

## CHAPTER VI

### RELATIONS BETWEEN *HATIS* AND *SATRA*

#### *Introduction*

The building in which the holy book is kept on the pedestal or the image is installed for the purpose of worship is known as *manikuta* and the big house in front of it, where *kirtan* is held known as *kirtanghar* or the *namghar*. In this permanent institution, a large number of devotees stay within or near precincts of the *kirtanghar* in separate huts constructed in lanes on all the four sides. These lanes are known as *hatis*. The whole institution is known by the term *satra*. At Barpeta, the contribution of Mathuradas Burha Ata, the first *adhikara* of Barpeta *satra* in organizing the *hatis* is notable. He divided the town into three *thul hatis* namely Dakshin *hati*, Uttar *hati* and Na *hati*. With these *hatis* there are another 19 *sakha* (secondary) *hatis* (Pathak, 1959: 72). People of different castes and creed live in the same *hati*. These *hatis* may be considered to be organized on the basis of division of labour, each *hati* having its own share of works to be performed in the *satra* context.

Celibates are devotees. They lead on intensely devotional live. They have a close relation with the *satra*. They live usually within the four walls of *satra* compound and sometimes outside it. The celibates are indifferent to any worldly attraction and the sole object of their life is the absolute devotion to God. Such devotees are called *keula* (celibates living in *satra* campus) in the Barpeta *satra* circle.

People in Barpeta *satra* living in different *hatis* are closely related with the *satra* in various aspects. There are a number of functionaries in Barpeta *satra* who are attached with the traditional functions since earlier times in regard to daily activities and also in times of various festivals. It can be gathered that various persons were closely related with the affairs of the *satra* in the early stage, the descendents of whom are still continuing such duties. Mathuradas Burha Ata, who by way of giving recognition to the *satra*, brought from various places persons proficient in different activities of the *satra* and settled at Barpeta. Their activities were fixed by Maturadas Burha Ata for smooth running of the *satra* (Pathak, 1959: 72). Their Specific duties are related to daily prayer services and can also be noticed at the time of annual festivals, such as *doul* Festivals, *domahi* or *bihu*, *kirtan* festival, *janmastami* etc.

Some of the members of these families working as teacher, government jobs or business activities also join as functionaries in the *satra*.

Another bigger group of society related to the *satra* is the community of devotees of Barpeta known as *samuaha bhakata*<sup>1</sup>. They are the resident disciple of the *satra*.

In this Chapter, I have tried to describe some of the relationships of *hatis* with the *satra*. I have divided these relations into formal and informal relation, regular and occasional relation, economic relation, socio-political relation and social relation. Besides these I have described some other relations also.

A person who is initiated to the *mahapurushiya*<sup>2</sup> faith and wishes to take a *bhag*<sup>3</sup> may be able to enlist him as a member of *samuha*. He is entitled to vote in the election of the *satra*. Moreover he is bound by the norms of the *vaisnava* fold and must have to pay *gurukar*<sup>4</sup> to the *satra* in order to continue his membership twice a year. A member of *samuha* is also required to render certain services to the *satra*, which is known as *pala*. There are certain professional castes at Barpeta. These are Hira, Kumars, Banias and kaibartas etc. These caste groups are related to the *satra* through their professions.

**a) Formal and Informal Relations:** People have formal as well as informal linkages with the *satra*. Formal linkages are those linkages which are established through formal contact with the *satra*. Such formal contacts are both religious and secular. Similarly people have variety of contact with the *satra*.

**Formal Relations:** There are some activities related to *kirtanghar* which are formal. These are *adhikara*, *deka-Adhikara*, *ghai deuri* other *deuries*, *chaul bharali*, *charu bharali*, *mas bharali*. Off these, *adhikara* is the principal person in the *kirtanghar*. He decides all the matters of the *kirtanghar*. In the absence of *adhikara* all the duties vested in him are performed by the *deka adhikara*. Otherwise he is the secondary person of the *satra*. There are other *deuries* also. *Chaul bharali* is the accountant of rice. *Charu bharali* is the custodian of the earthen pots. At Barpeta there are certain

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<sup>1</sup> *Samuaha Bhakata*: Community of devotee which is a bigger group of the society related to the *Satra*

<sup>2</sup> *Mahapurusiya*: Followers of the doctrine of Sankardeva.

