

## CHAPTER IV

### VAISNAVISM AND SATRA INSTITUTION IN ASSAM

The *vaisnavite* movement of Assam initiated by Shri Sankaradeva during the last part of fifteenth century of Christian era is remarkable for the religious and social life of medieval Assam. Its impact on religion, literature, fine arts and social life of Assam, particularly on the Brahmaputra valley is indeed great. Now the details of *vaisnavism* are discussed below-

#### *Vaisnavism*

“*Vaisnavism* is the cult of worshipping *Vishnu* as the supreme deity in any one of his several forms. Later on *vaisnavism* was known as neo-*vaisnavism*, which had been propagated in the 15<sup>th</sup> 16<sup>th</sup> centuries onwards, stress was laid on *bhakti* and on the singing of prayer songs than on other priestly rituals” (Sarma, 1990: 327). The *bhakti* movement or the *ekasharaniya-naam-dharma* (religion to supreme devotion to one God) initiated by Sankaradeva towards the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century reflects the religious, social and cultural history of the population of Assam (Nath, 1988: 306). *Bhakti* (a way to attain Holy Communion with God through devotion) movement was started by Sankaradeva at Bardowa which is situated at the middle of Assam. There after it spread throughout Assam, particularly in the Brahmaputra valley. Sankaradeva the father of this movement had to travel from one place to another place to avoid complexities that developed in the society in the course of his movement. This indirectly helped in the spread of his religion. This movement bred new ideas and institutions which upsurge religion, culture and other parameters.

**a) *Vaisnavism in India:*** A social reform movement swept across India between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century A.D and it was the *bhakti* movement based on the liberal doctrine of *bhakti* (Nath ed, 1989: 15). It initiated new ideas even as it gave birth to new faiths, which at some places of the country took the shape of a revolution. The context of the new trend is rooted in the societal degradation and cultural distortion that plagued many parts of India at that time. Under the corrupting influences of power and wealth and the incipient ritualism that had taken hold of the priestly and

ruling classes of the Hindu society, various malpractices were committed in the name of religion, which vitiated the social structure (Neog, 1965: 80). These factors impelled the Hindu thinkers and reformers of the day to evolve a simpler and liberal faith that would be acceptable to all alike. This set in motion what subsequently came to be known as the *vaisnava bhakti* movement, originally started by the Alvars of South India (Nath, 2001: 67) and which there after spread to northern India and then to the eastern region of India. The *vaisnava bhakti* movement thus encompassed the whole of India and thereby brought about a renaissance in the socio-religious life of Indian people. This type of religion is open to all classes and castes. To that extent the movement initiated structural changes in the socio-religious sphere of the Hindu society and consequential changes in its value system and equality of relationship.

**b) Vaisnavism in North East India:** North East India is the homeland of many Mongoloid tribes (Sarma, 2013: 5). The Kacharis, the Koches, the Ahoms are the tribes who ruled this part of India over long stretches of history. But they are soon reclaimed to Hinduism mainly through the door of *Bhakti*. This reclamation was a great gain to Indian nationhood and culture, for it brought about a sort of intellectual and spiritual and no less, political balance to this North Eastern region. It is to be noted that the integrating force of the Sankaradeva movement did not extend as far as the hills region which according to the Indian constitution was to have been ultimately integrated with the state of Assam became separated. Arunachal Pradesh was mainly spearheaded by a handful of Christianized educated youth of Pachighat. It is Naga tribe of Nagaland, the Nocte of frontier district of Tirap and Dafalas of the Subansiri district received their *vaisnavism* quite early; but that did not count positively in political matters. At one time *vaisnava* divine was fined by the area administration just for entering his disciple's hamlet. In the final analysis it would appear that there were difficulties of full Indianisation in the North East where this had not already happened under the aegis of the *bhakti* movement. It would thus appear how effectively Sankaradeva stood and stands as the sentinel of Indian nationality and culture on the Eastern front of India.

Sankaradeva's principal apostles Madhavadeva refers to the acceptance of the creed of *nama* by the tribes who were still then non Hindu. The Ahom, the Kachari, the Miri, the Garo, the Bhutiya and even Muslim, the last among non-tribes. All people were socially upgraded as no distinction was made among *bhakatas* (devotee of the

*satras*) and worked an upward social mobility which still obtains. It is significant that all the six followers of Sankaradeva namely Govinda belonging to Garo tribe, Paramananda belonging to Mishing tribe, Narahari a Ahom man, Narottama belonging to Naga tribe, Jayram a Bhutiya person including the Muslim Candsai are reverentially remembered when the *vaisnava* counts his beads on the rosary (Raychoudhury, 2000: 29)). Thus it may be noted that one of the chief characteristics of the *bhakti* faith all over India that *bhakatas* were to be rated from one consideration along that they are God's Men.

**c) Vaisnavism in Assam:** “*Bhakti* movement popularly known in Assam as the Neo-*Vaisnavite* movement and it entered this part of India in the 16<sup>th</sup> century” (Nath, 2011: 3). “As in the rest of India, the social, religious and political life in Assam was in shambles resulting in a society full of chaos and disorder. Since the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the ancient kingdom of Kamrupa was slowly undergoing a process of disintegration. The whole of Assam, from the eastern most Dikkarvasini region to the river Karatoya in the west, disintegrated into several kingdoms. The eastern most tract of Assam was ruled by a line of Chutiya kings. To the west of Chutiya kingdom laid the *Ahom* principality. Further west, there was the Kachari kingdom to the south of river Brahmaputra. On both sides of the river Brahmaputra to the west of the Kachari kingdom of the south and Chutiya kingdom of the north east, were a number of landed chiefs known as Bhuyans. The western part of Assam comprising the modern districts of Kamarupa, Goalpara and parts of Kochbehar was ruled by a few dynasties during the course of the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries and the kingdom was known as Kamata Rajya. By the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century A.D., however, a new power, viz., the Kochs, under the leadership of Bishwa Sinha, emerged as the dominant political power in Western Assam. Constant friction and Conflict for supremacy amongst the above powers was the order of the day, which severely affected the political condition of the region. The political instability brought about a chaotic condition in the religious sphere also” (Bhuyan, [www.tributetosankaradeva.org/Sankaradeva\\_and\\_NVM](http://www.tributetosankaradeva.org/Sankaradeva_and_NVM) doc). “Assam in the 15<sup>th</sup> century presented a motley picture of diverse shades and grades of culture. The majority of the people belonged to non-Aryan tribes having distinct manners, customs and religious beliefs. Those who professed Hinduism loosely adhered to *vaishnavism* or *saivism*; *saktism* bordering on extreme *tantricism*, was also widely prevalent. The followers of these cults were all found indulging in evil

practices like animal and sometimes even human sacrifices, magical rites, spells and the like. It was based on the philosophy of palate and sensual pleasures. The economically backward classes and the socially downtrodden became the victims of such ghastly practices. At the other end of the religious spectrum was the bulk of the indigenous tribal population who followed their indigenous tribal faiths. Bringing all these diverse communities and warring factions under a systematized religious code and conduct of life and to provide the masses with a mode of worship, which would be simple and at the same time accessible to all was what constituted the pressing need of the time. Against this backdrop, Sankaradeva appeared on the scene. A multi-faceted genius, Sankaradeva was at once a spiritual leader, a social reformer, a prolific writer and a master playwright and composer. He is credited with providing the bedrock of Assamese culture, and creating a religion that gave shape to a set of new values and social synthesis. He was born in the Assamese month *Ahin* (September-October) month in 1371 *Sakabda* (1449 AD) at Tembuani (Bordowa), in the present-day Nagaon district of Assam” (Bhuyan, [www.tributetosankaradeva.org/Sankaradeva](http://www.tributetosankaradeva.org/Sankaradeva) and NVM doc).

Sankara enjoyed a wild childhood up to his twelfth year. At that time his parents were dead. After his twelfth year his grandmother placed him under the care of a local *pandit* (proficient) named Mahendra Kandali. (Neog, 2004: 118). He came back home after a thorough education in grammar and Sanskrit lore and he was caught in the matrimonial tie and had to confine himself to the coarse duties of a Bhuyan chief. After three or four years his wife died and left him with a girl child. After the death of his first wife Sankaradeva began a long pilgrimage for 12 years covering such places as Brindavana, Puri and other holy places in the year 1481 A.D (Sarma, 1994: 231). His stay at Puri was particularly long. It was here at Puri that Sankaradeva received his illumination. He made a solemn vow that he would not bow his head to any other God except Jagannath. He returned home a saint carrying on an abiding impression on *vaisnavism*. He also intended to renounce the world, but on the insistence of his grandmother and other relatives, he married a second time (Lekharu, 1952: 34).

