

**REVISITING THE PAST
AND UNVEILING THE
GENDERED LEGACY:
HISTORY AND
REPRESENTATION
OF WOMEN IN NEO-
VAISHNAVISM IN ASSAM**

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REVISITING THE PAST AND UNVEILING THE GENDERED LEGACY: HISTORY AND REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN NEO-VAISHNAVISM IN ASSAM

The word 'anecdote' itself was and is used to describe a wide range of narratives, the defining feature of which appears to be less their brevity (though most are quite short) than their lack of complexity.

Lionel Gossman

People like the spice of anecdote and legend with their salt pork of the truthful facts of history.

James Sullivan

ABSTRACT

This article looks at the historical legacy and representation of women in Vaishnavism in Assam. Drawing from multiple historical accounts, the article discusses the presence of a female legacy and women's roles charting a complex narrative of Vaishnavism. Considering gendered representation, the article historically interrogates the Vaishnava texts and hagiographical writings of Vaishnava gurus. It argues that representation of female devotion within Vaishnavism is based on gender and caste norms, structured through popular narratives both oral and written legitimated under the precincts of institutional structures. Given structured inequalities, the article also analyses how gendered practices are continued in contemporary times.

INTRODUCTION

Are women's stories anecdotal throughout history? If so, what is the significance of anecdotes in the meta-narratives and what purpose do they serve? I started pondering over such questions as I started studying the history and philosophy of a religious sect, mostly a dominant and popular one. The genesis of the article lies in exploring historical legacy, roles and representation of women within Vaishnavism in Assam. The aim is to understand gendered devotion and spirituality within the religious sect and the way in which it defined and structured women's roles within the social order. Exploring women's narratives within the Vaishnava order will help in understanding some of the hitherto unexplored and unknown areas related to gender and religion in Assam. Gender and gender roles within Vaishnavism is a crucial area which lacks critical scrutiny. This paper unravels stories of Aai Kanaklata, Aai Padmapriya and Sati Radhika who played significant roles in determining major events and facets of Vaishnavism most of which are either absent or loosely connected to the dominant

narratives. By delving into the historical trajectory of Sankardeva, the main guru of the *Ek-sarana-naam-dharma*, and his disciples like Madhabdeva who later occupied significant positions, this paper critically looks at the construction of a gendered legacy and devotion. The politics of a highly divisive monastic tradition forms the order of the sect. As we understand, instituting guru-disciple relationships and legacies of male descendants determine and structure dominant history of monasteries and other significant events. Most of the historical narratives of monasteries start with a chronological order of various disciples and apostles handed down by the two main gurus. Constant references to Vaishnava gurus and their immediate disciples seem to add more authenticity and gravitas to their existence often negating the economic and political contexts within which the monastic tradition emerged in Assam. Although at the very beginning through the path of Bhakti and challenging Brahminical structures, Vaishnavism appeared as a popular religion, with monastic growth it soon brought back feudal and caste practices. Hiren Gohain (1987: 1972) writes, ‘In Assam vaishnava *satras* or monasteries, founded by great men with radiant humanistic ideals and radical attitudes (though not going as far as the heterodox saints like Kabir and Nanak) in the sixteenth century, later became the pillars of the caste system.’ However, patriarchal norms remained unchallenged within Assam’s Vaishnavism as opposed to others claiming that Bhakti opened a *marga* to all caste and religions (Ramanujan, 1982). On the contrary, caste practices remained central to Vaishnavism and its monastic order. It is in this context that this paper connects the patriarchal structure and caste practices set against the emancipatory attitude of the Vaishnava philosophy. Moreover, an array of myths and legends exist pertaining to the lives of Vaishnava gurus and their legacies, often attaching divinely attributes to them. This article investigates how certain prevalent narratives of the three women unravel complexities related to Vaishnava legacy and gendered devotion within the monastic order.

Most of the historians, philosophers and scholars have touched upon Vaishnavism and Vaishnava culture and have produced a vast

amount of literature (see Borkakoti 2005, 2006; Neog, 1965, 1967; Sarma, 1966). An overall reading of the scholarly works shows that very little attention is paid to certain aspects and questions related to Vaishnavism. I must admit that my academic engagement with Vaishnavism has been going on for close to a decade now. Earlier my primary concern was studying the institutional patterns and the existing monastic order prevailing in Assam for more than 500 years (Bora, 2016). However, recently I found more stories of women whose relevance was only part of anecdotal conversations. Studies on women saints or devotees, especially within the Indian Bhakti movement came as a challenge in constructing a gendered identity and contributed immensely towards establishing women's 'self expression' (Ramaswamy, 1992, 1996), and 'gendered self'¹ (Malhotra, 2012). Within a patriarchal structure, women were seen only as a part of the household domain, and their devotional agency was completely pushed to the margins.

In her study of the *Bhagavata* movement, Vijaya Ramaswamy (1997), sees relationships of such devotional movements and the role of the oppressed and marginal cutting across gender lines against the oppressors. In an endeavour to understand the historicity of Vaishnavism in Assam, rather than analysing the implications of Bhakti and devotionism, this paper points out established gender norms and ritual practices carried out in the course of institutionalizing the faith. Neo-Vaishnavism is one of the most fascinating religious traditions in Assam. As the case of medieval Vaishnavism can be put under the schema of change, similarly its development in Assam as a movement can be placed on the larger canvas of the Bhakti movement in medieval India which started against dominant modes of worshipping multiple gods and against the hierarchy prevailing in social practices. The idea of Bhakti as a concept resonates deeply with the ethics preached by Sankardeva, who was the pioneer of neo-Vaishnava reformation in Assam. Bhakti sects are often described as religious movements, especially developed and eminently suited for practice by the lower classes, namely Shudras and women; those who are not entitled to

read the *Vedas* or to understand the Brahmanical philosophy (Singer, 1972: 225).

