



Journal of North East India Studies

ISSN: 2278-1455 (Print) 2277-6869 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.jneis.com>

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To cite this article: Ankita Dutta (2017): Role of the State and Traditional Institutions in Identity Formation: A Study of the Namghar in Assam, *Journal of North East India Studies*, 7(2): 46-56.

Published online: 1 December 2017.

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Role of the State and Traditional Institutions in Identity Formation: A Study of the *Namghar* in Assam

Ankita Dutta

The Neo-Vaishnavite movement of Srimanta Sankardeva in the 14th century led to the subsequent formation of an ‘Assamese’ identity centering around the *Sattr*a (a Vaishnavite monastery) and the *Namghar* (the former’s extended wing). Both the *Sattr*a and the *Namghar* are intimately associated with the socio-cultural and religious life of the Assamese society. The ‘democratic’ institution of the *Namghar* provides a common forum for villagers to assemble and not only discuss collectively their common issues and problems but also resolve the local disputes of the village through locally evolved judicial procedures and methods. This paper tries to locate the role of the *Namghar* as a traditional institution in today’s context of the fragmentation of the Vaishnavite community into different sects and sub-sects. It makes a study of the factors resulting in the ‘fracture’ of the ‘Assamese’ identity in the context of the *Namghar*, and looks into the several ways by which people identify and distinguish themselves from the ‘other’. It also tries to emphasise the complementary relationship between the traditional and the modern, and how the continuous interaction between the state and traditional institutions seeks to create and re-create new identities and new dynamics of legitimacy and power relations, having implications on the way of functioning of both.

Keywords: Neo-Vaishnavism, *Namghar*, *Sattr*a, identity, Assam.

Understanding the Meaning of Traditional Institutions

The functioning of a state requires certain necessary conditions through which it can effectively exercise power in managing the society and its people. These conditions provide the basis for realising the democratic ideals and aspirations. The decision-making process of the state and the implementation of these decisions is based on the involvement of different structures from different walks of life. It includes institutions recognised as both formal and informal. In this background, traditional institutions play a very important role in determining the way of functioning of the structures of governance of the state (Sarmah 2011). Traditional institutions represent a

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process of institution-building within small cohesive communities giving voice to their demands and aspirations. It is through these institutions that social mobilisation around issues of immediate importance concerning communities takes place. These institutions, therefore, are the foundation that enable local communities to voice and enforce their interests, to influence decisions taken at the higher levels, and to hold policy-makers accountable.

In general parlance, any institution that functions within a specific community/locality, according to its own rules and norms, and stands apart from those institutions recognised by state law, is understood as a traditional institution. Traditional institutions are reflective of a curious blend of cohabitation of the traditional and the modern where, sometimes, the modern itself can be seen as a form of reincarnation of the traditional. However, the elusiveness of the category of the 'traditional' continuously persist when we undertake a study of the different such institutions in society. Several questions arise that raise doubts about the idea of the 'traditional' itself and which institutions, how, and why may be classified as 'traditional'. Even institutions such as family, marriage, or kinship, which vary across societies and communities, can be seen as traditional. Institutions like the khaps, or for that matter, Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs), Self-Help Groups (SHGs), etc. operate according to their own laws and decision-making structures.

The meaning of 'traditional' and which institutions may be classified as such vary across societies, cultures, and communities. However, these institutions have still managed to survive in today's fast-changing world. This may be attributed to the legitimacy and respect these institutions have historically enjoyed in society. People have often looked at them as parallel institutions existing alongside those institutions formally recognised by the state machinery. Irrespective of how the decisions of these institutions might be seen or judged, whether conservative or liberal, they create a space for participatory politics to emerge. The appeal of democracy is such that even traditional institutions seek to project themselves as democratic in their style of functioning, no matter in whatever way they look at it and define it. The role such institutions, traditional or otherwise, play within the context of an evolving Indian democracy provides evaluative standards by which to appraise their functioning across different socio-cultural and community contexts.

