# Informal and Skill-Based Education of Women under Neo-Vaishnavism during the Ahom Period in Assam: Institutions, Practices and Social Transformation

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***Abstract*—This study critically examines the role of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement, initiated by Srimanta Sankaradeva and consolidated by Madhavadeva, in transforming women's informal, skill-based, and spiritual education during the Ahom period in Assam. By prioritizing bhakti over esoteric Sanskritized rituals and replacing Sanskrit with vernacular Assamese, the movement democratized access to sacred knowledge. The Satra (monastery) and Namghar (community prayer hall) emerged as institutional spaces where women developed functional literacy, mnemonic skills, and artistic agency through engagement with devotional literature (Kirtana Ghosha, Borgeet), performative traditions (Ankia Naat, Bhaona), and manuscript copying (Nath, 2020). Furthermore, the integration of religious devotion with material production—notably ceremonial weaving, textile crafts, and mask decoration—enhanced women's socio-economic self-reliance and household agency. However, this study underscores that female empowerment remained bounded: while spiritual inclusivity and cultural visibility expanded significantly, persistent patriarchal frameworks restricted women from formal administrative authority and governance within the Satras. Ultimately, the movement imbued women's domestic, artistic, and devotional labor with sacred dignity, establishing an enduring community-based foundation for gendered learning and social upliftment in medieval Assamese society.**

***Index Terms*—Ahom Period, Namghar and Satra, Neo-Vaishnavism, Skill-Based Education, Women's Informal Education**

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Neo-Vaishnavite movement of medieval and early modern Assam, initiated by Srimanta Sankaradeva and consolidated by Madhavadeva, represented a seminal socio-religious paradigm shift that fundamentally reorganized the region's cultural, spiritual, and institutional landscapes. While scholarly discourse has extensively examined the movement's egalitarian ethos and theological departs from orthodox Brahmanical hegemony, its specific role in pedagogical and gendered transformation warrants deeper empirical investigation. This chapter critically analyzes the involvement of women in spiritual education, vernacular literary practices (Sonowal, 2019), performative arts, and skill-based learning within the institutional frameworks of the Satra (monastery) and Namghar (community prayer hall) during the Ahom period (Nath, 2020). By shifting the locus of devotion from esoteric, Sanskritized rituals to accessible, community-centered praxis, the movement created unique informal learning spaces for women. Crucially, this study work evaluates how these socio-spiritual concessions fostered functional literacy, artistic agency, and economic self-reliance among women, while simultaneously critically addressing the structural limitations imposed by persistent patriarchal frameworks that restricted formal administrative authority and complete gender parity.

## II. OBJECTIVES

1. To examine the role of the Vaishnavite Movement in promoting women's informal and skill-based education in medieval Assam.
2. To analyse the impact of the Vaishnavite Movement on the social and religious status of women in medieval Assamese society.
3. To assess the contribution of the Vaishnavite Movement to women's economic and cultural empowerment.

## III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1 Women's Involvement in Spiritual Education and Literary Practices

The Vaishnavite Movement played a significant role in shaping the informal and skill-based education of women, especially between the medieval and early modern periods. It emphasized devotion over rigid ritualism and caste hierarchies, which created new spaces for women's participation in spiritual and literacy activities (Neog, 1965).

#### 3.1.1 Promotion of Spiritual Equality,

The Assamese Vaishnavite movement, led by Srimanta Sankaradeva, promoted spiritual inclusivity by emphasizing bhakti, accessibility, and devotion beyond caste and gender barriers. The use of Assamese in religious texts and the role of Namghars enabled women to participate in prayer, devotional singing, religious discussions, and cultural expressions, facilitating greater access to spiritual knowledge (Neog, 1965; Pathak, 2021). However, this inclusion remained primarily spiritual rather than social. Women were largely excluded from leadership in Satras, and traditional gender roles persisted. Thus, the movement advanced women's spiritual participation and challenged certain religious hierarchies without fully dismantling patriarchal structures.