Vaishnavism's intimate relationship with state politics structured a complicated history. In the case of Assam's Vaishnavism, the monastic order gave rise to a convoluted system of religious beliefs and cultural paradigms. Monasteries were part of the larger politics, be it with the Ahoms and other kingdoms or the colonizers. During the Burmese invasion in Assam, Vaishnava institutions were attacked and looted. Due to sectarian divisions within Vaishnavism, the monastic order continuously went through significant transformations resulting in divisive caste politics. However, since the beginning it was through the guru-*sisya* relationship that it established itself as a dominant religious sect in Assam. Sankardeva and Madhabdeva were the best examples of this, and it was after Sankardeva's death that his disciple Madhabdeva created a new path for devotion. Most of the monasteries in Assam came into prominence after the guru's demise where many other disciples played equally significant roles. A close observation of the structured pattern of Vaishnavism tells us about a legacy and hereditary-based religious order. Along with Sankardeva's chief disciples, his sons and grandsons² played vital roles in carrying out the religious order. However, a careful study of the establishments belonging to the line of Sankardeva on the female side, known as *Srisankara jiyari vamsa sattra*, along with many other women contributing in different spheres of Vaishnavism, unravels the intricacies of Assamese society. The grand daughter-in-law of Sankardeva, Aai Kanaklata and her story provides a complex outlook for analysing female legacy and religious heads within the Vaishnavite tradition. This paper thus outlines a detailed life-history of the female descendants, genesis of the *Sattras* established by them and structural arrangements and their transformation in the present context. However, owing to the gendered narration, their contribution is conspicuously absent from both oral and written history of Vaishnavism. Therefore, the main aim of this paper is understanding the gap that exists in the historical narratives of Vaishnavism which only celebrate male legacies. Legends, stories and

life-histories of Sati Radhika, a lower caste woman and Padmapriya Aai, the first Assamese woman poet, tell us more about the representation of caste and gender dynamics both in literature and in the popular understanding. Reflecting on these women and their roles will bring out the convoluted interplay of caste and gender, which is otherwise a neglected subject. The paper does not limit its scope by focusing on the legacy of women devotees who had access to the monastic system by virtue of being the descendants of the Vaishnava gurus alone; instead it locates these stories within the larger understanding of gender in the structured space of neo-Vaishnavism. Sati Radhika and her story reflects the domains that exist beyond the nexus of Vaishnava descendants and their legacies. In fact, her story questions various aspects of Assamese society growing within the precinct of *Sattras* and the existing feudal structure. Gendered devotion provides a critical outlook for understanding the exclusion of women not only within the religious and spiritual domains of Vaishnavism, but also how they often come in conflict with women outside it.

This study was primarily conducted in Nagaon district in Assam especially in the Borduwa and Kaliabor regions. *Sri Sri Ai Kanaklata Thaan* in Aibheti (Borduwa) is one of the representative monasteries. Borduwa *Thaan*, the birthplace of Sankardeva, forms an important part of this study because of the history of its origin and its relevance in contemporary times. Some part of the data was also collected from Majuli, a river island in Assam which is considered as the epitome of Vaishnavite monasteries. *Sattras* belonging to all the four sub-sects (*samhatis*) are only found on the island representing the diverse structural arrangements and the contested ritualistic domains of neo-Vaishnavism. Narratives of *Sattradhikars*, the male religious heads of the monasteries are also important for understanding the historical representation of women's legacies and their continuity in contemporary times. *Katha-Guru-Charitas*, the biographical accounts of the Vaishnava gurus form an important part of this paper along with other hagiographical accounts.

GENDERED HISTORIOGRAPHY AND A HISTORICAL PROFILE OF FEMALE LEGACY IN VAISHNAVISM

The tradition of writing historiographies

Scholars of Bhakti have shown the importance of historical evidence and the religious authority of the saints or any specific persons (Lorenzon, 1996), and thus have emphasized on 'hagiography, the legendary lives of important saints' which one cannot find in Vedic and Sanskrit Hinduism (Lorenzon, 1966: 180). Dr Keshavananda Goswami writes that all traditions of biographical writings displaying or adding miraculous, unreal and divine attributes to saints are commonly found presenting their lives for public gaze and idealization. Keeping a similar tone for the *Charit Puthi*, he says that behind such exaggeration, meaningful messages or values are set for society. *Charit* or *Katha Guru Charit* is biographical and hagiographical literature of the Vaishnava gurus and their disciples, and therefore their importance cannot be underestimated. Many of Sankardeva's followers wrote biographical works in the medieval period which have been often used as historical texts. The tradition of writing biographical accounts was available in India where hagiographical accounts of various personalities and their numerous life-stories were stored by their followers. Medieval North India had a tradition of writing biographies (Sirat [pl. siyar]) in Persian language including those of religious divines and of Prophet Muhammad, known as *tazkiras* in Islamic tradition (Ramaswamy and Sharma, 2009: 4).

However, feminist writings have challenged other disciplines and questioned interpretations of social life through medieval manuscripts as historical texts. The dominant religious texts, hagiographical literature and their appropriation of gender based roles are questionable. Within Hinduism, over-reliance on these texts, primarily controlled by Brahminical groups created a dominant pattern and thus excluded 'women' along with many other social groups (Sangari and Chakravarti, 1999). Therefore, based on such minimal sources

of history, one cannot justify the nature and treatment of women and other social categories. Kumkum Roy (1999) explores the domain of a king's household that has been defined by a few religious texts within the *Sastric* tradition of North India.

