



Negotiating Spaces for a Shared Social Existence: Blurred Boundaries of *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma* in Assam

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This paper delves into the idea of space, primarily at the level of a constructed, physical space of *naamghar*. *Naamghars* are prayer halls made expressly for the devotionals of the Krishna *avatara* of Vishnu, popularised in the 16th century by Sankaradeva, a saint leader of Assam. In addition to the physical space of the *naamghar*, the paper deals with the spiritual space that encompasses Sankaradeva's religious ideology referred to as *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma*, or *Naba boishnab-baad* (Neo-vaishnavism). This study is located in the region of Dikhowmukh, a group of villages in the district of Sivasagar in Assam. Within the ambit of the above-mentioned spiritual space, the paper examines the relationship between the followers of the *Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha*, an organisation formed in the 20th century around the teachings of Sankaradeva, and others, who follow Sankaradeva's mode of Vishnu worship but are not members of the *sankaradeva sangha*. The article further explores how these groups navigate the space of *naamghar*. Finally, the study also engages with how the people of the region in general, navigate the complex boundaries between and within these spaces to create a shared-existence. The *naamghar* and the *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma* are not restricted to being the backdrop for action to unravel, but are distinct entities that shape and influence ways in which people orient their everyday lives and social relations. The interaction between these two spaces in Dikhowmukh provides avenues for the study of implications for evolving social dynamics within the *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma* in the broader context of Assam.

Sankaradeva, Neo-vaishnavism, naamghar, Assam, Sangha

Introduction

The association of the sacred with the spatial is perhaps as old as the notion of the sacred itself. Spaces have often been associated with elements of religiosity, piety and devotion, and give a material base to spiritual practices. This materiality substantiates belief, giving it a more concrete base for consolidation. The connection between spatial and the notion of sacred is not just restricted to particular spaces and objects of veneration. It also includes the ways in which people inhabiting an area make their own flexible and imaginary boundaries that are negotiated every day in order to co-exist. In the studies of religion and religious practices, spaces are now looked upon as active and dynamic, and not just limited to being the backdrop for people's activities (Knott 2010: 33-37). The research for this article is located in the larger Dikhowmukh region of the Sivasagar district of Assam. This area provides an interesting microcosm for an understanding of the Sankari-vaishnavite population of the Brahmaputra Valley in Assam that sees the coexistence among followers of the *Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha*, a 20th century organisation that emerged to follow the principles of the 16th century Vaishnavite saint-leader of Assam—Sankaradeva, and his other followers that are not associated with the *sangha*. Both these communities co-exist in Dikhowmukh by maintaining distinct forms of religious affiliations. This paper focuses on the

background of this bifurcation and explores how this is reflected in the lives of people on an everyday basis. This study uses primary and secondary texts, and while engaging with the region of Dikhowmukh in particular, the paper relies heavily on the oral accounts of people who live in and around the region to compensate for the absence of relevant academic work. The people interviewed have requested anonymity, and I have thus identified them as Interviewee A, B, C etc. The temporal focus of the paper is limited to the 20th century and early half of the 21st century. For denoting the specific form of Vaishnavism developed by Sankaradeva, the terms Sankarite Vaishnavism, *Naba boishnab-baad* and *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma* have been used interchangeably. The central aim of the paper is to construct a narrative of Sankarite Vaishnavism in the Dikhowmukh region, situating it historically in the larger picture of the role and outreach of the *Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha* in Assam.

The idea of space here is primarily discussed at two levels: First, I will look at the spiritual space provided by the *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma* in Assam and its demarcation into various categories through the years since its inception in the 16th century. By spiritual space, I am referring to the non-territorial space created by Sankaradeva's *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma* that is defined by words, rituals, symbols, and physical structures in the form of prayer halls and shrines that allow all of the above constituents to converge. We look at space here as an entity that interweaves "built environment, symbolic meanings, and routines of life" (Molotch 1993: 888). This spiritual space is, hence, not confined to a particular territorial boundary, but is created by the followers of Sankaradeva. It is a way of understanding the collective practices that define their allegiance to the *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma*. To what degree were these ritual practices observed strictly? Were there differences in the ways the various groups of followers practiced the *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma*? Were the demarcations within this space blurred, and how far was this space porous to other religious practices? These are some of the questions that this paper will seek to look at. At the second level, the idea of space will be analysed in the specific context of the constructed, physical space of the *naamghar*. The *naamghar* technically consists of a prayer hall in the *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma* tradition, but practically also functions as a community centre that facilitates social interaction at both the urban and rural areas of the Brahmaputra valley in Assam. This space while being a Vaishnavite sacred structure where the rituals of *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma* are practised, however, has a more overarching and profane function of social organisation and interaction. In this paper, I look at how the different denominations of the spiritual space of the *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma* come together in the congregational, physical space of the *naamghar*. It is, in fact, in relation to the *naamghar* that the different groups of the *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma* become a part of one unified spiritual space. Thus, I argue that the relationality between the physical space of the *naamghar* and the spiritual space of the *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma* is the crucial defining factor of the nature of both the spaces. To understand this relationality, I am focussing particularly on the region of Dikhowmukh. There are primarily two reasons for this - first, this cluster of villages provides an interesting microcosm for the study of the *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma* as it consists of multiple organisational expressions of different denominations of this spiritual space. The second and more important factor is my physical proximity to the region, which has allowed me to observe the relationality of these spaces for a prolonged period of time, and understand how it is expressed every day. Structurally the paper is divided into three