<sup>3</sup> *Bhag*: Share in the offerings in the *Satra* by paying a definite fee.

<sup>4</sup> *Gurukar*: Religious tithes given by the people to the *Satra*

castes groups which are formally related to the *satra*. These are *Hira*<sup>5</sup>, *Mukhi*<sup>6</sup>, *Dhoba*<sup>7</sup>, *Bania*<sup>8</sup>, *Kiabarta*<sup>9</sup> etc.

*Adhikara*: The supreme ecclesiastical authority of the *satra* is the *adhikara*. He is the religious head of the *satra* sect. He decides all matters relating to any dispute on religious matters. He presides over the meetings of the managing committee of the *satra*. He holds the religious discourses with the people. He also receives the dignitaries, who visit the *satra*. Occasionally he visits the branch *satras*. It is his duty to initiate people into the *mahapurushiya* religion. By virtue of his status and dignity he exerts spiritual influence on all disciples of the *mahapurushiya* religion.

The first *adhikara* of Barpeta *satra* was Mathuradas Burha Ata (Pathak, 1959,: 71). It was through his outstanding personality, organizing ability and skill and spiritual authority over the people that the *satra* became a premier religious institution of Assam. The post of *adhikara* has never been hereditary. It is a sign of the lofty ideals and far sightedness of Mahapurush Sankaradev and Madhavadev and Mathuradas Burha Ata that they could realize that if the post of the *adhikara* was made hereditary all kinds of corruption and greed would creep into the day to day works of the *satra* which would ultimately defile the purity of the religion (Das, 214: 6). Nor was the post of the *adhikara* made the exclusive preserve of a particular caste. In fact any Hindu who follows the *mahapurushiya* religion can become the *adhikara*.

*Deka Adhikara*: Apart from the *adhikara* there is also a *deka adhikara*. He is allotted no particular function, but if the *adhikara* is absent or if the post of *adhikara* becomes vacant due to death or discharge from duty, the *deka adhikara* performs all the functions of the *adhikara*.

*Ghai Deuri*: The post of the *deuri* is very important. In so far as daily religious functions of the *satra* are concerned there is one principal *deuri*. It is his duty to see that all the daily functions of the *satra* are performed regularly. He is the in-charge of the *akkhyay banti* (permanent lamp) of the sanctum sanctorum. He also prepares *prasad* (an offering to the God; an oblation) for the deity. He also lights the other lamps within the temple. He prepares the flowers and *tulsi* leaves for use by the

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<sup>5</sup> People who make earthen pots.

<sup>6</sup> People who are engaged in the preparation of lime.

<sup>7</sup> Washerman.

<sup>8</sup> Goldsmith.

<sup>9</sup> Fisherman.

pilgrims who visit the *satra* daily. He also receives the offerings of rice salt and other goods that are made by the devotees. In view of the nature of the work, the post of the *ghai deuri* is assigned to a celibate devotee. There are two *ghai deuris* in the *satra*, each of whom is required to perform his duty for two months at a stretch.

Other *deuris* are also there whose tasks are to assist the *ghai deuri* in his works.

The *satra* traditionally does not do the act of cleaning and sweeping the *kitranghar* with the help of hired labour. To ensure cooperation from the people these acts are performed by devotees' families by turns.

*Functionaries Attached to the Religious Functions of the Satra:* The following functionaries are also attached to the religious functions of the *satra*-

Mazumdar: *Mazumdar* is the accountant who keeps the daily accounts of the *satra*.

Chaul Bharali: *Chaul bharali* is the accountant of rice.

Charu Bharali: *Charu bharali* is the custodian and accountant who keeps the account of *charu* (earthen pots), *chati* (small earthen lights), *ghots* (earthen jars) and other earthen wares offered by persons who have responsibility to give them.

Mas Bharali: *Mas bharali* is the person who takes charge of the fish of the *satra* and arrange for its distribution among the pilgrims in accordance with the prevailing custom.

*Professional Castes of Barpeta:* At Barpeta *satra* different caste groups are related to the *satra* in different profession. The professional castes at Barpeta are Suri, Hira, Kumar, Kaibarta, Bania, Mukhi and Dhoba. They are differently related to the *satra* through their professions.

