



VKIC

Vol - XV

Newsletter

Issue - 37

October 2018 - March, 2019



A Publication of Vivekananda Kendra Institute of Culture, Guwahati

From the Director's Desk

Across Assam as the spring festivities sow the seeds of hope and longing, I extend season's greetings and warm wishes from VKIC. It is always a joy to arrive at a moment of anticipation and then to look back at the developments which led us to where we are today. For us, the recent months have prepared the groundwork for new achievements to aspire for. Recently we have created a corpus of knowledge that will enable researchers and academics to launch new intellectual forays into significant cultural issues of our region.

January 31 is the Foundation Day for VKIC and on this occasion the distinguished cultural activist Nabam Tata of Arunachal Pradesh was conferred the prestigious VKIC Sanmaan 2019. Today the North East is in acute need of social entrepreneurs like Sri Tata, who can empower communities to preserve and promote their ancient knowledge and practices which lead to sustainable living by respecting nature and natural processes. The Foundation Day lecture, delivered by Dr Sachchidanand Joshi, Member Secretary IGNCA, gave insights on Sanskriti, or culture in the Indian context.

The Jaintia community of Meghalaya is among the oldest indigenous people of North East India. They have evolved with some core beliefs which have remained unchanged over time, even though changes have also affected their day-to-day life. The Jaintia have rich oral history and have maintained institutions of self-governance. A pantheon of gods and goddesses represent their religious and spiritual roots. The national seminar, 'Traditional Systems of the Jaintia Community: Change and Continuity,' organized by VKIC in collaboration with Seinraij Jowai brought these and other facts to light.

Recently we published a book on Namghar, the religious and spiritual institution at the heart of Vaishnavite culture of Assam. Containing articles based on a series of interactive sessions, it attempts to look at the Namghar from different angles, but with the common thread that they are written with knowledge sourced from the grassroots. Another book on the Bodo community of Assam is a compilation of lectures on various aspects of the community, revealing important aspects of their traditional systems and how the people have flourished in the present while retaining many ancient beliefs and practices.

I hope you gain a bird's-eye view of our latest work and offer your suggestions to enhance our endeavour in the days ahead.

Dr Parimal Ch. Bhattacharjee

Activities

VKIC Sanmaan 2019

Sri Nabam Tata of Arunachal Pradesh, who has dedicated his life to safeguard and promote the culture of Nyishi and other indigenous communities of his State, was awarded the prestigious VKIC Sanmaan for the year 2019.



His contributions are in several significant areas including preservation of oral literature, music, film making and creative compositions – which have also encouraged many others. He was bestowed with the honour by Dr Sachchidanand Joshi, member secretary of Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts. In his acceptance speech Sri Tata expressed his gratitude to VKIC and reaffirmed his commitment to reveal the cultural richness contained among indigenous communities of the region.

2019 Foundation Day Lecture by Dr Sachchidanand Joshi

Topic : Culture Nurtures Unity

Recently, when I went to Nagaland I realized the importance of the topic, the topic which we are discussing – 'Culture Nurtures Unity: the North East Perspective.' Because you all are scholars mostly belonging to different academic fields or cultural fields I need not elaborate on



definition of culture, which is derived from Cult in Latin. But when we say cult, it becomes something different. It is about refining and cultivating other things, making your life more refined. That is cult. But when it comes to Indian terminology it is called *sanskriti* and *sanskriti* is something much more than only culture. Because *sanskriti* is something that comes from your heart.

We need to understand what *Sanskriti* exactly means. Pandit Deendayal Upadhyay in his *Ekatma Manav Darshan* showed us what is *prakriti*, what is *sanskriti* and what is *bikriti*. I have half-a-bread. Someone comes, I give half of that. That is *sanskriti*. If I have enough but I keep everything for myself that becomes *bikriti*; because nature has given enough for all of us to survive. But it depends on my *sanskriti* or *bikriti* of my mind, which decides how I am going to deliver it to the society.

And when I talk about *sanskriti*, I also wonder what Bharat means. From Afghanistan to Indonesia, and the culture that has flown can you confine the entire thing into just geographical borders? For the last 200 years, and more pathetically for the last 70 years, we have always been dragged and deprived from the reality of Indian cultural ethos. Nobody told us that India has never been enslaved. Entire India was not enslaved. The entire threads from Afghanistan to Indonesia were never entirely under occupation. One part of the country was always independent.