major sections apart from the introduction and conclusion. The first section traces the trajectory of evolution of the *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma* in the broader context of Assam. The second section deals with the manifestation of this spiritual space in the region of Dikhowmukh in particular, and finally the third section entails a discussion on *naamghars*. The aim is to explore the relationality between the physical space of the *naamghar* and the spiritual space of *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma* in the religiosity of the Dikhowmukh region.

Perceiving Sankaradeva and the Contested Spiritual Space of the *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma*

Sankaradeva, the 16th century saint-leader, propagated a novel form of Vishnu worship in the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam that was termed *Naba boishnab-baad* (Neo-vaishnavism) within the 20th century scholarship.¹ The *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma* that Sankaradeva propagated, involved a simple method of worshiping the Krishna *avatara* (or incarnation) of Vishnu, executed through *naam-kirtan*,² devoid of complicated rituals, or the use of incomprehensible Sanskrit (Bhaswati 2021: 68). After the demise of Sankaradeva, his disciples gradually split into four groups or *samhatis*: *Brahmo, Nika, Purusha and Kaal*. Their differences primarily consisted of the questions of how to correctly follow and interpret the teachings of Sankaradeva, and to determine who their leader would be. Planned physical structures called *satras* began proliferating across different parts of Assam under the aegis of these *samhatis*. A *satra*, headed by a *satradhikar* or *satriya*, includes a sanctum-sanctorum, a prayer hall (*Naamghar*), and residences for monks. The *satras* became the primary custodians of Sankarite Vaishnavism, around which the practices of followers revolved. Many *satradhikars* accumulated considerable wealth and authority that was bestowed onto them, both by the people (devotees), and the ruling powers on different occasions (Nath 2012: 107-108). In a way, thus, the *satras* became the physical rallying points around which the *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma* consolidated. Scattered across different parts of Assam, these *satras*, nevertheless, created a sense of a community of believers that formed a single, spiritual space. It is to be noted here that while *naamghars* are essential within the *satras*, they also exist independently in almost each broader neighbourhood in both rural and urban areas. Therefore, it is the *naamghars* that became the most accessible areas where the followers of *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma* could congregate, since the *satras* were not always within their territorial proximity. In a way, these *naamghars* acted as a more localised form of the sacred authority of the *satras* and allowed for the everyday manifestation of the *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma*.

By the 20th century, Sankaradeva's *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma* began to be seen as the most defining religious practice of Assam. Lakshminath Bezbarua, a prominent early 20th century Assamese author, wrote extensively on Sankaradeva and his primary

¹ Vishnu is one of the most important deities of the Hindu Pantheon, with various devotional cults surrounding his veneration that exist throughout India. The element of the 'new' in Neo-Vaishnavism is an indication to its difference from the previous forms of Vishnu worship in Assam that involved elaborate and expensive Brahminical rituals (Bhaswati 2021: 68).

