

[See also: - [The Rise of Sankaradeva Sangha](#)]

Sri Shankaradeva Sangha

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The point of controversy which proved the starting point of the Vaishnava reform sects related to the period of impurity (*asoc*) to be observed by non-Brahman castes on a death in the family. Traditionally in Assam Brahmans observe ten days' ritual impurity on a death, performing the first *sraddha* (*adya sraddha*) on the eleventh day, and non-Brahmans observe thirty days' ritual impurity, performing the first *sraddha* (*kaj*) on the thirty-first day. In the 1930s, in Nowgong district, a number of prominent non-Brahmans began to challenge this distinction on the grounds that they were not inferior to Brahmans and that it was a matter of presumption only that the soul of a Brahman, being superior to the soul of a Shudra, reached heaven more quickly. The movement proliferated and the Shudra population is now divided into the following groups:- (1) the monthly people (*mahakiya*), who continue in the old custom of one month; (2) the Eleven-day people (*egharadiniya*), who serve ten days' ritual impurity on the model of the Brahmans; (3) the Thirteen-day people (*teradiniya*), who observe twelve days' ritual impurity as an assertion of Kshatriya status; (4) an extreme group of Haridhaniyas, who do not observe ritual impurity and have ceased to employ Brahman priests for the performance of *sraddha* and other Brahminical rites.

The reform movement developed in response to the social changes which originated under British rule and accelerated after Independence. These were precipitated by two main factors:- the development of education and the spread of the Congress movement. The carrying of education and literacy to the masses enabled many non-Brahmans to read both Assamese and Sanskrit texts for the first time and to question traditional interpretations. Formerly the *puthis* existed chiefly in *satra* families as manuscripts which were copied and recopied over time. Now they became available as printed paperbacks in the bazaar.

‘The British came to Calcutta and started a school there. Then they came to Assam and started schools here. Gradually the people came to read the scriptures and to understand.’

More importantly, the non-Brahmans became qualified by education to compete for posts in government service, teaching and the law which, in the old days, had largely been Brahman preserves. The introduction of universal franchise and of special privileges for scheduled castes and tribes and backward classes (categories which cover two-thirds of the population) further altered the balance of power in favour of the lower castes. The Congress movement also had a considerable impact on the structure of society. After the social upheaval of the 1921 Civil Disobedience movement, which was widely supported in Assam, Kaibarttas and Brittil-Banias (exterior castes) and Naths (marginal), formerly excluded from upper-caste Name Houses, gained access to the exterior portion of the hall at the west end (*tup*). After the 1930 movement they were admitted in many parts of Lower Assam into the body of the hall where they worshipped together with other castes. The first leaders of the new sects were in the main active members of the Congress party who after Gandhi’s Harijan movement became interested in religious reform as a means of reforming society.

The movement originated in the politically active district of Nowgong from the association of two men, **Haladhar Bhuyan** and **Ramakanta Atoi**. Ramakanta Atoi had been a celibate devotee of Kamalabaria *satra* and was living at Bardoa *satra* in Nowgong. He was a man of decided opinions and robust health who is said to have died at the age of ninety-eight. Haladhar Bhuyan was President of the Nowgong District Congress. He gives the following account of how he came to hold his religious belief:-

[For the complete account, see: - [‘The Rise of Sankaradeva Sangha’](#) (Haladhar Bhuyan)]

Two incidents in his youth had a profound effect on his future life. When he was in class 6, he went to see the *dol jatra* festival at Bardoa but, being a Kooch, he was not admitted to the Name House. This upset him: his father’s elder brother was Barmedhi of Noruwa Satra at Bardoa and had made the stand for the *thapana*, but he was given

prasad outside like an untouchable. He did not forget this insult and stopped going to the *satra*.

The second incident occurred when he was at High School. Being an orphan he did not pay fees and the headmaster said that, if he did not attend regularly, he would forfeit his free studentship. One day he went to school with malaria. On the way back he collapsed and asked two men on the road to help him but they passed by on the other side. He decided that the time of this religion was over.

Later he read **Kirttan** and **Ghosa** and concluded there was nothing wrong with the religion: the people were at fault. The *gurus* had failed to instruct them properly.

In 1921 he left his job to join the Independence struggle and was influenced by Gandhi's Harijan movement. In the meantime he met Ramakanta Atoi and with his help he decided to form a Dharma Sabah for the propagation of Shankaradeva's teachings and for the reform of society. He asked the Auniati Satradhikar to assist him but he refused, so he approached the Garamur Satradhiker (himself an active Congress worker). The Garamur Satradhiker lent his support and became for a time actively involved in the movement.

