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The *Mahimā* of Ājali Āi and the Persecuted Māyāmārā Śatra: Guru-Mā as Holy Patroness and Divine Mother

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Abstract: Every year around 200,000 Māyāmārā Vaiṣṇavas congregate in a small village in Mājulī, Assam, India, for the annual *śevā*, or worship service, to Ājali Āi, a 16th-century female figure. She was the mother of Sri Sri Aniruddhadeva, the founder of Māyāmārā Vaiṣṇavism, a religious sect originating in medieval Assam that experienced royal persecution and ethnic cleansing. Among contemporary Māyāmārā Vaiṣṇavas, veneration of Ājali Āi as the mother of the founding Guru has become popular, which is somewhat puzzling since historical information about her life is scarce. Nevertheless, as Guru-Mā, Ājali Āi today has become a symbol of holiness in Māyāmārā society with community members attributing to her *mahimā*, translated as a divine agency, mysterious glory, or supremacy. Guru-*riṇ* and Mātri-*ṛin*, categories that are a part of the Vaiṣṇava and the larger Hindu canon, can generally explain the holiness accorded to the mother of the Guru. In the case of the Māyāmārā Vaiṣṇavas, however, they are not sufficient to explain the power in the form of *mahimā* that the community ascribes to her in the present day to the degree of attributing to her the power to grant wishes. This exploratory chapter argues for a systems approach to understand the phenomenon of the *mahimā* of Ājali Āi in contemporary Māyāmārā society. The chapter finds that socio-economic and political forces interacted with extant legends around Ājali Āi and ideas around Āi as Devi and mother in complex ways to create the community's contemporary understanding of Ājali Āi as a holy and loving maternal figure with *mahimā*—one who keeps a watchful and nurturing eye over the community and grants the wishes of ardent devotees.

Keywords: Hinduism; Māyāmārā; Vaiṣṇava; Guru; holiness; *śatra*; Assam; *bhakti*

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1. Introduction

Tucked away from the main road connecting the major *śatra*, places of Vaiṣṇava worship, in Mājulī, Assam, India, is a small, wooded area with a couple of houses. A decorative arch on the path leading to the area declares the area to be the *thāna*, place of rest or veneration, of Ājali Āi, who lived around five centuries ago in Kāmarupa (present-day Assam). Every year, around 200,000 Māyāmārā Vaiṣṇavas visit the *thāna* to pay their respects to Ājali Āi during an annual festival of *śevā*, worship festival or service[1]. As the mother of Sri Sri Aniruddhadeva, the founder of the sect of Māyāmārā Vaiṣṇavas, Ājali Āi is today revered as a holy, saint-like maternal figure, who watches over the community with a nurturing and caring eye and who grants the wishes of ardent devotees who offer *śevā* with an honest heart. She is not only a holy figure, but also a figure who has *mahimā*, the closest translation of *mahimā* being a mysterious glory infused with a divine power. The community associates this mysterious power with her *thāna*, place of rest, as well. Paying obeisance to Āi at her *thāna* promises blessings, while transgressions invite misfortune.

While *mahimā*, as a theological category, has great explanatory power for the community, its association with Ājali Āi is puzzling on account of the scarcity of historical information about her life.[2] *Sri Sri Aniruddhadeva'r Carit āru Māyāmārā Gośāin sakala'r Vaṃśāwali* (translated as the biography of Aniruddhadeva and the chronicle of Māyāmārā Gurus), compiled by one of the gurus of the community is, perhaps, the only known written

primary source that mentions Ājali Āi (see Aniruddhadeva 1931). From this source, we learn that she was the niece of Srīmanta Śankardeva (1449–1568 A.D.), who introduced the neo-Vaiṣṇava movement to Assam in the 15th century. Equally importantly, one of her sons, Sri Sri Aniruddhadeva, founded the Māyāmārā Vaiṣṇava sect under the auspices of the larger Vaiṣṇava bhakti movement in Assam. From this same source, we also understand that Aniruddhadeva was initiated into the neo-Vaiṣṇava movement by Gopāla Āta from the Kāla *saṃhati*, sect, the most egalitarian group of all Vaiṣṇava groups. After being initiated into the Kāla *saṃhati*, Aniruddhadeva, in turn, initiated his mother, Ājali Āi, and his father, Gunda Giri, into the *saṃhati* (Aniruddhadeva 1931, p. 7). The AC mentions Ājali Āi to be a *dhārmik*, *bhakti*-focused mother of the Guru, and by virtue of being the mother of the Guru, she is also considered *śujogya*, virtuous and holy by the community (S. Das 2019, pp. 81–82).

The concept of holiness lacks an exact equivalent in the South Asian context.[3] The word is generally used synonymously with terms such as *pavitra* (pure or sacred), *dhārmik* or *dharmaniṣṭha* (pious, focused on one's dharma), virtuous, or worthy of *śraddhā* (reverence). The sources of holiness in South Asian traditions may vary, and the term may acquire additional notions depending on the context. For example, in South Asian ascetic traditions, Hindu renunciants or mendicants called *sannyāsin*, *sādhu*, or *yogī* are considered holy—one of the sources of their holiness being the possession of knowledge of the supreme *Brahman* acquired through years of *tapasyā*, meditation, and *sādhanā*, spiritual practices. This *tapasyā* and *sādhanā* may also include practices of bodily mortification and suffering in addition to long periods of meditation. The Hindu canon lists a range of *siddhi*, abilities, and powers, including supernatural powers, that can be acquired through different kinds of *tapasyā* and *sādhanā*. The Vedic and Puranic literatures contain narratives of several such holy men with notions of purity, piety, and knowledge being generally associated with the holiness attributed to ascetics. Holiness, however, is not within the sole purview of men or ascetics.[4] Modern South Asia has witnessed a rise of sādhvis, swāminis, female gurus, and other female ascetics and non-ascetics who have been able to claim the mantle of holiness.[5]

Holiness, in the South Asian context, may also have other sources. Claims of divine authority, belongingness, or proximity to established lineage or holiness pedigree, identification with holiness myths or legends, and categorization under concepts that invoke *śraddhā* are a few other sources. These sources are not only relevant to holy women in contemporary South Asia seeking to challenge the established patriarchal understandings around holiness, but also applicable to historical figures, such as Ājali Āi, who are revered as holy women in the present day.[6] For the historical figures, however, the community plays an active role as an agent invested in the making of the saint.