#### 3.1.2 Informal Religious Education

Informal religious education played a significant role in shaping women's spiritual and intellectual participation during the Vaishnavite movement of the Ahom period. The movement also evolved a new institution known as Satra which began to serve not only as the instrument of spreading the faith, but also helped to sustain and stabilize Vaishnavism by making it a part and parcel of Assamese social life (Sarma, 1966). Namghars and satras functioned as accessible learning spaces where women engaged with the Bhagavata Purana, kirtans, borgeets, bhaonas, and oral storytelling. Although their public participation was sometimes restricted, women contributed as listeners, learners, and transmitters of religious knowledge within households and communities. The use of Assamese rather than Sanskrit enhanced accessibility and encouraged functional literacy and literary engagement, including devotional composition, storytelling, and manuscript copying (Dwija, 1957). Beyond religious learning, Vaishnavite practices fostered practical and artistic skills such as weaving, manuscript preservation, music, drama, painting, mask making and community organization (Hazarika, 2026). Despite persistent gender and caste limitations, these institutions created spaces for women's participation, agency, and gradual intellectual empowerment, contributing to community-based and skill-oriented educational traditions.

#### 3.1.3 Development of Literary Skills

The Vaishnavite movement in Assam (15th–16th centuries), led by Srimanta Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva, functioned not only as a religious reform movement but also as a significant cultural and informal educational force. By privileging bhakti and vernacular Assamese over Sanskrit, it enabled women to access devotional literature through listening, memorisation, recitation, singing, and storytelling. Satras and Namghars provided community-based spaces where women participated in collective worship and cultural practices, developing linguistic, interpretive, artistic, and communicative skills. Engagement with Borgeet, Ankia Naat, and devotional narratives strengthened functional literacy and cultural knowledge. Although patriarchal structures continued and leadership remained predominantly male, women became important transmitters of literary and spiritual traditions. Padmapriya, regarded as the first known Assamese female poet, exemplifies women's literary participation (Kashyap, 2012). Thus, Vaishnavism connected spirituality with informal, experiential, and skill-based education for women.

#### 3.1.4 Participation in performing Arts

The Vaishnavite movement in Assam contributed to women's spiritual, cultural and informal education without fundamentally disrupting prevailing patriarchal structures. Cultural forms such as Bhaona and Borgeet created avenues for women's indirect participation through music, oral traditions, costume-making and religious activities. Although women's direct stage participation remained restricted, their roles as singers, listeners and custodians of cultural knowledge developed skills in rhythm, memorisation, storytelling and artistic expression. Bhubaneswari or Kamalapriya, noted for her expertise in the sarengdar and Borgeet singing, exemplifies women's musical

accomplishments within this cultural milieu (Rajkhowa, 2012).

Namghars provided shared spaces for prayer, religious discourse and engagement with Vaishnavite teachings. The use of Assamese vernacular facilitated access to texts such as the Kirtana Ghosa and Bhagavata Purana (Sonowal, 2019). Participation in recitation, weaving and ritual preparations further fostered linguistic, practical and creative skills, constituting an important form of informal, skill-based education for women.

3.1.5 Transmission of Cultural knowledge

The Vaishnavite Movement facilitated women's informal education through accessible religious and cultural practices. The use of simple Assamese in devotional texts, songs, and narratives enabled women to acquire linguistic, interpretative, and oral skills. Namghars and Satras provided spaces for prayer, recitation, and community learning. Women also contributed to manuscript preservation, storytelling, weaving, mask-making, and ritual practices, developing memory, creativity, craftsmanship, and vocational abilities (Hazarika, 2026). Thus, cultural transmission fostered women's spiritual learning, social awareness, and empowerment.

3.1.6 Skill-based Learning

Skill-based learning significantly enhanced women's participation in spiritual education and literary practices during the Vaishnavite movement in Assam. Through Borgeets, Naam-Kirtan, scripture recitation, storytelling, weaving, and Bhaona-related activities, women acquired spiritual, artistic, and livelihood-oriented skills. The use of Assamese facilitated access to devotional and literary traditions. Their engagement with Satras and Namghars strengthened cultural transmission, social participation, and confidence, while preserving oral traditions and disseminating Vaishnavite values across families and rural communities.

3.1.7 Social Empowerment within Limits

The Vaishnavite Movement of Assam contributed to women's social and cultural participation through spiritual inclusion and informal education. Women participated in naam-kirtan, prayer, religious discourses and community activities, gaining greater social visibility and spiritual awareness. Satras and Namghars facilitated informal learning through religious instruction, storytelling, music, dance, drama, weaving and handicrafts, strengthening women's cultural and household skills.

However, empowerment remained constrained by patriarchal norms. Women had limited access to formal education, institutional leadership and public religious administration, while their roles were largely defined through devotion and domestic responsibilities. Thus, the movement advanced women's informal education and cultural participation without fundamentally transforming prevailing gender hierarchies.