They always say that India was under slavery, under British rule. It is only for a few hundred years if at all... What about the thousands and thousands of years of flowing traditions? Rich cultural heritage, rich traditions, Upanishads, Purans, shastriya traditions and we have immense knowledge. So what is this Akhanda Bharata? We

want to understand, know, what were the geographic and cultural dimensions?



When I see culture as the thread of continuity, thread of unity, it is the essence of the Indianness, it is the essence of Bharatiyata. When we say that cultures nurtures unity it is not nurturing unity, culture in fact is an integral, an important point of the unity. You don't have culture, you cannot unite. If there is no culture there will be no unity. Culture will sow unity.

Our culture is reflected in our society. For instance, we did not have Vriddhashrams, because we never think that I can be separated from my mother and father. As long as they are here, they are here, in my house, and I am living with them. We never had Anathashrams, because the society was capable enough, society was caring enough to take care of a boy or a girl who did not have father and mother.

But unfortunately, the education system, especially the modern education system has neglected that system. And coming to the North Eastern contribution, I would like to place it on record. If you see the map of Akhanda Bharat, from Afghanistan to Indonesia, or even Burma, just find out which is the central part of India? This entire North East becomes the focal part of India, in the Akhanda Bharat philosophy!

And the way the states of the North East have preserved their culture, propagated their culture is remarkable against the challenges, against the terrain. As to our reverend gurus, like most respected Shankardev ji, or stalwart kings like Lachit Barphukan who fought for their cultural survival, people of the North East have always tried to protect their cultural roots. And it is a lesson for all of us to learn for so-called mainland India – How to remain in touch with your own cultural traditions.

A few years back we did a project on textiles of the North East where we have documented the textile traditions of all



the eight North Eastern states, with the help of National Institute of Design. More than 20,000 samples from different North Eastern states were collected. When I was in a conference in Copenhagen, and I was discussing this fact with a lady from Holland who was doing some research on the textiles of Europe. I said, 'Textiles of Europe must be a very big subject, because in India we see different styles and patterns of textiles throughout the country.' She said, 'No sir, we are not lucky!' As she had been to the North East, she said, 'Only if we count the North East, the textiles of these states is much richer than the textile tradition of the whole of Europe.'

So this is the right forum and I am sure that institutions like Vivekananda Kendra Institute of Culture and eminent persons like Nabam Tata who are all doing great effort in bringing back the ethos back to the education system, social life, to our way of thinking. And then making life more culturally rich, culturally alive, which is the basic need of the hour. And if we don't move into that, we are in danger of losing our own identities.

So if we don't preserve we are on the verge of losing our cultural identities in the metropolitan cities. Development is one process but losing a cultural identity is a different thing. And we should not like that to happen to our villages, our own tribes and our own customs. And for that I think this is the right time and opportunity to *Uttisthata Jagrata!* The country requires a cultural rejuvenation. And that cultural rejuvenation would come when intellectuals like you take it like a pledge.

(Excerpts)

Development Through Culture

An Interactive Session

As a part of its Foundation Day celebrations VKIC organised an interaction with select resource persons related to one of its main objectives – Development Through Culture.

Dr. P. C. Bhattacharjee, Director, Research Advisory Council, in his welcome address mentioned that Development through Culture is now recognized internationally. VKIC for the last 20 years has been trying to understand the cultural elements of various communities, through seminars, symposiums recordings, documentation, etc. VKIC wants to find out the unifying threads. More thinking is required on Development Through Culture-sustainable agriculture, rice based economy and skill building can usher in Development Through Culture.

Retired senior banker, Sri Kashinath Hazarika, who chaired the session said that the main subject is deep. It has been under discussion for a long time; even at the United Nations level. However, no one has been able to master the subject in a minute way. What the strengths are at the community level and how those can be developed further and how to take it to a higher orbit calls for deep thinking. Therefore, communities must participate in the development process; because the community knows its reality better. And the process must be from the bottom to the top, not from top down.



Samir Bordoloi, a noted progressive farmer and a farm trainer of Assam presented a power point on 'Livelihood to Nutrition: A Farmer's Perspective and SPREAD NE Model.' He mentioned agri plus culture is agriculture. Agri means soil and culture is connected with *sanaskriti*. *Krishi* and *sanaskriti* come together to create our villages. And the youth are the backbone. If the youth are taken away from farming to other professions, then the culture disintegrates.