The holiness that the community attributes to Ājali Āi has two major sources. In addition to her piety, her being the mother of the founding Guru, Aniruddhadeva, makes her a figure worthy of reverence to the community. The category of Guru-Mā, Mother of the Guru, is of theological significance within the Hindu canon, as one may think of it as the summation of the two separate categories of *riṇ*, debt or obligation: guru-*riṇ* and mātri-*ṛin*. These are two of the many kinds of *riṇ* that abound in Vaiṣṇava and the larger Hindu canon. Guru-*riṇ* is the spiritual obligation that a disciple owes to one's guru, while mātri-*ṛin* is the moral obligation that one owes to one's mother as the person who gave them life. Guru-Mā, thus, combines the spiritual obligation of a *bhakata*, disciple, to their guru and the intergenerational moral obligation that they have towards their mother as a parent. In Assamese Vaiṣṇavism, including among the Māyāmārā Vaiṣṇavas, a guru is considered divine and a manifestation of Kṛṣṇa Himself. As the mother of divinity, Guru-Mā, thus, becomes a theological category that is associated with holiness through its proximity to the divine figure of the Guru and by virtue of Āi being a mother.

Ideas around piety, guru-*riṇ*, and mātri-*ṛin* can explain the holiness that the community attributes to Ājali Āi, but they do not explain the supernatural power and divine agency that the community attributes to Āi post mortem in the form of her *mahimā*.[7] While the Hindu canon features several holy figures with supernatural powers, such as the sages

Paraśurāma, Vaśiṣṭha, and Viṣvāmitra, among others, holiness does not always go hand in hand with supernatural powers. As per the canon, one is either born with such powers on account of divine lineage, such as Sage Paraśurama, who is one of Lord Viṣṇu's ten avatāra, or one acquires these powers through *tapasyā*, such as Sage Viṣvāmitra. The possession of these supernatural powers is, however, not a necessary condition to being considered holy. The concept of holiness in the form of *pavitratā*, *dharmaniṣṭhatā*, and as the crucible of *guru-riṇ* and *mātri-ṛin*, thus, does not subsume the category of *mahimā*. The boundary between the two categories becomes more conspicuous in the case of historical figures, such as Ājali Āi, about whom not much historical information is available.

Understanding the popular nature of the veneration of Ājali Āi and conception of her *mahimā* requires one to look beyond the historical figure of Ājali Āi and into the forces, discourses, and agents that created a modern theological imaginary of Āi as a holy mother of the Guru with *mahimā*.

In light of the above, this exploratory chapter argues for a systems approach to understand the phenomena of the *mahimā* of Ājali Āi in the present day Māyāmārā society. The chapter calls for looking beyond the boundaries of the community and exploring the many forces within the larger, historical evolution of the community over time that necessitated the development of a powerful, *mahimā*-infused category of holy Guru-Mā. These forces were part of the socio-economic, cultural, political, and religious systems that constituted the milieu of the community and its members. These forces shaped the identity, self-conception, and future trajectory of the community, but the latter was not doomed to conform to these seen and unseen forces. The community and its members actively interacted, clashed, and shaped, to a degree, some of these forces, in return. Drawing from primary sources and secondary literature, this chapter explores the historical socio-cultural, economic, and political conditions that shaped the community and its identity, and, in the process, created the saint-like holy mother of the Guru, who had *mahimā apāra*, i.e., *mahimā* without limit. The function of her *mahimā* was to keep a watchful and nurturing eye over the community as it was beset by winds of socio-economic oppression and brutal persecution by the Ahom monarchy for decades. Her *mahimā* functions in the present day as the nurturing mother who blesses devotees and grants wishes.

The sections below apply a systems approach to understanding the *mahimā* of Ājali Āi in current Māyāmārā Vaiṣṇavism. The sections begin by briefly describing how systemic approaches have been applied in the extant literature in religious and theological studies. It then applies this approach towards understanding the emergence of the community's understanding of the *mahimā* of Ājali Āi. As part of this system's approach, the chapter views religions as social systems that have several interconnected components and which overlap and interact with other systems in their environment. In this vein, the chapter explores the pertinent elements of the Māyāmārā Vaiṣṇava religious system and elements of the various socio-economic and political systems that existed in the environment of the Māyāmārā Vaiṣṇava religious system that potentially played a role in the emergence of community understandings of Ājali Āi's *mahimā*. The chapter demonstrates that as the Māyāmārā community interacted with components inside the religious system and forces outside the system, the interactions shaped the community's identity and self-conception as a persecuted Vaiṣṇava *śatra*. The evolution of the community's identity and self-conception, in turn, contributed to the phenomenon of the veneration and influence of Ājali Āi in the present day. No one factor was solely responsible for this phenomenon, but the complex interaction among many components inside and outside the Māyāmārā religious system gave rise to this phenomenon. In system theory parlance, such phenomena are called emergent properties of complex systems. In other words, this chapter will demonstrate that the *mahimā* of Ājali Āi as understood in contemporary Māyāmārā society cannot be attributed to one single factor; instead, it can be understood as an emergent property of the complex interactions and relationships within and outside of the Māyāmārā Vaiṣṇava system during the period of early 17th century to the present day. The chapter concludes

with reflections on the implications of this phenomenon for the category of Guru-Mā in the context of Māyāmārā Vaiṣṇavas.

2. Systems Approaches in Religious Studies and Theology

Viewing religions as systems helps address some of the challenges that religious studies scholars have traditionally encountered in cross-cultural and comparative contexts, especially around definitions, concepts, and the evolving, complex nature of religions. A system is a set of elements that work together through interconnected networks, processes, and structures towards a *telos*. This idea of multiple potentially interconnected elements working together towards a *telos* makes a system different from its environment or from simply a set of discrete elements. Religions can be seen as such systems that comprise many elements that work together towards an overall systemic goal (Luhmann 2013). Some of the elements within a religious system may be rituals, meaning, authority, obligation, texts, beliefs, customs, norms, supernatural phenomena, and supernatural deities, among others (Sosis 2019, pp. 421–49). Human agents interact with these various elements, are shaped by it, and shape them, at times, in return. These human agents also interact with other elements and systems that lie outside of the boundaries of the religious system. Adopting such a systems-agent approach towards religions offers a more contextual approach to understanding religious phenomena.