Within the domain of kingship, women's space is especially emphasized in terms of both idealized roles and sexuality (both queen/s and courtesans). Thus, these texts also bring into focus the stratified structure of society with a 'fuller understanding of socio-political process in general and gendered relations in particular, in early India' (Roy, 1999: 33). This ideal structure of a social set-up, followed in later historical discourse, did give rise to a specific socio-religious sphere which was exclusionary in nature.

Reconsidering Women's Position and Legacy

Started in the late 15th century, neo-Vaishnavism proliferated in Assam under the leadership of the reformer guru Sri Sankardeva (1449–1568) and later by his disciple Sri Madhavadeva (1489–1596). Vaishnavism proliferated at a time when *Saktism* or Tantric cults were prevailing along with ultra-religious animism and occultism. The dogma of polytheism included practices like animal and human sacrifices in some places and a caste hierarchy. Sankardeva propagated Vaishnava dharma believing in Vishnu, especially his avatara Krishna. Through the Vaishnava philosophy, he did not promote an abstract reasoning of religious beliefs, but emphasized on ethnic integration, social reforms through cultural means and spiritual upliftment through innovative modes of religious conduct. He started Vaishnavism in Assam to uplift the lower castes who faced discrimination and exclusion from the upper castes. Therefore, he incorporated people from various communities like Naga, Karbi, Missing, Garo, Bhutiya, Koch-Rajbansi, Kavhari, Brahmin, Kaibaitrya, Kayastha and Muslim. Chandsai, a Muslim follower and devotee of Sankardeva was given a respected position in the *Patbausi Sattra*. He propagated that caste

hierarchy could be eliminated through Krishna Bhakti, and one could attain true devotion through *naaam-kirtana*.

In the process of institutionalizing the neo-Vaishnava ethos, *Sattras* or monasteries were established all over Assam. Owing to significant transformation within Vaishnavism in the 17th and 18th centuries the main sect got divided into four *samhatis* or sub-sects. The tradition of establishing monasteries, headed by different apostles, initiated a convoluted process through which inheritance, legacy and the politics of the guru-sisya *parampara* were perpetuated. Celibacy was one of the institutionalized means of attaining Vaishnava in the true sense. Celibacy required abstention from family life, which in turn prohibited women's access to the *Sattras*. Through centuries, the monastic tradition produced male monks and apostles who were the sole bearers of Vaishnavism and such traditions were reproduced under the precinct of the *Sattras*. Neo-Vaishnavism, influenced by Vedic Hinduism, was unfavourable to women and their position within the sphere of religious institution. In several passages of the seminal Vaishnava text *Kirtana*, Sankardeva mentions the evil influence of women and wealth which devotees should avoid. The biographical literature of Sankardeva and other Vaishnava gurus – the *Charit Puthis* – also indicate that the reformer guru was not inclined towards initiating women into the fold of Vaishnavism.

Reading women's lives, as portrayed and exhibited in this literature and oral narratives, adds significant dimensions to the nature of representation of women. Within the feminist discourse, scholars have tried to study women's lives, their devotional voices and the way in which religious and reformatory characters were symbolically prevalent. Prior to this critical engagement, others appropriated women as iconic and symbols of purity and devotion. From the very beginning, neo-Vaishnavism rested on caste and gender politics. A careful study of the entire gamut of Vaishnavism reveals that through true means of devotion people of lower castes could also attain Vaishnava *gyana*, knowledge of a devotee otherwise denied by

the Brahminical order. However, the approach towards women was discriminatory in nature:

*Stri Sudrau kore Jodi amat bhakati
Tahaku diba haetu gyana moha moti³*
(If women and Sudra offer their Bhakti to me, they are also
worthy of great knowledge).

The Vaishnava philosophy carefully laid out in major religious texts like *Kirtana* and *Naam-Ghosha* represented a gendered form of devotion because in many parts of these texts ‘women’ are distinctively categorized as those who should be avoided. *Kirtana Gosha*, says:

*Stri Dhana jana jaubana maade
Andha howe bidya garbbar paade⁴*
(If you take pride in women, wealth and youth, the hard-earned
knowledge that you have attained in life will be worthless).

Similarly, the religious text also refers to those who talk of women and consume alcohol and meat and says that their lives are futile:⁵

*Stri madya manso xewar kotha
Koi mare kore janmaka brithaa.*

Talking about women’s position from deterioration to finally elimination Tilottoma Misra writes that although Sankardeva was successful in counteracting Brahminical Hinduism and the Tantric cult with an egalitarian attitude, ‘in case of women, his attitude was marked by a strange intolerance’ (Misra, 1985: 1559). Sankardeva pointed out the evil influence of women and wealth and how a devotee should avoid these two (Sarma, 1966: 65). Moreover, the reformer guru was not inclined towards initiating kings, Brahmins and women into the religious order. However, his disciple Madhabdeva more rigorously followed those practices which institutionalized celibacy within the *Sattras*. Thus, the great monastic order of Vaishnavism grew and celibacy became the only way to attain true Vaishnava. However, ‘the social framework around celibacy thus restricts entry of women into the realm of neo-Vaishnavism, and *Sattras* appropriate it