Apart from managing farm learning centres and agri-entrepreneurship, SPREAD NE is working in more than 150 schools in the North East through an activity-based learning model and is creating awareness of growing one's own food and becoming a food entrepreneur. Because the education system at present cannot give jobs to everybody, agripreneurship can help job creation. The motto is to make the kids learn to grow their own food. The school garden that is created becomes a science laboratory. From photosynthesis to the leaves, from the soil to the earthworms, everything can be related to the class V, VI, VII, VIII science textbooks.

A garden can teach children patience, love, compassion among other things. The child when it comes to the garden he or she can touch the soil, realise the patience required, the



compassion, the love, the group dynamics; everything can be taught, practically, not like in a workshop or lecture.

The children after receiving training will go to their community and they will motivate their parents to make homestead gardens. In Assam this effort is named *aamaar baari*, *aamaar parichay*. This is a movement to make homestead gardening a part of the Assamese identity.

Monorom Gogoi, well known for promoting indigenous food, in his presentation was of the view that although three things have been kept in focus in the session: Skill, Production and Market, an additional point that needs to be mentioned is Resources.

During a press meet not very long ago Assam's Minister of Agriculture had claimed that the Agriculture Department was in a position to say that the state is becoming self-reliant so far rice production is concerned. If that was indeed a fact why would shops in Guwahati have rice that is imported to the extent of 99 per cent? After studying and researching this, the seed of 'Tholguri', a brand, was planted in his mind ten years ago.

The food that grows best in a particular land and weather condition should be the staple of people living in the region. If that is a scientifically proven fact, then the people in Assam should not consume wheat products on a regular basis. Someone tries it for taste occasionally is a different thing. If the food that people have from breakfast till dinner have not been produced in their own agro-climatic conditions then they are becoming unhealthy.

He asserted that the use of local rice from which our ancestors made our traditional food items need to be promoted. All the traditional food items the indigenous people have are healthy and they can be made very tasty. This tradition was smoothly continuing till AD 1826. After that, it is not even 200 years and the people have altered their food culture.

Even when people were under royal governance, every family had a *bari*. It is mentioned that three *bigha* of land was used as a *bari* by Momai Tamuli Barbarua. This concept of having three *bigha* of dry land, was there. It had all the advantages of growing all types of vegetables, all types of fruits. There will be some bamboo and there will be wood to be used as cooking fuel. There will also be a pond to raise fish. They possessed such a self-sufficient economy in which a family could maintain itself without borrowing anything from anyone.

It is to show that indigenous food can be made acceptable that his brand Tholguri, *asamia howar gowrab* was started. Even though the Assamese, traditionally, were not

businessmen and traders, it is the right time now, because this is the era of market economy. It is the era of globalization.

A number of varieties of rice that Assam has can be marketed. The market for rice, internationally, nationally and domestically, can be captured. During this Bihu, selling *jalpan* and *pitha pana*, Tholguri quickly ran out of stocks; such was the demand. The only thing that needs to be remembered is quality. If a great many people can be involved in a rice centric economic movement, then it will be very profitable for all of them.



Now almost one thousand people are associated with *Tholguri* directly or indirectly in the last two years. These people are working from Sadiya to Dhubri. If work is done aggressively, it will not require much time to increase the numbers from one thousand to one lakh.

Manash Roy Barua made a presentation on the skill and capacity building activities of Vivekananda Kendra. Vivekananda Kendra started its work in Arunachal Pradesh in 1974 and three years later Kendra established its first chain of schools in the state to impart quality education by which character is formed, strength of mind is increased, the intellect is expanded and by which one can stand on one's own feet. Around 30,000 students are given man making character building education as envisaged by Swamiji.

Considering the vast potential for the skill development need of the region, Kendra established vocational training centre as a part of rural development programme in Arunachal Pradesh for women in 1986, the Vocational training centre at Khatkhathi, Karbi Anglong was set up as a part of rural development programme for women.

It was in 1986 that a programme for skill development started in order to equip the needy unemployed youth with



no skill or low level of skill comprising a major chunk of the population with employable skills of their choice.