In religious studies, there is a small albeit insightful corpus of work that use systems approaches to understand religious phenomena; however, most of the focus has been on the systems themselves, as individual agency has not received much attention in these extant works. Systems theories explore phenomena through the lens of social systems, interaction among the system elements, and/or interaction across systems. While systems approaches originated in the natural sciences and then were adopted and adapted into the social sciences, increasingly, they have found application in the humanities as well. The sections below highlight a few of the major systems approaches adopted in religious studies and offer a way of incorporating human agency towards understanding religious phenomena.

One of the pioneers of systems approaches in the social sciences is the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann, who offers a toolbox of applying systems approaches to social systems, including religions. He argues that a system is defined by its difference from its environment. A social system has a specific function, operation, or *raison d'être*, in the very service of which the system draws its boundaries from its environment. Social systems are also self-referential in that they make references to themselves as part of delineating and reinforcing these boundaries (Luhmann 2006, pp. 37–57). Law, as a social system, for example, occupies itself with the question of what is legal and what is not, and draws the appropriate boundaries based on this. Other social systems, such as politics, religion, and economics, function in similar ways. In this sense, the function or program of the social system works on the basis of a set of binary codes, such as legal versus illegal in the case of law as a social system. Similarly, Luhmann finds religions to be systems of communication and meaning. Like other social systems, religions have sets of codes that are a part of their communication and meaning-generation process and which are based on their specific program. This program also sets the boundaries of a religion.[8]

Looking inside the boundaries of a religious system, several elements may be a part of the system, which interact among one another and with forces outside of the boundaries of the religious system. Sosis (2019), for example, argues that religions have eight primary building blocks: ritual, meaning, sacrality, taboo, moral obligation, myth, authority, and supernatural agents. These building blocks interact among one another towards the *telos* of a religious system, which he argues is social cohesion, cooperation, or coordination. It is to be noted here, however, that a theologian will likely view social cohesion, cooperation, or coordination as collateral effects of a religious system—the *telos* being that of salvation or liberation of the soul, unity with a supreme divinity, etc. The building blocks may also evolve over time in complex and unpredictable ways on account of new circumstances and forces outside of the religious system.

Cho and Squier (2013) argue for treating religions as complex, adaptive, and dynamic systems (CADS) (Cho and Squier 2013, pp. 357–98). This approach helps us understand the evolution of religious systems and phenomena and offers a way of understanding them by exploring how complex systems behave and how some of their qualities may relate to religious phenomena. Religions are complex on two accounts. It is challenging to provide a complete definition or account of a religion in terms of explaining all its features. This is especially true when it is used as an analytical or theological category in cross-cultural contexts. Secondly, religions are complex in terms of the many components they have, such as myth, narratives, texts, traditions, institutions, doctrine, hierarchy, supernatural agents, and a meaning system, among others. They interact among one another in non-linear, and sometimes unpredictable, ways to give rise to various phenomena, patterns, structures, events, and behavior that we may understand to be religious in nature. Religions are, thus, not static, but dynamic and evolve spatially and temporally (Cho and Squier 2013). Part of the dynamic nature of religions is the fact that they are often adaptive; as systems, religions respond to new circumstances and realities inside and outside the boundaries of the religious system. Understanding religions as complex, adaptive, and dynamic systems that interact with other systems and their elements, thus, offers us a lens to explore how certain religious phenomena emerge in ways that are similar to the emergence of phenomena in complex systems.

This term, emergence, is used in the context of complex systems to denote certain properties that emerge as a result of various inter-related interactions among the elements of the system and their potential interactions with elements, including agents, outside of the system boundaries. Emergent properties of complex systems cannot be attributed to a single element or explained in terms of a simple two-way interaction between two system elements (Sosis 2019). While the phenomenon of emergence helps us understand some of the outcomes in complex systems, including religious systems, the role of human agents in the interactions responsible for emergence has not been sufficiently addressed. The question of human agents and their interaction with other agents and system elements has largely remained a black box in the extant literature on systems approaches in religious studies.[9] Understanding how a particular outcome has emerged in a complex system requires one to open this black box and unpack the key interactions that potentially led to said outcome. This is important even for scholars who may not be interested in a causal analysis, but only a deeper analysis of the outcome itself.

Human (and divine) agents interact with systems elements, building blocks if you will, of religious systems and elements outside of the system in subtle, complex, and non-linear ways contributing to emergent properties. The German sociologist Anthony Giddens has helpful insights on the interaction of agents and systems. He argues that just as systems constrain or enable actions of agents, the latter also contest the system and contribute to its evolution (Giddens 1984). Agents, thus, have a mutually interactive and constitutive process with what Giddens called structures, or in Sosis' terms, building blocks, of religious and other system. In other words, while agents are constrained by the rules and codes (or building blocks) in a system, they are also sometimes able to modify some of these building blocks. Giddens calls this the process of structuration. This interaction can also explain the property of emergence of complex systems. Agents interact with various building blocks in a system. On one hand, their agency is constrained by some of the blocks, such as rules, doctrine, and norms that are a part of the religious systems, but agents are also able to modify some of these rules and create new ones.[10] These interactions together shape phenomena that religious scholars and theologians are interested in. To put it more concretely, human agents may interact with some of these elements across systems and over time have a mutually constitutive relationship with various system elements. Over time, this may contribute to the evolution of religious phenomena or create new phenomena which cannot be explained solely on the basis of individual religious beliefs, doctrine, or any single building block of a religious system. They are emergent properties that are products of these many interactions. Theological categories and their interpretations are

emergent properties of religions as complex systems. In other words, religious phenomena or ideas may not be a simple reflection of a text or a philosophical concept. Instead, they are a product of a larger and more complex interaction process between the agent and the systems that they interact with (e.g., religion, law, politics, culture, economy, etc.), including the sub-system elements—the building blocks.