² *Naam-kirtan* may be understood as prayers involving the repetition of the name of incarnations of Vishnu.

disciple, Madhavadeva, highlighting stories about them that depicted their divine and blessed lives, their charisma and spiritual control over people. In addition to being identified as a spiritual leader, Sankaradeva came to be associated with the consolidation of the modern Assamese language. In a historical account of the development of Assamese, the author, scholar and civil servant, Gunabhiram Barua, described a marked and distinctive phase in the evolution of Assamese as comprised in Sankaradeva's writings. However, as noted by Sanjib Pal Deka, it was in the 20th century that writers began identifying Sankaradeva as the birth-giver of the modern Assamese language (Deka 2022: 33-35). This development was preceded by the consolidation of a print culture in Assam during the 19th century that was primarily manoeuvred from Calcutta (Kolkata). Young men from Assam moved to the British educational institutions in Calcutta to avail themselves of modern education, where a rising linguistic resentment among these students against Bengali hegemony developed. The assertion of a strong linguistic heritage also escalated with the increasing segregations and census categorisations that were implicit within colonial rules, identifying, emphasising on, and documenting the differences between groups of people within Assam. Consequently, many Assamese periodicals began to be published in the late 19th and 20th century, some of which were: *Orunodoi*, *Jonaki*, *Bijulee*, *Banhi*, *Sadhana* etc. The major task involved in generating publications, however, was in raising the required funds. It was here that the resources of the *satras* came to be mobilised by the intelligentsia for publishing these periodicals. Additionally, a significant number of religious texts pertaining to Vaishnavism, and writings of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva, were also published by the *satras* at this time (Sharma 2011: 150-190). These periodical articles and religious texts on Sankaradeva, Madhavadeva and their form of Vaishnavism, resulted in exalting the status of Sankaradeva as the central spiritual and social figure of Assam. Sankaradeva was now portrayed as someone who unified the people of the Brahmaputra Valley with his systematic, simplified veneration of Vishnu, and simultaneously formulated the beginnings of a common language for the Assamese people through his devotional writings. This exalted status of Sankaradeva further contributed to the growing interest of the people in *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma* and the ritual practices that marked this spiritual space.

In order to create a sense of a unified community of people around the figure of Sankaradeva, the writers in the 20th century periodicals and magazines, first began identifying the existing problems in the ways Sankaradeva's teachings were being followed. Thus, the schisms within Sankarite Vaishnavism that were in the form of *samhatis*, now came under sharp scrutiny. In other words, the heterogeneity of the everyday performance of this spiritual space was now being written about with a critical vigour. This was especially true for the *Brahmo samhati*, founded by Damodaradeva, a Brahmin disciple of Sankaradeva. To explain the schism between the *Damodariyas* and other sects better, one can carefully look at the census reports of the early 20th century, which reveal interesting patterns of religious identification and practices, especially of those who claimed to belong to the Vaishnava sects of Hinduism. In 1901, for British Assam, the selected sects for tabulation within Hinduism included Vaishnava, Shaiva and Shakta. Interestingly, it was only within the Vaishnavas, that a further identification of the sub-sects of the *Mahapurushiya* and 'Other Vaishnavas' was recorded. The 'Other Vaishnavas' primarily consisted of those who came to be

known as *Bamuniya*, who were the followers of the Brahmin disciples of Sankaradeva. The *Bamuniya satras* could only be headed by a Brahmin *satradhikars*.³ On the other hand, the others who accepted non-Brahmin *gosains* or *satradhikars* were all grouped as *Mahapurushiyas* (Allen 1902: 39-59). The British noted how it was hard to distinguish between a Vaishnava and a non-vaishnava in the *Bamuniya satras*, given that the *Bamuniya Vaishnava gosains* frequently carried out animal sacrifices combined with the worship of different deities that are otherwise not accepted in the Sankarite form of Vaishnavism. (Allen 1902: 39-50, McSwiney 1911: 44-45)

The activities in the *Damodariya satras* were repeatedly attacked by writers in the early 20th century periodicals. They questioned the *Bamuniyas'* Brahmanical practices, which according to them were against the very grain of Sankaradeva's teachings of equality of all before God. In a conversation that I had with a group of potters in Majuli, a river island in Assam, stories of discrimination in the *Damodariya satras* came up. They recounted their parents not being allowed to sit together with other devotees in the *satra* owing to their 'lower social status.' Whenever they were allowed a seat at a distance from the rest, the places where they sat were mandatorily washed and cleaned later. Moreover, in the 20th century periodicals, there were pointed criticisms levelled against the growing wealth and misuse of power by the *satradhikars*. An article published in *Banhi* by Lakshminath Bezbarua, under the pseudonym Kripabor, contains a satirical account of a fictional *satradhikar* that highlights the lavishes, worldly desires of wealth and status, and the abuse of authority by *satradhikars* (Kripabor 2008: 821-825). In a periodical named *Sanatana Dharma Mukhapatra*, Pitambara Devagoswami, the *satradhikar* of the *Garamur satra*, in the early 20th century, self-critically introspected on and identified the various areas in which the *gurus* following Sankaradeva after his demise faltered.⁴ He listed their mistakes, and suggested possible ways of remedying the same so that the society could become better organised under the *satras*, especially in the face of growing criticism. His list included matters such as hostility among the followers of the four *samhatas* that was perpetuated by the *gurus*, the treatment of *shishyas* or disciples who were treated as if they were the personal property of the Gurus, the sense of self-assumed superiority among the latter etc. According to Pitambara Deva Goswami, if the *gurus* and followers of the *satras* could not contain and undo these mistakes, it would be difficult to sustain the essence of the *satras* and Sankaradeva's Vaishnavism (Deva Goswami 2007: 34-37).

