees was "kill and be killed, thus pay the debt of our gurus".



## THE MOAMORIA REVOLT

Moamorias played a crucial role in the history of Assam in ending the almost 600-year rule of the Ahom dynasty (1228–1826). This conflict started because the Ahom kings and officials projected inferior and dominant attitudes towards the Moamoria gurus. Among the four principles of the neo-Vaishnava religion – devotee, reciting the name of God, guru, and God – guru is prioritised in Mayamara order and considered to be the living embodiment of God. As the guru holds an important position among the devotees of Mayamara, humiliating and neglecting the guru cannot be tolerated. Several *sattradhikars* were the owners of many acres of land and properties. However, the Ahom king Gadadhar Singha (1681–1695) adopted an anti-*sattra* policy and persecuted several *sattradhikars* including the execution of Vaikunthanathdeva. The king also did not approve of the enormous property of some of the big *sattras* (Sharma 2011: 7). The Goddess worship cult of the Bengal school was adopted by the Ahoms during the reign of Gadadhar's son Rudra Singha (1695–1714). His son Shiva Singha was formally initiated into the cult in 1714 (see Guha 1991: 106). Moreover, Shiva Singha and his wife, queen Phuleswari, had insulted the Mayamara Mahantas by compelling them to attend a Goddess worship event held at the palace, bow down before the image and smear their foreheads with a sacrificed animal's blood (see Nath 2008: 16–17). According to Sarma (1966: 184), this fanatical zeal intoxicated the queen greatly and exasperated the Vaishnava priests of the Mayamara, who commanded 800,000 disciples and swore vengeance upon the king.

However, Ahom royals were not against the Brahmasamhati sect of the neo-Vaishnava order. According to Dutta (1992: 9) “the Ahom king Jayadhvaj Singha (1648–1663) had killed an innocent *sattradhikar* of Kuruabahi, therefore the public including some of the royal officials became upset about the king's cruel act”. Eventually, the king realised his stigma and with the advice of his appointed Ahom priests, the king encouraged and patronised some Brahmin followers of the neo-Vaishnava faith to establish *sattras*. As a result, Auniati, the biggest *sattra* in Assam, came into existence in 1653. During my fieldwork I was informed that the king endowed the *sattra* with 81,650 *bighas* (around 10,923 hectare) of land to be looked after by the *sattra*. Vaishnavism received official recognition when Jayadhvaj Singha enrolled himself as a disciple of Niranjan Babu, whom he established as the first priest of Auniati *sattra* (Gait 2013 [1905]: 289).

During the rule of Lakshmi Singha (1769–1780), more tension arose between Ahom royalty and the Mayamara mahantas (see Gait 2013 [1905]: 194–195). As a result, on several occasions Mayamara priests were insulted publicly by the Ahom kings and royal officials. This prolonged abuse of the Mayamara subsect outraged followers, who revolted against the oppression of Ahom forces in due course, leading to the Moamoria revolt of the eighteenth century (Gogoi 2015: 25). This happened because Vaishnava devotees benefited from not having to work as *paiks*.<sup>13</sup> This led to a decrease in the number of *paiks* (see Sarma 1989: 10–11) and therefore the economy of the state began to decrease. As a result, the Ahom royals found it hard to retain their lavish lifestyle and gradually they began to dislike and neglect the Mayamaras.

Gaurinath Singha (1780–1795) was a bitter enemy of the Mayamara followers and missed no opportunity to oppress the Mayamaras (Gait 2013 [1905]: 200–201). Suppression of the Mayamara Vaishnavas and the patronisation of Brahmanism by the Ahoms

worsened the situation. The dominant *paik* system was reason enough for common people to stand up against the Ahom and join the Moamoria revolt. The Moamoria revolt intended to create an autonomous council or Matak state under the leadership of Sarbananda Singha. This revolt had to contend with many atrocities and destruction that caused suffering on both sides. The rebellion was led by young Gagini Mahanta along with Naharkhowa Saikia and Ragha Neog in 1768. Eventually, the Moamorias defeated the Ahom force and occupied the throne. However, after a few months of their occupation the Ahoms fought and regained their throne through massive atrocities and plunder. The Moamoria revolt against the Ahom royals continued lasted from 1769 to 1794.