The above dynamic of emergence is evident in the case of how Ājali Āi came to be venerated as the holy and divine mother with *mahimā* in present-day Māyāmārā society. The phenomenon of this veneration and influence can be understood as an emergent property of the Māyāmārā Vaiṣṇava system during the period of the early 17th century to the present day. The sections below delve deeper into the formation of the category of Guru-Mā in the context of Māyāmārā Vaiṣṇavism and how it contributed to the contemporary influence of Ājali Āi in Māyāmārā society as Guru-Mā. It explores the pertinent building blocks of the religious system of Māyāmārā Vaiṣṇavism from 17th-century Assam to its present day and charts some of the salient ways that agents interacted not only with building blocks within the Māyāmārā Vaiṣṇava religious system, but also systems that constituted the environment of the Māyāmārā Vaiṣṇava system. Doing so helps contextualize the forces that the Māyāmārā community encountered from within and without their religious system and understand the forces and interactions that possibly contributed to the phenomenon of Ājali Āi's influence in contemporary culture.

3. Ājali Āi's *Mahimā* in Contemporary Māyāmārā Society: A Systems-Agent Lens

The attribution of *mahimā* to Ājali Āi in contemporary Māyāmārā society can be understood through the lens of the larger systemic forces that shaped the identity and self-conception of the community. In the Hindu canon, *mahimā*, much like *līlā*, divine play or sport, has great explanatory power in being a kind of supernatural agency that works in *driśya* (visible) and *adriśya* (invisible) reality. In addition to the aspect of mystery and agency associated with it, *mahimā* can also be rewarding or punitive. This is the case with the Māyāmārā Vaiṣṇavas as well. The community attributes *mahimā* and *līlā* to its gurus, whom they consider to be divine and the very manifestation of Viṣṇu Himself. Ideas around *guru-riṇ* and *mātri-ṛin* can explain the community's reverence towards Ājali Āi as mother of the Guru; the attribution of *mahimā* to the Āi, however, can be understood when we consider the larger systemic context of the community in terms of the socio-economic and political structures that the community was situated within and the agents with whom the community interacted.

Complex interactions among pertinent structures and agents contributed to the emergence of Ājali Āi's influence in the form of holiness and *mahimā* in the present day. While some of these structures, i.e., building blocks and agents, were within the boundaries of the Māyāmārā Vaiṣṇava religious system as a whole, the system itself and its constituent blocks also interacted with systems and agents outside of the religious system, i.e., the environment of the Māyāmārā Vaiṣṇava religious system.[11] Some of the key elements—drawing from Sosis (2019)—within the Māyāmārā Vaiṣṇava religious system that shaped individual action and behavior were myth, ideas, obligation, authority, and supernatural agents. The legend associated with Ājali Āi that became part of written and oral lore offered the mythical aspect, while ideas around guru-*riṇ* and *mātri-ṛin* created moral and theological obligation and authority. Theological ideas around the Devi and supernatural beliefs regarding the power of the land where Ājali Āi's *thāna* is currently situated imparted a sense of sacrality to the geography of the *thāna*. Among supernatural agents, the pertinent ones are the Guru, Viṣṇu, and the Devi. The Guru, as per Māyāmārā beliefs, in being a manifestation of Viṣṇu Himself straddles the natural and supernatural world, while in the community, spiritual authority lay with the Guru—the ultimate authority being Viṣṇu—on account of the historical socio-cultural background of the Māyāmārā Vaiṣṇavas, ideas around the divinity and authority of the Devi, or goddess, while not conspicuous, did shape the religious substrate of the community.

Understanding the role of the Devi in a Vaiṣṇava community that supposedly offers a challenge to goddess worship requires one to look beyond the boundaries of the Māyāmārā Vaiṣṇava religious system, i.e., its environment. There were several socio-economic and political systems and forces that were a part of the environment of the Māyāmārā Vaiṣṇava system: the caste system, conceptions around *jāti* and economic class, other religious systems (Buddhism, Saktism, and indigenous traditions), and the *pāik-khel* system that the Ahom monarchy instituted within the context of the larger agrarian economy in medieval Assam (Gogoi 2002). The key extra-systemic agents were the Ahom monarch, Ahom nobles, other Vaiṣṇava sects who did not align with the Māyāmārā Vaiṣṇavas, neighboring kingdoms (Chutiyas and Kacari), and, to some degree, invading groups, including the Burmese, the Daflas, and finally, the British colonial administration.[12] The community of Māyāmārā disciples, as agents, interacted with the various building blocks of the Māyāmārā system and the systems outside of this. The sections below offer a narrative of how the systems and agents charted above interacted among one another to contribute to the phenomenon of Ājali Āi's *mahimā* in contemporary Māyāmārā society.

4. Socio-Economic Conditions and Qualified Access to *Mokṣa*

The pan-Indian neo-Vaiṣṇava bhakti movement of the 14th and 15th centuries offered a multi-layered challenge to the socio-economic and political systems prevalent in medieval Assam. The spiritual landscape at that time in Assam comprised a smorgasbord of traditions and practices offering varying degrees of access to *mokṣa* based on caste, class, *jāti*, and gender. While Vedic traditions tended to exclude Sudras and *avarṇa* persons from spiritual rituals and spaces, Śaiva and Śākta traditions were more inclusive and tended to be more popular among the socio-economically underprivileged masses. Into this society, Srīmanta Śankardeva, a 15th-century spiritual and social reformer, introduced a new religion of sorts—*eka-śaraṇa-nāma-dharma* (the only dharma is seeking refuge in the name of the Lord Viṣṇu) (Neog 1980). This neo-Vaiṣṇava movement, or bhakti *āndolan* (revolution), as it was called, was part of the medieval pan-Indian bhakti movement that swept through the country and consisted of proponents such as Kabir, Mira Bai, Guru Nanak, and Caitanya. The revolutionary aspect of this neo-Vaiṣṇava bhakti movement was the promise of democratizing access to *mokṣa*. *Nāma* dharma was for everyone, irrespective of class, caste, and *jāti*. With the goal of making *mokṣa* through *nāma* dharma accessible to everyone, Śankardeva and his disciple, Mādhavadeva, established a network of śatra, Vaiṣṇava institutions similar to monasteries, where disciples resided and worshipped. The two gurus also developed a vast and rich body of theological literature and arts drawing from the Hindu canon and presented them in Brajāwali and old Assamese, thereby making these works which were originally in Sanskrit and thus available to only a few learned people, mostly, from the Brahmin class, accessible to the masses (Ibid.).