An analysis of the articles in the periodicals uncovers a rising resentment, led by the belief that the Vaishnavism developed by Sankaradeva was gradually being 'led astray' by the *satradhikars*. Thus, a need to remodel the *ek-sharan-naam-dharma* was repeatedly articulated in these periodicals: "For the construction of a unified society, a neat and compartmental arrangement of the ritual realm was deemed important, and it was this consciousness that provided the grounds for the formation of the Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha" (Bhaswati 2022: 183). Therefore, the *srimanta sankaradeva sangha*, formed in 1930, was, in a way, a response and culmination of this situation. The criticism and counter-criticism observed in the print media was a reflection of the ways in which society was engaging with Sankaradeva and his *Ek-sharan-naam-*

³ These comprise the *Brahmo samhati* that can be considered almost synonymous to the *Bamuniya*.

⁴ The *Garamur satra* is one of the four most prominent *satras* of upper Assam

dharma. There was a growing momentum to the opposition against the *satras* and this created grounds for further schisms within the Sankari Vaishnavite practices in Assam. In addition to the four *samhatis*, now there was an institutionalised structuring of a consolidated attack (in the form of the ‘Sankaradeva Sangha’) on the entire style of Vaishnavism as practiced by the *satras* functioning within the loose demarcations of the *samhatis*. Thus, a broad bifurcation between *satras* and the *sangha* was created within the *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma*, wherein all the social and religious practices that the *sangha* did not deem to be Vaishnavite enough, came to be associated with the other camp.

In the 27th Annual Convention of the *Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha* held in 1958, its president Lakheswar Saikia, explained that the formation of the *sangha* was a result of a situation wherein, those who were supposed to uphold Sankari Vaishnavism, began to work against the primary principles of the *dharma*. This was a clear reference to the *satras* (Saikia 2005: 67-75). In the 1962 Annual Convention, Haladhar Bhuyan, one of the founding members of the *sangha*, narrated the tale of its formation. He highlighted the ironical situation where the *satras* that were envisioned as spaces which would perpetuate Sankaradeva’s messages of inclusivity in the spiritual sphere, began indulging in practices of caste-based discrimination, and propagating Brahmanical rituals. In the late 1920s, a platform of a few of such people who wished to redefine the *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma* situation in Assam started taking shape. At a public meeting in Nagaon, held in 1930, this platform first came to be called *sankara sangha* with the nomenclature eventually changing to *Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha* (Bhuyan 2005: 79-88). The *Sangha* aimed to redefine ‘Assamese’ society by perpetuating what according to them were true messages of Sankaradeva, propagated primarily through educational ventures. It has established its own schools and in 2014, it founded a university called *Mahapurushiya Srimanta Sankaradeva Vishwavidyala* (Bhaswati 2021: 73-74). Within the spiritual space of the *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma*, defined by porous borders with other forms of religious practices, the *sangha* was setting out to draw fresh boundaries and define its territory anew.

Organisations around *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma* in Dikhowmukh

Sivasagar is a district in the region along the upper stretches of the Brahmaputra in Assam (or Upper Assam). Dikhowmukh is technically one of the *Gram Panchayats* (village level local governments) of the district, located at the confluence of the Brahmaputra and its tributaries, Dikhow and Darika (also known as Gariajaan). According to the common lexicon, however, Dikhowmukh is a large area that goes beyond its formal identification as a Panchayat. A sizeable number of villages located around the confluence or *tribeni sangam* are all broadly identified as part of Dikhowmukh, while according to official documents, many of these areas actually fall under other Panchayats. This broader Dikhowmukh region provides an interesting platform for observing the fine negotiation of everyday spaces by people. A significant influence here is that of Sankaradeva’s *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma*, further segregated into streams. For example, interviewee A (an eminent, retired educator of the region, and also closely associated with the *sangha*) notes that in Dikhowmukh, the *Sankaradeva-janmotsava* (birth anniversary) was first organised in the 1950s by the people of the area. The celebration was attended by a large number of people