In 1933 Jogendranath Barua, a District Judge in Golaghat, performed the *sraddha* of his father on the eleventh day. This was the first eleven-day ceremony by a prominent non-Brahman and caused a sensation in society. A meeting was convened under the chairmanship of the Principal of Cotton College attended by eighteen pandits of Kamrup to determine whether the performance of *sraddha* by non-Brahmans on the eleventh day was supported by *sastra*. At the end of a heated debate, Haladhar Bhuyan spoke: We respect the Brahmans always. Whatever is quoted in this meeting, it is all written by Brahmans. But times are changing. If you press the people under your feet, the people will revolt. So you should conclude that both the Monthly and the Eleven-day forms have religious authority. Otherwise people will leave the Brahmans and become Nam-Kirtaniya. The scholars, however, subsequently printed a leaflet to the effect that Shudras could not perform *sraddha* at all: it had no *sastric* authority.

On receipt of this leaflet Bhuyan consulted with Mahantas and pandits of Nowgong. They called a meeting and founded the **Shankar Sangha** with Rai Sahib **Dambarudhar Barua**¹ as President and **Haladhar Bhuyan** as Secretary. Six months later the All-Assam State Sangha was established.

Haladhar Bhuyan said that he founded the **Srimanta Shankaradeva Sangha** in opposition to the Goswamis and Mahantas and devotees who call *dharma a-dharma* and *a-dharma dharma*, and against the Brahmans who offer *puja*. The main objects of the Sangha he described as the publicizing of a monotheistic religion (*ek nam dharma*), the abandonment of ritual impurity, the abolition of untouchability, the creation of equal rights for men of all castes and the cementing of good-will between the peoples of the hills and the plains. In this way he believed they would create a broader society and preserve the distinctive character of the Assamese people. (This account is taken from Haladhar Bhuyan's Presidential Address of 1962 in which he gives a history of the Sri Shankaradeva Sangha.)

The Sangha was proposing a change in the ritual observances of the Shudras as they had been practised within living memory, but they were not willing to proceed without *sastric* authority. Gopikaballubh Goswami of Golaghat acted as the pandit of the movement and, together with some other learned scholars (notably Cheniram Srutikar), he argued in many meetings called to pronounce on this question that he could find no bar in *sastra* to eleven-day observances for all castes, quoting in support of his position Garuda Purana, Ch. 13, sloka 19:-

'It is authoritatively stated in the *sastra* that in the Kali Age there are ten days purification for all castes.'

The reform sects base the authority for their teachings on the texts of the founders which they have selected and re-presented so as to provide a new image of the past consonant with their aspirations of radical social rearrangement in the present. The universalistic ethic of the **Bhagavata Purana** which opens salvation to all irrespective of caste or tribe was seen as an anticipation of the modern emphasis on equality and the abolition of caste distinctions. Sonaram Chutiya, President of the Shankaradeva Sangha,

observed:- ‘The climate of opinion today, the policy of the present government, the fundamental rights of the constitution, all tend to a casteless and classless society. But our custom was from before. Accidentally they match.’ These reformers made no distinction between restoring what they regarded as the fundamental principles of their religion which had become corrupted over time and moving forward to the creation of a modern egalitarian democratic society.

‘In our Vaishnava *Dharma* man is Vishnu. There is a saying: “The service of man is the service of God.” Nehru and Gandhi also believed that man is God.’

‘Mahatma Gandhi is the *guru* of this sect. There is no difference between the ideas of Shankaradeva and Mahatma Gandhi.’

‘Shankaradeva founded a casteless society. Vishnu was incarnated as Shankaradeva only to uplift backward people. Like Gandhi he worked for Untouchables. The Shankaradeva Sangha came into existence by the will of God for the purpose of restoring the actual principles of Shankaradeva. It has all castes eating and worshipping together. It is a new era in Assam.’

The Sri Shankaradeva Sangha now numbers about 100,000 members and claims to be the largest religious body in Assam. Unlike the *satra*, it is not based on the traditional link between guru and disciple and its organization is modern. The primary unit of association is a branch with a minimum membership of 25. Members are listed in a register kept by the branch secretary and pay a subscription of 4 annas a year. One-third of the sum of the subscriptions is retained by the branch, the rest being divided between the district and the state fund. The President of the Sangha, called the **Padadhikar**, is elected by secret ballot from three men nominated by the central executive committee. He holds office for two years. In 1971, according to the Padadhikar, there were some 600 primary units in the State, of which half were in Nowgong district. Lakhimpur, with its large population of Chutiyas and Ahoms, ranked second, and then came Sibsagar. The Sangha had only 20 branches in Kamrup, which is largely Brahman-dominated, and under 10 in the tribal district of Goalpara. It draws its support from the lower castes - Kooch, Chutiya, Ahom - rather than the higher - Kayastha, Kalita, Keot - and from the younger generation rather than the older, which is a source of much family conflict. The untouchables, who are highly Sanskritized in Assam, are in the main reluctant to forfeit the position they have achieved by more traditional methods. The Sangha is active in proselytizing and every branch contains a number of organizers who go from house to

house and arrange public meetings in likely areas. They work also among tea-garden labour and tribal peoples and claim two or three Muslim converts. The core of the movement consists of dedicated workers who hold meetings several times a week in each other's houses for religious discussion, but the membership is more fluid and their initial enthusiasm is not always maintained.