3.2 Influence of Vaishnavite Movement on Women's Informal and Skill Based Education

The Vaishnavite Movement had a significant influence on women's informal and skill-based education, especially in Assam during the Ahom period under the leadership of Srimanta Sankaradeva and his disciple Madhavadeva. The movement aimed at spreading devotion, equality and social reform through religion, culture and community participation.

3.2.1 Participation in Religious and Cultural Activities

The Vaishnavite Movement contributed significantly to women's informal education through their participation in Naam-Kirtan, Bhajan, prayer meetings, and other devotional activities in the Namghar. These practices facilitated the acquisition of religious, ethical, musical, and literary knowledge while cultivating values of discipline, cooperation, devotion, equality, and social harmony.

The movement also promoted women's engagement in Borgeet, Ankia Naat, weaving, and handicrafts, thereby developing their artistic, creative, and vocational skills. Women participated in religious discourses and gained enough knowledge to instruct on religious matters. Chanderi, the nurse and personal attendant of Sankaradeva sort out the confusion of positioning the Kalpataru tree in the Ankia Nat or one-act play called the Chinyayatra (Lekharu, 1952). The Namghar and Satra functioned as important spaces of social and cultural learning, where women acquired knowledge of household management, community participation, and traditional crafts. Weaving, particularly for religious ceremonies, enhanced their practical and economic capabilities. Despite prevailing social restrictions, the movement broadened women's participation in religious and

community life, contributing to their cultural, moral, and social development.

3.2.2 Development of Artistic Skills

The Neo-Vaishnavite movement in Assam enabled women's participation in artistic, spiritual and literary practices. Through Naam-Kirtan, Borgeet, devotional dance and household worship, women helped disseminate Vaishnavite teachings. Their expertise in weaving and handicrafts supported Satras, Bhaona and religious festivals while preserving cultural motifs. Women also transmitted moral and spiritual values within families, participated in Namghars, and contributed to manuscript preservation and devotional reading. Their engagement strengthened Assamese language, identity, religious consciousness and cultural traditions.

3.2.3 Spread of Moral and Spiritual Education

During the Ahom period, Neo-Vaishnavism under Srimanta Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva contributed significantly to women's moral and spiritual education by promoting bhakti, equality, discipline, cooperation and social harmony. Namghars functioned as centres of religious instruction, where women participated in prayers, recitations and devotional practices, acquiring values such as honesty, compassion, humility and devotion.

The use of Assamese rather than Sanskrit made Vaishnavite teachings accessible to ordinary women. Through Naam-kirtan, Borgeets, hymns and religious literature, women developed spiritual awareness and transmitted ethical values within their families. Participation in worship, festivals, rituals and cultural activities further strengthened their religious and social engagement. Thus, Neo-Vaishnavism facilitated women's moral development and contributed to the transmission of Assamese religious and cultural values.

3.2.4 Encouragement of Assamese language and Literature

During the 15th–16th centuries, the Vaishnavite movement facilitated women's informal and skill-based education through Assamese language, literature, religion, music, and cultural practices. Replacing Sanskrit with accessible Assamese enabled women to engage with religious narratives, moral teachings, and literary works such as the Kirtan Ghosha, Bhagavata, Borgeets, and Ankiya Naat.

Namghars functioned as community-based learning spaces where women participated in recitation, devotional singing, storytelling, and collective activities, developing cultural and communicative skills (Pathak, 2021). The movement also encouraged weaving, handicrafts, costume-making, and artistic practices. Through oral transmission and domestic practices, women preserved Assamese Vaishnavite traditions, contributing to cultural continuity and social awareness.

3.2.5 Community-Based Learning

The Vaishnavite movement in Assam during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries fostered community-based, informal education for women through institutions such as Namghars and Satras. Participation in devotional activities, storytelling, recitation, Bhaona, Borgeet, festivals, and community discussions facilitated the acquisition of moral values, communication skills, cultural knowledge, and social responsibility. Women also developed practical competencies in weaving, spinning, handicrafts, embroidery, music, and festival-related activities. These institutions promoted collective learning, social cooperation, cultural transmission, and participation across social groups. Consequently, community-based education contributed to women's cultural, social, and practical empowerment while preserving Assamese heritage.

3.2.6 Promotion of Weaving Skills

During the Vaishnavite period of the Ahom era, weaving emerged as an important form of informal and skill-based education for Assamese women. Traditionally taught by mothers and elder women, weaving transmitted practical knowledge of spinning, dyeing, designing, and loom operation across generations.