Hira: The Hiras are potters. They make earthen pots with the help of hand. They are to supply earthen pots to the *satra* and these pots are distributed to the guests as cooking vessels together with *sidhas* (uncooked articles of ration, vegetables etc. offered to guest). At the time of festivals the Hiras perform such type of duties.

Kumars: The Kumars are also potters. They make pots with the help of wheels. They are to supply various pots. Of these *chati* are special. These burners are necessary during the whole period.

Baniya: The Baniyas are gold smiths. They make gold ornaments. Now a day's most of them have abandoned their traditional work and taken up some other

occupations. Their services are requisitioned to clean the gold ornaments of the deity before the *doul* festival.

**Kaibrata:** The Kaibratas used to supply definite quantity of fish to the *satra* on the occasion of *doul* festival which are distributed among the guest. By supplying the definite amount of fish, the Kaibratas earn the voting rights in *satra* election.

**Mukhi:** The Mukhis are the dealers of lime. Their duty in the *satra* is to white wash the *kirtanghar* and other houses including the brick walls around the *satra* compound. At the time of festival they mainly perform such type of duties.

Another formal relation is the secular relation. Secular relations are those relations who are not related to ecclesiastical affairs, but to the management of the *satra*. In this context mention might be made to the prolonged litigation over the question of management of the *satra*. In other *mahapurusiya satras* of Assam the post of the *adhikara* has already become hereditary in character (Nath, 2012: 10). In order to prevent the management of the *satra* from the falling into hand of the hereditary religious leaders some well meaning persons of the town framed a constitution for the democratic management of the *satra*. Among these persons mention must particularly be made of

1. Late- Jagadish Ch. Das, M.A. , B.L
2. Late- Ramen Ch. Das, M.A., B.L.
3. Late- Mahendra Nath Mahanta, B.L.

The long litigation in connection with the constitution is known as scheme case.

The constitution of the *satra* made detailed provisions for the democratic management of the *satra* through an elected body. The constitution also clearly defined the rights and duties of the managing committee as well as other devotees of the *satra*.

*Managing Committee of the Satra:* As per the provision of the constitution of Barpeta *satra* the day to day management of the *satra* is vested with an elected body known as the managing committee comprising 28 members (Raychoudhury, 2012: 44). The *adhikara* is to preside over the meetings of the managing committee, but the supreme authority of the *satra* is vested with the *samuha* that is all the devotees who pay *kar* to the *satra*. For the purpose of election of the members to the managing committee, there is a separate electorate and each *hati* can elect one member to the managing committee. The tenure of the managing committee is 3 years. There shall be one

secretary, one assistant secretary, one registrar, one treasurer and one accountant in the managing committee who are to be elected by the managing committee (Raychoudhury, 2012: 46).

**The Secretary:** The secretary shall write and keep the proceedings of the managing committee which is to be countersigned by the president and confirmed in the next meeting of the committee. The secretary shall receive all applications and correspondence and letters on behalf of the managing committee with authority to reply all letters addressed to the committee in consultation with the majority of the members in urgent cases but under normal circumstances the secretary will reply to the best of his judgment and discretion not in matters seriously affecting the *satra*. He shall publish the account of the *satra* fund every year with the abstract of the auditor's report in the local Assamese News paper in the locality. Mahananda Pathak is elected secretary for this current session.

**The President:** The President shall preside over all the meetings of the managing committee and shall have a casting vote in case the members present are equally divided.

**The Vice President:** The Vice President shall represent the President in his absence and discharge all duties of President.

**The Accountant:** The Accountant shall maintain separate account books for such major heads of the accounts. After taking daily accounts, he shall enter the accounts in proper books. He shall take charge of all vouchers and the counterfoils of the receipts which he shall submit to the auditor for the inspection.

**The Treasurer:** The treasurer shall be in charge of the treasury of the *satra*, shall receive all sums deposited by the accountant by passbook.

**The Registrar:** The Registrar shall maintain voters' register. He shall receive all applications for registration of the voter and after being satisfied that all requisite qualifications have been fulfilled, shall register the name of application in the general register as well as register of the particular constituency, in case of any dispute the matters will be referred to a general meeting of the *samuaha* and its decision will be final.