Internal dissent among the Ahom officials, including the mismanagement of power (see Baruah 2009: 360) by commander in chief Badan Barphukan, led the state into an uncertain position. When this came to the notice of the minister (Burhagohain), a force was sent to arrest him. Badan was warned by his daughter, who had married Burhagohain's son, and he escaped to Kolkata. There he developed a friendship with the Kolkata agent of the Burmese government. By making allegations against Burhagohain and misrepresenting the state, Badan somehow managed to obtain a promise of help from the Burmese king. This later paved the way for the Burmese invasion (1817–1826) of Assam. During the first and second Burmese invasions, barbarous and inhuman conduct including killing, robbery and harassment became unbearable to the Assamese people (see Gait 2013 [1905]: 236–237). Kamalabari *sattra* was attacked and captured by the Burmese, but eventually returned to the priest on payment of 300 rupees, which was a large amount at that time.

Purandar Singha escaped to Chilmari in the British district of Rongpur together with Burhagohain and there solicited the assistance of the British government, although they were most unwilling to help because of their non-interference policy (see Acharya 1987: 190). After occupying Assam and Manipur, the Burmese decided to attack Cachar to punish the Manipuri princes, who fled from Manipur. At that point the British government took steps to interfere with the Burmese attack and fought against the Burmese at Cachar in 1824. Victory eventually paved the way for British colonialism in Assam. According to the treaty of Yandabo in 1826 the Ahom state was handed over to the British by the Burmese. It is worth mentioning that the British government also generally pursued a *sattra*-friendly policy under which the bigger state did not trouble the *sattras*, even with its colonial land revenue policy (Sharma 2011: 10). However, this policy did not apply to small *sattras*, including Mayamara. My informants from Katanipar *sattra* (Sivasagar), which belongs to the Kalasamhati, revealed that some of their *sattra* properties including four elephants and two motorboats were captured by the British and not returned to them (FM: 2018).

## MYTHIC NARRATIVES OF THE COMMUNITY

To gather my fieldwork data, I headed towards Barbheti shrine about 13 kilometres from Jorhat town in the state of Assam. My main interviews were with the priest Burho Gaonburha (a local person) and Upen Das (a senior member of the temple committee in Jorhat) (FM: 2018). I learned from them that the Barbheti was built in 1768 by devotees of Mayamara *sattra*. There are two myths regarding the emergence of the shrine. First, Aniruddhadeva's grandson Astabhujdeva announced a call just to seek the support of devotees before the Moamaria rebellion had begun in Assam. His son Saptabhujadeva took the main initiative to spread the news and brought Moamaria devotees to the Malou field. Each devotee threw a clod of earth onto Malou field, which turned out to be the foundation of a huge plinth known as Barbheti. During this process everyone recited the name of God. The platform increasing in height showed how the number of the devotees had increased. A total of 890,000 devotees had gathered at this place and the platform was completed within five days.



Photo 2. Barbheti shrine in Jorhat. Photo by the author.