Manash Roy Barua

The Kendra has been a pioneer in serving grassroots community. It could foresee the need thirty - thirty five years back and started "Rural Welfare Project" in Arunachal Pradesh and in Khatkhati, Karbi Anglong, Assam to skill poor and downtrodden young girls of tribal and rural areas.

The Vocational training centre at Khatkhati is in the middle of Karbi Anglong. It is 10 km away from Bokajan as well as from Dimapur. The sprawling campus is spread on 150 acre plot. Since 1986, around 1,000 weavers have been trained.

Sensing that organic farming is gaining prominence among the farming community as well as the urban dwellers, Vivekananda Kendra has ventured into this field to promote consciousness about health and the environment. In Mangaldoi, 21 villages are covered so far. Such training has started in Karbi Anglong, Sivasagar, Jorhat and Bongaigaon.

Moreover, few other workshops on skill development were done in 2016/17. One was on electrical gadget and the other on LED art. Recently a workshop on weaving was done in Mangaldoi with the help of Karyakartas from Khatkhati. It was a five-day programme. Twenty-five women benefitted from this programme.

success story scripted by the new Assamese film *Village Rockstars* which was chosen as India's official entry in the race for the Oscars. For the first time a film from Assam has been accorded that honour and Assam is inspired by the development.

Though songs and dances, folklore and myths were explored in the early years of Indian cinema, many of the stalwarts tried to break the conservative mould by dwelling with subjects as varied as love, untouchability, dowry, exploitation of the downtrodden and so on. The female form could not be shown, but gradually social taboos were broken allowing stray adventurous attempts which prompted the leaders of social reform and freedom struggle, for instance Mahatma Gandhi, called the medium of cinema a "sinful technology". Yet, Jyotiprasad did not keep himself away from making films, so much for his love for the medium, but at the same time he took great care to make his first film delving deep into the protest genre by drawing largely from the non-violent narrative of political and mass resistance.

The new crop of filmmakers in Assam is not easily bogged down by a hard and unfavorable reality and they continue to try their best to usher in a new language of cinema. Some of them have won prestigious honors at national and international platforms. The consistency in their efforts is laudable.



In this atmosphere it becomes necessary to recall New Wave cinema movement in France of the 1950s and 1960s, when some writers and film critics played a pioneering role shaping the new style that later came to be acknowledged as the Nouvelle Vague (New Wave) of French cinema. In the context of Assam, a new trend is noticeable in the last four or five years. The influence of Bollywood is very high, but still the new filmmakers have acquired a cinematic language of their own.

So it is high time that filmmakers in Assam make films of their own – rather than unsuccessfully trying to emulate the big-budget Bollywood ventures – by exploring their own

VIth Minati Hazarika Memorial Lecture at Nowgong College

Topic : Social importance of Assamese cinema in perspective

Sri Manoj Barpujari, eminent film critic, opened his lecture by stating that although he generally narrated his subject in a historic sequence, beginning in 1935 when the film *Joymoti* was released, he would like to deal the subject in a flashback mode. The reason being a recent development – a



film language, own cinematic vocabularies in terms of local subjects, local nuances and regional realities. In this case Romania can be mentioned. After the autocratic reign of Nicolae Ceau'escu, and the fall of the USSR, people found a new whiff of freedom. Then the filmmakers focused on their immediate past to make films with their new found freedom. They were so conscious about their subject material that when their films won international recognition and acclamations, bringing them lucrative proposals of co-productions from foreign producers, from the West, they politely refused to accept the offers.

That is called cinema, with all its charisma, its role in collective enlightenment, which is not limited to sheer entertainment alone. It is a matter of pride to observe and assess this kind of characteristic in the new generation of filmmakers from Assam.

Village Rockstars is excellently made for both children and mature audiences. That is why it won awards as best children film and best feature film at different national and international competitions. Talking of children, it is worth recalling how the underage filmgoers are groomed in India. Once in a special programme for small kids the question was: how many of them have seen *Bahubali: The Beginning*. Almost all of them raised their hands. This S. S. Rajamouli's Tamil-Telugu film *Bahubali* which was dubbed in Hindi is no way a children film, it is made for grownups.

So the childlike mentality of the adult is reflected in the films. The films that are from Bollywood are meant to satiate the childlike craving within the common person. Should not the audience evolve intellectually? "If I am a mature person, then *Village Rockstars* will be equally significant for me. I will find entertainment there; and I won't remain a child. If I stay with a childlike mindset, I will love *Bahubali*, and *Mission China* as well. If our mental faculty is not allowed to grow, the filmmakers will continue to treat us as children that will no doubt hamper our growth, psychologically and intellectually."