including some associated with the *Sankaradeva Sangha*. An *Anchalik Vaishnav Samaj* (which would roughly translate to Regional Vaishnav Society) was created thereafter to celebrate the *Sankaradeva-janmotsava* annually. The members of the *Sankaradeva sangha*, active within this *Samaj*, eventually began propagating the ideals of the *Sangha* in Dikhowmukh during the subsequent period. Interviewee B, another senior septuagenarian member of the *sangha*, recalls the initiative of a certain individual of Goalgaon village who started the first *prathamik* (village unit of the *sangha*) in Dikhowmukh. His son carried the task forward, and now there around eleven *prathamiks* in the region, which comprise one Dikhowmukh *anchalik*.⁵

The *sangha*, being an already well-established organisation, came with its own set of rules and prohibitions, which the newly inculcated members of Dikhowmukh were expected to abide by. For instance, the followers of the *sangha* (known as *sangi*), explain the special *sangha* norms regarding marriage. While there are no restrictions on inter-caste marital unions among *sangis*, marriage with someone outside the *sangha*, even if from the same caste, is a matter of dispute, especially if the marriage rituals are not conducted according to certain specific rules laid down by the *sangha*. In case of any digression, the family in question must undertake ritual purification to ensure that their membership within the organisation remains intact (Bhaswati 2021: 77-78). Thus, newer forms of regulations emerged in Dikhowmukh now, a region that was hitherto immersed in *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma*, but not accustomed to *sangha* norms. Interviewee A reflects on how locals, who joined the *sangha* in its early days in Dikhowmukh, did so without being completely aware of what it would actually entail. Thereafter, once they understood better, they refused to follow *sangha* rules, especially those that pertained to eating practices, which in turn led to disappointment and confusion in the *Sangha*. The eating practices referred to especially implies the consumption of meat, fish, eggs etc. As the interviewee notes, Sankaradeva was a follower of Vedantic Philosophy, and thus for the *sangha* too, understanding the essence of Vedantism was important: the belief that God was present in all his creations, and that divinity could be found everywhere. Since the whole world was included in his field of creation; one was disallowed from harming God's creations that include killing animals for consumption. To quote from another interviewee, interviewee B: "Socially we are all vegetarians. At home people may choose to eat non-vegetarian, but not in public gatherings. The idea is not to hurt animals."

Interviewee C, a non-*sangi* in his late sixties, spoke about the growing influence of the *sangha* in the original *Anchalik Vaishnav Samaj*, wherein it was the opinion of *sangha* members that primarily prevailed in making all the significant decisions. Eventually, the discontented others formed a *Vedic Vaishnav Samaj*. When Interviewee B was asked

⁵ Like most other institutional initiatives of its time that were primarily influenced by the colonial and missionary style of working, the *sangha* created a structured system of hierarchical functioning that designated the *prathamik* as its lowest unit, comprising a number of families. A few *prathamiks* are organized under one *anchalik*, and a *zila* committee is formed by a sizeable number of *anchaliks*. Representatives from *zila* committees thereafter form the *mool* or *kendra*. Members of the *sangha* (known as *sangis*) pay an annual contribution and membership fee (in cash or kind) to the organization for its maintenance. Several branches within the *sangha* are given the responsibility to ensure the smooth implementation of its decisions in the spheres of culture, education, literature etc. The *sangha* has established its own schools and in 2014, it founded the *Mahapurushiya Srimanta Sankaradeva Vishwavidyala* (Bhaswati 2021: 73-74).

to describe how the *Vedic Vaishnav Samaj* differed from the *Sangha*, he noted that the *Samaj* was more influenced by the *satras* in their approach. In his response to the same question, Interviewee C explained, as opposed to all the rigidities of the *Sangha*, the *Vedic Vaishnav Samaj* actually facilitated the inculcation and memorialisation of Krishna as was espoused by Sankaradeva, while also maintaining associations with other multiple forms of religious traditions. He gave an interesting example by narrating a hypothetical situation wherein a follower of Vaishnavism has colleagues—other employees at his office, who wish to celebrate a *puja* that comprises idol worship, for instance, a *Saraswati puja* involving worshipping the idol of the Hindu Goddess *Saraswati*. As a colleague following the *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma*, the concerned person cannot participate in the *puja*. However, since the *Vedic Vaishnav Samaj* teaches one to take the name of Krishna, the *avatara* of Vishnu, even while bowing to another deity, they can continue to maintain their affiliation to *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma* without upsetting their colleagues. Thus, the *Vedic Vaishnav Samaj* allows for the possibility of an amicable balance in situations where one might have to partake in ritual practices that are not prescribed by the tenets of *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma* for the sake of social courtesy. In Dikhowmukh, thus, there were three organisations that grew around *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma*: the *Anchalik Vaishnav Samaj*, the *Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha* and the *Vedic Vaishnav Samaj*. The *Vedic Vaishnav Samaj* identified itself with the *satra* mode of functioning, which allowed for a more fluid association with forms of ritual practices that are outside the fold of the *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma*. The *Anchalik Vaishnav Samaj*, on the other hand, is a shared platform, which included all followers of Sankaradeva. While the two were local in terms of their inception and character, the *Sangha* was a bigger and more of a trans-regional organisation across Assam.