While staying at home, he received a copy of *Bhagavata Purana* from pair furnished with commentary of Sridhar Swami (Neog, 1965: 107 cited in Daityari 82-95). Sankaradeva who had profound knowledge and command over Sanskrit language set to render parts of this book into Assamese in practical form with the definite aim of propagating the *bhakti* cult. In order to propagate his religion, Sankaradeva adopted

attractive methods of holding *Kirtana* or mass prayer and dramatic performances and this form attracted many people to his religion (Neog, 2004: 119). He also made prayer house near his home. The hallmark of neo-*vaisnavite* movement initiated by him is reflected in two distinctively unique institutions like- *namghar* (prayer house in village level) and *satra* (a *vaisnavite* institution) and these two are associated with the social, cultural, as well as religious life of the Assamese society. These institutions became the nucleus of the *vaisnava* organization while later on spread throughout length and breadth of Assam.

Due to growing strife with the *Kacharis* at his native place (Bezbarua, 1914: 40) Sankaradeva along with his kinsmen and followers crossed the Brahmaputra to Dhuwahat or Belguri which was located in the Majuli island of Brahmaputra (Raychoudhry, 2000: 37). At Dhuwahat he met Madhava (1498-1596), a *Sakta Kaystha* (Lekharu, 1952: 249) who had firm faith in sacrifice of animals as a means of propitiating God. He came to have a serious dispute with Sankaradeva. Soon Madhavadeva was overwhelmed by the knowledge and sagacity of Sankaradeva and decided to renounce his *Sakta* cult. He became a disciple and associate of Sankaradeva. "He became Sankaradeva's dearest and closest disciple, supporting the guru in his proselytizing and literary activities, and greatest apostle of the new found faith, giving poise and strength to the organization of the *vaisnava* order in Assam" (Neog, 2004: 120).

The Brahman priests contemporary to Sankaradeva finding that the followers of the new religious order was swelling day by day at the cost of their religion based on worship of different Gods and animal sacrifice which went adverse to their economic interests complained before the *Ahom* monarch that Sankaradeva was polluting the Hindu Religion. The king was also skeptical about the new religion of Sankaradeva. King's policeman began to persecute the followers of the new religion. Sankaradeva's son-in-law was beheaded by the king after trial while Madhavadeva was let off after confinement for nine months (Nath, 2001: 83).

This incident filled Sankaradeva's mind with pain and disgust. He decided to leave the *Ahom* kingdom and set off westward to Koch Behar in about 1537 A.D. where king Naranarayana was ruling at that time (Baruah, 2009: 257). He and his younger brother Sukladvja who was the commander-in-chief were known to be learned men. Therefore Sankaradeva and his followers rowed down the Brahmaputra to Koch Kingdom. They settled at Barpeta which was at that time under Koch Kingdom. (Das,

2010: 75). There the new creed began to thrive and the no of followers began to swell. He met several important followers like Bhabananda (later Narayan Das Thakur Ata), Damodaradeva (a Brahmin) (Sarma, 1994: 239). Sankaradeva stayed at Patbausi near Barpeta with his followers for about 18 years (Nath, 2001: 84). This place became the center for dissemination of the new religion. He also wrote several religious books while he was staying at Patbausi. Thus it was the most fruitful period of his life. He also made a second pilgrimage for 6 months mainly to Puri (Neog, 1965: 115). Sankaradeva's writings comprised *Kirtan*, *Dasam*, several dramas, *bargeetas*, (a kind of devotional song) etc. He proved to be a very prolific writer judging by the time he thrived.

Sankaradeva nominated Madhavadeva, his successor to hold charge of the order. Madhavadeva, a celibate was also a scholar and contributed significantly to *vaisnavite* literature. He set up his *Satra* at Sundaridiya near Barpeta (Bezbarua, 1914 new print 2010: 153) His chief literary work was *namghosha* (Sarma, 1999: 30), (a book dealing with the *Bhakti* cult much valued by the followers of *vaisnavism*). Sankaradeva delegated to his Brahmin followers Damodaradeva the power of administering ordination as this was considered expedient particularly in the case of the Brahmin neophytes. Like Madhvadeva, Damodaradeva also set up *Satras* at different places of Assam (Patbausi *Satra*). Another Brahman Guru was Harideva who set up *vaisnava satras*, but his *satras* mainly confined to old Kamarupa district (Bahari *satra*, Bamundi *satra*, Maneri *satra* etc), (Sarma, 1999: 298-299).

Sankaradeva's chief apostles like Madhavadeva, Damodaradeva, and Harideva and their followers were instrumental in setting different *satras* covering upper Assam, Kamrupa and Kocbehar (Sarma, 1999: 93) so much so that the whole of Hindu population residing in these three regions were divided among them. Some of the *vaisnava* adherents made serious departures from the original tenets of faith into heterogeneous doctrines discarded by the Gurus. Others have carried the puritanical zeal of the new order very far indeed. Whatever may be the variation in creed, the neo-*vaisnavite* movement in Assam in this north-eastern part of India which is composed mostly of people belonging to Tibeto-Mongoloid races remains by and large free from extreme caste division, ritualistic extravaganza and animistic practices. The *vaisnava* religion has given the people a simple religion based on *bhakti* to one God. "The cultural renaissance which had its beginning in the activities of Sankaradeva has wrought itself into fulfillment in many ways and marked out a

definite place for Assam in the cultural map of India” (Neog, 2004: 124). It was revolutionary in the sense that neo-*vaisnavism* in Assam meant not only a religious faith but a way of life. neo-*vaisnavism* stands out among the different *bhakti* cults of India in terms of its unique and innovative character, which found expression in the move to create an egalitarian civil society based on the shared values of fraternity, equality, humanism and democracy.

“The new cult thus moulded according to the local circumstances, was popularly known as the *mahapurushiya dharma* and the real name of the cult was *ekasarana-nam-dharma* or the religion of supreme surrender to one God Viz-*Visnu\_krishna*” (Sarma, 1999: introduction 1-2). Sankaradeva considered the *sravana* (listening) and *kirtana* (chanting in the praise of God) in the modes of *bhakti* or devotion as prescribed by the *Bhagavata Purana* to be sufficient (Neog, 2004: 126). Idol worship does not feature in Sankaradeva’s system (Sarma, 1999: 19). The four fundamental elements of neo-*vaisnavism* are – God, Guru (the religious preceptor), *bhaktas*, and *naam* (names and glories of God), (Sarma 1994 in Barpujari 1994: 236).

***Spreading of the Movement in Assam:*** After the death of Sankaradeva, his Brahman disciple Damodaradeva remodeled his institution at Patbausi near Barpeta with the help of his own Brahmana disciple. Vaikunthanathdeva introduced many Brahmanical rites and ceremonies. In the place of a holy book he installed the image of Vishnu with other paraphernalia of worship (Nath, 2001: 29). Madhavadeva established another institution, with a gorgeously constructed *satra* at Barpeta, where he strictly followed the system of his master (Sarma, 1999: 29).

Vangshigopaladeva, a young Brahmana of North Lakhimpur in Upper Assam, who had once met Sankaradeva at Belguri during his childhood, came to Barpeta in search of a master. He was initiated by Damodaradeva and trained up by Madhavadeva. Then he was sent to Upper Assam to spread *vaisnavism*. Vangshigopaladeva succeeded in establishing a large *vaisnavite* institution first at Katabari and then Kuruabahi (Adhikary, 2010: 99), where he installed a stone image of *Govinda* (lord). Many *vaisnava* emissaries gradually went forth to Upper Assam side where Vangshiamegopaladeva had already prepared the way and they started separate institutions in different parts of the state within a short time. The common people became attracted to the new cult. Officials of *Ahom* kings also became attracted to this new religion. After the death of Vangshigopaladeva, the *Ahom* king Jayaddhaja Sinha

was initiated into *vaisnavism* in 1648 A.D. under the teaching of Niranjana Bapu, whom he established as the first *Satradhikara* of Auniati *satra* (Gait, 1905: 357).

Sankaradeva built his religious movement not with the help of great scholars or rich influential people, but built it up with simple folk round about them. Himself a sound scholar, having to place his faith four square on acknowledged authorities he propagated a simple religion- simple to understand and simple to practice. The *Bhagavata Purana*, the *Bhagavata Gita* and the *Sahasranama*, section of the *padma purana* are popularly held to be the sources from which Sankaradeva accepted the chief articles of his faith, namely *satsanga* (the company of *bhaktas* as a means to the culturing of *bhakti*), *Ekasarana* (spiritual shelter in one deity along with *Vishnu* or *Krishna*) and *Nama* (Adhikary, 2010: 155). The lord moreover has no other image than the holy, a word. The ideal *bhakta*, therefore worships the Lord within with but his heart can offer. Like a mystic, Sankaradeva realized that God lived broadcast in the general hearts of all beings and it is only when we miss this truth that we go to seek him outside. Idol worship does not play any important role in Sankaradeva's system and even this small bit of ritualism can very well be done away with if the devotees wish.