'Srimanta Shankar Sangha went to tea garden labour. The people say: "Yes, we are with you." But whether they have taken initiation or avoid inedible food (e.g. alcohol and chicken) is another matter. In every garden Durga Puja is held. It is incorrect to say they have converted among tea-garden labour.'

The Sri Shankaradeva Sangha began as an anti-Brahman movement. The Brahmans number probably only 150,000 in Assam but they are over-represented in government service, teaching and the bar which, before Independence, were largely Brahman preserves. With the spread of education non-Brahmans felt they could compete with the Brahmans and were not different from the Brahmans.

'I agreed to address some meetings in the villages. I said to them: "Brahman blood is said to be different from the blood of other castes. We have examined the blood of Brahmans and the blood of non-Brahmans under a microscope. No difference could be found between them." They liked it very much.'

Many educated members of non-Brahman castes began in consequence to resent the distinctions between themselves and the Brahmans in the ritual sphere.

'If Brahmans can end in eleven days, why should we stay one month?'

'My father performed the first *sraddha* of my father's father on the eleventh day on the grounds that he was not inferior to the Brahmans. There was a ripple in the society.'

'In *hom* and other rituals the priest in case of non-Brahman will say: "offering of slave" (*dasa*). But in the case of Brahman he will say: "offering of god" (*deva*). The non-Brahmans object and when the Brahman says "slave", they say "god" in the *mantras*.'

The leaders of the Sangha deny that they are opposed to Brahmans - 'we are not anti-Brahman, but anti-priest'- but anti-Brahmanism is prominent at all levels of the organization.

'I am a living witness to the start of the Sri Shankaradeva Sangha. I was a member of the District Congress Committee in Nowgong at that time. Haladhar Bhuyan was the President. We ran our candidate for the Assam Assembly. He was opposed by one of the most powerful persons in Nowgong, Rai Bahadur Bindalan Chandra Goswami (Brahman) ... Wherever we went, we were frustrated. No one came to vote for

us. We not only had no supporters, even the candidate suggested that we should not spend another farthing and not go into any more villages canvassing votes, for he received so many insults.

‘We sat dejected. At that moment a man came to Haladhar Bhuyan’s house, Rama Kanta Atoi, on cycle. Seeing us brooding he asked us the matter. We expressed our frustration. He said: “Give me Rs. 20 and a good bicycle. I will defeat Bindalan Chandra Goswami.” Although at that time Rs. 20 was something, we gave it to him and the office bicycle.

‘He went first to the village where our candidate was born and started speaking ill of the Brahmins from generation to generation. That worked like anything. Our candidate was returned...

‘When we won, there was another meeting among ourselves. In order to continue our support Haladhar Bhuyan said we should go on preaching against Brahmins and Brahminism. And so the Sangha came into being.’

The Brahmins tend to live apart from the rest of society and, not being known, are often misunderstood. Nowadays they are largely on the defensive and no longer express open opposition to the Eleven-day movement. The following stories (probably apocryphal), which were still circulating in Nowgong District in 1971, illustrate the bitterness of anti-Brahmin feeling in that area:-

‘A Sut died near Nowgong town, leaving a wife and baby. The Brahmin priest asked for her cow which was her only possession. She said she needed the cow or her baby would die. The Brahmin insisted. She refused. He said he would not perform the funerary rites unless she gave him the cow. She burnt her husband without Vedic rites.’

‘A Brahmin came to perform the funerary rites of a prominent Sut. The son of the dead man was an undergraduate with no belief in ritual observances. Sixteen gifts are offered in the name of the deceased in order to extinguish the attachment of the soul to this world. If he gets these articles over there, he will not hanker for them here and his soul will rise upwards. The Brahmin accepts certain of these gifts in the name of the dead. He generally wants something to which the deceased was particularly attached. In this case the Brahmin knew the family well. He said, “Your father was very fond of his bicycle. If possible offer that bicycle to me.” The son became annoyed and said, “Do you insist on something very dear to my father?” He replied, “Yes.” The son went inside the house and returned with his mother. He said to the priest, “My father loved my mother very much. I offer my mother to you. Take her away.” The priest replied, “Because you have said this, you will get no benefit from the *śraddha*”, and left without taking anything. After that the village gave up employing Brahmin priests.’