***Samuaha:*** The bigger group of the society related with the *Satra* is the community of devotees of Barpeta known as *samuaha bhakat*. They are the resident disciples of the

*satra*. *Samuaha* is the elective body of resident disciples, the religious brother-hood. *Samuaha bhakata* conveys the sense of the *bhakat*s in assembly or the *bhakat*s who are entitled to vote in the assembly.

A person who is initiated to the *mahapurusiya* faith and wishes to take a *bhag* may be able to enlist him as a member of the *samuaha*; thereby he is entitled to vote in the election of the *satra*. Moreover he is bound by the norms of the *vaisnava* fold and first has to pay *gurukar* to the *satra* in order to continue his membership, twice in a year. A member of the *samuaha* is also required to render certain services to the *satra* which are known as *pala*.

Incidence of *pala* is given below-

1. *Pala* includes the services of washing the floor of the temple in the *kirtanghar*.
2. Collecting tulsi leaves and flower for daily worship.
3. Beating the drums and playing other Musical instruments.
4. Collecting plantain leaves for daily use.
5. Collecting offerings.
6. Keeping day and night vigil over the *kirtanghar* and its property.

The institution of *samuha bhakata* in the past took the greater responsibilities of the management and supervision of daily activities including religious activities. For this purpose there were regular sitting of the *samuaha* in front of the *math* twice a day just after the morning prayers and also in the afternoon. Such sitting is known as *samuaha bhakatar mel* (sitting of the *samuha bhakata*).

***Informal Relations:*** Devotees of the *mahapurusiya* sect and non devotees as well have a variety of contacts with the *satra*. These are given below-

There are some relations of the people living outside the *satra* campus and *satra*. The *satra* premise is very large surrounded by walls and arches. Within the campus rows of coconut trees present beautiful and picturesque scenery. So the campus as well as the street outside the campus is a suitable place for gossiping. During the summer season, people can sit behind the tall trees. Again during the winter season it is comfortable to sit on the pavements and gossip. The topic of such gossips may be anything ranging from religious discourses to national and international politics, economic problems, price rise or the elopement of the local girl. The campus is also a very favorite place for local brats for playing and marry making. As the surroundings

area is thickly populated and as there is no open space for games and sports, the campus provides the ideal spot for them for outdoor activities.

The daily visitors to the *satra* come for different purposes; some come to the *satra* to listen to the Bhagawata recitation in the evening. Some come to just have a *darshan* (viewing) of the *satra*. But there are also people both male and female who come for solace. The poverty stricken people dejected by different trials and tribulations come to pray before god to get relief from their troubles. Some celibates living inside the campus are consulted by people in different matters, such as fixing up auspicious dates for marriage of children, naming newly born etc.

On all auspicious occasions like marriage, first appearances of puberty of girl etc. people go to the *satra* to make obeisance to the God. A bride groom on his marriage day would invariably visit the *satra* before leaving for the bride's house. Similarly after marriage the newlywed husband and wife visit the *satra*. A girl after attaining puberty also visits the *satra* after observance of the period of isolation and ceremonial bathing. Whenever a person buys a motor vehicle, he would take the vehicle to the front of the main portal of the *satra* for ceremonial blessings and naming. Devotees also go to the *satra* to order different goods like salt, mustard oil, sugar, coconut, gold and silver flowers, sacred pedestal, wick stand, a variety of other things as *manas* (Sacred intention made by the people to have god's favour). The occasion of such names may be serious illness of sons and daughters, a service for the son, or promotion in examination or marriage of a daughter etc.

Devotees on different occasions come from outside, particularly during the *doul* festival. A large number of such devotees are very large indeed. The *satra* has the longstanding custom of offering hospitality to such devotees in the form of rice, pulses, salt, mustered oil, firewood and earthen pots to cook their means. At present people from different places comes to have a visit to the *satra*.

With the western influence gradually creeping into our society, a section of people of the town observe marriage anniversary, birth day of children etc. On such occasions also the concerned people visit the *satra*.