***Contribution of Neo-Vaisnavite Movement in Assam:*** There are so many contributions of neo-*vaisnavite* movement in Assam. These are discussed below-

*Social Mobility:* People from all castes and walks of life were received by Sankaradeva as disciples and they could even act as teachers in his *vaisnava* order. A democratic outlook permeates the entire teachings and practices of the neo-*vaisnavite* faith in Assam. The missionary work started amongst the backward classes by the early reformers, was extensively carried out by their successors and followers during the succeeding periods. Members of such tribes soon took the new creed of *vaisnavism*. A great social mobility thus became the rule except in the institutions headed by Brahmans while Brahmanical influences in the Ahom capital saw to the branding of scavengers and fisherman with marks of a broom and a fish on the forehead. People of the so-called untouchables or lower castes came to live in fellowship with those of the highest castes in Assamese villages and they could take part in all functions of the villages. In fact when Mahatma Gandhi came to Assam in the later twenties in pursuance of his removal of untouchability campaign, he hardly

found any work here and paid a high tribute to the liberating activities of the 16<sup>th</sup> century *vaisnava* saint (Sarma, 1999: 217). Sankaradeva did what a whole regiment of British army could not have accomplished. This is indeed of much significance in a part of India, where the ethnology is so mixed and confused.

*Literature:* There was the efflorescence of a great literature in the wake of the Sankaradeva movement of Assam. Sankara and Madhava themselves composed a good number of songs, dramas, verse narratives and other types of literature, wherein they expounded and elaborated the teachings of the faith they sought to propagate (Nath, 1988: 308). “A host of poets, writers and scholars like- Ananta Kandali, Rama Saraswati, Vaikunthanatha Kaviratna, Sridhara Kandali, Gopaladeva, Ramacarana Tahkura, Daityari Thakura, Gopalacarana Dvija flocked under the banner of *bhakti* and formed into a vigorous literary movement” (Neog, 2004: 134). It was the age of one ideal, that of *bhakti* of one God, Vishnu-Krishna; of one leadership, that of Sankaradeva; of one book the *Bhagavata Purana* (Neog, 1965 rprint 2008: 107). The *vaisnava* writer’s adherence to the sanction of scriptural authority amounted to a limitation upon their creative ability and a curb upon their poetic genius. Nonetheless, the literary output of Sankara and Madhava alone is considerable, and is characterized by a rare power of reading the spirit of the original fights of creative imagination. Their literary works acted as the chief machinery of propaganda of the faith and afforded both enlightenment and pleasure of the people (Neog, 2004: 134-135). He translated in simple verse of the whole of the first, second, eleventh and twelfth books and portion of the third, sixth, eighth and tenth books of the *Bhagavata* (holy book) into the spoken dialect of local people (Baruah, 2009: 260).

In his early works, *Harischandra Upakhyaana* and *Rukmini Harana* (dramas) (Kakati, 1921 in Neog 1980: 173), Sankaradeva exhibit the same narrative zeal as was evident in the preceding period of Assamese poetry. Each of the 25 sections of the *Kirtana Ghosha* (the most popular and important of Sankaradeva’s works), contains several *kirtana* songs with refrains, goes to relate a story or expound a subject. *Gunamala* (a tiny work of six *Kirtanas* of jingling verses), is a remarkable feat of mental speed and brevity of expression (Kakati, 1921: 173).

Sankaradeva composed 34 songs, later known as *bargeeta*, Madhavadeva complementing them with 157 (Kakati, 1921 in Neog 1980: 173) of his composition. Sankaradeva’s songs sing of the futility of human efforts and urge upon listeners the

need for *bhakti*, some of them are prayer songs, pure and simple and didactic verses. Madhava's songs breathe an open air atmosphere and excel in the description of Krishna's child life and the bringing out of the eternal mother in Yoshoda (Neog, 2004: 135-136). Both of them wrote a number of songs called *bhatima* (panegyrics) in praise of the worshipful Lord. The dramas of both are a type by themselves and do not follow any model like Sanskrit, Prakrit or otherwise (Neog, 2004: 136). The dramas are in an artificial literary dialect, used in the *bargeeta* and *Bhatima* also, later called as *Brajawali Bhasa* or *Brajabuli Bhasa* (a literary medium used by the vaishnava poets of eastern India) (Kakati, 1971: 70) and this has a queer mixture of Assamese, Maithili, Hindi and other elements (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brajabuli).

*Drama*: "The Bhaona or neo-Vaisnava form of dramas owes its origin to the unique genera of plays evolved by Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva, which they themselves had called *Nata*, *Yatra* or *Anka*, and which later on came to be designated as *ankiya nata*" (Sarma, 1994: 419). The dramas are a type by themselves and there are no act or scene divisions within a play. The *sutradhara* (interlocutor of an Assamese drama) role originally taken from the classical Sanskrit drama is the central characters, conducting the whole action with songs, dances and narratives and explanatory commentary in prose. Dramas are normally performed at the common prayer hall both in the *satras* and in the village *namgharas*. Madhvadeva himself staged drama in open houses called *Rangghar* or *Rangiyalghar* (Neog, 1965: 267). Being religious in character, there is always the role of Krishna or Rama in the Assamese *vaisnava* dramas.

*Music and Dance*: In Assam neo-vaisnavism brought in its train a wide culture of music. The *vaisnava* music in Assam is rich and remarkable for its tone and variety. Among the different forms of this music, Sankaradeva himself composed a number of devotional songs (Nath, 2011: 58). Songs composed by Sankaradeva and Madhvadeva are still sung in the *satras* (Barpeta *satra*). The *bargeetas* are composed in *brajawali bhasha* although a good number of them are composed by his disciple Madhavadeva deviate from it (Neog, 1965: 278). The next class of songs is the *ankar geet*. These are the songs of dramas (Nath, 2011: 59). Another important song which is sung in the *satras* is *nama-kirtana* which is easy for all classes of singers as it is sung in chorus with a leader called *naam lagowa*. Being easy this form of music is popular both in the *satras* and in the villages. *naama-kirtana* is accompanied by use of musical

instruments like- *khol*, *mridanga*, *nagara* and *bar Tal* (cymbal). A different set of music known as *ojha pali* (a party of choreographers) is popular in all the *satras* of Majuli. It is a distinct form of dance and music performed in form of a chorus and similar to the *nam-kirtana* (Nath, 2011: 59-60). At Barpeta *satra*, type of *ojha-pali* is called *ghosha kirtaniya*. The *satra* dances mainly center round the *anka* dramas of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva. The *sutrdhara*, the hero that is Rama and Krishna and the women roles, that are the *Vrindavana gopis*, provide the class types of the dance performance (Neog, 2004: 140). Of the various other forms of dances, important ones include- *gossai prabeshar nach* or *Krishna bhangi*, *gopi prabeshar nach* or *gopi bhangi*, *cali nach*, *jhumura* or *nritya bhangi*, *ras nritya*, varieties of dance forma associated with *bhaonas* etc (Nath, 2011: 60). At Barpeta *satra* One more dance type is found that is *bhor tal nritya* (group dance with cymbal).

Dances involve the use of various kinds of musical instruments like *khol*, *tal*, *mridanga* etc. *tals* are of three varieties- big or *bar tal*, *bhor tal* (cymbal originally imported from Bhutan by Sankaradeva), middle sized- *pati tal* and small sized- *khuti tal* (Nath, 2011: 61). *khol*, *mridanga* and *tals* are used in the performance of various kinds of dance, drama and devotional songs. A very large wooden and skinned drum called *daba* (kettle drum) is found in every *satra* and village *namghar*. It is used in congregational prayer and in the evening as a symbol of announcing the time for prayer. At Barpeta *satra* also *daba* is beaten in the morning and evening also (Das, 2010: 43). *Nagara* is another type of musical instrument.

*Painting*: One of the many forms in which the *vaisnava* Renaissance of India manifested itself is the art of painting. Like other states in Assam also *vaisnavism* brought in the practice of illuminating the holy books with small illustrative paintings. Sankaradeva is also believed to have been a painter (Gogoi, 1990: 86). On one occasion he is said to have painted on *tulapat* (ginned cotton paper) scenes of seven *vaikunthas* (abode of lord Vishnu). On another he painted with vermilion and yellow arsenic the picture of an elephant and pasted it on a wooden book-case to be presented to his royal patron, Naranarayana (Neog, 2004: 141). He had scenes of Krishna's life in Vrindavana woven with the help of the weavers of Tantikuchi (present Barpeta) into a sheet of cloth of 180 feet long with a caption for each miniature (Gogoi, 1990:117). He prepared this cloth for king Naranarayana (Khan Choudhry, 1936: 101). "The illustrations are a copy of Sankaradeva's rendering of the first half of 10<sup>th</sup>

*Skandha* of the *Bhagavata purana*, found in the Bali *Satra* of the Bardowa group have been reproduced in print in a recent publication, *Citra Bhagavata*. The original copy bore the date 1461 *saka*/1539 A.D. which seems to be too early; the work may suitably date from the late 17<sup>th</sup> century” (Neog, 2004: 141). It is evident that these paintings were done in some *satras*, most probably into Bali *satra*, where the original manuscript was preserved (Neog, 1949: 50). In some *satras* are to be seen mural paintings and wood carvings of some beauty and with folk-art elements in them. Barpeta *satra kirtanghars*, which has now been demolished, was decorated with many finely engraved and painted wooden panels, depicting scenes from religious texts (Pathak, 1959: 135). Barpeta *satra* also shows the art of ivory carving. Paintings also are provided on wooden posts and post plates, book rests, raised trays used for the purpose of making offerings (*Sarai*), and pleasure boat (Sarma, 1995: 277).