The second myth is as follows,

Krishnadeva Gosain, son of Aniruddhadeva, established a *sattra* called Khutiaputa at Kakilamukh, Jorhat. As the *sattra* was eroded by the river Brahmaputra during the monsoon they planned to move the *sattra* to a place called Malou field, which is more than 3 kilometres away from the main Khutiaputa *sattra*. Devotees came from

all over Assam to help build the platform of the *sattra*. A total of 890,000 devotees gathered at that place to make it possible. During the time of the Moamaria rebellion, the Ahom army came and attacked the devotees. But Astabhujdeva escaped in the platform and did not appear from there afterwards. According to them, he is still there. Sometimes, he makes his presence felt at midnight by creating some devotional music called *gayan-bayan*.<sup>14</sup> (FM: 2018)

Both narratives show the community's support for their leaders in different situations and reflect their life struggle and hardship when preaching the faith. Devotees share these narratives widely with visitors in order to let them know the tragic and marginalised past of the community. Moreover, Borbheti is the symbol of their rebellion against marginalisation and dominance by a more powerful force. Here, my argument is that in the past and present, Mayamara tradition survived in a peripheral or liminal space locked in a kind of tug of war between Indigenous and mainstream cultures. This is because some devotees within the Mayamara tradition sought to wipe out the lower social gaze imposed on them and gain recognition in the wider context of the neo-Vaishnava tradition governed by caste hierarchy. I also argue that the Mayamara tradition has a unique cultural and religious assimilation with some subdued Indigenous communities and more potential to establish a cross-cultural religious identity and environment between marginalised and mainstream culture within the complex neo-Vaishnava tradition. Majoritarian influence and their liminal position have essentially led the community into a marginal stage.

#### TEXTUAL BASIS, SECRECY AND TENSION

Mayamara scriptures uphold devotion without desire or non-recognition of imagery present of God Krishna or Vishnu. As a result of which Mayamara devotees offer prayers to the almighty with the symbolic representation of an earthen lamp, a betel nut and a leaf.

Mayamaras follow two main scriptures known as *Bhaktimangal ghoxa* and *Nij-shastra*, both of which were compiled by Aniruddhadeva. *Bhaktimangal ghoxa*, based on the *Bhagavata Purana*, is a devotional text with 805 poetic verses. Vaishnava saints such as Sankaradeva, Madhavadeva and Aniruddhadeva simplified the ideas of the *Bhagavata Purana* for devotees through the *Bhaktimangal ghoxa* by putting central emphasis on devotion. This text could be found in every Mayamara devotee's household.

A secret scripture called *Nij-shastra* (meaning 'own scripture') is also believed to be composed by Aniruddhadeva. Devotees consider the *Nij-shastra* a very powerful manuscript based on devotion to God and magical power. It is believed that if an unauthorised person reads or listens to this book secretly, this person will become deaf or dumb. There are different opinions about this manuscript. Several non-believer informants mentioned that *Nij-shastra* had belonged to Sankaradeva, and that it was his family heritage. Eventually, it was stolen by Aniruddhadeva from Sankaradeva's bedroom. A written source says that

it is narrated in *Adi Carit*<sup>15</sup> that the cause of Aniruddhadeva's rapid success in the proselytizing activity was the magical power exercised by him with the help of a tantric scripture which originally belonged to the Sankaradeva family (Sarma 1966: 87).

However, in contrast, followers of the Mayamara tradition claim that the hagiographers envied this powerful manuscript and tried to blame Aniruddhadeva as the thief. Padmeswar Gogoi (1967: 106–108) mentions that

the present Mayamoria gosain (priest) disowns the *Adi Carit-Puthi* as a forged document written by a third-rate poet and not by Madhavadeva. The book (*puthi*) presents not only a poor style of poetry but also a factually inaccurate picture of the rise of the sect. Hence the *Adi Carit* story about the tragic separation of Aniruddhadeva from Sankaradeva is a deliberate fabrication to undermine the prestige of the Mayamorias.

Neog (2011: 29) puts this manuscript in the category of spurious account in his analysis. Apart from that tension, both believers and non-believers agree that the nature of the *Nij-shastra* is very powerful and lively. It is such that, with the help of the recitation of verses from this manuscript, one can get anything that one wishes, in a similar way to the wish-fulfilling tree *Kalpataru*,<sup>16</sup> leading to this scripture also being known as *Kalpataru*. An anonymous book called *Adi-Carit* mentions that Aniruddhadeva stole the *Kalpataru* from Sankaradeva. With the help of this tantric book Aniruddhadeva performed magical feats. One of my informants said to me that this book was written to humiliate the Mayamara tradition (FM: 2018).