Traditional Institutions in Northeast India

Speaking of traditional institutions in Northeast India, as we have them today, they largely originated among communities in the pre-colonial times. These institutions have performed roles almost similar to the formal elected institutions at the state level endowed with a statutory and constitutional basis (Sarmah 2011). Each state in Northeast India has a different set of location-specific concerns and grievances. This, however, often gets blurred in the scheme of things of policy-makers and government leaders. This has even led some to accuse the Indian state of having a myopic vision with regard to the Northeast which seeks to camouflage the real issues of dissent through short-term gains. As pointed out by Prof. Udayan Misra (1984), present-day Assam, made up primarily of the Brahmaputra and Barak Valleys, pre-

sents a very different picture when placed with the other neighbouring states of Meghalaya, Mizoram, Manipur, Tripura, Nagaland, and Arunachal Pradesh. Assam had a deep and wide-ranging cultural intercourse with the rest of the Indian subcontinent, centuries before the other hill regions came to know of the so-called mainstream. Interaction with the outside world led to a gradual process of state formation. The institution of the *Namghar* in Assam is based on people's participation and community development at the grassroots. But, what remains to be analysed is how open and democratic is this space of the *Namghar* as a traditional institution? Has it been able to facilitate active people's participation and community development cutting across the lines of caste, religion, and ethnicity? Again, the coexistence of the *Namghar* as a traditional institution with formally-elected state level bodies raises questions of understanding the traditional within the modern. The usefulness and functionality of traditional institutions is what we need to look at, esp. in a context when the Indian state has provided mechanisms like the courts for modern and democratic governance to redress people's demands and grievances.

Emergence of the *Sattra* and the *Namghar* in Assam

The traditional cultural life of the Assamese Vaishnavite community revolves around the *Namghar*, which is also called *Harigriha* or *Kirtan-ghar*. It is ideally understood as a community prayer hall and a place where idol worship is not performed. Vaishnavism emerged in Assam on similar lines as the rest of India. There was an urgent need to reorganise society along democratic lines to restore peace and order in the prevailing state of utter turmoil, chaos, and disorder. Dr. Maheswar Neog (2008) says that the Vaishnava revival under the leadership of Srimanta Sankardeva brought about a new and comprehensive outlook on the way of life of the people and their social behaviour with an all-pervasive organisational set-up. The *Sattra* and the *Namghar* were at the epicentre of this organisational transformation.

The *Namghar* evolved as an offshoot, an extended wing of its parent institution, the *Sattra*. Originally, the *Namghar* was a long and open hall with no idol in the altar, but only the *Bhagavata Purana* symbolising the supreme God. Not only religious discourses and daily devotional recitations known as *naam-kirtana* or congregational prayers were held in the *Namghar* or *kirtan-ghar*, but also regular public meetings concerning issues affecting the village community. It acted as a social meeting ground for people from various backgrounds. The foundation of the *Namghar* was based on the twin principles of equality of man and recognition of the worth and dignity of every living being. In due course of time, it came to serve as a forum of not only religious but also socio-cultural activities of the community.

Every Assamese village gradually came under the religious hold of one *Sattra* or the other and each now built its own respective *Namghars*. Its influence even penetrated into the neighbouring tribal areas of Assam. The growing popularity of the institution of the *Sattras* in terms of religion, culture, and literature, gradually led to the emergence of the *Namghar* as the nerve-centre of all important village activities. Today, even villages with a mixed population and individual households too, have set up their own *Namghars* which function as important centres of community

activities. Due to factionalism in the Vaishnavite community and the coming up of different sects such as *Krishnaguru*, *Sankar-Sangha*, etc. within the Assamese Vaishnavites, many *Namghars* have now come up in a single village. The *Namghar* today functions as an autonomous institution in all its affairs. However, in religious and moral matters, decisions taken at the *Namghar* by the village elders under the guidance of the agents of the affiliated *Sattras*, the final appeal lies with the head of the *Sattra* of which the parties concerned are disciples.