by separating the world between “men” and “women”, “monks” and “householders”. Through means of celibacy, men are entitled to the world of renunciation whereas women are debarred and attached instead to the sphere of domesticity’ (Bora, 2018: 339). Women’s position in medieval Vaishnavism and its transformation into a more complex structure raises issues of how women tried to create separate spaces for themselves outside the monastic sphere of the *Sattra*. However, within the *Sattra*, women’s roles and positions are at times claimed to be glorious by citing examples of the female descendants of the religious guru and some of his disciples. In this context, therefore, it is significant to review their representation in oral and written forms. These examples show contradictions in Sankardeva’s philosophy and the dominant pattern of institutionalizing devotion through the male line, as claimed by various Vaishnava scholars and *Sattra* authorities. A careful study of the history of Vaishnavism shows that women popularly known were the female descendants of religious gurus who acted as religious heads and appointed apostles or deputies to establish *Sattras* in different parts of Assam. The *Sattras* established by Sankardeva’s male and female descendants were known as *Nati Sattras* (grandson’s establishments) and *Srisankar ajiyari vamsa sattra* (establishments belonging to the line of Sankardeva on the female side) respectively. Maheswar Neog (1986) writes that Sankardeva gave Madhavdeva the responsibility of his sons and grandsons. Purushottom and Chaturvuj established premiere *Sattras* in Borduwa like *Noruwa*, *Kuwamari* (Xalaguri), *Dighali* and *Samaguri* which came to be known as *Nati-Sattra* or *Thakure-Nopta Sattra* (monasteries which were not established by Thakurs or Brahmins). Like Madhabdeva, both Purushottom and Chaturvuj deputed 12 apostles each, known as *Bare-Jania* and *Xaru Bara Jania*. Hence, it is said that Sankardeva’s legacy is found all over the Assam, Kamrup and Cooch Behar (Bhela Madhupur, Chowa Madhupur) region. Surprisingly, monasteries were rarely founded by female devotees, and a careful scrutiny is required to understand the stories of Aai Kanaklata and Aai Padmapriya whose life stories tell us more than their Vaishnava legacies. Similarly, narratives

around Sati Radhika and her life call for a deeper introspection on caste and gender relations within Vaishnavism and its monastic order.

MANY WOMEN MANY STORIES

This section lays out stories of three important women who played seminal roles and therefore secured vital positions within Vaishnavism.

Aai Kanaklata

After Sankardeva's death, his grandson Purushottom and Chaturvuj Thakur were the last male descendants. Aai Kanaklata was the first wife of Chaturvuj⁶ and the grand daughter-in-law of Sankardeva. Chaturvuj and Kanaklata did not have any son. To continue Sankardeva's legacy they decided to adopt Chaturvuj's sister Govinapriya's son Damodar (1626). At that time, they were living in the Goalpara Bishupur *Sattr*a of which Chaturvuj was the religious head. However, Assam was going through political turmoil as the region was under attack by many foreign forces. Having no male legacy, Chaturvij initiated his first wife as the *Dharma Adhikarniki*. This significant episode is found in *Aai Lakhmi Charit*, of the Sukadal Barbadi *Sattr*a, *Aanantaram Charit* by Bhabracharu and *Aai Kanaklata Charit* by Ramakanta Muktiar. After Chaturvuj's death in 1655 Abu Samat, a Muslim, attacked and burnt the *Sattr*a where Kanaklata along with her adopted son Damodar Ata were residing. On her husband's death, Kanaklata assumed the role of the religious head. Her religious role came at a time of paucity within Vaishnavism caused by sectarian divisions and conflicts emerged among several followers of the religious guru. Due to the political turmoil Sankardeva left Borduwa at the age of 67 and his place of origin was abandoned since none of his grandsons returned there. However, after the horrific accident, Aai Kanaklata decided to leave Goalpara, and she reached Borduwa in 1656. Her entire journey is elaborately

captured by Dwarika Dwij in his *Charit Santawali* (pp. 375–376).
Some of the verses are:

Natini Anantarai Bhakata Xahiti
Ujai Kankaklata Huya Bhaya Bhiti.
Dinata Bongala Bhoje Thakanta Lukai
Naukata Uthiarati Rati Soli Jai(verse 2866)
Brahmaputra Ujaivai Kori Nana Dukh
Kotudine Pailo Axi Dhansiri Mukh.
Kurabahi Misra Putre E Kotha Xunilo
Xidha Pati Diya Dui Dibaxrakhilo(verse 2867)
Majuli Chapori Goilo Bhakta Xamannviti
Belguri Thanata Thankilo Ekrati.
Naukata Uthilo Chatuvuj r Gharini
Kamalabarit Paileko dui Dini (verse 2868)
Aaxise Kanaka Ata Natie Xunilo
Xidha Pati Diya Sari Diboxa Rakhile
Xamuhaka Mati Buli Korileko Jatra
Kherkota Xuti Pailo Chatuvuj r Bharjya (verse 2869)
Padina Sinatoli Gram Pailo Paase
Gobinda Atoir Xatra Xehi Sthaane Aase.
Lukaa Mukhaa Gobinda Atoie Xunilonta
Borduwa Hante Bor Ai Axilonte (verse 2670)

‘It was the time when Mughal General Mir Jumla attacked Assam (1662) and occupied the Ahom capital Garhgaon. After the *Sattrra* was destroyed, Aai Kanaklata along with her grandson Anatarai aka Jagjiv⁷ and other disciples sailed through Brahmaputra towards the eastern part of Assam. Fearing attacks from the Bengalis (here it means Mirjumla), Kanaklata and her fellow devotees sailed at night hiding during the visible hours of the day. After days of suffering, she first reached Kuruwabahi where she stayed for two days and then with her disciples, she landed on Majuli island where they took shelter in Belaguri *Sattrra* for a day. After two days of a further journey, she stayed at Kamalabari for another four days following which they took refuge at Kherkota Xuti and Sinatoli village before finally arriving at Borduwa’ (translation by the author).