### ***Satra Institution***

The most notable characteristic of *vaisnavism* in Assam is the *satra* institution through which the faith is being propagated and established. It may be monastic as well as semi monastic in form. The *satra* institution is intimately connected with the Assamese society and it has become a part and parcel of Assamese life. Now the details of *satra* institution in Assam has been discussed below-

**a) *Satra Institution in Assam:*** The most notable characteristics of *vaisnavism* in Assam are the *satra* institution through which the faith was propagated and established. It may be monastic as well as semi-monastic in form (Sarma, 1999: introduction). The *satras* are established by Assamese *vaisnavite* monasteries for religious practices at the initiative of the Ahom kings of Assam in the middle of the 17th century (Nath, 2011: 37). The origin of the *satra* institution can be traced to the time when the neo-*vaisnavite* movement initiated by Sankaradeva was still at a nascent stage. Sankaradeva is said to have established his first *satra* at Bardowa, his birth place (Mahanta, 2004: 99). The importance of the institution lies in the fact that it is intimately connected with the Assamese society and it has become a part and parcel of Assamese life. Contributions of this institution towards the spread of *vaisnavism* in particular and the cultural development of Assam in general are indeed great. The high percentage of people professing *vaisnavism* in Assam is accountable to the activities of this institution during the last four centuries of the Christian era.

The District Gazetteers of Assam, 1905, have recorded two hundred eighty eight (288) *satras* excluding many branches of those *satras*, spreading over the entire Brahmaputra Valley. All of them are not uniform in size and affluence, but they are marked by the same fundamental characteristics (Sarma, 1999: introduction). Today the number of *satras* in Assam is well over five hundred with numerous *vaisnava* householders affiliated to one or the other *satra*.

[www.atributosankaradeva.org/satra.htm](http://www.atributosankaradeva.org/satra.htm)).

The *satra* has been defined as-

*(ekanta vaisnava yot nibasa karai*

*Jibaka sarana diye, tak Satra kai)*

Meaning- Where the single minded *vaisnavas* reside, where they offer *sarana* (shelter) to the souls, that (place) is called a *satra*.

The history of *vaisnavism* in Assam cannot be treated without reference to the *satra* institution. In fact the origin and development of the institution is intimately connected with the growth and development of the neo- *vaisnavite* movement in Assam (Sarma, 1999: introduction). The religious activities of the *vaisnavite* householders are also conducted in accordance with the direction of *satras*. The Head of the *satra* is termed as *satradhikara* or *adhikara* traces his spiritual genealogy by hereditary succession or by the link of initiation through his predecessors and hence to the founder of his sub-sect who was one of the disciples initiated by Sankaradeva.

Sankaradeva established two types of religious institutions- *namghara* and *satra*. *Namghara* is a village level institution and while *satra* is more central institution (Nath, 2012: 11). The *namghara* or *satra* have a unique place in social life of the Assamese people. The building is usually a long open hall with dais at the eastern end. Sometimes it also contains a room. In some of the new *namgharas* the images of lord Krishna come to be installed. Some of the buildings maintained in the *satra* are quite impressive and have wooden pillars with carving on them and Barpeta *satra* is the best example for this. It would be seen that the *namghara* or *satra* are the nucleus around which has grown up the social fabric of the Assamese people, most of them being *vaisnavite*. The institution is apparently religious in origin, but it performs social and certain legal functions. The *satra* has religious, judicial and cultural functions (Nath, 2011 2011: 44). It is a judicial institution in a way but in the administration of the country it does not play any role.

***Origin and Development of Satra Institution in Assam:*** The word *satra* is used in the sense of a *vaisnava* institution. It is a corrupt form of the Sanskrit word *sattra*. In Sanskrit literature the word has been used in two senses- i) in the sense of an alms house and ii) in the sense of a sacrifice lasting from a few days to a year or more (Sarma, 1999: 143). In the opening chapter of the *Bhagawata Purana* the word *satra* has been used to denote a long session of sacrifice of a thousand year's duration performed by the sages in the forest of Nimisa. In the course of the sacrificial session, Ugrsrava the sage, recited and explained the Sage, recited and explained the entire *Bhagawata Purana* in the assembly of the sages. The process of reciting the *Bhagawata*, in all probability gave currency to the word *satra* in Assam. Sankaradeva, the *vaisnava guru*, probably initiated his movement by reciting and expounding the stories from *Bhagawata\_ Purana* to a band of his followers. Thus the word *satra* has come to be used in the sense of an assembly of devotees where the *Bhagawata* has been recited (Sarma, 1999: 143).

***Development of the term Satra:*** In the initial stage of the neo-*vaisnavite* movement the word *satra* was used in the sense of a religious sitting or association and not in the sense of a systematized institution. According to Ananta Kandali, a contemporary of Sankaradeva, his father Ratna Pathak founded a *satra* at Hajo where *Bagawata Purana* was constantly recited (Baruah, 2009: 19). Bhattadeva, one of the foremost religious teachers of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, defined *satra* as an assembly of holy persons where *bhakti* in all its aspects is practiced. Thus in the initial stage of the *vaisnava* movement in Assam, the term *satra* came to mean a sitting or association where *Bhagawata* was recited or explained (Sarma, 1999: 157).

In course of time, this association of devotees began to develop on a distinct line and ultimately emerged as a well developed institution with distinct structural feature and elaborates paraphernalia and practices. Henceforth the term *satra* began to signify a distinct type of institution with characteristics of its own.

***Stages of Development:*** The *satra* institution is passing through three stages of evolution-

***First stage:*** The first stage began with Sankaradeva. The religious association organized by him did not take in shape of a regular institution of a permanent nature. That there was no *Satra* of a permanent type can be inferred from the fact that

Madhavadeva who succeeded Sankaradeva as the head of the sect did not become the head of a *Satra* left by Sankaradeva. He conducted the affairs of the *Satra* by staying at Ganakkuchi and there at Sundaridiya and not at Barpeta (Mahanta, 2004: 99)

It is also not known from contemporary literature of that period whether the *Satra* of Sankaradeva besides containing the prayer hall did really contain the system of *cari-hati* (four number of cluster of settlements) like that of latter *satras*.

*Second stage:* It was in the time of Damodaradeva and Madhavadeva both disciples of Sankaradeva that the *satra* institution attained the second phase of growth. Vaikunthapara *satra*, founded by Damodaradeva at Coach Behar consisted a shrine and a large prayer hall well decorated with various designs and surrounded by four rows of systematically conducted *hatis* (cluster of settlements). The boundary of the *satra* was decorated by high palisades. The *satra* also contained separate rows of huts outside the palisades for married disciples. There was also a guest house with a tower over it (Neog, 1965: 320-21). Madhavadeva planned and built the *satra* at Barpeta on the traces of *satra* of Damodaradeva at Patbausi. The *kirtanghar* (prayer hall) at Barpeta was tastefully decorated with various designs and carvings. The lines of huts for celibates were also properly arranged. The structural feature of the *satra* also received the final shape during this period. The prayer hall was modeled on the structural pattern of Hindu temple which consists of a *garbha grha* containing the image of deity and a *mandapa hall*. The apsidal prayer hall attached to the *manikuta* (sanctum sanctorum) exactly resembles an apsidal *mandapa* attached to *garbha grha* (Neog, 1965: 321)

*Third or the final stage:* This stage was attained with the extension of royal patronage to the *satras* during the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Sarma, 1999: 147). This placed the *satras* on a sound financial footing. Some of the *satras* became financially very strong. The royal power bestowed on the *satras* large tracts of land which the latter rented to the tenants. During this period, the headship of the *satras* began to develop on hereditary line. The royal court also began to exert its influence in the management of the *satras*.

***b) Sub-sects of the Visnavite Religion of Sankaradeva and Expansion of Satras:***  
After the death of Sankaradeva, serious rift took place between Madhavadeva and Damodaradeva, two principal apostles of Sankaradeva. This rift ultimately led

Damodaradeva to secede from the orthodox *vaisnavite* or *mahapurushiya* (following the doctrine of Sankaradeva) cult of Madhavadeva. Damodaradeva initiated a new sect. Harideva, another contemporary and associate of Sankaradeva started a new sect distinct from the sect popularized by Madhavadeva, the principal apostle of Sankaradeva. But in spite of the profession of independence of this sect, it cannot call an independent sect in so far as the religious tenets and observances of this sub sect is almost identical with the Sankarite sect (Sarma, 1990: 239).

**c) Division in the Vaisnavite or Mahapurushiya Order:** Besides the two sub-sects of Damodaradeva and Harideva, there are three more sub-sects which originated after the death of Madhavadeva within the main body of *vaisnavite* order. These three sub-sects together with the two seceding sub-sects of Damodaradeva and Harideva are known as *samhati* (a sect of the vaisnavites of Assam). The sub-sects organized by Damodaradeva and Harideva are considered as one *samhati* and it is called the *brahma samhati* since both these *gurus* were Brahmins. The sub-sects founded by Gopala Ata and Purusottama Das are known as *kala samhati* and *purusa samhati* respectively. The sub-sect organized by Mathuradas Burha Ata and Padma Ata is called the *nika samhati*.