The offices of the Brahmin priest in respect of mortuary rites have been described in Chapter 2. The Garamur Satradhikar, one of the early Padadhikars of the Sri Shankaradeva Sangha, wrote a short manual called ‘Eleventh-day purification ceremony or First *Śraddha*’ for the guidance of Shudras.

The Garamuriya Gosain begins by advising all castes to follow the instruction of the Garuda Purana and end their period of impurity on the tenth day of death, performing the first *śraddha* on the eleventh day, on the grounds that ‘there is no difference between

the soul of a Brahman and that of a Shudra, all souls are the same and indistinguishable.’ He then takes up the question of obtaining a priest fit to perform the *sraddha* who, according to *sastra*, should be versed in the Veda and perform the daily fire sacrifice. He quotes Manu as saying that the soul of the deceased has to swallow as many mouthfuls of molten iron as morsels of food eaten in his name by a Brahman who is not versed in the Veda, and the Mahabharata as saying that if a man knowingly invites an unfit Brahman, his ancestors have to swallow excrement. If a suitable Brahman is not available, the Garamuriya Gosain advises the rites to be performed by Nam-Kirtan. In support of this he quotes a number of slokas from the Brahmanda Purana to the effect that, ‘Those who worship Hari on the *sraddha* days of their ancestors need not offer *pinda* in Gaya and other sacred places’, and a sloka from the Padma Purana that what is accomplished in the Satya age by meditation and austerities, in the Treta age by sacrifice and in the Dvapara age by worship is effected in the Kali age by chanting the Names of Hari. He concludes that it follows that worship of Hari is to be effected by Nam-Kirtan which yields results which cannot be equaled by hundreds of sacrifices.

He then sets out nine rules for the performance of *sraddha* by means of Nam-Kirtan. These include rules governing fast, ritual impurity, daily performances of Nam Kirtan for 12 days with special performances for guests on those days when *pinda* is usually offered by Shudras. The rites conclude with a feast for friends and relatives on the 13th day. ‘If everything is done in this way, it will yield greater results than the offering of *pindas* through Brahmans. Nothing can be of greater benefit than chanting the Names of God.’

The impurity associated with birth is also to be terminated on the 10th day except for the mother who remains unclean for one month.

In the manual published in 1945 the Garamuriya Gosain does not condemn the employment of Brahman priests for the performance of *sraddha*: he says only that, if a good Brahman cannot be found, Kirtan provides an alternative of at least equal efficacy.² Today, however, the Sangha rejects the performance of Brahmanical ritual as contrary to Vaishnava precepts.

‘Eight thousand rishis well versed in all the Vedas performed *hom* till their bodies were blackened but still they could not find peace. Then they asked Shuka to recite the Bhagavat and they found peace.

‘Bhagavat came into existence to stop *hom*. So how can Vaishnavas perform *hom*? If God cannot save a man, how will *pindas* and rites give salvation? If we give milk to Brahman, how can the dead man drink? If we give him bed, clothes, fan, how can the dead man get them? The Sangha has given up *karma kanda* and does *bhakti kanda*.’

The main rationale for the rejection of Brahmanical ritual is that it involves the worship of deities other than Vishnu. The Vaishnavas describe their religion as ‘taking shelter in One’ (*ekasarana dharma*) and traditionally strict Vaishnavas refused to participate in Durga Puja and similar festivals. Now, however, for the first time the principle of monotheism was applied to domestic ritual in the course of which, it was pointed out, the priest makes offerings to a great number of gods and goddesses. All such rites were therefore condemned as explicitly forbidden by Shankaradeva:-

‘Do not bow down before other gods and goddesses;
Partake not of their offering;
Look not upon their images, enter not their temples;
Lest thy faith be vitiated.’

(Shankaradeva, *Bhagavata*, II, v.545)

Those who continue to perform Brahmanical rites do not deny the authenticity of this verse, which they explain in a number of ways, but they point out that Shankaradeva was married by *hom* and offered *pinda* to his father and to his father’s mother.

‘The first biography of Shankaradeva was written by Ram Saran Thakur, Madhavadeva’s nephew. Here it is said that Shankaradeva observed 30 days’ impurity for his father’s death and for his father’s mother’s death. Madhavadeva observed 30 days for Shankaradeva. This nephew was with Madhavadeva all the time as his cook. He records marriage with *hom*, he records *pinda*, he records *lagun diya*. In the ten or twelve biographies which I have read, the same story is told. All cannot be wrong.’