Being inducted into the Vaishnava tradition and as part of the monastic order, Kanaklata was believed to be endowed with qualities of a true devotee, enabling her to embark upon a path which otherwise seemed unattainable for women at that time. Kanaklata's journey is the first in the history of Vaishnavism where a woman's story received such attention. The prose depicted a clear picture of the socio-political history of Assam. One of the significant aspects of medieval Bhakti was that of comprehending the legendary lives of various saints with their specific messages found mostly in hagiographical literature, and in this respect, Kanaklata's story also legitimizes such trends. Aai Kanaklata is often remembered for possessing extraordinary qualities, and her godly acts 'which have their own historical importance, independent of whether or not the stories tell us what actually happened' (Lorenzon, 1996: 182). Such familiarity is found in historical narratives. She arrived at Borduwa with 126 *bhakats* to rediscover Sankardeva's birth place. She camped at Aibheti, a place near Borduwa, Nagaon where *Sri Sri Aai Kanaklata Thaan* is currently located. According to one legend, despite scarcity of supplies she was still able to fulfil the needs of her fellow devotees who accompanied her.

Aai Kanaklata and her role in the religious order is essentially contextualized within the political turmoil and changes that Assam went through at that time. Mir Jumla's attack towards the end of the 17th century portrayed a grand picture of how Aai Kanaklata came in conflict and decided to leave her place of origin. Given the precarious circumstances, disciples in monasteries had no choice but to abscond. In the Ahom kingdom many died of hunger and poverty. The Ahom state came back to normalcy after the death of Mir Jumla and the return of King Jyadhwaj Singha to his throne. The political circumstances and changes in the region had a great impact on shaping the monastic order. Mir Jumla's attack towards the end of the 17th century created devastation. Her involvement in this entire process was not merely personal as both the Ahom state and Vaishnava religion was under threat. The struggles within Asom Desh are captured in historical documents, especially emphasizing their impact

on religious institutions. This also indicated the ‘entangled relations’ between kings and the temples that existed for centuries (Dube, 2001). It was found that Tungusu Phukan, then Borphukan⁸ of King Jyadhvaj Singha helped Kanaklata when she left Bishnupur *Sattras* and discovered Borduwa.⁹ At that time, an alliance with Karbi King Setuwa also showed that political relationships were often formed outside the Ahom kingdom.¹⁰

During the time of political upheavals when the devotees were struggling with their everyday amenities, Kanaklata travelled towards the Upper Assam region to take care of the Vaishnavas. Her missionary zeal embedded in Vaishnava ideology forged political alliances with the Ahom state. Above all, major conflicts occurred among the proponents and successors of Vaishnavism, which led to the creation of the four *samhatis*. *Samhatis* referred to the schism in the parent sect into four different sub-sects and this was seen as a major institutional and structural change within the religious order. Maheswar Neog is of the opinion that the system of *samhati* within the Vaishnava sect started emerging when Kanaklata tried to rejuvenate Sankardeva’s legacy through his female descendants (Neog, 1986: 153). After Borduwa’s rebirth as a holy site for Vaishnava devotees, religious faith grew stronger under her supervision. She established a strong force of devotees and disciples, known as *Kanaka Barajonia*, who were primarily the 12 apostles deputed by her. The names of the 12 apostles were: Srirama (Patkatiya–*Sattras*), Jagatananda – son of Yadumani of Adhar (Adhar), Haricarana (Nalatiya;), Ratikanta (Brahman), Nepali Raghupati (Kantari), Ramacarana (Dhundul), Medhi Sadhu Dvija (Digcong), Haricarana (Leteri), Narayana (Kaupatiya), Ananta Thakura alias Hridayananda Kayastha (Kalsila), Narada (Darang), Jayahari (Micimi). The monasteries were together known as *Ai Barajonia* or *Xaru Barajonia*. This was considered to be a major turning point in Vaishnava history followed by other historical events like branching out of the *Sattras*, antagonism among Sankardeva’s grandsons and conflicts for inheritance.

All being said, *Aai Kanaklata's Thaan* embodies her devotional journey witnessed in the reminiscences of a poorly constructed structure, often referred to as a sacred site. The *Thaan* depicts Kanaklata's mystic character and her extraordinary qualities. Like most temples, the villagers have assigned a male *bhakat* to perform everyday rituals at the *Thaan*. Kanaklata's life story, as it travels from Goalpara to Borduwa, does not seem to find a suitable place in the Vaishnava legacy.



Interiors of Aai Kanaklata Thaan

The patriarchal structure defined politics, religion and economy and therefore women's participation and their position in the social sphere was not without its control. There has been a deliberate silence in representing Kanaklata's story although Vaishnavism celebrates her as an extraordinary example in history. There is a lack of uniformity between hagiographical literature and oral narratives on her life which indicate an embedded gendered devotional attitude predominantly held by male descendants, apostles and devotees. Unlike Bhakti in

other parts of India, personal devotion opened the space for many female devotional voices; however, in the context of neo-Vaishnavism it was almost missing. Kanaklata is a rare example who possibly inherited such a position in the absence of male descendants and not because of an established practice. Kanaklata was made *Dharma Adhikarini*, although before Chaturuj's death he declared that the 'son born from their daughter Shubhadra would be the subsequent authority.'¹¹ On the other hand, the responsibility of protecting the monastery from any external attacks was given to Sri Damordeva.¹² However, an important question here is what made a woman play a significant role within an otherwise gendered space? Deeper thinking is needed to understand the entire discourse of gendered devotion and women's position not only in Vaishnavism, but in the entire social sphere. Looking at the family structure at that time, polygamy seemed to be a common practice among various communities in Assamese society. The monastic structure did not give any religious positions to women because of its tradition based on male descendants and guru-disciple relationships. Given the polygamous marriage norms prevalent in Assam, Kanaklata's position as the first wife further cemented her status as the harbinger of Vaishnava faith.