In fact, many unrealistic films are made and they become popular. They are market oriented. Their inherent grammar and dialogues are not perfect, mostly theatrical; such movies can be watched and understood by a blind person because the dialogues are so heavy that the visuals lose their importance and meaning to be seen or understood. Sound design is made to enhance the dialogues. Sensitive people like Jyotiprasad Agarwala could not remain indifferent to what developments cinema as an art form was experiencing in his time.

It may sound repetitive, but worth recalling why, and how, Jyotiprasad did not use the language of drama. He took the European and American classic films as his model. In acting too he did not use the style used in theatrical exercise.

Even now many veteran filmmakers do not exploit that potential of cinematic acting and visual language, rather make their films laden with dialogues like a radio play; whereas in a good film, if you cease watching for a few moments a lot will be missed.

Joymoti became an important addition to the Protest Film genre by dealing with the national and patriotic narrative of non-violence. It was also India's first feminist film which not only had a woman as the protagonist, leaving all the important male characters for the side roles, thereby reversing the contemporary Indian film pattern, but also used other females in the film to construct a definite feminist discourse.

The social significance of the changing trend is immense. The originality of the resulting films has impact of a new-found consciousness of the indigenous people of Assam. Keeping away from it one cannot create any great and original art. "We have to encourage the new filmmakers who are keen to develop the aesthetics of cinema, and that too with the historic social significance. We should support their works wholeheartedly."

(Abridged)

XIth R N Phukan Memorial Lecture Topic: Technology for Sustainable Development

Focusing only on the environment would not help serve the cause of Sustainable Development. Along with it, the economy and the society too have to be taken into consideration when we aim for achieving development that also secures the needs of future generations.



This was a view of Prof. M Jagadesh Kumar, Vice Chancellor of Jawaharlal Nehru University, while delivering



the 11th Vedanta Vachaspati Radha Nath Phukan Memorial Biennial Lecture organised by VKIC on November 24, 2018.

Describing technology as a serious pursuit of craft and techniques, he mentioned that economic developments which are sustainable are crucial for India. They ought to be inclusive and should not be wasteful. In the last few decades, South East Asia has witnessed an output of E-waste that is dangerous and has serious consequences. Technology is trying to effect changes by designing devices with components which can be replaced, thus lengthening the life span of products.



Economic models have an impact on sustainable development. The reduction of energy use and adapting to solar and wind energy can be a big boon for a country like India. It has been assessed that about 84 per cent of the country's energy needs can be secured by a combination of solar and wind power.

About 60 per cent of Indians are in one way or the other dependent on agriculture. Unfortunately farming contributes only 17 per cent of the GDP. In order to achieve growth that is sustainable there is a great need for technological interventions. The Indian Institute of Science has made an apparatus that farmers can easily use to check the soil moisture, a vital task in agriculture. This and other innovations have made an impact on people away from cities and towns.

Society, in his opinion, also has a great role in laying the foundation for sustainable development in India. Since ancient times, Indian philosophy has underlined the concept of the common good. Now sociologists have once again underlined that truism – self-centred attitude and behaviour do not lead to common good. Citing experts, Prof Kumar said, “We have become pleasure seeking, curiosity driven human animals.”

Self-awareness is, therefore, the need of the hour. If one is serious about achieving sustainable development, then we must practice perennial human values such as love, affection and sharing. All these constitute part of Indian culture.

Urging people to become less materialistic and more responsible in their behaviour, Prof. Kumar said that when that happens society will become more effective in ushering in a type of development that does not endanger future generations.

(Abridged)

Seminar on the Jaintia Community in Jowai, Meghalaya

For the first time, VKIC organized a national seminar on an indigenous community in Meghalaya in collaboration with Sein Raij, an elite organization of the Jaintia people. The seminar with the theme ‘Traditional Systems of the Jaintia community: Change and continuity’ was held at Jowai on December 17-18-2018 and witnessed presentation of papers as well as interactions with the resource people.

The opening function was graced by Sri Metbah Lyngdoh, Cabinet Minister of Meghalaya, who was the Chief Guest. The welcome address was delivered by Sri O R Shallam, President of Sein Raij, Jowai. He provided significant insights into the traditional Jaintia society and also shed light on the beliefs associated with the community's origins.