**Brahma Samhati:** *Brahma samhati* includes the sub-sects of Damodaradeva and Harideva. Both of them were inspired and influenced by Sankaradeva, the great *vaisnavite* reformer. The *brahma samhati* comprising the two sub-sects of Damodaradeva and Harideva and consisting of the most affluent *satras* of Assam is the most influential of the *samhatas*. Most of the *satras* affiliated to this *samhati* are headed by Brahmins. These *gurus* introduced compromise between Vedic and *puranic* (verse in the Puranas) rituals and the devotional practices of *vaisnavite* religion. There is no bar for a person to be a good *vaisnava* even performing the daily and occasional rites enjoined by the *dharmasastras* (religious books). The chalking out of the middle path between Vedic rites and rituals and devotional practices helped considerably to win over those people who did not like to give up the Vedic rites and rituals.

**Kala Samhati:** *Kala Samhati* owes its origin to Gopal Dev (Gopal Ata). He was one of the twelve apostles nominated by Madhavadeva to proselytize people to the new faith. The followers of this branch of vaisnavism claimed that Gopaldeva is the supreme religious head after Madhavadeva.

**Purusa Samhati:** According to this sub-sect, Purusottama, the grandson of Sankaradeva is the real successor to this headship of the order founded by his grandfather. The *purusa samhati* is often the name of Purusa, the religious head of this sub-sect.

**Nika Samhati:** The *nika samhati* took shape after the formation of the others three sub-sects appeared to gone astray from the strict principles of *vaisnavism*. Padma Ata, an apostle nominated by Madhavadeva was the head of this sect.

(Sarma, 1999: 97-135).

**c) The layout of a Satra:** *satras* are generally situated on quadrangles surrounded by palisades or walls. A full-fledged *satra* usually consists of a well laid out arrangement of the essential areas. Details of this layout are given below –

**The Namghar-** The centre of the main activities of a *satra* is the *namghar* and it faces the east. It is a large open hall with galled roof having an apsidal facade in the western side and over which is a top or the dome on the roof

([www.tributetosankarkeva.orgsatra.htm](http://www.tributetosankarkeva.orgsatra.htm)).

The *namghar* serves the purpose of a prayer hall as well as a hall for holding religious meetings and discussions (Sarma, 1999: 139). The interior is a simple nave and two aisles with pillars. These pillars are in the number of 5 and 7 usually, which divide the area loosely into chambers. They are erected with wooden beams supporting an architrave over which rests the roof. These wooden beams are known as the *chati* and either carved with motifs or painted (Neog, 1965: 314) from the level of the architecture, a nave is extended all around the pavilion to widen the shade. These from the veranda and devotees sit here. The walls of the *Namghar* are usually left with *jalis* or perforated wood carvings of devotional imagery, which embellish and allow light and air at the same time. The door towards the top is the main entrance call *mukh-duar*; the ones at the side are the *pet-duar*. Doors with carvings of lion motifs are called *simha-duar* and those with floral patterns are *phuljalikata-duar*. The area in a *namghar* is systematically arranged for its numerous functions. Space is determined by a host of ceremonial requirements places for offering, place for *ashana* (wooden pedestal with the sacred scripture). At festival time the area for performance of the drama is also marked out. Even the seat for the *adhikara* (abbot), who sits against the *laikhuta* (main pillar) of the hall the *deka-adhikara* (deputy), the *bhakatas* the

*gayana-bayana* (musicians) and the common people are all predetermined. The use of space is formal one and highly ordered ([www.tributetosankarkeva.orgsatra.htm](http://www.tributetosankarkeva.orgsatra.htm)). The existence of *namghar* is not confined to the *satra* alone. It is a common feature of Assamese villages also. In addition to serving as the common prayer hall in the villages it also serves as a stage for dramatic performance and a venue of village pancayets (Sarma, 1999: 139).

**The Manikuta:** The most sacred space is the *manikut* attached to the east of the *namghar*. The actual shrine where the idol of the deity on the sacred scripture is kept is called *manikuta* (Sarma, 1999: 139). It is the sanctum-sanctorum of the entire establishment and as all the valuables and jewels of the *satra* including the sacred idol are kept and preserved here. In this area and beyond a certain limit lay devotees are not allowed in.

**The Hatis:** Centering round the *manikuta* and the *namghar* exist four rows (sometimes two) of residential huts intended for clerical devotees. These four rows of huts are known as *cari-hati*. The word *hati* is derived from Sanskrit *Hatta* meaning a market or a fair. To each devotee is allotted a hut consisting one or more rooms according to his status and need (Sarma, 1999: 140). Most of the huts are equal in size, having a common veranda joining the length from one end to the other, except the ones on the eastern side which are much larger being the quarters of the *satradhikar* ([www.tributetosankarkeva.orgsatra.htm](http://www.tributetosankarkeva.orgsatra.htm)).

At Barpeta *satra* all four rows of huts are not found. Instead there are two such rows are found within *satra* campus known as the *kewlia hati* or *kewlar baha* (residence of celibate devotees). Residential houses at Barpeta are arranged along both sides of a road. Each area consisting of such rows of houses separated by narrow alleys is called a *hati* (Neog, 1965: 326).

Minor *satras*, where monastic life is not observed, could be identified as such only for the existence of the *namghar* and the *manikut*. The system of *cari hati* is rarely noticed there.

**Batcora:** The entrance leading to the interior of a *satra* is usually marked by a small open house known as *batcora* (Sarma, 1999: 140) or *karapat*. It functions as the entrance gate when a devotee enters the *satra* premises through the *batcora*, he received by the *bhakatas* who make arrangements accordingly for the devotees to be

guided inside. Distinguished guests are first received at the *batcora* and then they are escorted to the interior of the *satra*.

**d) Description of a Modern Satra:** The following account of the Garmur *satra* as given in the District Gazetteer of Sibsagar, 1905 may be taken as a representative description of the Principal monastic *satras* of Assam. “The building of the Satra is approached by good road which is constructed at some expense. The *namghar* is a huge structure, the roof of which supported on huge wooden pillars and the great floor-space is entirely bare save for one or two lecterns on which the sacred writings are reposing. The actual shrine is a separate building closely adjoining the eastern end of the *namghar*. The shrine is very different from the penetralia of the *sakta* temple. There is no trace of blood or greases; there is nothing disgusting or grotesque and the whole place is dominated by the note of decency and propriety which is so marked a characteristic of *vaisnavism* of Majuli. In a square around the gardens stand the lines of huts in which the resident monks live. They consist of well-built rows of rooms which are much more spacious than those ordinarily occupied by village folk and are kept scrupulously clean. There is singularly gracious and pleasing in the whole atmosphere. Everything is fresh, neat and well to-do. The well-groomed smiling monks are evidently at peace with themselves and with the world at large and even little boys that flock around them are unusually clean and well-behaved. The children are recruited from the villages and trained to be devotees, but if at any time they find the restraint of celibacy irksome they are at liberty to return to the outer world” (district gazetteers of Assam).

**e) Parties Attached to the Satra:** Each *satra* consists of four principal parties viz – (i) *adhikara*, (ii) *deka adhikara*, (iii) *bhakata* and (iv) *sishya*. The first two parties are generally resided within the four walls of the *satra* campus and the last the *sishya* live in *hatis* leading householder’s life. (Sarma, 1999: 141).

**Adhikara:** So long as Sankara was living, he was the head of the whole *vaisnava* order and anybody, who administered ordination, did so on the authority delegated to him by the Master. When Sankara died, Madhava succeeded to this supreme position in the order. But Damodaradeva for some reason or order did not recognize this succession and formed a schism. At a later date Harideva was succeeded from the order. Madhava, Damodaradeva and Harideva sent out different persons to proselytize

and these persons started *satras* of their own and they became their heads (Neog, 1965: 332-333). They came to be known as *adhikara* (Lekhuru, 1952 reprint 1964: 513), *adhikar* (Damodardeva Carita 530), *Satriya* (Lekhuru, 1952: 453). Although a *Sudra*, Sankara came to be called “Sankardeva”. Madhava calls him so in his *guru-bhatima*, recited by all who consider Sankara as the Guru of the order. He was addressed by Madhava and other disciples as *baap*, father (Lekhuru, 1952: 138) and referred to as *gurujan*, the master (Lekhuru, 1952: 137). When Madhava became the head of the order, these terms were applied to him and all through the Katha Guru Carita Sankara and Madhava have been referred to as *dujana guru* the two masters (Neog, 1965 rprnt 2008: 333). Possibly the two terms *Guru* and *Ata*, referred to Sankara and Madhava only till sometimes after Madhava had passed away (Lekhuru, 1952: 475). The latter word when an extended meaning had and the Katha Guru Carita refers to nine *Aatas*.