The Sangha rejects these passages as spurious additions interpolated by the Brahmans, preferring to rely on the writings of Shankaradeva himself rather than on his biographers. Much of the argument is conducted in homely analogies:-

'Is it not said in the **Bhagavata Purana** that if water is poured on the base of a tree, then all the branches and leaves suck up nourishment? All gods and goddesses are mere manifestations of Vishnu so their worship as independent deities is unnecessary.'

'If one wants some corrugated iron sheets, one does not go directly to the Deputy Commissioner but to the Supply Officer. So we poor devotees, if we want wealth, we must go to Lakshmi.'

'It is true: God is one. But this does not mean we should disrespect other gods. To dinner we invite a guest of honour. But there are other guests. We must feed them too. What is the harm if we feed them too?'

As the prohibition of the worship of deities other than Vishnu provides the only rationale for the rejection of Brahmanical rites and the opposition to the Brahmins, it is insisted upon in the Sri Shankaradeva Sangha with a rigidity uncommon among Hindus and members have been suspended for attending Durga Puja. At the same time the concept of untouchability has been re-defined to apply to worshippers of many gods, described as 'the unholyest thing in the world', more polluting than beef cooking in wine by an outcaste woman (cf. Shankaradeva's *Daham*). 'Shankaradeva wrote,' observed a Vice-President of the Sangha from the Untouchable fisherman caste, 'that he who believes in more than one god is an Untouchable. That was the opinion of Shankaradeva. That was the opinion of Lord Krishna.' Members of the Sangha eat with Untouchables who have joined the organization but they refuse to eat with Brahmins observing Brahmanical ritual.

The Sangha was formed with the assistance of a number of *satradhikars*. Some, like Garamur, were attracted by their programme of social reform.³ Others saw in the substitution of Nam-Kirtan for Brahmanical ritual more work for the poorer Gosains. But as the Sangha became more extreme in its views, the majority, including the Garamuriya Gosain, withdrew.

'Srimanta Shankar Sangha has peculiar history. Child of betrayal. They wanted to oust the Brahmins from the social leadership. For that purpose they enlisted many poor Mahantas (i.e. Kayastha Gosains). The Mahantas got money for performing by *nam* instead of Vedic rites, so it suited them. With their help they were partially successful. Then they began to oust the Mahantas. These leaders wanted their own disciples. If Mahantas were within the fold, the trade was poor for them. So they worked against the Mahantas. Those who joined the fold turned back. Few are there now.'

'In a meeting at his house Haladhar Bhuyan said: "First we are to oust the Brahmins, then we will crush the *satradhikars*. After that we will establish our own system of religion.'

'Few Brahmans and Goswamis join, because the activities of the Sangha are against them' (statement of Vice-President of Shankar Sangha).

The leaders of the Sangha criticize the *gurus* for corrupting the religion of Shankaradeva and appeal over their heads to the authority of the written text as support for their views:-

'After Shankaradeva's death, the *satradhikars* neglected his ideals and vitiated his principles. They did not consult his books and did not do what the books said. They became self-indulgent. *Dharma* became a money-making business' (Vice-President of Shankar Sangha).

'There are many *satradhikars* who regard Sri Shankaradeva as *guru* but never follow his instructions' (President of Shankar Sangha).

'The *satras* were established to carry out Shankaradeva's teaching but the *satradhikars* are groping in the darkness. They have forgotten the real motto of Mahapurusha and are ruining the society. Some *satradhikars* have become zemindars. They have no time to preach *dharma* and occupy themselves with land accounts' (former President of Shankar Sangha).

'If this state of affairs continues in the *satra*, in twenty years they will go to hell.'

The *satradhikars* are in a difficult position. For a number of reasons they have become unpopular today. Visitors to the *satra* are expected to wash their own utensils. They sit on the bare ground while the Gosain sits on a mat. These customs are resented by the educated youth. When the Gosain is invited to low-caste Name Houses he takes his own distributor to prepare the offering. Today the lower castes resent these distinctions and mock the Gosain, 'Why are you bringing that distributor wearing a dirty *dhuti*?' The *satradhikars* depend for their livelihood and for the maintenance of the *satra* on the support of their disciples. This limits their freedom of action.

I don't know what I am. I would like to be Eleven-day but I associate with the Monthly people. My father supported the Sri Shankaradeva Sangha. He addressed meetings and wrote books, but he could not practise because of the obstruction of Monthly disciples' (Purna Chandradeva Goswami, Noruva Satra, Bardoa).

The Sangha claims the support of five or six *satras* with Kayastha Gosains, but of these only two are actively involved in the organization. At first many Gosains refused to initiate Eleven-day disciples but, as their numbers grew, this became impractical. The majority of *satras* still refuse to initiate Haridhaniyas.