Sri Lyndoh congratulated VKIC and Sein Raij for organizing the important event in Jowai and attempting to reveal the customs, traditions, history and other aspects of the Jaintia community. He was of the view that the seminar will help promote the unique culture of the Jaintias.



Dr P. C. Bhattacharjee, Director of Research Advisory Council, VKIC shared the objectives of VKIC and also mentioned the intent of the seminar. The activities of the



VKIC over more than two decades seek to explore and document traditional cultures which are still untapped. The seminar is a celebration of the knowledge, culture and identity of the Jaintia people.

In his keynote address, noted cultural activist Dr Joram Begi said that the Jaintias who belong to the Austro Asiatic language family is one of the oldest inhabitants of the North East. The teachings of the Niamtre religion, the original faith of the Jaintias encourage right living and right livelihood; every person is pious and the means of living ought to be good and virtuous.



The papers presented in the seminar, sponsored by the North Eastern Council, explored a range of topics. Some of them are 'Oral history of the Jaintias,' 'Traditional self-governing institutions,' 'God, divinities and spirit in Jaintia's religious belief,' 'Creation myths or cosmogonic myths of the Jaintias,' 'Marriage system of the Jaintias,' 'Divination in Jaintia's religious beliefs' and 'Traditional knowledge for cultural continuity.'

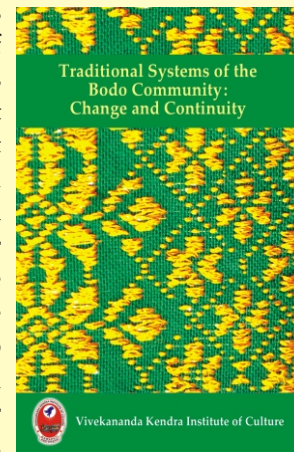
Maananeeya Nivedita Bhide, Vice President of Vivekananda Kendra Kanyakumari, delivering the valedictory address emphasized that culture is like a flow. We start in divinity and as time changes we hold on to the divinity. But we also take on to the challenges of the time. If we fail to do so, we become outdated. If we go with the time and forget our roots, then we lose our identity. Therefore, this process of change and continuity is vital for any community to keep its culture and identity intact.

She commended the efforts of those who presented the papers and praised Sein Raji Jowai for making the seminar a success. Swami Vivekananda, she said, always talked about practical Vedanta that manifested as 'Serve man, serve God!' He said religion is not in believing but 'in being and becoming,' it is how you behave with others. "Our Niamtre people, our Jaintia people have really made this seeing divinity everywhere practical in life."

New Books from VKIC

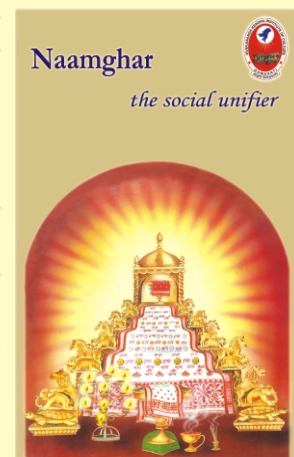
Traditional Systems of the Bodo Community: Change and Continuity

As the name suggests this book explores crucial aspects of the Bodo community as it evolves from its ancient past to its present status; embracing changes but also retaining key core beliefs and traditions. A collection of research papers presented in a seminar organized by VKIC, the publication attempts to provide an overall view of the Bodo people's cultural and spiritual evolution and their manifestations in knowledge as well as in practices. Containing a number of rare insights on the community, from experts who have carried out their research at the grassroots, it is a valued testament about a community that is justifiably proud of its deep cultural moorings.



Naamghar – The social unifier

Within this slim volume is an array of information on Naamghar, the definitive cultural landmark of Assam's *vaishnava* faith and traditions. Several experts and practitioners reveal facets of the Naamghar, their roots, cultural contributions, transformative phases and their present status in society. The writings reveal how and why this spiritual, cultural and social institution occupies an esteemed position in a region that is also marked with great diversity. In a way that is subtly suggestive the different voices underline the unifying, equalizing ethos of the Naamghar that has remained relevant in the 21st century even though its foundation was laid by Srimanta Sankardeva and his followers many centuries ago.



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