Organisation and Management of the *Namghar*

The day-to-day affairs of every *Namghar* are looked after by a management committee comprising of the President, secretary, joint-secretary and other members elected unanimously by the *raij* or common people. Generally, the management committee is seen to be composed of people from diverse sections of the society such as government servants, school and college teachers, landowners, etc. It looks after the funds of the *Namghar*. Money is collected by the *Namghar* through several means such as collective farming on the *Namghar* land, donations, subscriptions, and token amounts called '*orihona*' contributed by people. It is the responsibility of the management committee to ensure that the money collected in the name of the *Namghar* is channelized towards effective use. They also gather together the common people of the locality in regular meetings and discuss issues of immediate importance to the community.

Funding of these *Namghars* are now no longer limited to the local community alone. *Namghars* now operate through both community funds as well as government grants and donations by wealthy families and individuals. Community efforts and intervention by local MLAs and PWD officials through the panchayats in villages and municipalities in towns, have helped to make the *Namghars* places of popular interest both among the locals and outsiders. Many *Namghars* also have their own libraries and museums which are a treasure house of centuries-old rare manuscripts and other valuable books. The *Namghars* have also functioned as centres of education. The *tol* system of education first started in the *Namghars* under the patronage of the *Sattras* through the Assamese language as the medium of instruction.

The *Namghar* as an Agency of Decision-Making and Citizen Participation

It has been seen that the establishment of *Namghars* itself is sometimes guided by the aims and objectives of the state. For instance, in order to give expression to an all-encompassing 'Assamese' identity as a response to the failure of the state to control infiltration of foreigners into Assam, the Assam Accord was signed in 1985. Among other provisions, it mandated the Govt. of Assam to undertake activities towards cultural preservation, which also included the setting up of new *Namghars* across different regions of the state. This led to the establishment of *Sattras* and *Namghars* in different parts of Assam, so as to concretise the idea of a homogenous community of the Assamese.

In the premises of the *Namghar* are taken important decisions regarding various issues of community life like the construction of water tanks, libraries, roads, bridges,

educational institutions, fisheries, etc. Such decisions are collectively arrived at by the *raij*, consisting of the eldest male member from each household of the village. The *raij* is a general body of the villagers, and *Namghars* are instrumental in imparting training to the villagers in decision-making and decentralised planning. In some cases, valuable healthcare advice relating to vaccination and inoculation programmes and mother-child health are also dispensed by knowledgeable persons in the *Namghar* premises.

Historically, the *Namghar* has played a role of immense significance in arousing the socio-political consciousness of the villagers and promoting a sense of unity and community spirit among them. Both during the nationalist struggle for freedom and the Assam agitation (1979-85) against the issue of undocumented immigrants in Assam, regular meetings were held in the premises of many *Namghars* spread all over the state. Many freedom fighters also took refuge in the *Namghar* to escape from being caught by the police. Especially during the crucial years of the Assam agitation, meetings called '*mel*' were regularly held in *Namghars*, which were addressed by representatives from the local units of the All Assam Students' Union (AASU). In this context, the *Namghar* served as an important forum for the mobilisation of public opinion. In order to inform people about any meeting or gathering, the *doba* (a big drum) is sounded continuously till people come and assemble in the *Namghar*. This practice of sounding the *doba* both before meetings and also for alerting the village folk against any impending threat in the village, is prevalent even today.

Parliamentary and Assembly elections provide suitable occasions when the *Namghar* becomes the major centre of political activity in the village. Issues such as cooperative credit, rural banking and agricultural loans, decisions on the construction of schools, libraries, dispensaries, roads, tube-wells, grants for specific rural development projects, etc. come up for discussion during election time. In a way, the *Namghar* supplements the functions of the Gram Sabha to promote village development through popular participation at the grassroots. Since Independence, different regional and national political parties have been holding meetings in the *Namghar* premises as a part of their poll campaign to address and interact with voters. It is generally observed in many *Namghars* that it is the Gaon Unnayan Samiti (Village Development Committee) which takes all the major decisions relating to the provision of physical infrastructure and grants for the same. Any expenditure is incurred with the permission of the management committee of the *Namghar*. However, on substantial issues of wider importance involving heavy expenditures, a general meeting of the Gaon Unnayan Samiti composed of the *raij* is called.

