

# Overview

## North East India

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Editor  
Sikhamoni Konwar



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*Editor*  
**Sikhamoni Konwar**



**EBH Publishers (India)**  
**Guwahati-1**

**Sikhamoni Konwar**

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## Preface

The book "Overview" is published to commemorate the 40<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of North-East India History Association (NEIHA) held in Karmashree Hiteswar Saikia College, Guwahati. Befitting to the academic spirit of the esteemed conference the book is compiled with a collection of varied research articles on different shades and aspects of history, culture, economy, religions, archaeology etc. by eminent historians, academicians, researchers and scholars from India and abroad. North-East India is viewed as anthropological museum of the country enriched with its diverse ethnicity, language, literature, diasporas, migration, cross-border movement, archaeology etc. The book "Overview" is an attempt to showcase these ever enchanting social-cultural facets of this region. The study of North-East India has always been of enormous significance for the National life of India as it is like a land bridge between South-East Asia and the rest of India. Besides, historically, North-East India is a strategic location for its proximity to India's international borders with four countries- viz. China, Myanmar, Bhutan and Bangladesh. Of India's 4600 km long land boundaries with these four neighbouring countries North-Eastern states share ninety-eight per cent, while being attached with the main land India only by two per cent land lock.

There was a time when the people living outside the North-East often harboured prejudices and sceptical views with regards to its people and culture. It was known to the people outside as a land of mountains, rivers, rains, floods, tea, jungle and terrorist. Referring to the veiled existence of the North East, eminent Parliamentarian Hem Barua once observed, "North-East to most people is mentally a distant horizon like Bolivia or Peru, less known and more fancied". But, presently, North-East of India is no more *terra incognita*. The situation has changed with more and more scholars, researchers, academicians, public, tourist and social scientists showing keen interest in exploring the exquisite and unique nuances of the rich cultural tapestry of North East India. Government of India has given special attention towards the North-East and set up The Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (DoNER) with a vision to accelerate the pace of socio-economic development of the Region so that it may enjoy growth parity with the rest of the country.

The book "Overview" will surely open up new avenues for further study and research on North-East India and will go a long way to incite constructive inquisitiveness for the region in the minds of the discerning readers. Here we have made every possible effort to maintain the high standard of its academic values. Any error and hiccups in the publication is quite unintentional. We have maintained the authors' style and methodology in their respective papers.

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Here, I extend my heartfelt thanks and gratitude to the esteemed advisors, reviewers, the members of the editorial board and the members of the college fraternity.

Finally, I would like to thank Eastern Book House for their interest in our work and getting it published.

19<sup>th</sup> Sept. 2019  
Guwahati

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## Religion and Social Status: Neo-Vaishnavite movement and Women

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*Nipon Panging*

Religion plays an important part in a society. It determines the status of an individual on the basis of accordance of privileges in the rites and rituals<sup>1</sup>. Likewise, privileges accorded or denied to women by religion in the medieval Assam give a picture of their social status. The Brahmaputra valley, before the advent of the Ahom, was inhabited by many tribes with their own codes and conducts and own religious beliefs. The heterogeneous society consisting of traditions of the early religious cults such as Saivism, Saktism, Tantrikism, Sun-worship, Vaishnavism and different sects of Buddhism<sup>2</sup>, of this Saivism and Saktism were the dominant cults<sup>3</sup>. Saktism was the worshipping of goddesses KechaiKhati, Kamakhi or Kamalakhi and Jayanti or Jayanteswari<sup>4</sup>. Siva was worshipped according to tribal and Brahmanic rites<sup>5</sup>. Tantrikism was open to all irrespective of caste or sex with equal opportunity of worship<sup>6</sup>. Religion imposed certain norms and conditions on women. Morality and chastity were associated with women. Vaishnavism restricted the movement of women and advised to cover their whole body. The Ahom brought their own religion and customs into the valley. In the subsequent period, the Ahom embraced Hinduism and some rulers came under the influence of Saktism and Vaishnavism as well. In the 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> century, Assam witnessed a socio-religious movement in the form of Neo-Vaishnavite movement and it had influenced the socio-cultural aspect of the land. It this paper, women's participation in religious activities is discussed to ascertain their role and status in the society.

Women were appointed as dancers and courtesans in connection with temple



services. These women were known as Nati and Daluhangana and appointed mainly in the Siva temples<sup>7</sup>. Apart from singing and dancing in the temple their duty was to fan the idol of the temple. The Natis occupied a privileged and honourable position in the society due to the royal patronages. King Siva Singha married a nati named Phuleswari and made her the Bar Raja of the State<sup>8</sup>.

Women participated in the religious discourses and gained enough knowledge to give instructions on religious matters. Chanderi, the nurse and personal attendant of Sankardeva, sort out the confusion of positioning the *kalpataru* tree in the *Ankia nat Chinhayatra* of the latter<sup>9</sup>. Women were appointed as religious instructor or Medhi. Dayal, wife of Teli-krishna Atoi, was a disciple of Badula Ata and appointed as a Medhi to the queens of king Lakshmi Narayan<sup>10</sup>. Women were also made the heads of religious institutions. Ai-Kanaklata, the grand daughter-in-law of Sankardeva and Bhubaneswari, the daughter of Harideva, were made as the heads of their sub-sects<sup>11</sup>.