The *sattradhikar* keeps the *Nij* scripture with him in full care. This scripture could be read and heard only by those senior devotees who have already undergone two different initiation rituals in the Mayamara subsect, which allows them to hold higher positions of religious conduct. Either the priest or his assistant (*medhi*) recites the *Nij-shastra* and performs the necessary rituals at midnight so that others cannot hear them. For example, if devotees of a village are willing to organise the ritual event of the *Nij-shastra* to keep away evil spirits, then they will inform the *sattradhikar* beforehand so that he can plan accordingly. The *sattradhikar* carries this scripture with some senior devotees in his vehicle from his home to the village temple (after ensuring that the car has been washed properly). All four to five accompanying devotees will wear traditional attire, as part of which a turban with a symbolic snakehead on the top front is considered a necessity. The turban is the epitome of the Mayamara subsect, and a devotee should wear it to conduct every religious ritual. The assistant is supposed to sit in the middle of the backseat, where he should hold the scripture on his head. During the journey, the assistant is not allowed to speak until they reach the destination and he places the scripture in the village temple. Only the senior devotees will be waiting for them in the village to perform the welcome rituals, as part of which they will bring the scripture to the designated area of the prayer hall. Then the assistant will bow down in front of the altar for forgiveness in case he had made any mistake in the ritual process while carrying the scripture. Next follows the recitation of the scripture. However, when they carry the scripture back to the car after the completion of the event, water, a ritual vessel and fire are necessary. One will throw holy water in front, followed by

the vessel in someone's hand and the assistant holding the scripture on his head. Fire goes behind so that no one can walk on the shadow of the *Nij-shastra*, even though logically fire should go in the front. They should return to the priest's home before daylight comes (4 AM). If something goes wrong in the ritual process harm could be brought to the lives of those who conducted the ritual.

#### INITIATION, MARGINALISATION AND ATTEMPTS AT MERGER

The initiation ritual of the Mayamara tradition is long and captivating. Initiation takes place among a group at the village prayer hall. The initiation ritual is organised before the cultivation season starts, i.e. in February–March and April–May.

If devotees would like to be initiated in Mayamara *sattra*, first they need to inform the village head. The village head will then forward the list of devotees to the *sattradhikar* to be able to agree on a date according to the *sattradhikar's* comfort. Before the *sattradhikar* comes to give them the initiation, the village head will give some initial advice related to initiation rituals that needs to be followed by the devotees before taking initiation. They are advised to read the scripture *Bhaktimangal ghoxa*, practice a certain meditation and maintain fasting for a night meal before the initiation begins. Next morning, the male members of the initiation group need to shave their beards and hair. By shaving their heads devotees take a vow that they are renouncing all previous sins and bad habits and starting a new life from the day of initiation. After that, they should wear special white clothing. White is considered a symbol of purity.

The initiation starts during the day. Women are initiated in the prayer hall whereas men are supposed to stand in a water pond. Each Mayamara *sattra* has a pond for their initiation ritual. Male devotees are supposed to consider the pond water to be the holy water of the river Ganges. They need to make a procession in the water, dip three times while chanting the name of God and hold a package on their forehead. The package contains 80 pieces of betel-nut leaf all wrapped up in a banana leaf. The devotees then return to the prayer hall with wet clothes to offer the packages to the guru.

The *sattradhikar* leads the initiation ritual as the master of the ceremony. One part of the ritual is that each male devotee obtains a holy name given by the guru or *sattradhikar*. Previously Aniruddhadeva was known as Harakantha. His guru Gopal Ata gave him a new name during his initiation. Then, the guru gives some spiritual lesson to the group. Finally, the guru gives them an offering (usually a mixture of green gram, small pieces of coconut, ginger, salt, etc.) to break their fasting.