The *Namghar* as a Village Court – A Mechanism of Dispute Resolution

Namghars still serve the function of a village court. Villagers can sit together in the *Namghar* premises and unanimously resolve their local disputes in accordance with the local judicial procedures and methods. Much before the formal institutionalisation of local self-government at the village level, the *Namghar* initiated the system of Panchayati Raj in Assam. According to Abhijit Bhuyan, it promotes ‘social capital’ through a network of participatory governance promoting responsibility and inter-personal cooperation. There is an age-old system prevailing in many *Namghars* till today where a bamboo pole is put up in front of the house of any family or villager who is deemed to be a social outcaste by the village elders. It is a sign of punishment of not adhering to community norms and hence forbidding any mixing or interaction with the village community of the particular individual and his family.

Village elders or *raij* assemble in the *Namghar* to try cases of moral or social delinquency on the part of any villager with the help of *raij-medhi* or *barmedhi*, the *Sattradhikar*, and other *Sattra* functionaries of the particular *Sattra* to which the *Namghar* is affiliated. In religious and moral matters as well as minor offences like thefts, land disputes, or encroachment of boundaries, etc. decisions taken in the *Namghar* by the *raij* under the guidance of the agents of the *Sattras*, are strictly adhered to. Familial disputes over property and inheritance are also referred to the *Namghar* for settlement. The final appeal in such cases lies with the *Sattradhikar* of the *Sattra*, of which the parties concerned are considered disciples. His decision, known as *vyastha* or *adesa* in popular parlance, is considered binding. Even the police are seen to respect the verdict of the *raij* as it is backed by the sanction of the entire village community.

Audrey Cantlie (1984) says that the *Namghar*, in its functions as a village court, aims to arrive at a negotiated settlement. At the very outset of the meeting, the parties concerned pledge to abide by the decision of the *Namghar*. The trial is generally of an open nature and the defendant or the accused has the right to be heard and is given a chance to defend himself in front of the village community. If found guilty, suitable punishment is meted out to him keeping in mind the nature of the offence committed by him (Cantlie 1984). In case the guilty refuses to abide by the verdict of the *raij*, he is made a social outcaste and boycotted from the community. The *Namghar*, however, essentially aims at reforming the offender by trying to bring him back on the right path rather than punishing him. It serves as a common platform for villagers to assemble and discuss on a collective basis the common issues and problems affecting the village community as a whole. It functions as an agency through which information regarding the government’s development policies is disseminated to the common man. The *Namghar* follows a process of reformative justice where fines are usually trifling. It ensures that disputes are settled through proper negotiation without escalating into a serious crisis.

Women’s Participation in the *Namghar*

The gender difference is clearly prominent in the activities of the *Namghar*. Women play an important role in the *Namghar*, although however, not always at par with

men. Women organise their own congregational prayers (*duprasangas* and *diha-naam*) generally in the afternoon. These are all-women gatherings of which men are generally not a part. However, in the main congregational prayers (*naam-prasangas*) attended by both men and women, women generally sit behind men and do not take part in the core activities associated with these rituals. There exists an all-women committee called the *Gopini* Committee in almost every *Namghar*, which looks into the issues concerning women in the village/locality, and takes them up at the higher levels.

Traditional religious groups of women in the *Namghar* called the *namoti dol* often take up social issues exclusively concerning women, which work closely with members of the *mahila samitis* (Behal, 2002 as cited by Fernandes and Barbora). These *mahila samitis* are groups formed by women in both villages and towns for undertaking various women-centric socio-economic and development programmes. Members of the *namoti dol* have forged links with these *mahila samitis* with the aim of making the space of the *Namghar* women-friendly. As a result of their efforts, separate toilets for women with running water facility have been constructed in the premises of various *Namghars*. Decisions are also taken with regard to various maternity and child welfare *aasonis* (schemes) of the government, social reforms and weaving projects under bank loans exclusively for women.