While Śankardeva and Mādhavadeva sought to preach to the masses and democratize access to *mokṣa* to include groups marginalized by *varnāṣrama dharma*, after the death of the two gurus, schisms emerged in the Vaiṣṇava community. Differences and disagreements arose regarding the inclusion of Vedic rituals, *varnāṣrama* dharma, and ways of worship. The disagreements brought to the fore fault lines along castes and *jāti* that remained dormant while the two gurus lived. As a result, the community broke up into four *saṃhati*, or groups, namely, Brahma, Nikā, Puruṣa, and Kāla *saṃhati*. Each *saṃhati* had several sub-groups and related *śatras*. Each *saṃhati* differed from the other in terms of their views on the inclusion of Vedic practices, ways of worship, and the opportunities open to the lower castes in the administration of the *śatra*, the Kāla *saṃhati* was the most egalitarian among them and embraced individuals who were Sudras and *avarṇa*/Dalits. After the death of Śankardeva and Mādhavadeva; thus, old schisms were reanimated in new forms among the four *saṃhati* (Ibid.).

While Sri Sri Aniruddhadeva preached in this post-Śankardeva and Mādhavadeva society that continued being divided along rigid socio-economic lines, he actively proselytized among the lower castes and classes. Aniruddhadeva founded the Māyāmārā *śatra*

as part of the Kala *saṃhati*, and, thus, incorporated ethos of egalitarianism in its religious programme. While the Māyāmārā Vaiṣṇavas are a religious community as opposed to being an ethnic or language group, several of its disciples are Sudra and *avarṇa* as per the *varnāṣrama* system. In demographic composition, several of its disciples belong to the ethnic community of Marān in the region of Upper Assam, but there are several other local tribes, who constitute the community. In medieval Assam, Māyāmārā disciples belonged to diverse socio-economic groups, among whom were former Śāktas, Śaivas, and Vaiṣṇavas from lower castes and classes. Aniruddhadeva actively sought to include the most socio-economically marginalized and disenfranchised of the society into the new *śatra*. With the liberal and progressive views of the founder, the śatra, thus, gained several converts, many of whom belonged to lower *varṇa*, castes, or were *avarṇa*, i.e., Dalits, Adivasis, and tribal communities (Rupa Chetia 2020).

5. Legends, Ideas, Beliefs

Community members often trace Ājali Āi's *mahimā* to a legend found in the AC. In sum, the story goes thusly: Ājali Āi and her son, Aniruddhadeva, were once attacked by members of a hill tribe called the Daflas, who invaded valley areas from time to time. (Aniruddhadeva 1931, pp. 22–23). The Daflas attacked the family in the dead of the night. Fearing for her son's safety and assuming that the attackers were only after her son, Ājali Āi asked Aniruddhadeva to leave the house through the roof. Aniruddhadeva followed his mother's instruction and left. On not finding Aniruddhadeva in the house, the Daflas captured his mother instead and took her with them. The AC continues that on the way, it grew as dark as night in the middle of the day, and the Daflas lost their way. Attributing this sudden onset of darkness to the *mahimā* of Ājali Āi, they became afraid and let her go. When Aniruddhadeva came back home and did not find his mother at home, he and a few of his disciples went in search of her and found her being protected by a pack of wild elephants. Aniruddhadeva and his disciples found that the wild elephants had killed the Daflas who had captured Ājali Āi and the latter was safe (Aniruddhadeva 1931). Soon after this incident, Ājali Āi and Aniruddhadeva moved to Mājulī, where he began actively proselytizing among fishing communities and tribes close to where Ājali Āi's current *thāna* is.[13]

It was around this time that Aniruddhadeva began his active work of proselytization among disenfranchised castes and classes, who formerly worshipped local gods and goddesses. Most of the early converts came from fishing communities and other tribes living in the area. These new converts came with understandings and beliefs around female deities, whom they formerly worshipped. Goddess worship, whether it be in the form of aspects of nature, or the goddess, herself, as Durga, Kāli, Manaśā, Pārvati, Saraswati, Laksmi, Kāmākhyā, or another form of her, is a key part of the religious substrate of the Northeast Indian region. While the form of the goddess might be many, her role as Āi, mother, is a quintessential one as worshippers use this term for all female deities, including virgin goddesses.[14] As new Māyāmārā Vaiṣṇava converts were introduced to the seemingly different customs and rituals that constituted Vaiṣṇavism, they also brought with them understandings and beliefs around the Āi.[15] Consciously or sub-consciously, they incorporated some of these understandings into their new religion and way of life as Māyāmārā Vaiṣṇavas.[16]

Beliefs around the Devi as Āi are also associated with the place of Ājali Āi's rest, her *thāna*. As per local lore, the place has a living and ferocious quality to it similar to the Devi in the form of Kali and Kesaikhati, whom several local tribal communities, who eventually became Māyāmārās, worshipped.[17] Families living in the area before the *thāna* was established experienced deaths of several family members, which the locals attribute to the Devi. The grounds were abandoned for several years before the locals decided to house a Brahmin family on the ground, after which the untimely deaths are believed to have stopped (Nath 2019, pp. 12–17). Such supernatural beliefs and local lore have reinforced the theological significance of the place, which the locals consider to be "*pavitra*", or holy

(Nath 2019, p. 17). Given the supernatural power of the place among the locals, housing Ājali Āi's *thāna* there seemed apt as beliefs around the Āi and Devi traditionally associated with the place now found new expression in the *mahimā* of Ājali Āi and, by association, her place of rest.

Ājali Āi's *thāna* now inspires hundreds of thousands of Māyāmārā devotees to visit her and pay their respects every year. Ideas around moral obligation to the guru and the mother, i.e., guru-*riṇ* and *mātri-ṛin*, form the foundation of this reverence. In Assamese Vaiṣṇavism, guru forms one of the four pillars of bhakti: guru, *nāma*, deva, and bhakata. Guru, in being the divine manifestation of Viṣṇu Himself, is to be revered as divine. The theological texts of the community present the guru as indispensable on the path of bhakti and mokṣa. He is described as the rudder that provides direction to the boat in the ocean of *saṃsāra*. Similarly, an individual owes an obligation to one's mother as a life-giver and to one's ancestors, who came before one. The category of Guru-Mā combines ideas around these two obligations. The mother of the Guru is holy by virtue of being a mother and by giving birth to the Guru and thus is to be revered. In Ājali Āi, these two categories of *riṇ* found expression for the community.