After the initiation process, each devotee needs to announce their holy name in front of the other devotees in an event that they organise together. Newly initiated devotees should invite guests from different villages to the event in order to reveal their holy names publicly. Once the new name is revealed, others will call the devotees by their new holy names from that time onwards. All the invited devotees should be served with food. Food which is offered during the event is known as *choimora saul*,<sup>17</sup> and the priest is expected to cook so that the devotees can share a holy meal. As it is not possible for the priest to cook for everybody, he puts the first ball of rice into boiling water and then allows senior devotees to cook the rest themselves. However, the priest does not eat food cooked by the devotees. In the same way, each group cooks on a separate kitchen flame

for their own people as they are not supposed to eat food cooked by other groups. Hierarchy on the basis of social class appears to be a prominent practice in this case.

As I investigated the interpretations of local people who do not belong to Mayamara subsect, I came to know that unlike the devotees of other sects of the neo-Vaishnava order, Mayamaras have adopted an alternative and cohesive way of constituting their own rituals. Their way of conducting rituals, in some context, aligns with day-to-day Indigenous life behaviours. But today, some attempts are being made by the leaders to transfer ritual practices into mainstream Assamese society. One reason for pointing it out here is because Mayamara devotees use a local alcoholic drink known as *saj* in their ritual events. During the time of my interview when I asked the head of Vishnubalikhunchi *sattra* to talk about the use of *saj* and its ritual importance, he said:

in our context, *saj* is not local alcohol, which is a common and popular drink among the Indigenous people. It is a kind of offering that we have been using for quite a long time. When preparing this offering one will have to be very clean when one starts preparing it. First, they keep the rice under water for some time, then they will grind it in a wooden pot. Some more processing is needed to make it. Our *saj* means offering, just as other people in society normally have for their religious occasions. (FM: 2017)

This explanation regarding the process of making *saj* is similar to the way Indigenous people in Assam make their local alcoholic drink. I was fortunate to have a conversation with an Indigenous family who came from Jonai (Assam) to visit the Naharati shrine. Binu Chetia, one of them, told me that *saj* is very important in their culture and that they use it on every auspicious occasion (FM: 2017). However, in a way, the *sattradhikar* in his explanation above tried to avoid acknowledging Indigenous practice and behaviour in their ritual system. This explanation may come from the idea of changing indigenous behaviour to fit better into the wider narrative of society, which is being promoted by the cult of dominant practice for socio-political purpose. There has been an attempt among the religious leaders of Mayamara to narrate stories in favour of merging Indigenous elements of Mayamara into the wider context of the mainstream society. The aim of this is to gain wider recognition among mainstream neo-Vaishnava followers. In addition, “an important aspect of the discourses that lead to the marginalization of minority and indigenous groups relate to the devaluation by mainstream societies of the cultural practices and forms of knowledge of minority communities” (Guzy and Kapalo 2017: 2). I felt comfortable asking the question above because I knew the Kalamhati sect as an egalitarian one well merged with Indigenous practice compared to three other sects of neo-Vaishnava faith. But it turned out to be different even though cultural assimilation exists to some extent among them.

There is some gossip among the people who do not believe in the Mayamara subsect, that Mayamara devotees perform a night ritual that takes place after midnight. Being free from illusion, devotees including men and women perform this secret rite, in which wearing clothes is not necessary. Sexual intercourse is also allowed, and followers conceive the intimate moment as the spiritual union between devotee and God (see Dutta 1990: 114). This rite is performed only among the senior devotees with very limited participation in order to protect families from the evil eye. A written source also explains that

Dharma cult continued to be prevalent in Kamarupa even after the propagation of the Bhakti cult by Sri Sankar Deva. The sect was known as Rati-khoa sect, or the 'night worshippers', because their secret rites were performed in the dead of night. (See Neog 1984: 12)

This source also expresses that it had its origin in the system which was evidently a mixture of Tantric Buddhism and Indigenous customs. Today nobody who belongs to the Mayamara tradition is willing to talk about this rite as it is believed to be a rite of illiterate and primitive people, therefore a negative impression is being associated with the Mayamara community. This new belief among the devotees suggests how the community is being hijacked by the dominant mainstream thought system.