**b) Regular and Occasional Relations:** Tradition goes that it was Mathura Das Ata, the first *adhikara* of Barpeta *satra* who by way of recognizing the *satra*, brought from various places persons proficient in different activities of the *satra* and settled them at Barpeta. Their activities were fixed by Mathuradas Burha Ata for smooth running of

the *satra*. Their specific duties are related to the daily prayer services and can also be noted at the time of annual festivals such as *doul* festivals, *domahi*, *kirtan* festival, *janmastami* etc. They are very sincere in performing these duties and that is why the *satra* is running without any fault. Some of the members of such families work as teachers doing government jobs or business activities also join as functionaries in the *satra*. They feel proud of joining such works and taking it to be their noble duties. There are close relationship between different dynasties of Barpeta with the *satra*. In the *kirtanghar* regularly 14 prayers are held. Different dynasties from different *hatis* perform their functions everyday in the *satra*. Every festival of Barpeta different dynasties performs their duties. During the festival, people come there from different places. The local people living at different places for their services come during the festival.

There are a number of functionaries at Barpeta *satra* who are accustomed with the traditional functions since early times in regard to daily activities as well as at the time of occasional festivals. It can be gathered that various dynasties of Barpeta who were closely associated with the affairs of the *satra* in the early stage are still continuing these duties.

The regular relationships and occasional relationships between the different dynasties in different *hatis* are discussed below-

**Regular Relations:** The daily prayer services are divided into three different programs like the *puwar prasanga* (matins), *biyalir prasanga* (afternoon prayer service) and *ratir prasanga* (evening prayer services) (Neog -341 cited in Gurulila - 254). The *Katha Gurucharita* (Reference Pate – 01, 331 & 584) tells us that when Madhava lived at Sundaridia after his master had passed away, he installed the *guru-asana* there, systematized the *prasangas* into fourteen fixed up the order in which they were to be performed. At Barpeta *satra* Mathuradas Burha Aata developed the three times daily prayer services into fourteen units (Roy Choudhury, 2012: 110). This programme is followed even today at Barpeta. *Sewait bangsara* (dedicated devotees) performing the daily rites in the *satra* as per shifting system. Different *bangsaras* are *pathak* (public reader or reciter of religious book). *Gayan* (Singer of devotional music like, *bargeet*, *bhatima*, *geet*, *pada*, *ghosa*), *Bayan* (an instrumentalist, specially *khol*), *ojah* (choral singer), *ghosha kirtaniya* (a group of religious singer of devotional music).

The morning *prasanga* constitutes of 5 units. The first unit consists of singing of two *bargeetas* by the *pathaka* dynasty in front of the *guru asana* facing towards it. It is called *jagaran geet*<sup>10</sup>. The second unit is known as *calanar geet*<sup>11</sup>.

The second unit consists of singing the *bhatima*. At the end of the singing of a *bargeeta* and a *bhatima* the *pathaka* comes out for presenting similar performance inside the *matha*. At 7 A.M. the Brahmin *purohit* (priest) arrives and opens the lock of the door enclosing *Kaliya Thakur* (lord Krishna). He took his seat inside the enclosure and arranged the articles necessary for giving ceremonial bath of the deity and begins to worship. The *pala dhariya* kept ready all the materials necessary for the daily worship.

At this time, women devotees begin to assemble for offering Morning Prayer to be held at the stipulated place on the southern *varanda* of the *kritanghar*<sup>12</sup>. The Prayer services of the women devotee start before that of the male devotees.

The third unit is the morning *prasanga* consists of different parts. a) The *Pathaka* takes his definite seat and begins recitation by calling the names of God. This part is known as *nam-daka* (calling the name of God) b) Next item consist of reciting a portion of the combined section of Madhavadeva's *Namghosa*, c) One or two chapters of Sankaradeva's *Kirtanghosa* are then recited, d) Closing of the *prasanga* with repetition of God's names in rhythm. Elderly persons generally attend the prayer services.

The fourth unit of the Morning Prayer starts with reading a few chapters from the *Bhagavata*. The *Bhagavata* is read by persons of Ramray Guru Dynasty.

The fifth unit starts with the *pathaka* reading a few chapters of the *Kirtanghoshha*. From other religious books also one or two chapters are to be read. Thus the morning session of the prayer comes to an end. At that time the *daba*, *borkah* (gong), *sankha* (conch shell) *joyghanta* (bell) etc. are sounded to mark the end of the morning session of prayer in the *satra*.

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<sup>10</sup> *Jagaran Geet*: It depicts the scene of rising Krishna from his sleep.

<sup>11</sup> *Calanar Geet*: Songs associated with Krishna's preparation for starting towards Vrindavana to tend cows.