However, key positions in the management of the *Namghar* are mostly held by men. A study conducted by the Women's Studies Research Centre of Gauhati University reveals that women in Lower Assam are generally not a part of the decision-making process in the *Namghars*. The study says that such restrictions are, however, in sharp contrast to the social milieu in Upper Assam, where women enjoy an exalted status and are an integral part of the religious functions in the *Namghar*. However, at the same time, the study also notes that women in the *Namghars* of Upper Assam are at best assigned work like cleaning the floors, lighting the lamps, and washing the offerings. They have no substantial voice in the decisions taken by the management committees of the *Namghars*. The *namoti dol* or the *gopini* committee consisting exclusively of women, are hardly represented in the management committee which looks after the overall functioning of the *Namghar* (Sharma 2013).

Emergence of Divisive Tendencies

The composite, homogenous community of the Vaishnavas under Srimanta Sankardeva was never as unified as it seemed to be. Dissensions within the community later gave rise to divisive tendencies. The result was factionalism and fragmentation of the diverse groups that were earlier a part of one fold. Under the umbrella of Vaishnavism, different tribes of the Northeast such as Garo, Karbi, Bodo, Mishing, etc. had once been a part of the same community as the native Assamese-speaking population. They also took part in different activities in the *Sattra* and the *Namghar*. However, they gradually began seeking a separate identity of their own. Although even today, many such tribes are ardent followers of Vaishnavism, but they have carved out for themselves a niche in the society and politics of the state of Assam. This has, at times, even questioned the very basis of the 'Assamese' identity itself. For instance,

although both the Assamese and the Bodos visit the *Namghar* and celebrate common festivals such as *Bihu* (the Bodos celebrate *Baisagu*), the conflict between the two communities still awaits a permanent solution.

These secessionist tendencies within Vaishnavism have come to the fore not only among people belonging to diverse tribes and communities, but also within the Vaishnavite community itself. Many different sects claiming themselves to be true or real Vaishnavas challenging Brahmanism to the core have emerged, e.g. the Srimanata Sankardeva Sangha. They have set up their own *Namghars*, challenging the core principles of unity and cohesiveness that the institution claims to represent. The result has been that unlike earlier when a single *Namghar* in a village represented the entire village community, many *Namghars* have now emerged. Sometimes, hostile relations between communities have also developed on account of their differences regarding the way the *Namghar* is organised or certain rituals are being performed. A contradiction to its professed ideology of monotheism and prohibition of idol-worship has now become visible. This has led to divisions within the community between those professing to be idol worshippers but still performing *naam* and those only believing in *naam*. The Upper Assam-Lower Assam divide is also clearly seen in the *Namghars* with many people from both the regions claiming that the way of conducting *naam prasangas* of both are different, and each trying to claim superiority over the other.

It is indeed a matter of concern that *Sattras* in present-day Assam have lost their original popularity mainly because of their non-democratic way of functioning and the prevalence of certain decadent customs and rituals which no longer hold good relevance. People belonging to the lower castes have now begun to question the various divisions and hierarchies in the *Sattras* and *Namghars*, which stands against the original foundational spirit of *bhakti* or equality on which these institutions stood. The proliferation of *Namghars* in Assam has come about as a result of fission in the Vaishnavite sect. Cantlie (1984) says that the important and sometimes quite covert role played by caste in this respect cannot be underplayed. Caste is of major significance both in determining the complexion of the congregation and in limiting its range of membership. Villages in Assam, as elsewhere, may be multi-caste or single-caste. Majority of the *Namghars* in several villages are, however, single-caste. In many villages, studies have shown that the lower castes prefer to establish *Namghars* of their own rather than suffer the disabilities of association with higher castes who may not admit them into their *Namghars*. In the middle range of the hierarchy, there exist many multi-caste *Namghars*. Villages are divided into several religious congregations, each owning their respective *Namghars*. In many *Namghars*, the *bilonia* or distributor of the offering (*prasad*) is usually chosen from the highest caste so that there can be no objection by anyone to taking food from his hands.