To know the lineage of the leadership of the Mayamara subsect I choose to go to Dinjoi *sattra*, Tinsukia, Assam. I conducted an interview with Mukundananda Chandradeva Goswami, the present deputy head of Dinjoi *sattra*. He informed me that about 100 years ago his family had adopted the surname Goswami, before which they used to write *adhikar* (meaning 'right'). (FM: 2017) Even though they belonged to the lower social class they had still decided to use the title Goswami because of its social necessity to become the head of Mayamara *sattra*. This contradicts their view of denouncing the main Hindu rites and Brahminic ritual practices as being associated with their faith. The narratives above show how the process of Sanskritisation dominates their activities.

## CONCLUSION

In the context of the Mayamara order, cultural practices found among Indigenous communities in Assam are partially adapted and later subdued by the authority. This process could be an attempt to marginalise or eliminate local and Indigenous behaviour within the circle of mainstream culture. This nature of cultural exclusion may separate groups from the mainstream and create conflict. The Mayamara revolt is an example in this context. The revolt occurred because of the suppression of local practices and the adaptation and promotion of pan-Indian Brahmanic rites. This proves that the accommodative nature of local practice and vernacular knowledge needs to be valorised in society to create a transcultural and religious environment in order to avoid conflict. Indeed, it is remarkable that in spite of the Ahom royals' oppression and killing, Mayamara devotees stayed firm and continued their fight against the Ahom to the end. Eventually, they formed an autonomous territory called Matak state in 1805, with Sarbananda Singha as chief, and continued to practice their religiosity, belief and rituals.

Initially the sect became popular among the locals by opening them up and adopting indigenous elements into their faith. To do that followers deviated from stereotypical mainstream ideas and assimilated local practices. However, there is now a force within and outside the Mayamara order pushing to merge Indigenous elements into the dominant cult of neo-Vaishnava by creating new narratives. In this scenario, vernacular and Indigenous practices are subdued again by the dominant belief system of society, even though this has more potential to help create a cohesive identity for the Mayamara. And of course, it would fit very well within the doctrine of Sankaradeva as they often compare their 'egalitarian view' to Sankaradeva's ideology. Moreover, Indigenous elements need to be practiced and adopted (if necessary) to be able to move ahead towards



the idea of egalitarian understanding, as the Mayamara devotees call it. To some extent Mayamara *sattras* hold an egalitarian approach, although the sect is not acknowledged by the other schools of neo-Vaishnava faith. If this continues for long it could widen the socio-cultural and religious gap within neo-Vaishnava sectarian orders.

## NOTES

1 *Bhakti Ratnakara* is a Purana based book compiled in Sanskrit.

2 Those adhering to so-called Hindu high caste tradition.

3 Dihing *sattra* is situated in the Dibrugarh district of Assam. It was patronised by the Ahom kings Rajeswar Singha and Gaurinath Singha.

4 *Kal-sarpa* could also mean the time of death. In neo-Vaishnava tradition, *kal* is understood as time which is dangerous. Often it is related with the deity Yama-kala who is in charge of justice and death in the Hindu pantheon.

5 Harikirtan means reciting the name of God. It is a big ritual event for a devotee and should be organised in the latter part of life to gain devotion.

6 *Mora/moria* ('catch', 'kill'), *moa* means Indian carplet.

7 The term *matak* ('people of one opinion') itself contains a message.

8 A conflict between Ahom royals and Mayamara devotees happened in 18th-century Assam.

9 One of the Aboriginal tribes inhabiting mainly in the upper region of Assam.

10 A popular Goddess among some tribal populations of Assam, worshipped at the Tam-reswari temple situated in Tinsukia district.