'I allow people to be Monthly or Eleven-day. What I object to is this revolutionary Haridhaniya doctrine which has nothing to do with Shankaradeva's religion or with Hindu *sastra*. Some of my disciples have become Haridhaniya. I have almost severed connection with them' (Mohan Chandra Mahanta, Diciaryal Satra, Nowgong).

Dissociation from the *gurus* has created problems with initiation. Traditionally the rite of initiation was the portal to the sect. 'Without a *guru*,' Shankaradeva said, 'you cannot enter into my religion.' Few men outside the *satra* are versed in the stages of higher initiation with their attendant *mantras*. The Sangha in consequence minimizes the significance of the rite - 'If a man reads the Bhagavat, initiation is unnecessary' - but the public continue to expect it. In an attempt to undermine the authority of the *gurus* the Sri Shankaradeva Sangha has recently published a manual for initiation (Tirthanath Goswami 1969) containing the esoteric *mantras* which they describe as 'fake things introduced by the *satradhikars* for their own power.' The first leaders of the Sangha initiated converts who became attached to them personally as their disciples. This system led to schismatic tendencies in the organization and allegations of corruption. They have now introduced in each district an Initiation Committee, three to seven of whose members are required to be present at initiation. Initiates thus belong to the organization and not to an individual *guru*. In the form of initiation adopted by the Sangha **Shankaradeva** and **Madhavadeva** are presented to the initiate as the gurus of the sect and *not* those who give initiation. A Gosain made the following practical comment on the revised system:

'The religion of Shankaradeva is based on initiation. The particular instructions are not important. They are kept secret and handed down from Mahanta to Mahanta and from Gosain to Gosain. But it creates belief in the system. By publishing the *mantras* they have destroyed this framework and modified the religion of Shankaradeva ... Initiation taken from a committee of seven members is meaningless.'

Indirectly the impact of the new sects is said to have benefited both the *satradhikars* and the priests. The Gosains of many small *satras*, driven by economic necessity, have profited by turning to western education and taking gainful employment; their *satras* exist today only as a postal address. Similarly the Brahman priests, with a diminishing clientèle, are abandoning their traditional occupation and only the fool of the family is said to enter the priesthood. Some are to be seen cultivating with hoe or buffalo, others have entered the professions.

The commonest reason given for the change to Eleven days is that one month's impurity is incompatible with the conditions of modern life.

'Nowadays one cannot stay in the house doing nothing for one month after the death of parents - that is certain. That is not a crime.'

The Shankar Sangha is opposed to the renunciation of the world:-

'We oppose *bhakats* who have long hair and go from house to house begging. The *sastras* say we should marry and do our duty in the world - that is *dharma*. In Kali Yuga the sannyasis are eaters of night soil' (former Padadhikar of Shankar Sangha).

They have devised a shortened version of the *mantras* and other daily rituals compatible with active participation in business and office life. For the traditional *hom* sacrifice at marriage they have substituted a new ceremony in the vernacular. The simplification of ritual extends to many folk customs either suggestive of spirit worship or rejected as superstitious. Traditionally, for example, it is the custom for the mother of the bride and the mother of the groom, when they go in procession to draw water for the ceremonial bath, to place an areca nut, pan and pice in the tank saying, 'I draw water for the marriage of so-and-so.' This is objected to on the grounds that, 'We worship Vishnu, we do not worship water'. The marriage customs that have been discontinued in some areas include the throwing of sugar balls (*laru*) over the head of the groom on arrival as a protection against evil spirits, the rubbing of the bride and groom with turmeric and pulse, the erection of a ceremonial quadrangle of banana trees (*bei*) for the ceremonial bath, the burial of a duck's egg under the quadrangle, the pounding of wild turmeric by seven married women (*gathiyā khunda*), the exchange of ceremonial water pots between the bride's house and the groom's house, the drawing with rice flour of a circular pattern (*maral*) as a seat for the sacred water pot, the hanging of auspicious mango leaves across the gateway to the house, the ribald dance of an old woman with a winnowing mat on her head, the contest between drummers, the ritual fast of the bride and groom and the offering of spiced food to the spirits of envy (Khoba Khubi) on the third day of the wedding.⁴ On folk custom there is a division of opinion within the Sangha. Some reject all such customs as superstitious, others wish to preserve their distinctively Assamese character provided they do not contravene the monotheistic principle.

‘We want to preserve the old customs unless they clash with Shankaradeva. I build a *bei* but I do not bury a duck’s egg under it. I have no objection to mango leaves and other things. They will be used in my daughter’s marriage. It is play. Some say: “Why should we use mango leaves?” But I say, “Why should we not?” My children will throw vegetables on the cattle on Cow Bihu. Play’ (Padadhikar of Shankar Sangha).