In the present day *satras* also there is an *adhikara*. The head of a *satra* is popularly known as *adhikara* (Sarma, 1999: 141). He is the religious head and spiritual guide of flock under his care. The formal initiation ceremony *sarana* and the confirmatory *bhajana* are conducted under his direct supervision (Sarma, 1999: 142).

***Deka Adhikara***: Next to *adhikara* in power and prestige is *deka adhikara* who usually becomes the head after the demise of the *adhikara*. When the *adhikara* remains absent or goes out on a tour the *deka-adhikara* performs the duties of the head (Sarma, 1999: 142).

***Bhakata***: Though the term *bhakata* means any devotee, yet it is popularly applied to mean those devotees who either hold ecclesiastical office of the *satra* or lead the life of a celibate within the *satra* Campus (Sarma, 1999: 142). In monastic *Satras* where celibacy is strictly observed, the number of such celibate devotees is more numerous than those of *grhasthi Satras*. Such unmarried devotees are called *kevaliya- bhakat*. The word *kevaliya* is derived from Sanskrit *kevala* (alone) (Lekhuru, 1952: 300). Celibate devotees are recruited in their early ears by elderly celibates and under the guidance and supervision of the later they remain as apprentices for a few years. When they are sufficiently acquainted with the religious tenets and practices they are formerly initiated to the religious order.

***Sishya***: Lay devotees or disciples of a *satra* are called *sisya*. They generally live in villages and towns or *Hatis* leading house holder’s life. Every *vaisnava* householder

in Assam belonging to the Assamese community is invariably affiliated to one or the other of the *satras* of Assam. Customarily every Assamese young man of the *vaisnava* families must have his initiation before he gets himself married (Sarma, 1999: 142).

**f) Management of the Satra:** “The management of the *satra* is run by the *adhikara* with the help of a number of functionaries attached to different departments of the *satra*. At the initial stage of the movement when the *satra* institution was in its formative stage, the office of the *adhikara* or of a set of functionaries with various duties in the *satra* and in village could not be expected to have existed. The organizational side of the *satra* institution improved a lot during the time of Madhavdeva and Damodardeva. Madhavdeva for the first time introduced the system of *sidha-bhojani* (uncooked articles of ration, vegetables etc. offered to guest). Madhavdeva appointed three *bhagavatis* to recite the *bhagavata* at morning, afternoon and evening.” (Sarma, 1999: 148-149).

For the efficient management of the *satras* and for conduct of religious services regularly, the *adhikara* appoints from among his devotees several functionaries to hold different departments under his control. The number of functionaries to hold different departments is under his control. The number of functionaries may vary according to the size and nature of each *satra* (Sarma, 1999: 153).

For the efficient management of the *satra* and for conduction religious services regularly, several officers or functionaries are appointed to hold different branches of *satra*. The number of these functionaries varies in number according to the size of the *satra*. In big *satras* like Barpeta *satra* and Garmur *satra* etc. the following functionaries are found –

*Bar Bhagavati* or *Bhagati*: The chief recite of the *Bhagavata*.

*Bar Sravani*: The chief listener.

*Bar Pathak*: The chief recite of the vernacular scriptures.

*Bar Nam lagowa*: The leader of *nama-kirtana*.

*Bar Gayan*: The chief singer.

*Bar Bayan*: The chief player of musical instruments.

*Bar Bhandari*: The chief treasury officer.

*Caul Bharali*: The Granary keeper.

*Gua Bhandari*: In charge of betel-nuts.

*Bar Aldhara*: The head attendant.

*Bar Kakati*: The chief clerical officer.

*Bar Medhi*: Represents the *Satra* in the village.

*Bar Khataniyar*: Representative in the royal court or abroad.

([www.tributetosankarkeva.orgsatra.htm](http://www.tributetosankarkeva.orgsatra.htm)).

Most of the above functionaries are held in the highest honour. Besides the above functionaries of the highest order, there are hosts of other officers of the second, third and fourth grades working in different branches. The Officers of the lower orders though immediately responsible to their respective heads are ultimately responsible to their respective heads are ultimately responsible to the *adhikar* who can appoint or discharge them.

**g) Income:** “The present income of the *satra* is mainly derived from two sources. These two sources are – (i) Lands originally granted by the kings of the Pre-British days and subsequently confirmed and recognized by the British Government (ii) Religious tithes contributed by disciples’ (District Gazetteers of Assam, Sivsagar Page 98). In addition to these regular sources of income, occasional presents or offerings from devotees and patrons and special subscription raised from disciples to meet expenses of important functions.” (Sarma, 1999: 158).

**h) Ownership and Property:** There are three types of ownership – (i) Ownership vested in the idol of a *satra*, (ii) Ownership vested in the community of devotees (iii) family ownership (Sarma, 1999: 159). In the first case the *satra* theoretically belongs to the Chief idol of the deity to whose name the entire property of the *satra* is dedicated. The second mode is the ownership is sometimes collectively vested in the community of devotees with the *adhikara* as the formal head. Under this system the *adhikara* is nothing but a figure head. This mode of ownership is in vogue since early times in Barpeta and a few other *satras* of western Assam (RayChoudhry, 2011: 83). The third mode of ownership is ownership vested in the family is prevalent in most of the hereditary *satras*. The *adhikaraship* of this type of *satras* has been traditionally and invariably held by one particular family and all movable and immovable properties are held in the name of the family. This type of ownership of property of *satra* is found in *Satras* like Aauniati, Dakshinpat, Garamur etc. (Nath, 2011 40-41).

*i) Prayer Services:* The worship of image is usually conducted by a single individual; the entire group of devotees cannot take part in it. Therefore different types of congregational services were introduced daily continue from morning till the early hours of night (Sarma, 1999: 175). 'The Chief features of these services constitute the singing of prayers to the accompaniment of musical instruments and the reading and explaining of the *Bhagavata* and the *Gita*. The whole programme is called *namprasanga* (singing of prayers with musical instruments in *satras*). Each prasanga, consisting of several units, should depict four sentiments. Viz- (1) Sthapana, (2) Vandana, (3) Ananda (4) Khela' (Lekharu, 1952: 521).

The total number of items of services is fourteen in the three *mahapurusiya* sub-sects and twelve in the sub-sects of Damodaradeva and Harideva (Sarma, 1999: 176). These services are grouped into three categories viz-morning prayer service, afternoon prayer service and evening prayer service. The order of items in each service is not uniform in all *satras*. But the principal items of each service are approximately the same. At the initial stage of the movement the number of units was not fixed and the order of performance of different items was not determined. After the death of Sankaradeva, his successor Madhavadeva who lived at Sundaridiya installed the *guru-aasana* there, systematized the *prasangas* into fourteen, fixed up the order in which they were to be performed and also fixed up lines for the no of devotees to sit, as prior to this they possibly sat pell-mell (Lekharu, 1952 reprint 1964: 331, 584).

Later on, every *satra* made certain alterations in the procedure of conducting daily services originally prepared by Madhavadeva and Damodaradeva. The detailed programme of services observed in Barpeta *satra*, the earliest and the most influential *satra* of the mahapurusiya sects has been recorded below as a specimen (Neog, 2008: 342).

*Nitya Prasanga (daily rites):* The daily rites of the *satras* of Assam as a whole are given below-

*Matins (puwar prasanga):*

- i) Morning raga songs (*Gita*).
- ii) Morning *bhatima*
- iii) Morning *nama-kirtana*.

- iv) Morning verse readings from the *bhagavata*.
- v) Morning verse readings (*paath*).

*Afternoon services (biyalir prasanga):*

- vi) Afternoon *paath*.
- vii) Afternoon *nama prasangas*.
- viii) Afternoon readings from the *bhagavata*.

*Evening services (ratir prasanga):*

- ix) Evening recitations of the *guna-mala*.
- x) Evening recitations of the *lila-mala*.
- xi) Evening *bhatimas*.
- xii) Evening raga-songs.
- xiii) Evening *nama prasanga* and
- xiv) Evening *path* (reading)

This fourteen *prasangas* are performed even to-day at Barpeta. Damodaradeva also observed the three *prasangas*, which included twelve sub-divisions in their fold. “The *Bhagavata-Purana* was regularly read and expounded in every morning afternoon and evening services” (Neog, 1965: 344 cited in Gurulila, 274, 282, 284). “Bhatta Deva and Arjunadeva of the *Loca-Satra* also saw the observance of the twelve *prasangas*” (Neog, 1965: 344 cited in Guru Lila, 496). It thus became customary for the *satras*, claiming evolution from Damodara, to put the total number of *prasangas* at twelve. “There are three major divisions of *prasangas* in which *nama-kirtana*, *pada paath*, *ojha kirtana* and readings from the *Bhagavata Purana* featured” (Neog, 1965: 344 cited in Vamsigopaladevar Carita 356). “In the Auniati *Satra*, established by Vamsigopala’s Pathak, Niranjana, the ceremonials performed daily are fourteen in number.” (Neog, 1965 reprint 2008: 344 cited in Auniati-Satradhikara’s Statement 1904, art 3). It is particularly be noted here that whatever the enumeration, the *prasangas* did not include the worship of image (Neog, 1965 reprint 2008 in 344). Besides the daily services there are some particular occasions when *naimittika prasanga* has to be gone through (Neog, 1965: 344).