The Vaishnavite movement, associated with Srimanta Sankaradeva, strengthened weaving through its emphasis on simplicity, self-reliance, and community participation. Women produced garments and textiles for households, markets, and religious institutions, fostering creativity, economic participation, cultural preservation, and social recognition. Thus, weaving functioned as both vocational education and an instrument of women's empowerment.

3.2.7 Social Respect and Inclusion

The Vaishnavite movement in Assam contributed to the social inclusion of women by emphasizing bhakti, equality, and humanity over caste and status. Women gained greater opportunities to participate in Namghar activities, devotional singing, and religious gatherings (Patha, 2021). Although formal education remained limited, Satras and Namghars facilitated informal, skill-based, and spiritual learning, fostering women's confidence, self-expression, and social recognition.

3.2.8 Informal Education of Women

Women learned religious songs (Borgeets), prayers, storytelling and moral teachings through participation in Vaishnavite cultural practices. Listening to recitations of the Bhagavata and other devotional texts increased their knowledge and awareness. Women also learned communication skills, discipline, cooperation and community participation through festivals and group religious activities. Elder women often passed knowledge orally to younger generations, creating a strong tradition of informal education.

3.2.9 Skill-Based Education of Women

The Vaishnavite Movement significantly advanced women's informal and skill-based education during the Ahom period. Through weaving, textile-making, handicrafts, mask decoration, music, devotional singing, dance, manuscript preparation, and religious-cultural activities, women acquired vocational, artistic, and moral knowledge (Hazarika, 2026). Although formal schooling remained limited, their participation strengthened social inclusion, preserved Assamese cultural traditions, and enhanced women's contributions to community and cultural development.

3.3 Role of Vaishnavite Movement in Upgrading Women's Status

The Vaishnavite movement initiated by Srimanta Sankaradeva and strengthened by Madhavadeva constituted a significant socio-religious transformation in medieval Assam. Its emphasis on bhakti, spiritual equality, moral conduct, and devotion to one God challenged orthodox practices, caste distinctions, costly rituals, and superstitions. By facilitating women's participation in Namghars, Naam-kirtans, devotional singing, religious observances, and community activities, the movement enhanced their religious visibility and social dignity. Women's involvement in Bhaona, Borgeet, festivals, and the preservation of devotional traditions further expanded their cultural participation. The movement's egalitarian ethos also enabled women from diverse caste and tribal communities to engage more actively in religious and communal life.

Nevertheless, the transformation remained partial. Patriarchal structures persisted, and leadership within Satras largely remained male-dominated. Thus, Neo-Vaishnavism did not establish gender equality in a modern sense, but it broadened women's religious, cultural, and social participation. Its institutional and ideological interventions represented an important development in the gradual reconfiguration of women's status in medieval Assamese society.

3.3.1 Impact on the Social Status of Women

The Vaishnavite Movement in Assam in the 15th-16th centuries brought significant social and religious reforms. One of its important contributions was the improvement of the position of women in medieval Assamese society.

1. Promotion of Spiritual Equality:

The Vaishnavite movement in medieval Assam promoted spiritual equality through bhakti, challenging caste and gender hierarchies. Women gained greater participation in Namghars and religious practices, enhancing their dignity, visibility, and spiritual agency. Figures such as Kanakalata and Bhubaneshwari exemplified female religious leadership. Kanaklata Ai alias Lakshi Ai, the granddaughter -in-law of Sankaradeva and the wife of Chaturbhuja Thakur was the first woman to act as a religious head (Neog, 1965). Bhuvaneswari, the daughter of Harideva, was also made the head of their sub-sects (Sarma, 1966). Despite limitations, the movement strengthened women's social and spiritual status.

2. Participation in Religious Activities:

Women's participation in Vaishnavite religious activities under Srimanta Sankardeva and Madhavadeva contributed significantly to their enhanced social status in medieval Assam. Participation in Namghars, Naam-Kirtan, and religious discourses fostered spiritual awareness, social interaction, self-confidence, and recognition beyond domestic spheres. Despite enduring social limitations, such involvement strengthened women's

dignity, visibility, social acceptance, and contribution to preserving Vaishnavite cultural traditions.