Members of the Sangha do *not* observe fast days, the forbidden months for marriage or the forbidden days for ploughing, when they can be seen in the fields driving their oxen. They do not recognize ritual pollution - ‘pollution does not exist’-, for which they have substituted the western notion of hygiene:-

‘We think as you do. When a fly falls on food, that food is impure.’

‘Others put on ritually pure (*dhuti*) clothes to eat. We put on clean (*capha*) clothes to eat.’

The attenuation of ritual is criticized on the grounds that it has made religion too easy: the leaders may be devout but the followers will simply observe the forms and the forms have been so reduced as to mean little.

‘If you take the line of the Shankar Sangha, just burn a man and finish him. They are too drastic. The danger is that when the rites become a habit, the religion will disappear. They are making religion too easy. Of course it is all right if done with feeling - this will not remain. In their ardent enthusiasm they will destroy everything.’

It was open to the reform sects to take the position that ritual requires adaptation and simplification in the changed conditions of modern life. Their critics, indeed, see what they are doing as essentially something new.

‘Let them found a new religion. Why claim to derive from Shankaradeva? Shankaradeva’s teaching has been handed down to us unchanged in an unbroken line from Gosain to Gosain. They say what we have done for five hundred years is a mistake. No, what they do now is a mistake.’

The Sangha, on the contrary, claims that its teachings derive from the authority of *sastra* and the writings of the founders. The story is current of how Gopikaballubh Goswami, the pandit of the movement, journeyed to Benares in order to obtain an authentic copy of the Garuda Purana. In the edition used in Assam, published in Bengal, sloka 19 authorizing eleven-day observances for all castes was omitted - or so it is said - at the instigation of the Brahman priests. At the annual meeting of the Sri Shankaradeva Sangha in 1936 Rs. 2000 was put on the table and promised to anyone who could show

that the rules in respect of death pollution (*asoc*) as laid down in the Sangha were (*asastriya*) contrary to *sastra*. The Sangha takes the view that its changes in accepted practice represent a return to the original purity of Shankaradeva's religion as set out in his writings and that they in consequence are the only true Vaishnavas:-

'We don't speak anything outside the religious books, Shankaradeva's works. He also did not invent his own religion but referred to earlier scriptures.'

'Our basis is the writing of Shankaradeva and Madhavadeva only. It is no new thing. What we believe is that it is Sri Shankaradeva's own teaching. The *satras* were established to continue his teaching, but the *satradhikars* are groping in the darkness. There are many *satradhikars* who regard Sri Shankaradeva as their *guru* but never follow his instructions. The people have been misled. The Sri Shankaradeva Sangha was started forty years ago in order to teach people exactly what their religion is.'

The uncompromising rigidity of the Sangha is often criticized: 'If a man's religion cannot tolerate other religions, it is not worth the name of religion.' It serves, however, two important functions for its adherents. In the first place, it provides them with a platform for the abolition of caste and the rejection of the Brahman so that the social reforms which provide the impetus of the movement can be implemented in the name of religion. Secondly, it acts as a form of legitimation for a new middle-class elite composed of men from the lower castes who have benefited from the changed conditions of education and employment to gain a new secular standing. These men are not willing to acquiesce in the inferior rank held by their caste in the traditional system. At the same time, by virtue of being brought up in this system, they also share its values. A highly educated Chutiya, attracted by the ideas of the Sangha and engaged with his co-villagers in a protest to the Gosain at the low place given to Chutiyas at feasts in the *satra* Name House, commented on his caste rank as follows: 'It is not only the high castes who think we are inferior. We also feel we are inferior.' The effect of the reform movement is to provide such men with an alternative system in which caste distinctions are not only disregarded as irrelevant to spiritual salvation but condemned as heretical social practices on the authority of the scriptures.

The reform sects draw a parallel between the teachings of the **Bhagavata Purana** and the egalitarian values of democratic India. Many of their revisions to existing practice advocated in the name of *bhakti* - the simplification of ritual, the abandonment of magical and superstitious customs, the emphasis on monotheism, the condemnation of blood

sacrifice and image worship and the rejection of untouchable and caste - seem to owe at least as much to the current trends of the modern age. The belief in One God provides a rationale for abolishing caste distinctions - 'God is one: therefore man is also one' - and is seen as the basis of a universalistic ethic which will convert Vaishnavism into a world religion:-

'This religion will unify not only Assam, including tribals and Muslims but the whole world.⁵ The worship of one God is the only religion of mankind. Islam and Christianity are simple forms of Vaishnavism.'