The *mahimā* of Ājali Āi, however, takes the category of Guru-Mā a step further by ascribing to it powers associated with the feminine divine in the form of Devi and Āi. Community members believe that when devotees offer her *sevā* at her *thāna* with a pure heart, Ai grants them their wish (See G. Das 2019, p. 116). While Srīmanta Śankardeva, the guru who introduced the neo-Vaiṣṇava movement to Assam, is believed to have launched a direct challenge to goddess worship in the region, after his death, the landscape evolved and incorporated worship and veneration of the feminine divine in one form or the other.[18] For the Māyāmārā Vaiṣṇavas, the feminine divine was incorporated in a different way—the category of Guru-Mā offered a ready and smooth receptacle for their reverence to the feminine divine. Their veneration of Ai as the holy mother found expression in the form of the mother of the founding Guru, Ājali Āi. As the community came under severe persecution by the Ahom monarchy, there was a need for a mother, a saint-like holy and maternal figure, who would keep a nurturing and watchful eye over the community.

6. Persecution by Ahom Monarchy

The Ahom dynasty ruled in Assam for more than 600 years from the early 13th century until 1826 AD, when, under the Treaty of Yandabo, the kingdom passed into the hands of the British East India Company (Sadar-Amin 1930). The Āhoms were descendants of the Tai/ Shan tribe in Upper Burma, who arrived in Assam in the early 13th century and quickly gained prominence. The first Tai-Ahom king in Assam, Sukāphā, established the Ahom kingdom in Assam in 1228 AD in the southeastern part of the Brahmaputra valley (Baruah 1993). Over the next couple of centuries, they consolidated their rule and absorbed nearby kingdoms in the west and north of the valley through conquests and intermarriages, thereby becoming one of the largest ruling dynasties of medieval Assam. This process of consolidation also necessitated advanced military organization and strategic planning, which transformed the Ahom from a set of loose groups of militia-like people who first arrived in the Brahmaputra valley to a kingdom that resisted the eastward expansion of the Mughals (Sadar-Amin 1930). While the Ahoms brought their own Tai language, customs, and deities, they also embraced local customs and cultural norms over time. The kingdom was threatened from time to time by external invaders and nearby kingdoms, the Mughals and the Burmese being the key ones, but the major event that the Ahom monarchy perceived to be a political threat was internal—the rise of the neo-Vaiṣṇava bhakti movement in Assam.

As the Vaiṣṇava reformers, Srīmanta Śankardeva and Mādhavadeva, attracted the masses, the religious movement also captured the attention of the Ahom monarchs, who began viewing the movement as a political threat. Thus began a wave of marginalization by the Ahom monarchy towards the neo-Vaiṣṇavite reformers and their disciples. Persecution of the emerging Vaiṣṇavite movement continued through several generations of Ahom

kings until the monarch Jayadhwaja Singha embraced Vaiṣṇavism and established the Auniāti śatra in Mājulī. He and his successors began the tradition of *rajāghariyā śatra*, royal *śatra*, which the royal family patronized. The gurus of these royal *śatra* received preferential treatment at the hands of the monarch. The Māyāmārā śatra, however, eschewed royal patronization and bore the brunt of royal persecution even as other *śatra* flourished under royal patronage (Aniruddhadeva 1931, pp. 65–66). Coupled with the mass appeal that the Māyāmārā śatra and its Guru enjoyed, especially among the large numbers from the underprivileged classes, the śatra came, inevitably, in the crosshairs of the Ahom monarchy that began seeing the śatra and the Māyāmārā guru as a political threat that needed to be addressed. The relationship of the śatra with the monarchy and even with other śatras has been, thus, fraught from the beginning.

This tense relationship is also evident, to a degree, in the contestation around the term Māyāmārā. It is translated as eliminating *māyā*, or the one who eliminates *māyā*, the Advaita Vedantic concept of the matrix of illusion that is the material world as we know it. There are other terms that have been used interchangeably, albeit, as the community argues, erroneously, to denote the Māyāmārā community, such as Matak, Morān, and Moāmoriā—the last one being considered a derogatory epithet by the community used by other communities for them.[19] The term, Moāmoriā, comes from the fish, moa, and the fishing community in Upper Assam that depended on the moa fish. Fishing communities in medieval Assam generally belonged to the lowest castes and were mostly financially and socially underprivileged. As Aniruddhadeva began by proselytizing among these fishing communities, many became disciples of the new *śatra* (Rupa Chetia 2020, p. 31). While the *śatra* grew in reach and number of disciples, other Vaiṣṇava sects and non-Vaiṣṇavas began calling them Moāmoriā even though there were disciples from other communities as well. Over time, as relations between the new *śatra* and the other *śatra* and the Ahom monarchy worsened, the community began perceiving the term as an attempt by others to demean the community (Ibid).

There were several flashpoints between the Ahom monarch and the Māyāmārā community. Through generations, the monarchy publicly humiliated, punished, and executed several Māyāmārā gurus. Under the reign of King Gadādhara Singha, who was the first in the Tungkhungia dynasty, persecution of the community reached alarming proportions as he routed several Vaiṣṇava *śatra*, including the Māyāmārā *śatra*. In 1697, he ordered his soldiers to capture twelve gurus and their family members from the Kāla *saṃhati*. The Māyāmārā Guru Vaikunthadeva was one of them. King Gadādhara's soldiers captured the gurus and family members, tortured, and killed them in a forest in Nāmrup, now known as the Nāmrup forest massacre (Ibid., p. 69). Gadādhara's bloody reign was, however, indicative of the general attitude of the monarchy towards the Māyāmārā *śatra*. Decades of persecution led to the first armed rebellion of the Māyāmārā disciples against the monarchy.

The event that triggered the rebellion was comparatively a minor one, but it added to the mass of grievances had accumulated for decades. During the tenure of Guru Aṣtabhujadeva, grievances reached critical mass and led to the fire of popular unrest that engulfed, almost literally, the Ahom kingdom. The Ahom monarch, Laksmi Singha, captured Guru Aṣtabhujadeva and his son and executed them (Barbarua and Bhuyan 1933, p. XXII). The community remained without a guru for fourteen years, during which period both Laksmi Singha and his successor, King Gaurinath Singha, engaged in the indiscriminate killing of the Māyāmārā Vaiṣṇavas. Gaurinath Singha engaged in what can only be called a genocide of the Māyāmārā community. His forces killed some 790,000 Māyāmārā Vaiṣṇavas bringing their total population down to around 10,000 from 800,000 (Ibid., p. XXV). Fourteen years after the execution of Guru Aṣtabhujadeva, the community was able to supplicate to the then king to allow them to re-instate a guru—Pitāmbaradeva. Royal persecution, however, continued, and the community engaged in armed rebellion twice more.