3. Access to Religious Education:
Vaishnavism in medieval Assam expanded women's access to religious education through vernacular devotional learning, borgeets, sacred discourses, and participation in Namghars. By challenging caste- and gender-based restrictions, the movement enhanced women's religious awareness, social dignity, confidence, and community participation, contributing significantly to their gradual social upliftment despite persisting gender inequalities.

4. Reduction of Caste and Social Barriers:
The Vaishnavite movement weakened caste and social hierarchies by emphasizing bhakti, spiritual equality, and individual dignity. This inclusivism expanded women's participation in congregational worship, religious discourse, and devotional practices across social groups. Although gender equality remained incomplete, the movement enhanced women's religious recognition, social dignity, and community participation, contributing to their improved status in medieval Assam.

5. Encouragement of Cultural Participation:
The Vaishnavite movement in medieval Assam contributed to women's social upliftment by expanding their participation in religious and cultural life. Through Namghars, women engaged in devotional singing, religious discourses, prayer, and cultural performances (Neog, 1965). This participation fostered social interaction, spiritual development, confidence, and public recognition. By emphasizing spiritual equality and human dignity, the movement challenged gender-based social restrictions and broadened women's societal roles.

6. Improvement in Moral and Social Respect:
The Vaishnavite movement of Srimanta Sankardeva and Madhavadeva advanced women's moral and social status in medieval Assam by emphasizing spiritual equality, devotion, ethical conduct, and compassion beyond caste, wealth, or gender. Women gained greater participation in prayer, Naam-Kirtan, religious discourses, and community life, enhancing their dignity and social recognition, despite limited institutional leadership roles.

7. Influence through Family and Society:
The Vaishnavite Movement in medieval Assam challenged caste and gender distinctions through bhakti, equality, and ethical values. Family participation in devotional practices enhanced women's recognition, while Satras and Namghars facilitated community engagement. Though leadership remained limited, the movement strengthened women's social dignity and moral status.

8. Creation of More Human Social Order:
The Vaishnavite movement contributed to a more humane and egalitarian social order in medieval Assam. By emphasizing bhakti, spiritual equality, moral values, and social harmony, it enabled women's participation in devotional and cultural activities and enhanced their social dignity. However, patriarchal customs persisted, and women remained largely excluded from leadership within Satras.
Thus, Neo-Vaishnavism represented a significant, though incomplete, step toward improving women's social and religious status.

3.3.2 Impact on the Religious Aspect of Women
The Vaishnavite movement on Assam, led by Srimanta Sankardeva and later strengthened by Madhavadeva brought significant changes to the religious life of women in medieval Assam. Before this movement, women's participation in religious activities was often restricted by social customs and orthodox practices. The Neo- Vaishnavite movement helped to improve their religious status in several ways.
1. Equal Access to Devotion:
The Neo-Vaishnavite movement enhanced women's religious status by promoting devotional equality beyond caste, class, and gender. Through Nam-Kirtan, prayer, religious discourse, Assamese-language teachings, and reduced ritual dependence, women gained greater access to spiritual knowledge and worship, fostering religious recognition, self-respect, spiritual equality, and broader social upliftment in medieval Assam.

2. Participation in Namghar Activities:
In medieval Assam, women's participation in Namghar activities significantly enhanced their religious consciousness and spiritual awareness. Through Nam-Prasanga, scriptural recitation, religious discourses, festivals, and collective prayers,

women gained access to religious knowledge previously dominated by men. Women were appointed as religious instructors or Medhi. Dayal, the wife of Teli- Krishna Atoi, was a disciple of Badula Ata and was appointed as a Medhi to the queens of king Lakshmi Narayan (Lekharu, 1952). Neo-Vaishnavite egalitarianism foregrounded bhakti beyond caste and gender distinctions, fostering moral education, social interaction, dignity, and collective identity, thereby strengthening women's religious status and social recognition. Women were also made the heads of religious institutions.

3. Spiritual Equality:

Spiritual equality was central to the Neo-Vaishnavite movement of Srimanta Sankardeva and Madhavadeva, asserting equal spiritual worth irrespective of caste, gender, or status. By emphasising bhakti as the path to salvation, the movement expanded women's participation in devotional practices, enhanced religious awareness and self-respect, and challenged gender-based restrictions, thereby fostering a more inclusive religious culture in medieval Assam.