***Naamghar* as a Space of Shared Existence**

To further explore how the people navigate these complex layers of veneration within the *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma*, it is important to understand how they access the space of the *naamghar*. Scholars have understood the *naamghars* as the central structure of the *satras*, where the main prayer congregations are held (Neog 2018: 314). Nevertheless, *naamghars* are not confined to the *satras* alone and their presence in the society is far more numerous as compared to the *satras*. The latter are larger constructions comprising other structures like housing units for monks, storehouses etc. On the other hand, the physical plan of a *naamghar* is rather simple with a large, rectangular hall supported by rows of pillars, and the size of the hall depends upon the number of devotees in the area that it caters to (Sarma 2016: 101). The simplicity of the construction is understood as a reflection of the nature of the *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma* itself, which aims to make the practice of religious rituals non-complicated and accessible to the devotees. Dr. Pitambar Deva Goswami, *satradhikar* of the *Auniati satra* gives a detailed description of the physical components of these prayer halls in the preface of the volume on Assam's *naamghars* published by the same *satra*. He writes, the first structure that we encounter as we cross the main gate of the *naamghar* is the *raangali sora*, upon entering which we are supposed to be infused with the *rang* or colour of devotion. It is a smaller construction that functions as an entryway to the main *naamghar*. Thereafter, we reach the central space for prayers—*naamghar* or *kirtanghar*. The *manikut* is at the other end of the *naamghar*, which is the most sacred

part of the structure. It houses the important texts of Sankaradeva that are believed to be the source of divinity (Kalita 2020: x-xix).

Naamghars perhaps plays the most crucial role in the social fabric of both urban and rural localities in Assam. Pitambara Deva Goswami, of the *auniati satra*, explained the social role of *naamghars* as not just Vaishnavite prayer halls, but as community centres that provide a multifaceted space, which is ideally inclusive of all people irrespective of their caste, gender, and economic status. The *naamghar* also creates a platform for dispensing justice and solving local disputes (Goswami 2021: 1-10). Interviewee E, a sexagenarian woman, who was a former member of the Dikhowmukh Panchayat talked about the financial aid provided by Panchayats to *naamghars*. According to her, Panchayats provided funds for the maintenance of *naamghars*, by building community halls for Youth clubs within *naamghar* boundaries, and by constructing urinals and providing tube wells among other things. The state hence identifies the *naamghars* for their crucial social role in providing a space for the community to perform their collective activities. Each village in the region of Dikhowmukh has at least one *naamghar*, and in villages where the population is denser there are more. The *naamghars* have a committee (*parichalana samiti*) that looks after its maintenance and organises activities, ruled at the helm by a President and Secretary. Additionally there is a *naamgharia*, a person deputed to carry out everyday rituals within *naamghars* that include lighting the lamp etc. Interviewee E continued to say that both the *naamgharia* and the *parichalana samiti* members are chosen after discussion with *naamghar* members in the village. The *naamgharia* also receives remuneration based on donations made by villagers, but recently, the government has also begun to provide a nominal annual salary for *naamgharias*.