***Naimittika Prasanga (occasional rites):*** “The annual or *naimittika* agenda of the *satra* include various types of observances like religious and secular festivals,

ceremonies connected with birth and death anniversaries of the earlier Gurus and *adhikaras*, special devotional functions and fastings” (Nath, 2012: 179). Excepting the last one, the other observances are held in the *satra* in a gorgeous manner. The festivals of the *vaisnava* sects of Assam are mainly related to some incidents or episodes of Krishna’s life. These festivals are mostly identical with similar festivals held in other parts of India. In addition to those, the *vaisnavas* of Assam observe the three *bihus*<sup>1</sup> which are considered as the national festival of Assamese people. The following *vaisnava* festivals are observed in the *satras* of Assam.

*i) Janmastami:* *Janmastami* or birth anniversary of Lord Krishna is observed on the 8<sup>th</sup> lunar day of dark fort night in the Assamese month *Bhada* (August-September). It is celebrated with great festivity in all the *satras* of Assam. The festival stands in the evening on that day with illumination of earthen lamp. “It is marked by *puja* (worship), *naam prasanga*, *brata* (fasting) and performance of drama depicting the birth of Lord Krishna” (Nath, 2012: 186). The next day is known as *nandotsav*<sup>2</sup> Illumination of earthen lamps takes place as on the previous day and devotional services consisting of prayers recitation and music continue throughout the day. Devotees smear mud on their bodies and recite in merriment. One person acts as sage Guru who makes astrological calculation of Lord Krishna. Another festival known as *pachati* (Sanskrit Pancha) is observed on the 5<sup>th</sup> day of the birth of Lord Krishna (Nath, 2001: 165)

*ii) Doul:* This festival is celebrated on the full moon day in the Assamese month *Chaitra* (March-April) also. This festival is connected with the marriage ceremony of Lord Krishna. It lasts for two or three days. In the evening of the first day, *adhivasa* (purificatory rites) connected with the worship of the deity takes place. During the whole period of the festival, different daily functions like chanting of prayers, *ojah pali*, recitation from the holy books etc take place. Last day of the festival is marked by great merriment where the common people come out of their houses and play with *faku* (coloured powder), (Nath, 2001: 160).

*iii) Rasa Yatra:* This festival takes place on the full moon day of the Assamese month *Kartika* (October-November). In some *satras* of upper Assam notably in the

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<sup>1</sup> *Bihu*: It is the prime festival of Assam.

<sup>2</sup> *Nandotsav*: The festival observed at Nanda’s house celebrating the birth of Krishna. It is observed at Barpeta *Satra* the day after the *Janmastami*.

Dakshinpat *satra*, this festival draws a large number of people (Sarma, 1999: 185). This festival deals with the amorous relationship of Lord Krishna with the *gopinis* (milk maids) of Braja<sup>3</sup>. This festival lasts for three or four days. But in *satras* belonging to the *nika samhati*, particularly in Barpeta *satra*, this festival is not celebrated.

There are some festivals, like *ratha-yatra*, *snana yatra* and *jhulan yatra* which are not observed in all *satras* (Sarma, 1999: 185). These are mainly observed in the *satras* belonging to the *brahma samhati*.

iv) *The Bihus*: The word *bihu* is connected with the Sanskrit word *visuva*. Although it originally meant the festival connected with the approach of the Assamese month *Bahag* (April-May), it is extended to mean the two other *bihu* festivals namely the *kati-bihu* and the *magh-bihu* because they are all peasant festivals. The *bihus* are secular festivals observed by all the communities of Assam. However because of their mass observance and intimate connection with the present society of Assam, these are observed in the *satras* with religious fervour.

The three *Bihus* observed on the last day of Assamese month *Ahin*, *Pooh* and *Chaitra* are respectively known as *kangali bihu*, *bhogali bihu* and *rongali bihu*. On the day of *kongali bihu*, the *tulasi* (basil plant) is ceremoniously planted in the courtyard and light is offered to the plant. *Naam prasangas* are also held. Light is also offered in the agricultural field. On the day of *bhogali bihu*, the peasant communities celebrate it with bon fires and feasts and the *satras* observed it with congregational prayers and music. *Rongali bihu* is observed for 7 days. It is observed just before the harvesting season with a lot of merriment. In the *satras*, special devotional programmes continue for the whole period. At Barpeta *satra*, on the second day or the New Year's Day, according to Indian calendar, astrological reading of the New Year is made known to everybody present in the *satra* (Raychoudhury, 2012:177).

v) *Tithi (death anniversary)*: Death anniversaries of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva are observed with all solemnity of *mahapurushiya* order. Death anniversaries of the founder of different *samhatis* as well as different *satras* are also observed with pomp and honour. *Satras* officials to the *brahma samhati* observe the death anniversaries of Damodaradeva, Harideva and Bhattadeva.

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<sup>3</sup> Braja: A place, where Krishna was brought up.

vi) *Investiture*: It is the ceremony in which the junior is formally raised to the headship of a *satra* (Sarma, 1999: 187).

**k) *Special Devotional functions***: Apart from the occasional observances mentioned above, there are a few more devotional functions which do not fall under the category mentioned above. These are discussed below-

***Bar Sabah***: The word Sabah is derived from the Sanskrit word *sabha* which means assembly. It means a great religious congregation where devotional functions of various natures make the proceedings of the ceremony.

***Pal naam***: The word *pal* is derived from the Sanskrit word *parjay* (one after another). *Pal naam* continues from 3 to 7 days at a time without break. People recite from various scriptures such as *Kiratan, Dasham and Bhagavata* etc. In popular parlance, the religious function is held in high esteem.

***Bhakat-seva***: It is function which is observed by the household and not by the *satras* where devotees are invited by a household to be served with food.

***Fasting***: Fasting in the *satras* of Assam are accorded great importance as means of attaining salvation. Devotees observe fast on the occasion of death and birth anniversaries of Sankaradev, Madhavadeva and other religious Gurus. They also observe fasting every month on *ekadashisi* (eleventh day of the dark or bright fortnight) *puernimas* (full moon) and *amabashyas* (dark moon).

**l) *Customs and Manners evolved in Vaisnavite Satras of Assam***: There are so many customs and manners seen in *satras* of Assam and are discussed below-

***Customs***: The *vaisnavite* Gurus like Sankaradeva, Madhvadeva, Damdaradeva, Harideva and their apostles established a large number of *satras* in upper Assam, Kamarupa and Koch Behar. These *satras* have in course of time evolved certain customs, tradition and manners which were being observed by both celibate devotees and householder devotees. These customs and traditions were comprehensive covering religious and temporal lives of the devotees, dos and do nots, customs and duties in their daily lives. Following are some of the customs and manners observed in *vaisnavite satras*.

*Celibacy:* Some devotees observe celibacy, however it is not a general practice observed in all *satras*. This practice has been in vogue in a few *satras* situated in Majuli<sup>4</sup>, like Auniati, Daakshinpat, and Garmur etc and in *satras* like Barpeta, devotees living permanently within the four walls of a *satra* must be celibate. However any celibate devotee can marry at any time of his life. Married devotees can reside in the proximity of a monastic *satra* and can participate in religious discourses and prayers.

Women are allowed to have initiation and can enter a *satra* at any time, but they are not allowed to stay at night. The life in a purely monastic *satra* where celibate devotees are only allowed to stay is not however absolutely coenobitical. The celibates live in separate house where they live and dine accordingly to their own way. Caste distinction is scrupulously maintained in the matter of dinning and social practices. A Brahman does not take food cooked by people belonging to other castes. Brahmins have the right to worship idols in *satras* where they are kept. However “all devotees irrespective of their caste meet together in prayer services and take their positions according to their ecclesiastical order” (Sarma, 1999: 196).

*Maintenance:* The celibates living within the *satra* campus are required to work with their own hands such work as cooking, washing clothes etc. However they often manage such works with the help of juniors attached to them. They utilize their spare time in different handicrafts.

In the formative stage of *satra* institution, regular incomes derived from tithes and grants from kings were not sufficient for maintenance of the celibate devotees living within the *satra* campus. (Sarma, 1999: 197) So they maintained themselves partly by begging and partly from gifts offered by visitors to the *satra*. These devotees also constructed their huts within the *satra* campus. They also lent their services for the construction of the shrines and prayer halls. They husked paddy, collected wood from the forest and washed their utensils and worked for the sanitation of their camps.

With the attainment of material prosperity consequent upon the prevalence of the system of paying tithes to the *satra* and of grants from the kings, the problem of maintenance of celibate devotees was solved. At the same time, there was no necessity for begging. But still the celibate devotees cooked for themselves washed

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<sup>4</sup> Majuli: River Island in the River Brahmaputra

their clothes and performed other day to day works. They were also in pursuit of some useful crafts.