4. Freedom from Costly Rituals:

Neo-Vaishnavism challenged costly, ritualistic religious practices and priestly mediation in medieval Assam. By emphasizing accessible bhakti, nam-kirtan, prayer, and congregational worship, it enabled women across economic backgrounds to participate more actively in religious life. Its emphasis on spiritual equality over caste, gender, and status consequently facilitated women's religious agency, social recognition, and broader participation.

5. Access to Religious Knowledge:

In Medieval Assam, the Neo-Vaishnavite movement of Srimanta Sankardeva and Madhavadeva expanded women's access to religious knowledge through vernacular literature, Naam-Kirtan, Namghars, and Satras (Sonowal, 2019). Although participation remained gender-differentiated, bhakti ideals challenged caste and ritual hierarchies, enabling women to gain spiritual awareness, confidence, and social recognition, thereby contributing to their gradual social empowerment.

6. Development of Moral and Ethical Values:

The development of moral and ethical values under the Neo-Vaishnavite movement significantly influenced women's social status in medieval Assam. Teachings emphasizing compassion, equality, humility, truthfulness, respect, and devotion challenged caste, class, and gender-based discrimination. They encouraged women's participation in religious and community life while enhancing their dignity and recognition. Although gender equality remained incomplete, these ethical ideals fostered more inclusive attitudes and gradually improved women's social position.

7. Inclusion of Women from Different Social Groups:

Srimanta Sankardeva's Vaishnavite movement advanced women's social status in medieval Assam by fostering inclusive participation across caste and social boundaries. Women engaged in prayer, bhakti, and Ankia Naat, challenging restrictive domestic norms. This participation expanded their access to spiritual, cultural, and educational spheres, fostering greater equality, dignity, and recognition of women's agency in Assamese society.

8. Strengthening of Women's Religious Identity:

During the Ahom period, Vaishnavite movement strengthened women's religious identity through bhakti, inclusivity, and participation in naam-kirtans and devotional practices. This enhanced their spiritual visibility, encouraged ethical and cultural expression, and challenged restrictive gender norms. Consequently, women gained greater religious recognition and freedom, contributing to their social upliftment in medieval Assamese society.

3.3.3 Impact on the Economic Aspect of Women

The Vaishnavite movement in Assam in the 15th-16th centuries, brought significant social and cultural changes. One important aspect was the improvement of women's economic participation, which helped to raise their social status.

1. Participation in Cottage Industries:

The Vaishnavite movement contributed to women's economic upliftment in medieval Assam by fostering cottage industries through Namghars and Satras. Women actively engaged in weaving, spinning, embroidery, decorative crafts, manuscript-related

work, and production of religious and ceremonial articles. The expanding demand for textiles and handicrafts generated income, enhanced skills, and strengthened women's economic agency, thereby facilitating their greater participation in local socio-economic life (Deka et. al., 2024).

2. Promotion of Self-Reliance:

The contribution of the Vaishnavite movement in women's economic upliftment during medieval Assam were immense. Women participated in weaving, spinning, embroidery, manuscript-related crafts, and production of religious and ceremonial articles. The expanding demand for textiles and performance costumes enhanced their skills, income-generating opportunities, and financial autonomy, while collective participation and dignity of labour strengthened their socio-economic recognition (Deka et. al., 2024).

3. Role of contribution to Satra Economy:

During the Ahom-period Vaishnavite movement, Satras emerged as significant centres of women's economic participation. Through weaving, spinning, handicrafts, agricultural activities, and production of ritual textiles, women contributed substantially to Satra-based economies. This productive engagement enhanced their economic self-reliance, familial importance, and social recognition, while simultaneously preserving Assamese cultural traditions and reinforcing the dignity of labour.

4. Role of Recognition of Women's Labour:

During the Vaishnavite movement, women's labour gained greater social and economic recognition through participation in Satras, Namghars, weaving, spinning, and textile production. The promotion of cottage industries and handicrafts enhanced their contribution to household income and community life (Deka et. al., 2024). One such example was Gopal Ata's mother, who became the head of the weaving looms of the royal palace (Bardalai, 2023). Although economic independence remained limited, recognition of their productive skills strengthened women's socio-economic position during the Ahom-period in Assam.

5. Reduction of Social Barriers:

The Vaishnavite movement reduced social barriers by promoting equality, devotion, and inclusion. Women's participation in Satras and Namghars expanded their social visibility and cultural roles. Engagement in weaving, spinning, handicrafts, and cottage industries enhanced household income and economic self-reliance (Deka et. al., 2024). Consequently, the movement strengthened women's economic participation, social recognition, and relative financial autonomy in medieval Assamese society.