Interviewee C shared an interesting narrative explaining the social role of *naamghars*. This was about a local shrine, popularly known as Ramkhapeeth Devalaya (temple), in Deogharia village of Dikhowmukh. To provide more context here, there are many contested legends associated with the *devalaya*, the history of which is yet to be studied systematically. While local beliefs identify the *devalaya* as a *shakti peetha*,⁶ Sabharam Rajguru believes that the origin of this *devalaya* preceded the coming of the *Ahoms* in this region, and was probably a sacred space significant for some tribal community here (Rajguru 2009: 22-25). Another author provides a more specific but conjectural theory when writing that the shrine belonged to the Kachari tribe before the *Ahom* ruler Sukapha discovered and systematised the management of the place.⁷ Succeeding *Ahom* rulers created designations for those people who maintained the shrine, and exempted it from taxes. Eventually worship at the shrine was incorporated within Brahmanical practices that essentially meant a Brahmin priest carrying out the rituals therein, though how this merge exactly took place has not been ascertained or

⁶ The *shakti peethas* are shrines, which according to the *Kalika Puran* came up in places where parts of the goddess Sati's severed body fell. However, Dr. Sabharam Rajguru observes that the *Kalika Puran* does not mention the Ramkhapeeth Devalaya (Rajguru 2009: 22-25).

⁷ The *Ahoms* were a dynasty that ruled over parts of Assam for about 600 years until the British takeover of the region in early 19th century. Maheswar Neog writes that the *Ahoms* belonged to the 'Tai or Shan sections of the Siamese-Chinese branch of Sino-Tibetans, who descended upon the Brahmaputra valley in 1228 under the leadership of Sukapha. The Kacharis, on the other hand, were one of the powerful tribes ruling over the area towards the south of the Brahmaputra. The capital of their kingdom was at Dimapur, now in the state of Nagaland (Neog 2018: 58).

documented (Handique 2009: 12-21). Irrespective of the authenticity of these origin stories, one can conclude that the *devalaya* is an old and significant sacred space within the region that is now associated with Brahmanical rituals and the worship of the Goddess or Shakti. Animal sacrifices are regularly practised here, like at most other Shakti shrines and temples. Interviewee C narrated that until much recently, the *devalaya* and a *naamghar* were located at the same premises. The *naamghar* in fact provided space for *devalaya* committee meetings. This is a crucial detail, since on principle, Sankaradeva's Vaishnavism or the *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma* is quite the opposite of Brahminical goddess worship. As the name itself signified, the *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma*, propagated devotion towards the one true God—Vishnu. In fact, its inception can be understood as a protest against worship of multiple deities and elaborate, Brahmanical rituals especially since they entailed animal sacrifices. Thus, for the *naamghar* and *devalaya* to have shared the same space reflects the multi-layered role of the *naamghar*. The *naamghar* is primarily a community space that provides a functional platform for people to gather and celebrate social and cultural occasions besides regular prayers. At times, thus, the *naamghars* may also accommodate discussions around ritual practices that are not associated with the *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma*. However, it is essentially the spirit of congregating as a community of devotees under *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma*, which as an extension, allowed the *naamghar* to develop as a space for more generalised social gatherings. In Dikhowmukh, nevertheless, the story began changing with the growing influence of the *sangha*.

Interviewee C continued to recount how in 2009, the *devalaya* celebrated the 240th anniversary, of its re-establishment by the *Ahom* ruler Lakshmi Singha.⁸ The discussion about the arrangement for a grand celebration took place at the *naamghar*, which was not only attended by the people of Dikhowmukh, but from many places across Assam. At this time, however, the *Sangha* had begun being popular in Dikhowmukh, and there was resistance from those who were primarily influenced by it, to the sharing of spaces between the *devalaya* and the *naamghar*. Thereafter, the two were separated by a wall, and *sangha* families from the village split to form a new *naamghar* at the nearby village of Seujpur. The *naamghar* in Deogharia continued to be used by the others in the village for prayer. Why this split occurred in 2009, so many decades after the *Sangha* consolidated its influence in the region, is yet to be explored. The presence of people from outside the village, unaccustomed to its style of social interaction may have led to some discomfort regarding the proximity between the two sacred spaces that were principally supposed to remain at loggerheads with one another. The process of change, according to interviewee C, had begun gradually after the formation of the *Anchalik Vaishnav Samaj* and the celebration of the *Sankarajanmotsav*, after which people started discussing the essence of Sankaradeva's ideals with a renewed vigour. This was further strengthened by the *sangha*'s emphasis on restoration of the true essence of the *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma*. While the Deogharia villagers continued the practice of animal sacrifices in the *devalaya*, they nevertheless

⁸ The *Ahom* ruler Lakshmi Singha ascended the throne in 1769 and ruled until his demise in 1780 (Gohainbarua 2019: 118, 127). He is said to have re-constructed the *devalaya* and given it a definite structure.

stopped performing the sacrifices on their own, and instead invited Brahmins from outside for the purpose.