Many households in a village, however, remain aloof and never join any *Namghar* because of their own reasons, whether personal or social. People from other places also come to the villages and buy land here in order to be near to their place of work in the town. Villages in Assam were almost wholly agricultural in the previous generations. Increasing mobility and diversification of occupations have come to

affect rural areas in Assam as elsewhere in the country. There is thus now a likely shift in the role of the *Namghar* as the representative institution of the entire village community to one in which it caters chiefly to the religious needs of the villagers who are socially and economically part of a wider and more dispersed network. The hold of feudalism has tightened over time and the hierarchical division of society based on social classes has strengthened, which reflects itself in the functioning and class composition of the *Namghars*.

It may be said that Sankardeva's philosophy of Vaishnavism through the institutions of the *Sattrra* and the *Namghar* contributed only to a limited extent towards effecting real social change. He laid more emphasis on a change of consciousness than on a radical change of the society and social order. As a result, the real problems of caste or gender were overlooked in the quest for ritual satisfaction. Both the *Sattrra* and the *Namghar* seemed to lack a missionary zeal to bring the varied cultures and tribes of the region into the mainstream of the Assamese culture and society through the spread of Vaishnavism among them. The result has been dissensions leading people either to embrace the teachings of other philosophies or reinterpret these same teachings in the light of the changed circumstances of the present-day world. This explains the ongoing social problems centering around the conflicting notion of an 'Assamese' identity between plain and hill tribes in the region.

Conclusion

The emergence of traditional institutions like the *Namghar* may at times, be a response to disenchantment with the policies of the state. It enables a community, here, the Assamese Vaishnavas, to identify itself easily with such an institution and thereby help to preserve the idea of a 'community'. However, the functioning of these institutions might not always be open and democratic. Distinctions of caste, religion or gender remain deeply entrenched in the structure and organization of these institutions which do not make them entirely representative of the community that they seek to represent. This automatically gets reflected in the way of decision-making of these institutions with different implications of these decisions for different groups within the community.

In its attempt at religious and social transformation of a community, there have been a re-ordering of caste relations around the institution of the *Namghar*. This has brought to light the socially divisive tendencies that were already a part of the society in which the *Namghar* emerged. However, this social tension vis-à-vis the legitimacy it still enjoys among the Assamese explains the usefulness and existence of this age-old institution. The fact of its survival as a community institution has ensured its continuing visibility in political matters, without however, coming into conflict with political institutions like the panchayats which are recognised within the domains of the formal state machinery.

Both the state and community institutions are a part of the same process of social change and transformation that is a characteristic feature of any society. Traditionally seen as an institution with limited scope, the idea of the state has now been transformed into that of a central moral force regulating the activities and behaviour

of all individuals, institutions and laws. Kaviraj (2005) argues that in contrast to European society, in India, the state has been the primary driver of modernity. He says the despite the emergence of a global world order and predominance of the ideas of liberalisation and globalisation, the ‘enchantment’ of the state still remains unchallenged in social and economic matters. For example, the adoption of a constitution by many *Namghars*, delineating its powers and functions, the concept of election of members by the management committee in the *Namghar*, etc. – these are certain practices that can be viewed as deriving inspiration from state-recognised institutions. No matter how democratic or undemocratic they might be, but the conscious/sub-conscious presence of the state is something that cannot be ruled out. Through a process of ‘legibility’, the modern state has imposed order upon those aspects of society that it needed to understand and control (Scott 1998). This is similarly true of different institutions such as the *Namghar* that have adapted themselves to different situations in a way that somewhere can be located within a framework either directly or indirectly determined by the state. Not only the aspect of adaptation, but also the Census reports carried out by the state departments classify and enumerate people on the basis of their communities, castes and sub-castes. This becomes a tool for the identification of people and their institutions on different grounds. Formation of different institutions, whether modern or traditional, is replete with traces of history which determine the way they adapt themselves to different times and circumstances. The laws of the state are often perceived differently by communities, and especially in a multi-ethnic and diverse country like India, one law may contradict the practices of some communities, while at the same time, get closer to another community (Mahajan 2011).

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