The adaptation of Vaishnavite practices to the spirit of the age has been accompanied by a transformation in the categories of religious thought. The idea of Brahmanhood as the possession of knowledge, traditionally vested in the Brahman caste and extended to the *gurus*, has given place to the diffusion of divinity among the laity regarded as the living representatives of God. The privileged intermediary roles of the priest (in respect of Vedic ritual) and the *guru* (in respect of *bhakti*) have been rejected in favour of the text of the **Bhagavat** which is accessible to all who can read. The rite of initiation, traditionally regarded as the only portal through which the devotee can approach God, has been diminished to the point at which it is no longer considered essential for membership of the sect. The rite itself has lost both its esoteric character and its personalized link between *guru* and disciple conceived in terms of exchange of substance when the initiate is identified with the *guru* as the embodiment of God. In its revised form the *mantras* have been greatly simplified and the system of higher stages of initiation has lapsed. The Sangha is hostile to the idea of renunciation as withdrawal from the world and advocates a short and straightforward set of rituals appropriate to the daily life of Vaishnava actively involved in worldly affairs. The complex observances of ritual purity have also been abandoned in favour of the modern notion of hygiene. The sect has rejected the concept of caste - 'caste does not exist' - and the gradations of the caste hierarchy, formerly expressed in terms of relative purity, are replaced by a dichotomy between those within the faith and those without, untouchability being re-defined in terms of those outside the faith who worship many gods. The belief that devotees are 'one' and the 'same' by virtue of sharing a common substance is translated into the modern idiom of equality and democracy. The worship of the devotees as embodiments

of God - 'The service of man is the service of God' - is secularized as the idea of public and national service. The leaders of the Sangha see themselves as reformers, faithful to the teachings of **Shankaradeva**, who are striving to regenerate their religion and their society in accordance with his principles. But in the eyes of their critics the conversion of Vaishnavism into Everyman's religion has necessitated a radical transformation in the structure of the religion which they no longer recognize as their own.

From Nowgong the reform movement spread to other districts of the State. Today the Sri Shankaradeva Sangha represents only a small proportion of those who have become Eleven-day or Haridhaniya under the influence of the ideas which led to its inception. It is estimated that perhaps one-third of the Shudra population of the State has already become Eleven-day and their numbers are increasing. The effect of the movement has been to create new social divisions in the village. When a group of households decides to become Eleven-days or Haridhaniya - usually on the death of a prominent man - it divides itself from the rest of the village to form a separate religious association with its own Name House. The different sects do not associate or inter-dine and as one or other of the new sects is now to be found in almost every village of Upper Assam,⁶ the reform movement has become the major vehicle for the expression of caste and other local animosities.

[See also: - [*The Rise of Sankaradeva Sangha*](#)]

NOTES

1. My father, who was Deputy Commissioner of Nowgong at this time, notes in his memoirs that he had a very religious man in his office called Dambarudhar Barua who arranged the marriage of his daughter without employing a Brahman to perform the customary rites. The atmosphere in the office became so acrimonious that he had to have him transferred.
2. When offering *pinda*, a length of *kusa* grass, measured by the stretch between the thumb and forefinger, is cut and twisted into a ring. This is called the *kusa* Brahman. I have been given various interpretations of its significance. It is said that a Brahman in performing *sraddha* acts as the servant of his client; but a Brahman cannot be servant (*dasa*), so he invokes the *kusa* Brahman which becomes impure and is thrown away at the conclusion of the rite. It is also

suggested that the *kusa* Brahman is used so that the *mantras* uttered by the giver of *pinda* should have the same efficacy as if uttered by a Brahman. Again it is said that if there is any fault in the performance, the responsibility will rest, not with the giver of *pinda*, but with the *kusa* Brahman. The most popular interpretation, however, is that a good Brahman priest is required for the rite, but as there is no such thing as a genuine priest, a Brahman is made out of *kusa* instead.

3. The Garamuriya Gosain was an active member of the Congress party and spent some years in jail. When he was released, it is said that the other Gosains would not give him proper place, a slight which he resented. The Gosains usually required Congress workers to undergo purification (*prayascitta*) on release from jail, which often caused offence.
4. A guest at a wedding ceremony conducted according to Sangha rites commented that it was more like a funeral than a marriage.
5. The movement also serves as a vehicle for ideas of Assamese nationalism. The Sri Shankaradeva Sangha takes the view that all who live in Assam are Assamese and not only proselytizes actively among tribals and tea-garden labour but claims three Muslim converts. This view is partly a response to the dismemberment of Assam and the carving of five hill states out of what was once a single province.
6. I visited 11 villages in Upper Assam during the course of the field-work. All contained one or more sectarian divisions of Eleven-day people, Haridhanyas, or members of the Sri Shankaradeva Sangha, who did not inter-dine or associate with the Monthly people or with one another.