This signified that the growing discussions around Sankaradeva and the system of faith that he formulated, had different degrees of impact on the people. To begin with, there was no definite, separate community that did or did not practise *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma*. The same people visited the *naamghars* for prayers as espoused by the Sankaradeva, and also partook in rituals in the *devalaya*. As the *sangha* slowly consolidated its base, the spiritual space of the *ek-sharan-naam-dharma* began to be demarcated more definitively. Even people that were not associated with the *sangha* perhaps came to internalise this and the wall that was built between the *devalaya* and the *naamghar* can be seen as tangible evidence of the same. It may be perceived as reclamation of the physical space of the *naamghar* and an affirmation of its functionality in relation with the spiritual space of the *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma*. To take it a step further, the *sangha* families of the village distanced themselves from this shared premises altogether and associated with a separate *naamghar* in the neighbouring village of Seujpur. In Seujpur, the *naamghar* was especially established for members of the *sangha*. While there was no restriction on people from outside the *sangha* on entering the *naamghar*, according to interviewee C, people did not usually go there in the absence of a particular occasion. In addition to this, there is another *sangha naamghar* in Dikhowmukh, at the village of Nakatani, and all *sangha prathamiks* in the Dikhowmukh region have one *anchalik naamghar*, where *anchalik* level events and discussions of the *sangha* take place.

However, as also described by interviewee B, in all other villages of Dikhowmukh, the same *naamghars* are used by both *sangis* and non-*sangis*. They just ensure that the dates of their meetings or other occasions to be held at the *naamghars* do not clash. On occasions of the *naamprasanga* (prayer session for chanting the name of Krishna) organised by the *sangha*, non-*sangis* could be present and vice-versa. Only the organisation and management of events remained separate. The *naamghar* provides a platform for people to congregate. It is a community space, evolved within the ambit of *Naba boishnab-baad*, particularly used for expressing devotion towards God through prayer and the chanting of the *naam* (in keeping with the name *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma*). While the *naamghar* constitutes the single-most crucial space for the social performance of a shared existence, this produces the physical space as something more than just a prayer hall. Most importantly, the people who construct, maintain, pray and take part in activities at the *naamghar*, are not bound only by the devotion towards Vishnu or his Krishna *avatara*. They also take part in other rituals that include the worship of the many deities of the Hindu pantheon. However, taking the name of Krishna, as is done during prayers at the *naamghar*, has been imbibed within their consciousness in a way that cannot be ignored. As interviewee D said: “We take the name of Krishna before eating, before sitting, as an exclamation, as an affirmation and in everything that we do.” Despite the fact that the *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma* is marked by different denominations, all of these ultimately manifest as one unified spiritual space when inside the physical space of the *naamghar*. Even when there are examples of creation of exclusive *naamghars* by the *sangha*, the *naamghar* by and large remains a platform that creates the space for a shared social existence.

In Conclusion

The region of Dikhowmukh consists of numerous villages that provide scope for understanding the relationality between *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma* and *naamghars*. Within the spiritual domain of the region, it is hard to define who the followers of the *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma* are. Are they members of the *Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha*, who strictly follow the regulations given by the organisation, or are they the non-*sangihis* who bow in front of an idol of Shiva but take the name of Krishna? Amidst this fluidity, the physical space of the *naamghar* provides a fascinating intersectional domain. Besides congregating for ritual purposes, the *naamghar* also becomes a meeting point where important decisions are taken, where justice is dispensed, and where people are required to be present, irrespective of personal differences. The *naamghar* binds the society, while retaining a distinct Vaishnavite flavour. It thus produces Sankaradeva's *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma* as more than just a spiritual space. The *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma* also becomes a powerful social reality that is lived and performed every day, and in most situations without restricting or limiting people to any one form of veneration. It becomes the defining character of society, as observed in Dikhowmukh. The *sangha*, which began as a way of redefining Sankaradeva's Vaishnavism, by restoring, what according to them, comprised his true message, can nevertheless be understood as only one of the ways of observing and practicing *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma*. While this paper is limited to Dikhowmukh, the complex interaction between the physical space of the *naamghar* and the spiritual space of *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma* may be understood as applicable to the broader area of the Brahmaputra valley in Assam. Same is the case with the internal dynamic of the spiritual space within Sankarite Vaishnavism, which can be primarily categorised in terms of the *sangha* and *satra* divide. Despite this broad bifurcation within the *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma*, the spiritual space comes together as one entity within the physical space of the *naamghar*, where they do not just meet for prayers, but also for other crucial social discussions. These spaces are in constant interaction with one another, creating a relationality that shapes a shared social existence for the people.

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