Sati Radhika and Her Life

Sati Radhika is one of the very few women who one comes across often in narratives related to women's position and representation. There has been some speculative writing about her life by local intellectuals mainly based on the oral tradition. According to the prevalent oral tradition, she was born into a Nadiyal (Kaivartya) family, a lower caste group in Assam and her father was a devotee of Sankardeva. Here is a popular narrative about Sati Radhika:

Once upon a time, a major flood broke in the nearby village where Sankardeva was residing. Villagers were continuously working to stop it from causing further damage; however, they did not succeed. Having no solution, the worried villagers approached the

Guru. Listening to their story, Sankardeva told the villagers that only a pure woman could save the village. If one found a chaste woman and offered a handful of soil and water in the creek that would save everyone from the misery. Following the Guru's words, villagers went around looking for a chaste woman. Male villagers brought their wives; however somehow, they failed to prove themselves as pure and chaste. The upper castes, the purest of all were also unsuccessful. This led to an utter confusion and distress among the villagers. In the meantime, Radhika with her husband Purnananda were sailing through the river. She heard that Sankardeva and his devotees had gathered in the nearby area and were praying and chanting. Radhika and Purnananda decided to park at the river bank and walked towards the gathering. Both of them were the embodiment of a pure and perfect couple, whose lifestyle was above material aspirations. Despite being born into a lower caste both led the life of a true Vaishnava. She was considered an ideal wife. As mentioned in the *Charita*, she met the criterion of an ideal woman; she was described as a woman of good character, a widened face, long nose and long hair. She appeared neither too short nor tall, neither too fat nor thin. Radhika with her divinely qualities made her trustworthy of the Guru. She was compared to Beula and Sita who were considered to be iconic women. She showed *Aloukik* powers with which she stopped the tributary from further damaging the village. To prove her chastity, she was asked to fetch water in a fishing instrument, (*pala*) a basket made from bamboo. *Pala* is usually open from both ends of the mouth. It was quite unlikely for anyone to hold water in such an item. However, when Sati went to collect water from the Brahmaputra, to everyone's surprise she was successful in holding water in the *pala*. This proved that she was the chosen one. It is also said that before she passed away she completely surrendered to Sankardeva's Bhakti and dedicated her life to teaching the Brahmins, Kayasthas and so on. Along with that she also wrote *Bhatimas* and various religious songs which in the present context have completely disappeared and thus remain unknown to us. Like many other devotees of Sankardeva, Sati Radhika became the embodiment of Sankardeva's Vaishnava dharma.

Unlike monks, women renouncers or nuns are absent in the monastic order. Female asceticism and its representation in Buddhism, Jainism, Christianity and some sects of Hinduism have various forms. *Sadhivis* or pious women and the ordination of women into the monastic order are relatively common. Talking about gender, asceticism and female soteriological agency, Manisha Sethi (2009: 43-44) writes, ‘a class of female ascetics and pious female lay followers – *sadhivis* and *shravikas*, respectively - is not only distinctively identified, but its placed on an equal footing with the two male classes: *sadhus* (or *munis*) and *shravaks*, that is, male ascetics and pious male householders.’ However, female asceticism does not have any space in Vaishnavism. In Radhika’s narratives, it becomes apparent that considering the limitations on women’s “self-expression,” their depiction is mostly idealized, both in history and at present. Her stories encompassed teachings of *Yugdharma*, the religion of the age and a philosophy based on Sankardeva’s *ek-sarana-naam-dharma*. However, caste based hierarchy and its influence on Vaishnavism is neither highlighted nor questioned in Radhika’s narratives. Instead Vaishnavism tries to appropriate lower caste women in order to retain the emancipatory and reformatory character of the faith. Historical narratives show women in important positions, especially belonging to the lower castes. However, such views are problematic considering the social reality of the time. These only legitimized notions of “chaste women” produced under the realm of a powerful religion and portrayed lower caste women as a symbol of purity and worthy of being a true “Vaishnava”.¹³ In reality, a woman was attributed divinely status, yet she was only recognized in association with the guru. It was often heard that behind her powerful acts, it was the saint’s greatness and divinely quality which guided Sati Radhika in reality.

Preliminary interviews with *Kaibarta* women suggested that legends about Sati Radhika are represented in many folksongs as well as religious songs. In the month of *Kartik* (October), lower caste women celebrate Sati Radhika’s legacy, known as *Sati Radhika Naam Kirtaan*. This event is exclusively organized by women at a specific

site dedicated to her as the *Sati Radhika Smriti Sthal*, situated in the premises of Borduwa monastery. To mention some parts of the folksongs (as sung by an elderly woman on request):

Sankar Madhebe Radhika Sati

Bandhale Santi Jaan

Tinitaa Kathire paani aanile

Rakhile Kaibarta r naam

(This particular verse captures the essence of her acts of bravery similar to those in oral narratives).

It should be noted here, this is an intriguing finding and it does not primarily correspond to Vaishnavism's effort to include lower castes into its fold. What is more, as these interviews suggest, Sati Radhika represented the locus of the lower castes within the religious order and the nature of hierarchy maintained throughout history. The lower caste groups of Assam have maintained their exclusive Vaishnava identities.



The Sati Radhika Smriti Sthal

Apart from these stories, references to a few other women can be found, mostly to the wives of some of Sankardeva's disciples. These

women played notable roles by influencing their husbands to become Sankardeva's disciples, as mentioned in the *Charitas*. However, to no one's surprise, none of their names were known. Some of them were, as they were remembered, - wives of Ananta Kandali, Bhushan Dvij and Narayan Thakur Gopal Ata. Therefore, their stories only exist in anecdotes.