7. A Persecuted *Śatra* and the Emerging Archetype of Guru-Mā and Her *Mahimā*

The historical memories of discrimination along caste and class from other Vaiṣṇava groups and brutal persecution by the Ahom monarchy over decades influenced the self-perception of the community and their identity. The community responded by attempting to strengthen intra-community ties and reinforce community identity through several ritualized processes and phenomena that helped delineate community boundaries. One such example is the *Nij-Śāstra*, one of the five theological works written by Aniruddhadeva; unlike the other four texts, however, access to the *Nij-Śāstra* is limited to only a few senior members of the community. *Nij* is translated as one's own. It is said that Aniruddhadeva himself advised his disciples in this text to limit access to it to only Māyāmārā Vaiṣṇavas who have gone through a prescribed set of rituals associated with *śaraṇa*, initiation, and *bhajana* (P. C. Das 2019, p. 96). The community guards the text fiercely, and only a few verses of this text are now available to the public in secondary literature (Gosain 2003, pp. 140–48). The text is read under a strictly followed set of rituals on a particular day of the month and at a pre-determined time. In addition to the rituals surrounding the *Nij-Śāstra*, the community also differs from the other *śatra* in their style of initiation of new disciples, including women, and their dance and musical compositional and accompaniments, among others. On the face of the shared experience of oppression and persecution, the community, thus, found strength and fellowship through ritualized processes and procedures that differentiated them from other Vaiṣṇava groups.

In addition to creating a unique community identity, there was also a need to create a safe space, so to speak, that would offer a sanctuary from the suffering and the tumultuous years the community experienced. The experience of shared and collective suffering strengthened community ties and reinforced the self-conception and identity of the community as a persecuted *śatra*. The need for such a space was heightened by the fact that there were several periods when the community existed without a guru or a with a guru in exile. The longest such period was fourteen years after the first rebellion was quelled by King Laksmi Singha. The genocide conducted by King Gaurinath Singha not only reduced the size of the population to almost a tenth of what it was before, it also dispersed the survivors of the genocide. During such long periods of exile and lack of spiritual direction from a guru, there was a need for a nurturing, maternal form of divinity, who would bring theological and emotional succor to the community in the midst of the suffering of *saṃsāra*. While that is generally the job of a guru, when the gurus have been assassinated, the community needed an Āi, mother, who would protect the community in a way that Ājali Āi protected Aniruddhadeva from the attack of the Daflas. Ājali Āi as Guru-Mā offered a *sanctum sanctorum* and a sanctuary for the community through the turbulence of *saṃsāra*.

With ideas around the Devi, the feminine divine, already part of the conscious and sub-conscious theological substrate of the community, the category of Guru-Mā also offered a ready receptacle for reverence to the feminine divine. The powers and *mahimā* of the Āi, the divine mother, and her *thāna* became associated with Ājali Āi as the mother of the Guru. Ājali Āi is thus, not only holy, but has divinity and *mahimā*. Much like the Devi, Ājali Āi's *mahimā* is *apāra*, limitless. She nurtures and protects, but, if necessary, disciplines and punishes. When and how Ai's *mahimā* comes into play is part of the mystery of her *mahimā* that works in both *driśya* and *adriśya* reality.

8. Conclusions

Understanding the category of *mahimā* of Guru-Mā, Ājali Āi, calls for a systems–agent look into the socio-economic, political, and religious contexts within which the Māyāmārā Vaiṣṇava community emerged and developed. This exploratory chapter argues for a systems–agent approach to understand the phenomena of the *mahimā* of Ājali Āi in the present day Māyāmārā society. It looks beyond the boundaries of the community and explores the many elements within the larger, historical context of the community over time that necessitated the evolution of a powerful, *mahimā*-infused category of holy Guru-Mā. These elements were a part of the socio-economic, cultural, political, and religious systems

that constituted the milieu of the community and its members. They shaped the identity, self-conception, and future trajectory of the community, but the latter was not doomed to conform to these seen and unseen forces. The community and its members actively interacted, clashed, and shaped, to a degree, some of these elements in return.

While some of these pertinent elements were within the boundaries of the Māyāmārā Vaiṣṇava religious system as a whole, they also interacted with systems and constituent elements outside of the Māyāmārā Vaiṣṇava religious system. Some of the key elements within the Māyāmārā Vaiṣṇava religious system that shaped individual action and behavior include myth, ideas, obligation, authority, and supernatural agents. The legend associated with Ājali Āi that became part of written and oral lore offered the mythical aspect, while ideas around guru-*riṇ* and *mātri-ṛin* created moral and theological obligation and authority. Theological ideas around the Devi and supernatural beliefs regarding the power of the land where Ājali Āi's *thāna* is currently situated imparted a sense of sacrality to the geography of the *thāna*. Among supernatural agents, the pertinent ones were the Guru, Viṣṇu, and the Devi. The Guru, as per Māyāmārā beliefs, in being a manifestation of Viṣṇu Himself, straddles the natural and supernatural world. While in the community, spiritual authority lay with the Guru—the ultimate authority being Viṣṇu—on account of the historical socio-cultural background of the Māyāmārā Vaiṣṇavas, ideas around the divinity and authority of the Devi, or goddess, while not conspicuous, did shape the religious substrate of the community. Among elements from systems outside the Māyāmārā system, the social organization and corresponding rules and norms in addition to economic and ethnic divisions played a significant role. The Ahom monarchy and the monarch himself being in possession of the power to prescribe and enforce many of the socio-economic rules, e.g., the *pāik-khel* system also played a key role. Equally importantly, in being an agent with the power to marginalize entire groups of people, the Ahom monarch represented a major actor that other agents interacted with including the Māyāmārā Guru and the community.