11 *Sattradhikar* is the head of a *sattra* institution and runs it according to tradition.

12 In this context, *sruti* refers to a written text containing rules and regulations on how to prosecute social offences. These are Brahminical social norms popular among the neo-Vaishnava followers in Assam.

13 *Paik* is a system introduced by Ahom officials in Assam. According to the system, people including adults and able males in the state around the age group of 16–50 should serve the Ahom royals. In return they received a piece of land for cultivation.

14 A music symphony created using dram, cymbal and devotional song.

15 *Adi-carit* is a text written by an anonymous writer but named after Madhavadeva.

16 *Kalpataru* is a divine and wish-fulfilling tree. According to Hindu mythology, the tree emerged out of the water during the time of the ocean churning process.

17 *Choimora* means 'killing of the earlier confusion' or 'sin' and *saul* means 'rice'. One should eat something from the hands of a guru after taking the initiation in order to kill previous sin committed knowingly or unknowingly.

## SOURCES

FM = Author's fieldwork materials from 2017–2018.

## REFERENCES

- Acharya, N. N. 1987. *A History of Assam*. New Delhi: Omsons Publications.
- Baruah, Swaran Lata. 2009. *A Comprehensive History of Assam*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers.
- Bezbaruah, Laksminath. 1914. *Mahapurush Sri Sri Sankaradeva Aru Sri Sri Madhavadeva*. Guwahati: Jyoti Prakashan.
- Dutta, Narendra Nath. 1990. *Obscure Religious Practices Among Some Vaisnavas of Assam*. Calcutta: Punthi Pustak.
- Dutta, Narendra Nath. 1992. *Sree Sree Anirudhadev aru Mayamara Samaja*. Jorhat: Borkatoki Company.
- Gait, Edward. 2013 [1905]. *A History of Assam*. Guwahati: New Book Stall.
- Gogoi, Biswadip. 2015. *The Matak, Mayamara Sect and Moamaria Revolt: A Brief Revisit*. Mysore: National Translation Mission.
- Gogoi, Padmeswar. 1967. *Tai Ahom Religions and Customs*. Guwahati: Publication Board Assam.
- Guha, A. 1991. *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam: Society, Polity, Economy*. Calcutta: Centre for Studies in Social Sciences.
- Guzy, Lidia and James Kapaló, eds. 2017. *Marginalised and Endangered Worldviews: Comparative Studies on Contemporary Eurasia, India and South America*. Münster: Deutsche Nationalbibliothek.
- Nath, D. 2008. *The Matak and Their Revolt Against the State in 18th Century Assam: Searching for Ethno-Religious Roots*. Kolkata: Maulana Abul Kalam Azal Institute of Asian Studies.
- Neog, Maheswar. 1965. *Early History of the Vaishnava Faith and Movement in Assam*. Guwahati: LBS Publications.
- Neog, Maheswar. 1984. *Religion of the North East*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers.
- Neog, Maheswar. 2011. *Sankaradeva: The Great Integrator*, compiled and edited by Navanita Varadapande. New Delhi: Omsons Publications.
- Rodrigues, Hillary P. 2017 [2006]. *Introducing Hinduism*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Sarma, Satyendranath. 1966. *The Neo-Vaishnavite Movement and the Sattra Institutes of Assam*. Guwahati: Lawyer's Book Stall.
- Sarma, Satyendranath. 1989. *A Socio-Economic and Cultural History of Medieval Assam*. Guwahati: Arunoday Press.
- Sharma, Chandan Kumar. 2011. Religion and Social Change: Neo-Vaishnavism vis a vis the Tribal Groups in the Assam Valley. – *Religion and Society in North East India*, edited by D. Nath. Guwahati/Delhi: DVS publishers, 1–21.