Aai Padmapriya

Aai Padmapriya was the daughter of Gopaldeva, one of Sankardeva's chief disciples of all times. It is found in various *Charitas*¹⁴ that Padmapriya was known for composing Bhakti songs, known as *Jhuna* and *Dulari*. Though she did not promulgate Vaishnavism, her contributions as a writer, singer and composer were undeniable, and she was known as the first Assamese woman poet of medieval times. Following the path of Sankardeva, Madhabdeva and her father Gopaldeva, she wrote and composed ragas. Although not much of her writing is available, a few sources discuss that her literary expressions captured the notion of gendered devotion embedded in a patriarchal structure. Through that she possibly tried to create a space for 'self-expression,' independent of the male agency and outside the patriarchal domain of the household.

Rebat Chandra Mahanta, belonging to the family of Gopaldeva, points out Aai Padmapriya's significant contributions. In an effort to preserve her writings, Mahanta recollects that there was a gradual disappearance of songs and melodies from public memory. Only a few monasteries belonging to *Kala-Samhati*, established by Gopaldeva remain. Writing about Padmapriya, Meeta Deka (2013:19) says, 'her writings eulogized the preceptor as well as her father. Imbued with a strong sense of spirituality, she also wrote on the transient nature of life, sexual pleasure and materialism. Her writings reflect patriarchal domination, where the son, husband and wealth occupy a predominant position in one's life.' Padmapriya's strong sense of protest arose, as some may say, from her own experience of defying

marriage. She was married to a man who was a *Shakta*, but due to their differences she left her husband and returned to her father's house at a very early age (Mahanta, 1987). Through detachment (*vairaaag*) from *Samsara* she formed a strong female devotional voice and transformed the religious sphere into a spiritual one. Many claim that through her 'personal rebellion' she broke the norms of existing religiosity rooted in hierarchical social relations and male devotion. Padmapriya's notions of defiance and language of aspirations were well expressed in the following verse:

*Putra pati dhana karane,
Jene jala bimba hase
Ei ase nai sabe hobo sai
Sakalo kal garase
Jibana yaubana sabea karana
Jene saponar nidhi
Misa dukha lagi brahmaka tiyagi
Nabhaila kichuo siddhi (Mahanta, 05: 2016).*

(Son, husband, and wealth are like reflections on the water.
Now here and now gone – time will reduce all to ashes
Life and youth are like dreams;
Sorrow and sacrifice are meaningless).

The medieval period saw many women walking on a similar path who were very expressive in their writings. In the 12th century, *Vacanas* of the Virasaivite women¹⁵ featured mysticism, and 'the combination of mysticism with eroticism, romantic passion with transcendentalism and quotidian expressions with sublimity, make these twelfth century vachanas of the Virasaivite women saints unique in terms of both their literary form and content' (Ramaswamy, 1996: 150). However, Padmapriya and her writings remain the sole example in medieval Assam. This limits a full exploration of the issues of sexuality and marriage in relation to women's dharma. However, in the context of Assamese society, there is ambivalence about the place of revolutionary attitude in a woman's voice. The traditional roles prescribed for women continued to direct their position in society,

and this is also reflected in the treatment of women's subject matters in contemporary times. Following the ideals of Vaishnavism, the modern period has continued to produce male centric literature and to concentrate on issues that are public and masculine in nature.

CONTINUING GENDERED REPRESENTATION IN CONTEMPORARY TIMES

The egalitarian ideology of Vaishnavism could not survive in the process of institutionalizing monasticism. Based on norms of purity and impurity, caste practices became more rigorous. Women were kept outside the monastic order. Over time, women slowly developed their own devotional space in the *Naamghars*, religious centres in villages. This space was restricted to married women. At present, although men and women share the same space, women are mostly passive participants. Guided by strict gendered rules, as can be observed in the *Naamghar*, rituals are performed by male *bhakats*. Generally, women devotees are referred to as 'Aai'. Historically, women had to form separate congregations. Such practices are still followed in several places in Assam. For instance, in the main Naamghar of Borduwa *Thaan*, separate prayer slots are structured for female and male devotees. Traditionally, a total of eight sets of prayers (*aathprasanga*) are offered in the entire day, and women devotees gather twice for their prayer sessions. However, within the monastic sphere, entry of women is restricted and in some cases completely prohibited. For instance, till date women's entry is completely prohibited in *Patbaushi Sattra* in Barpeta, one of the oldest surviving monasteries in Assam. Such customs and practices are based on impurity of female sexuality largely common in the Indian context. Along with various norms of purification, a certain type of clothing emerged as dominant and popular. For instance, women wear the traditional Assamese clothing, *mekhela sador* to Naamghar and participate in religious activities. In

terms of women's entry into religious spaces, various authoritative bodies of temples and monasteries make compulsory regulations on women's clothing.¹⁶

Instructions and customs around clothing have always been part of neo-Vaishnavism. Along with food habits and rules of cleanliness, customs related to clothing quickly became part of the faith, starting with monks and male devotees. Separate clothing was prescribed for different occasions and performing rituals and similarly for public and household domains. Clothing in this context was associated with cleanliness, purity and being sacred. White was the prescribed colour for monks. In a monastery a monk wears a white dhoti, and mostly nothing on the upper part of the body. As a part of public attire, a white long cloth is wrapped around the upper torso. In today's time, a white vest and kurta have found a place in their clothing. Similar customs emerged for women related to their religious participation outside the household domain. Vaishnavism played a major role in constructing the dominant Assamese identity in the nationalist discourse too. Interestingly, women's clothing was a matter of public discussion in the colonial era. In the first edition of *Asam Bandhu* (1885), one of the earliest magazines, Gunabhiram Barua mentioned that traditional Assamese women's attire, *mekhela-sador* was slowly replaced by a saree worn by Bengali women. As claimed by Barua, practices related to women's clothing were gendered as they were regulated by the men of the household. He emphasized that the husbands insisted that their wives wear or dress in a certain way. As opposed to a saree or even the traditional attire of Assamese women, dresses worn by European women were favoured as they endured dignity and modesty. Thus, conventional and orthodox notions related to a woman's body continued to be appropriated. Although a saree or *mekhela-riha* are not very different, however, pertaining to the question of women's body and modesty a saree was considered *lazzakar* (shameful) and *apakrishtrata* (vile). Morality impinging on women's attire played out at several levels. Women's clothing became a signifier of both nationalist and regional politics in the colonial era (Gupta, 2012). For