<sup>12</sup> Women are not allowed now to enter the main prayer hall where the idol of Lord Krishna is worshipped. It is alleged that women proper cleanliness and may enter the holy place even during the days of menstruation. Hence women are debarred.

The next prayer service is called *biyalir prasanga*. This *prasanga* is started at about 3 pm. The afternoon *prasanga* consist of reading one section from a number of selected works to be taken one after another by the *samuaha bhakat*.

The next item of the afternoon prayer consists of recitation of one section of *nama chanda* by the Sutradhar dynasty.

On the single sitting the *Pathaka* complete the afternoon prayer by reading one chapter from the *Namghosa*. The *paladhariya* sounded the big drum indicating the time for evening prayer.

By this time the reading of the religious books in the *bhagavatagriha* starts. Listeners both males and females take their seats covering the southern *varandah* of the *kirtanghar*. The *pathaka* can make nearly one thousand strong devotees audience spell bound through his melodious loud voices. Side by side with such recitation the evening prayer services also starts. The ninth item of daily *prasanga* or the first item of the evening service consists of reciting one section of *Gunamala*. In the next item one section from *lilamala* is recited. Recitation of *Guru Bhatima* is performed.

These 3 items are performed by the Sutradhar dynasty for 6 months. These Assamese months are *phagun, chot, bohag, jeth, ahar* and *saon*. Pathak dynasty performs these 3 items for other 6 months –*bhada, ahin, kati, aghon, puh* and *magh*. The gathering of the *bhagavata-griha* breaks up at nearly 6.30 p.m. in the evening.

The next item of prayer service is called *sewar kirtan* in which the *gayan, bayan* presents two *bargeetas* in specified *Ragas* to the accompaniment of *khol*s and *tal*s in front of *guru asana*. This program is performed by different dynasties in different period – Sutradhar dynasty performs for 3 months viz. *jeth, ahar and saon*. People of Dakhin *hati* perform another 3 months- *phagun, chot and bahag*. Bhima Bayan dynasty performs it for 2 months- *bhado* and *ahin*. Sarbajya Atoi dynasty performs for 2 months- *kati* and *aghon* and Galia *hati* Bayan dynasty performs it for 2 months- *puh* and *magh*. The *pathak* comes again to perform the last two *prasangas*. He recites one section each of *Nama Chanda* and *Sarana Chanda* along with playing cymbals. The Final item of the prayer is called *ratir path*, reading of sacred book at night.

As the *pathaka* completes his reading, the *paladhariya* sounds the *daba* indicating the end of the day's prayer services at 8 p.m. The prayer services being over, the *paladhariya* begins to clean the *kirtanghar* by sweeping. After completion of sweeping the floor, he again sounded the *daba* to mark the end of the day's religious activities of the *satra*.

Apart from this, people of various ages always go to the *satra*. Every morning, the elderly persons go to the *satra*. There is a special place for women where they pray to God. In the evening two hundreds to three hundreds of people go to the *satra* for listening to the recitation of different epics and *Puranas*.

***Occasional Relations:*** In each of these functions religious performance are held in minute details. These functions are divided among different dynasties of disciple of the *satra*. These are also meticulously observed by functionaries. The roles of the Sutradhara dynasty, Pathak dynasty, and the Gayan and Bayan dynasty are particularly significant in all these functions. Barpeta *satra* performs the following occasional functions-

***Bahag Bihu:*** In lower Assam particularly in Barpeta District, *bihu* is known as *domhi*. The *bahag bihu* is observed in the *satra* every year. The usual folk favour in the form of songs and dances. But amorous songs and dances are forbidden and it is observed strictly on religious line. The *domhi* is observed for seven days from the day of the *sankranti* (last day of the month of *chaitra*). On the day before *sankranti*, the *gayan* and the *bayan* who sing *Gunamala*, *lilamala* and *Bhatima* accompanied by *khol* and *tal* at night. Then two *bargeets* and one *ghosa* are recited. These duties are performed by *Gayan* and *Bayan* of the dynasties appointed for this purposes for that particular period of the year.

***Magh Bihu:*** The rituals observed in the *magh bihu* are exactly the same as those of the *bahag bihu*. There is only one addition in the form of making of a *mejji* (a bonfire) in the courtyard of the *satra*. The devotees in the morning of the *sankranti* go in large number to the nearby river for holy bath. They return to the *kirtanghar* and light the *mejji*.