The chapter finds that as the Māyāmārā community interacted with these elements inside and outside the religious system, these interactions shaped the community's identity and self-conception. This, in turn, contributed to the phenomenon of the veneration and influence of Ājali Āi in the present day. No one factor was solely responsible for this phenomenon, but the complex interaction among the many components inside and outside the Māyāmārā religious system gave rise to this phenomenon. In the system theory parlance, such phenomena are called emergent properties of complex systems. In other words, this chapter demonstrates that the *mahimā* of Ājali Āi as understood in contemporary Māyāmārā society, while cannot be attributed to one single factor, it can be understood as an emergent property of the complex interactions and relationships within and outside of the Māyāmārā Vaiṣṇava system during the period of early 17th century to the present day.

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Notes

1 It is incumbent on the author to disclose their socio-economic and religious location. The author was born, raised, and socialized within a Vaiṣṇava family in Kamrup, Assam. They are not part of the sect of Māyāmārā Vaiṣṇavas but share several beliefs and rituals with them on account of their belonging to Assamese Vaiṣṇavas.

2 There is a consensus among historians on Assam regarding the scarcity of sources on the life of Ājali Āi and the Māyāmārā community in general. The only source the author found that mentions her is the biography of Aniruddhadeva and the chronicle of Māyāmārā Gośāin compiled by Sri Sri Chidānandadeva (1868 A.D.–1880 A.D.), the sixteenth Guru of the community. Since the first compilation, the text has gone through a few revisions. The original manuscript is now believed to be lost and the currently available edition is believed to be the fourth edition published in 1931. The author has acquired a scanned/digital copy of the physical book from Dr. Noni Rupa Chetia, Principal of DDR College, in Dibrugarh district in Assam and who is a member of the Māyāmārā community.

3 Rudolph Otto's concept of the numinous as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* does not quite explain how holiness and its adjacent categories are conceptualized in South Asian traditions. For Otto's conceptualization of holiness, please see (Otto 1926).

4 For a discussion of women Gurus in classical and modern Hinduism, please see (Pechilis 2015, pp. 400–9).

5 For a discussion of female Gurus in the Kumbh Mela in India, please see (DeNapoli 2023).

6 For an example of how modern female Gurus and Sadhus in India (Rajasthan) resist and transcend patriarchal normative structures around holiness, read (DeNapoli 2013, pp. 117–33).

7 Scholarly literature on the concept of *mahimā* is scarce. The author was not able to find any contemporary substantive scholarly works on *mahimā*.

8 For example, in Christian religious systems, we find codes such as heaven and hell, good and evil, salvation and damnation, among others, which are drawn from Christian doctrine. Communication of this programme sets the boundary of the religion and determines whether one lies within or outside this boundary.

9 This is true for most systems approaches in religious studies since the focus is on the systems and the system elements, and not necessarily the agents, who are subsumed as elements who are bound by and doomed to conform to systemic forces.

10 While I draw from the work of Cho and Squier in thinking of religions as CADS, I depart from their work in looking at systems as ontological, i.e., there are sets of elements that function together as a system out in the world. Religion per se is not a system, but it is possible to carve out specific aspects of a particular religion that function as systems. For example, what we popularly understand to be Hinduism does not function as an ontological system, but what would make it a system is drawing out specific aspects in context, space, and time that work together towards a *telos*. For example, various structures or building blocks that came under the auspices of Māyāmārā Vaiṣṇavism in medieval to modern Assam work together in interconnected ways towards a *telos* as parts of a system.

11 The chapter uses the terms, "building blocks," "elements," and "structures" interchangeably in the context of systems.

12 For a discussion of the history of Aniruddhadeva, Māyāmārā Vaiṣṇavism, and the Māyāmārā armed rebellion, please see (Baruah 2003; Hazarika 2014, pp. 466–77; Borah 1983).

13 Ājali Āi did not live very long after the incident with the Daflas. It is thought that she might have suffered a few injuries during the invasion and capture by the Daflas. See (Nath 2019, pp. 12–17).

14 There are also several superstitious beliefs associated with the Āi, mother. In Assam, even in contemporary culture, Āi is thought to manifest in different ways. One example is when a child contracts chicken pox, the Āi, or mother, is thought to have visited and manifested in the child. During this time, many people in rural areas worship the Devi as Āi, mother, to satisfy her so that she would leave the child alone. These beliefs were also prevalent in the community of the author of the chapter.

15 Some scholars have argued that Aniruddhadeva was less orthodox than his Vaiṣṇava peers when it came to following some of the handed-down Vaiṣṇava customs and rituals. He and the community over time developed several new customs and rituals that made the community unique among the then Vaiṣṇava sects (Rupa Chetia 2020).

16 This was, however, the case not only with the Māyāmārā Vaiṣṇava sect. As mentioned earlier, after the death of Śankardeva and Mādhavadeva, the landscape of Vaiṣṇavism in Assam evolved in key contextual ways.

17 While beliefs around sacred geography are common in Vaiṣṇavism and the larger Hindu canon (e.g., the birthplace of the Gurus in the case of Assamese Vaiṣṇavism), beliefs that straddle the worlds of what is sacred and what is taboo are common in certain kinds of goddess worship in the region. For example, in May 2019, the author visited a Kali temple where human sacrifices were carried out in a village called, Māyong, popular for its erstwhile magical practices. The author spoke to the locals regarding *nara-bali*, human sacrifice, in the temple, and was told that as per the local oral historical tradition, human sacrifices occurred until the 17th century or so although no specific date or year was specified. While accompanying the author to the temple premises, the locals expressed fear and reverence to the power of the Devi that they believed to be present on the premises. Human sacrifice in Assam in connection to Devi/Sakti worship has been documented in Ahom büranji and by the British colonial officer and historian, Sir Edward Gait, in his book, *A history of Assam* (Gait 1906).

18 For example, while Śankardeva was thought to be against having any statues or murti in the sanctuary, several śatra have murti in their sacred spaces.

19 In the Preface section of Aniruddhadeva's *Carit*, Sri Hridyānanda Chandra Adhikāra Goswāmi, the 7th Māyāmārā Guru of the Dinjoy branch of Māyāmārā śatra, summarized the differences in these terms thusly, "Matak comes from "Mat-ek," translated as those who are of the same mind and opinion. Morān is an ethnic group residing in several districts in Upper Assam." (Aniruddhadeva 1931, pp. 50–51). As per the community, the acceptable terms for them are Matak (with Mat-ek being preferable) and Māyāmārā.

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