6. Strengthening Household Economy:

During the Ahom period, the Vaishnavite movement strengthened women's economic position by promoting household industries, self-reliance, and productive labour. Women contributed through weaving, spinning, food preparation, dairy production, and religious crafts. By encouraging cottage industries, resource conservation, and restrained expenditure, the movement enhanced women's economic significance within families and communities without fundamentally altering patriarchal structures.

The Vaishnavite movement in medieval Assam improved the status of women not only through religious and social reforms but also through economic empowerment. By encouraging women's participation in weaving, handicrafts, community production and religious institutions, the movement enhanced their economic value, self- confidence and social respect. Thus, economic participation became an important factor in upgrading the status of women during the Vaishnavite era.

3.3.4 Impact on the Cultural Aspect of Women

The Vaishnavite movement in Assam, led by Srimanta Sankardeva, brought significant social and cultural changes. Its cultural activities helped to improve the position of women in medieval society.

1. Participation in Religious Activities:

The Vaishnavite movement enhanced women's cultural status in medieval Assam by facilitating their participation in devotional practices, religious learning, artistic activities, weaving, and handicrafts. While gender inequalities persisted, collective engagement in Namghars and Satras strengthened women's spiritual awareness, social recognition, and role in preserving Assamese cultural traditions.

2. Access to Religious Knowledge:

Access to religious knowledge during the Vaishnavite movement broadened women's cultural and

educational horizons in Ahom period. Through bhakti and spiritual equality, women gained greater exposure to literacy, ethical values, religious practices, and communal participation, strengthening their social confidence, cultural agency, and role as transmitters of religious traditions.

3. Contribution to Satra and Namghar Culture:
During the Ahom period, Satra and Namghar institutions significantly enhanced women's cultural participation within the Vaishnavite movement. Through devotional practices, religious gatherings, Borgeet, festivals, crafts, and community activities, women acquired religious knowledge and social recognition. Their participation strengthened cultural identity and facilitated the intergenerational transmission of Vaishnavite traditions (Sarma, 1966).

4. Promotion of Equality:
The Vaishnavite Movement promoted gender equality and enhanced women's social and cultural status. Through accessible Assamese religious teachings, Namghars, Naam-Kirtan, devotional music, festivals, and community participation, women gained greater opportunities for spiritual learning, cultural expression, and collective engagement, contributing significantly to Assamese cultural preservation.

5. Opportunities in Performing Arts:
Vaishnavism during the Ahom period enhanced women's cultural status by facilitating participation in devotional singing, religious recitation, storytelling, folk traditions, and community-based performances. Despite restrictions on stage participation in Satras, women gained access to music, literature, religious knowledge, and Assamese cultural expression, strengthening their roles as cultural and religious preservers.

6. Moral and Social Reform:
The Vaishnavite movement significantly enhanced women's cultural status in medieval Assam by promoting equality, ethical conduct, spiritual education and social participation. Through Namghar-centred activities, devotional practices and Assamese religious instruction, women gained visibility, dignity and cultural awareness, while contributing to the preservation of religious traditions and collective identity.

The cultural dimensions of the Vaishnavite Movement in Assam played an important role in enhancing the status of women. By promoting devotional participation, access to religious knowledge, cultural involvement and spiritual equality, the movement helped women to gain greater respect and visibility in medieval Assamese society, even though complete gender equality was not achieved.

## IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this investigation demonstrates that the Neo-Vaishnavite movement served as a transformative catalyst for the informal, skill-based, and spiritual education of women in medieval Assam. By establishing the Namghar as a site of collective pedagogy and shifting religious discourse into the vernacular Assamese language, the movement democratized access to sacred knowledge, enabling women to cultivate functional literacy, mnemonic capabilities, and aesthetic expertise (Sonowal, 2019). Furthermore, the integration of devotional life with material practices—most notably ceremonial weaving, craft production, and performative arts—enhanced women's socio-economic utility and agency within the household and broader agrarian economy. However, an objective historical assessment reveals that this empowerment operated within defined boundaries; the movement's egalitarianism remained primarily spiritual rather than structural, as patriarchal norms continued to exclude women from institutional governance within the Satras. Nevertheless, by imbuing women's domestic, artistic, and devotional labor with sacred dignity, the Vaishnavite movement permanently elevated their social standing, expanded their cultural visibility, and laid an enduring, community-based foundation for women's informal education in Assamese society.

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