*Food:* The *vaisnavas* are scrupulously careful in taking food. One does not take food cooked by another person if the latter does not belong to one's own caste. Again a person does not take food from another person if he is not initiated. Therefore, there is a practice still prevalent among the *vaisnavas* to initiate a newly married wife soon after her marriage so that she could enter the kitchen to cook food.

Fish and meat with a certain exception are not taboos. The *vaisnavas* are generally non-vegetarian. However *vaisnavas* should not indulge in killing animals, but they can take meat of animals provided they are killed by others. Mutton was generally accepted as food. However fish was the most common food item in view of its abundance in Assam during those days. Both self indulgence and self deprivation must be avoided. A middle path should be taken. "A celibate devotee should be a light rope walker balancing his way between the two abysses of laxity and excessive austerity" (Lekhuru, 1952 reprint 1964: 42). Chewing of betel nut with betel leaf, lime and tobacco is in practice.

*Worship:* The *vaisnavas* except those belonging to the *brahma samhati* do not observe brahmanical rites of worship. They follow *panchopachara* (Gandha, Puspa, Dhupa, Dwipa and Naibedya) are sufficient enough for an ordinary devotional rites. Of these *upacharas* (things) the offering of *naibedya* (an offering to God) is considered to be the most important. *naibedya* usually consist of softened gram, moong pulse, rice, fruits betel nut and betel leaf etc. But these should be offered uncooked.

*Dress and other articles of use:* A celibate devotee attached to a *satra* uses three pieces of white cloth- a dhoti, a *chadar* (wrapper) and a *gamocha* (towel). On ceremonial occasions the devotees wear a bodice or waist coat or a *chapkan* (long flowing garment). The rich devotees are often found to wear silk garments. However religious Gurus like Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva advised the devotees to be simple and humble in the dresses and manners.

Wooden furniture is rarely used in *satras*. Instead rough blankets, mattresses made of grass, bamboo, slits or withered plantain leaves are in use. Foot wares made of hide and skin was not used, instead of wooden foot wares were in use. Male devotees like

women used to keep long hair which they keep trailing their back. They do not keep beard or moustaches. They remained clean shaven.

*Sacramental relationship:* There are two types sacramental relationship, namely (a) between the *adhikara* and the devotees (b) among devotees. The *adhikara* as the head of the religious community naturally commands respect and obedience. It is the duty of the devotees to serve the *adhikara*. The *adhikara* is regarded as the representative of God. The *adhikara* initiates his devotees. After initiation, the devotee must show unconditional loyalty to his Guru. He cannot change his Guru in any circumstances. The relationship between one devotee and another is more divinely than between the Guru and the devotee. “According to *vaisnava* scriptures, an offence against deity or Guru is redeemable in certain circumstances, but an offence against a devotee, no matter how insignificant position he might hold is unpardonable (Sarma, 1999: 204). Madhavadeva once expelled from his sect two of his disciples for abusing and assaulting devotees.

*Manners:* Persons living within the boundary of a *satra* are a very polite and highly polished. A *satriya* devotee never speaks in terms of first person because that would mean egoism. For instance, if a *satriya* devotee is asked “Have you done it”, he will say “Yes, by the grace of God, it is done.” Uttering the names of Visnu once or twice, such as Ram, Hari or Krishna in the midst of every sentence is a kind of mannerism with the devotees. The devotees remain neat and clean. They never eat anything in the morning before main bath. After bath, they will wear only clean cloths washed on the previous day.

*Offence and Punishment:* Certain offences such as adultery, theft, assault and moral turpitude are considered very serious and any person who commits such crime is liable for expulsion. Similarly telling a lie is also considered a serious offence. Devotees found to be indulging in the practice of magic, charms and sorcery are also considered as offence and severely deals with addiction and gambling are considered serious vices and accordingly dealt with.

*Marriage and Obsequies rite:* A celibate devotee, if he so desires can marry and become a householder devotee. During the days of Sankaradeva, Madhavadeva or other Gurus, marriage was strictly within the caste. For example, a *Brahmin* bridegroom must take a *Brahmin* Bride. Marriage was solemnized accordingly to

*brahmanical* rites. (Sarma, 1999: 199) But now a lot of changes have taken place and inter-caste marriage is not considered a taboo. Moreover, apart from *brahmanical* rites, today marriages are taking place with the chanting of *naam* and binding of the nuptial chord by a priest (not necessarily *Brahmin*) around the bridegroom and the bride.

**n) Types of Satra:** There are two types of *satra* establishment found in different parts of Assam, (a) Monastic with 1<sup>st</sup> celibate inmate (*Kewalia/ Udasin Bhakat*) and the celibate pontiff (*Udasin Adhikara*) or celibate pontiff with house holding inmates (*Grihi/Grihasthi/Udasin Bhakata*) and (b) Semi monastic or house holding inmates and house holding pontiff (*grihasthi/ vishagee adhikara*). (Nath, 2011 in Nath 2011: 40). *satras* like Aauniati Dakhinpat, Garamur etc. are the monastic *satras* and *satras* like Barpeta, Patbaushi, Sundaridiya are the example of semi monastic *staras*.

*Vaisnavism* is the cult of worshipping Vishnu as the supreme deity. The *bhakti* movement in Assam reflects the religious, social and cultural history of the population of Assam. *Bhakti* movement swept across India as a social reform movement. Due to popularity of this new religion, many people belonging to different castes and creed espoused the new religion. The new faith built its basis first in lower Assam. But after the death of Sankardeva, his followers carried the new religion to upper Assam where people of different tribes espoused it quickly. Apart from lower and upper Assam, the movement even spread to some parts of Arunachal Pradesh. People of different tribes like the Ahom, Kachari, Mising, Garo, Bhutiya and even the Muslims were proselytized into the new faith. All people were equally regarded and there was no distinction as between caste and creed. A democratic outlook prevailed, which increased social mobility. This new atmosphere paved the way for growth of Assamese nationality. It has contributed immensely to the formation and development of the Assamese society and its culture. He aimed at elevating the so called lower castes and the tribal people of Assam to higher social position. According to him there is no distinction between higher and lower castes in the temple of God. Because of this communistic ideal in the spiritual sphere, caste distinction and animosities in the Assamese society are minimum. The complex philosophical ideas of the religious scriptures which the common un-lettered people cannot understand have been made simple and comprehensible through his writings. As a corollary to his religious

mission of spreading *vaisnavism*, he developed mass communication media like-drama, dance, song and painting which were gladly accepted by the people. As a result common people were attracted to his religion. In this way he built up the neo-*vaisnavite* religion on a solid foundation. This movement gives a new lease of life to Assamese society and its culture.

The special feature of Assamese neo-*vaisnavism* is the *satra* institution. Due to popularity of this new religion, many people belonging to different castes and creed espoused the new religion *satra* institution helped in the unity of the Assamese society. It is also a chord linking Assam with the rest of India. *Satra* is the main institution around which all religious and cultural activities move. There are three parties attached to the *satra*, namely- *adhikara* and *deka-adhikara*, *bhakata* and *sisya*. *Adhikara* is the head of the whole *vaisnava* order. For efficient management of the *satra*, several functionaries are appointed. Income of the *satra* consists of two sources- (i) Land granted by the kings which were later on confirmed by the British Govt. (ii) Religious tithes contributed by the disciples. There are also different types of congregational services. These are called *naam-prasanga*. These services are grouped into 3 categories- (i) Morning Prayer Service (ii) Afternoon Prayer Service and (iii) Evening Prayer Service. Certain customs and manners are observed by both celibate devotees and householder devotees. Some devotees observe celibacy. They cook their own food and wash their clothes. Fish and meat with a certain exceptions are not taboos. Persons living within the four walls of the *satra* are required to be very polite in their behaviour. Certain offences of the devotees such as- adultery, theft, assault are considered very serious and anyone involving in such crimes is expelled. *Satra* institution helped in the unity of the Assamese society. It is also chord linking in Assam with the rest of India. *Satra* is the main institution around which all religious and cultural activities move. One of the most important contributions of the *satra* institution is the upliftment of the backward classes and minimization of caste distinction. *satras* are also centers of imparting education. The *satras* enriched the Assamese society with songs, dramas and dances. However, the *satras* have undergone significant changes in the post-independent period. The changes induced by modern technology in attitude and opportunity for the common masses have reduced the effectiveness of the *satra* institution to influence their life style. The *satras* could not respond in time to expand their areas to retain the faith of the people in matters of education, performing art, health etc. The growing scientific temper also

played a role to distance the common man from guidance of the *satra*. It must also be admitted that the rites and rituals observed in the *satras* all over Assam helped the new faith to place it on a systematic foundation, gave it a dignified appearance and finally tended to bring about discipline and order in religious life.

Despite the changes, the institution of the *satra* is still a great force of the composite society in Assam with certain distinct characteristics reflected in entire value system. It is through the *satras* that the people of Brahmaputra valley have attained a common identity, despite the great diversity and difference among various groups of people in their culture, economy, education and social status. Classical Assamese culture owes much to the *satras* of the land.

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