***Death anniversary of Sankaradeva:*** The death anniversary of Sankaradeva falls on the second day of the month of *bhada*. Locally it is called *kirtan*. It continues for seven days. On the first day the sacred pedestal containing the *Bhagawata* is placed and the same is kept for seven days. On the preceding day of the *kirtan*, the *adikara* delivers a religious speech. Then the *kakati* announces the names of the devotees in presence of *samuah*. In the morning of the *kirtan* songs are recited, followed by *namprasanga* and *Bhagawat* recitation. Then the *Bayans* and *Gayans* of the dynasties of Gandhiya Bayan and Bhima Bayan recite devotional songs and *Nam-Ghosa*. In the Afternoon

the devotees sing two *bargeets*. At night the Gayans and Bayans of the Sutradhara dynasty recite devotional songs from the *kirtanghosh* composed by Sankaradeva.

The religious duties for the rest of the days are also arranged meticulously and observed to the minutest details.

*Death anniversary of Madhavadeva:* The Death anniversary of Madhavadeva falls on the fourth and fifth day of the dark moon in the month of bhada. It continues for seven days. The sacred pedestal with *Bhagawat* is placed in the sanctum sanctorum of the *kirtanghar*. Enumeration of devotees by the *kakati* is done as in the case of the *kirtan* of Sankardev.

On the first day in the morning one song from the *Gunamala* and two songs from the *lilamala* are sung. Then the *bhatima* is recited followed by *namprasanga* and the recitation of the *Bhagawat*. Then Gayans and Bayans of the dynasties of Bhima Bayan and Gandhiya Bayan take part in the recitation of the song. In the afternoon *ghoshakritan* is recited. At night some parts from the *Gunamala* and *Lilamala* are recited. The next six days are also observed in accordance with strict routine.

*Death Anniversary of Mathuradas Burha Ata:* Death anniversary of Mathuradas Burha Ata falls on the 4<sup>th</sup> day of the dark moon in the month of *ahin*. The religious paraphernalia observed in the death anniversary of Mathuradas Burha Ata is the same as that of Sankaradeva. On the preceding day of the *kirtan*, someone from the Kakati dynasty enumerate the *baras* instead of the devotees. The *namprasanga* at night is performed by the dynasties of Bhima Bayan and Gandhiya Bayan. During the days of the *kirtan*, *namprasanga*, *Bhagwat* recitation and other religious duties are performed as usual. The festival runs for 5 days.

*Karbhar (Payment of Tithe):* The system of Tithe was perhaps initiated by Madhavadeva. He paid the tithe to Mathuradas Burha Ata when the later was made *adhikara* of Barpeta *satra*. Following this other devotees like Narayandas Thakur Ata, Barbisnu Ata, Nanda Gopal Ata also paid tithe to the *satra*. It has now become a tradition to pay tithe on the days of the three *kirtans* mentioned above. The three *thul hatis* have been performing this sacred duty, Uttar *hati* (Brindabhati) on Sankardev's *kirtan*, Dakhin *hati* on Madhavadeva's *kirtan* and Na-*hati* on the *kirtan* of Mathuradas Burha Ata. On these days the *karbhar* is ceremonially carried on the shoulders by the devotees accompanied by the thousands of people in procession. Singing devotional

songs to the *satra*, the procession ends at the courtyard of the *kirtanghar*. Then it is distributed among the devotees who have shares in the *satra*.

*Janmastami (The birth anniversary of Lord Krishna)*: Another festival observed in the *Satra* falls on the eight day of the dark moon in the month of *bhada*. At night the *Gayans* and *Bayans* recite the *naat-dhemali* before the sacred pedestal. The following dynasties and/or *hatis* take part in the performance-

- 1) Sutradhar dynasty
- 2) Bhima bayan dynasty
- 3) Dakshin hati
- 4) Gandhiya dynasty

On the following day again recitation of devotional songs takes place. Then the drama *nandotsava* composed by Gopal Ata is read out. Thereafter *namprasanga* is held before the sacred pedestal. The devotees then traverse seven times around the *kirtanghar* singing devotional songs.

*Pachati festival*: The *pashati* festival is held on the following day of *janmastami*. It is observed as a day of rejoice at the birth of Lord Krishna.