the first time, Assamese women and their clothing found a national platform; however, while one type of clothing was accepted, another was ridiculed. In public discourse, such engagements only referred to upper-middle class women and not tribal or lower castes. Within the nationalist discourse, continuous attention to women's bodies, femininity and modesty soon became a matter of public discussion. The paucity of women writing on women in Assam is worrisome. It can be ascertained that it was only towards the end of the 19th century that a handful of women started writing, most of who were the wives or daughters of pioneers of Assamese literature. Exploring the life of the medieval women poet Aai Padmapriya provides a very limited scope in understanding women's position in Assam, as she was the only example in the entire Vaishnavite tradition and most of her work is unknown in history. However, without a doubt her exploration of female sexuality, marriage and defiance offered a complicated framework for questioning the gendered legacy of Vaishnavism and gendering devotion.

Conclusion

Although in the beginning Vaishnavism tried to include devotees from all sections of society, with time caste discrimination and inequalities became prominent. Sankardeva's efforts to include lower castes as his disciples remained merely symbolic. This becomes pertinent if we carefully examine the legacies of the disciples of both the gurus. Within such a structure, what was the role and position of women? How did women like Aai Kanaklata, Aai Padmapriya and Sati Radhika secure a space in Vaishnavism? Most importantly, what was the relevance of these stories outside the monastic domain? To answer these questions, this paper offered some arguments by critically looking at the life-stories of these women. The paper specifically questioned the historical legacy of the monastic tradition and the way in which Vaishnavism tried to offer a space for women by incorporating the stories of a select few. Myths and legends created around them is one

way of looking at the politics of representation, however, none of their own writings were found to locate the ‘gendered self’ in relation to devotion and their position in the monastic order. Unravelling women’s legacy and questioning their absence in reality provided a framework for reconsidering and restructuring historical events. So far whatever little is available on female descendants and their roles is sparsely represented in texts, most of which are about Vaishnava gurus and their disciples and apostles.

Gendered practices continue within the religious sphere even though women participate in the sacred space. Within the monastic order, women are still considered a secondary category. Earlier, *Sattriya Gosani*, the wives of the *Sattradhikars*,¹⁷ the religious heads of monasteries seemed to secure a higher position in the hierarchy of women; however, they had to be covered and escorted by other women in public. At present their position and status are nominal. Rules of purity and pollution based on caste and a woman’s body are still followed. Similarly, as women’s narratives are constantly pushed to the margins; this showcases their presence, roles and positions in historical and contemporary times.

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NOTES

1. The term 'gendered self' is borrowed from historian Anshu Malhotra's work on Piro, a prostitute who stayed in the Dera of Guru Gulab Das at Chathianwala, near Lahore, Punjab. Through Piro's own writing, the author tries to see the space that Bhakti opens for women, especially in the case of a prostitute.
2. Hari, Manu, Ramananda, Kamalocana, Haricarana, then Ramananda's son Purushottom and Haricarana's son Chartuvuj.
3. *Aai Kanaklata Charit*, p. 24.
4. *Kirtan Ghosha*, 21, verse 91.
5. *Ibid*: 22, verse 93.
6. His three wives were Aai Kanaklata, Mukundapriya and Debahuti.
7. Anantarai (1659) was the son of Subhadra, who was the daughter of Aai Kanaklata and Chaturvuj Thakur.
8. Borphukan was one of the five councilors, a position created in Ahom kingdom. This group of councilors was known as *Patra Mantri*.
9. *Aai Kanaklata Charit*.
10. *Ibid*.
11. Bhadrasaru, *Sri Sri Aanata Charit*, as mentioned in Saikia(2001), 'Asomar Bipanna Vaishnava Aoititjya', Prahari, Jorhat, p. 22.
12. *Ibid* (verses 63–65), p. 23.
13. Another example mentioned in *Katha-Guru Charita* is Chandari Aai, a woman of the lower caste *Dasi* who was an expert on the *Bhagavata Gita*. Once when a Brahmin was coming to meet Sankardeva to discuss *Gita's slokas* with him, he saw Chandari Aai washing clothes. He heard her reciting *slokas* from the *Gita*. The Brahmin was shocked hearing a *Dasi* not only reciting but also explaining the essence of *Gita* in a one verse *Ghosha*. Through many instances like this Chandari Aai's association with Sankardeva was made prevalent.
14. *Sri Sri Gopal Dev Charit* by Purnananda, *Guru-Charit* by Dwij Ramananda and *Ramkrishna Charit* by Hariballav (Gopal Dev's grandson).
15. Akka Mahadevi, Ayyidakki Lakkamma and Akka Nagamma were Virasavite women, who wrote religious lyrics, the *Vacanas* in Kannada.
16. Outside many of the monasteries and *thaans*, notice boards are maintained stating such rules and regulations.

17. Certain significant changes happened in the structural arrangement of Vaishnava monasteries and one of them was the introduction of marriage where the *sattradhikar* and disciples were allowed to marry and have a family. Although one cannot ascertain the precise time when this practice was introduced, it was Sri Pitamber Dev Goswami, the 14th *sattradhikar* of Garamur *Sattra* of Majuli who brought changes in the functioning of monasteries. Now monasteries are categorized as *Udasins* (where only celibate monks reside) and *Grihasthis* (where disciples are married).

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