The queens of the Ahom kings had an authority over the religion of the kingdom. Bar-Raja or chief king Phuleswari kunwari, wife of king Siva Singha, was a staunch devotee of Saktism and took a new name Pramatheswari which is another name of goddess Durga. She excavated the Gaurisagar tank and on the bank, there temples dedicated to Siva, Vishnu and Devi, were erected<sup>12</sup>. To make her faith popular in the state, queen Phuleswari attempted to attack on the Vaishnavite sect. She organized Durga puja and summoned the Sudra Mahantas and besmeared their foreheads with the blood of the sacrificed animals and forced to take *nirmali* and Prasad<sup>13</sup>. She also patronized a school for the learning of the Sanskrit language<sup>14</sup>. After the death of Phuleswari Kunwari her sister Draupadi became the queen and acted as the Bar-Raja. Like her sister, Draupadi excavated the Sivasagar tank in capital city of Rangpur and three temples dedicated to Siva, Vishnu and Devi were constructed on its bank. The queen mother, Rajmao also constructed a temple<sup>15</sup>.

The Neo-vaishnavite movement was initiated by Sankardeva and his disciples in Assam in the 15<sup>th</sup> -16<sup>th</sup> century. Neo-Vaishnavism was a religious belief and in fact a code conduct that attempted to cleanse the society from all of its bigotry and hatred, to liberate the poor and wretched from suppression, exploitation and also from ignorance and enslavement. The doctrine of equality was seen in spiritual domain as Sankardeva made a distinction between religion and social spheres<sup>16</sup>. Sankardeva and his followers did not interfere with caste regulation. To follow the path of devotion, detachment from the materialistic world was necessary according to the teachings of Sankardeva. Vishay or worldly concerns that usually includes women and children and wealth were the main obstacles of spiritual progress and a devotee should remain free from all these. In Practice, Sankardeva and his followers initiated women. His grandmother Khersuti and wife of Jayanta Doloi were initiated to the faith and wife of Jayanti Madhai was given

the status of a devotee<sup>17</sup>. He favoured the life of a householder<sup>18</sup> and led the life with wife and children. Sankardeva also supported the widow-remarriage and insisted his daughter-in-law to remarry after the death of his son Kamalalochana. At the same time in theoretically, the image of women was propagated as Mohini, the enchantress and the source of all evil. In the writings of Sankardeva, Sati or the chaste women was propagated as another traditional image of women. The chastity could be attained by any women irrespective of caste and there is a story in Katha Guru Charit about Sati Radhika who belonged to Kaivarta caste<sup>19</sup>. The teachings of Sankardeva supported the patriarchal values of the society. Women did not have a recognized role in the satra institution of the Neo-Vaishnavism. The structure has no office for women and they are even prohibited from entering into some of the satras<sup>20</sup>.

Neo-Vaishnavism with its strong patriarchal base did not intend to disturb the stratified caste system and Sankardeva's sole concern was that one can aspire to spiritual perfection even despite the caste differences. Women were given equal position with the sudra and were treated as subordinate to men but at the same time women got certain amount of autonomy and could participate in her own way in the religious matters. Thus, women were encouraged by the Neo-Vaishnavite movement to reach beyond the traditional outlook of household duties towards a wider socio-cultural horizon.

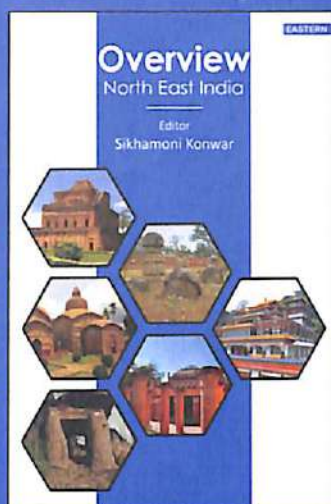
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### The Book

*Overview* is a compilation of varied research articles on different aspects of history, culture, economy, religion, ethnicity, archaeology etc. of North East India by eminent historians, academicians, researchers and scholars from India and abroad. The issues covered in the book are of much historical as well as contemporary interest. In view of the increasing significance of the North-East region in the context of India's "Act East Policy" and its historical and ethnic affinity with China, Myanmar and other South-East Asian countries, the book will go a long way to incite constructive inquisitiveness for the North-East region in the minds of the discerning readers and researchers.



### The Editor

**Dr. (Mrs) Sikhamoni Konwar** (Gohain Boruah) is presently the Principal of Karmashree Hiteswar Saikia College, Guwahati-22, Assam, India. She did her schooling in North Lakhimpur, graduated from Cotton College in History (Major) and obtained her Master degree with specialization in ancient Indian history from Gauhati University. She was awarded JRF by Indian Council of Historical Research and received her PhD from Gauhati University.

She has the credit of contributing as many as 60 research papers in different International and National seminars. Her research papers and articles have been published in the proceedings of the seminars, in the reputed journals, magazines, souvenirs and local news papers. She has widely travelled various Universities of Taiwan, Thailand, Indonesia, Myanmar, Bhutan, Singapore, Malaysia, Philippines, People's Republic of China, UK, Japan & Bangladesh.

Dr. Konwar has edited six books which includes books on North-East India like *Historical and Socio-Cultural Aspects of North East India* (Two Volumes), *Diversity and Integrity of North East India*. Besides, she has authored the book *Charaideo: A Cultural Heritage Site of Assam*, and also completed a UGC Minor Research Project on *Moidams of Charaideo*. Her major areas of interests and work are the history and culture of Assam.



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