*Doul festival*: The grandest festival observed in the *satra* is the *doul* festival. It begins on the day of full moon in the month of *phagun*. The first day is called *gandh*. On this day all religious functions are held as per strict formalities. In the morning *namprasanga* is held. In the afternoon the idol of Doul Govinda and Kolia Thakur (both are the idols of Lord Krishna) are taken out with religious festivities to the courtyard near the *matha*. Eight *bargeets* are sung at night. The *gayans* and *bayans* from the dynasty of Bhima Bayan, Gandhiya Bayan dynasty, Sutradhar dynasty and the Bayan dynasty of Galiya *hati* according to predetermined schedule take part.

On the day of the actual *doul* the singers and drummers of the dynasty and or the *hati* sing the *bargeets*. On the day of the *sueri* similarly devotional morning songs, recitation of *bhatima* and *namprasanga* and *Bhagwata* recitation are observed strictly as per the schedule. In the afternoon on that day of the *gayan* and *bayan* accompanied by devotees to take out the idol to nearby Kalabari *satra*. On return, the devotees make seven rounds around the *kirtanghar* singing devotional songs.

It should be noted that particular *hatis* and dynasties of *Gayan* and *Bayan* are assigned the duty of songs and the recitation in different festivals mentioned above at different periods of the day, and these are still in vogue.

At different times of festival people meet each other in the *kirtanghar*. Such moments are so good. The people of Barpeta who hold services at different places come home at the time of different festivals. The special function of Barpeta *satra* is *doul* festival. In this festival every household has guests. At that time the women folk remain busy in preparing different types of foods. But they go to *kirtanghar* also. There they meet old friends.

**c) Economic Relations:** For the day-to-day management of the *satra* like Barpeta huge amount of money is necessary. For this purpose the *satra* must have some perennial sources of income. During the initial period of establishment of the *satra*, there were no significant sources of income of the *satra*. The daily rituals and the maintenance of the celibate devotees were managed through generous gifts and donation from devotees. The celibates' devotees lived very simple lives and their daily living was mainly based on alms. During the initial period, royal dynasties showed no favour to the *satra*. Even the land on which the *satra* is now established was granted by Ram Laruah Burha, a devotee of the *satra*. But in course of time when the influence of the *satra* expanded considerably and the number of devotees swelled, the kings began to pay interest in the management of the *satra*. Cooper plates revealed that king Siva Singha granted land to Barpeta *satra*. The boundary of the *satra* land as per the copper plate was the Barpeta *beel* on the east, Galaya *beel* on the west, Hari *Jaan* on the South and Chinpora *Bhithi* on the north. The copper plate also mentioned the attachment of 150 families of devotees and 17 families of *paiks*. Similar hand grants were also made to other *vaishnava satras*.

The Economy of the *satra* depends on its source of income. The income of the *satra* is mainly derived from two sources-

- i) Religious tithes contributed by disciples,
- ii) Land originally granted by the Ahom kings and subsequently confirmed and recognize by the British Government. The religious tithes yield income according to the number of disciples. Every disciple is expected to make a small contribution to the *satra* annually by cash.

With the introduction of system *gurukar* and *sidha* in the late Sixteenth century by Madhabdeva the institution of *satra* come to be associated with the permanent and regular sources of income. *Bhakats* of Barpeta *satra* and also the *samuah* have to pay

the required *gurukar* consisting of a little cash and definite amount of rice twice in a year.

There are other Economic means of the *satra*, such as *pranami*<sup>13</sup>. Besides these sources, *sidha* is a source of income of the *satra*. Religious obligation of people was strong enough to induce them to offer such things. But in the present day context, these are irregular.

Other sources of income of the *satra* are land and land ownership, are the major sources of income since the middle of the 17 the century A.D. The various types of grants especially land grants made by the Ahom kings helped the *satra* in making a sound economic footing. Land grants to the religious institutions were of different categories.

There is fishing swamps of Barpeta *satra*. These are given on lease for a year. 15 percent of the total income being taken away by the government of Assam and the remaining being the *satras* share.

The other heads from which the *satra* acquires income are sale proceeds of various articles, rents from the houses on the *satra* land, taking of new shares, donations of various forms and so forth.

The main item of expenditure of the *satra* under study revolves round the performance of annual festivals of which major portion is spent on *prasada*. There is also the monthly payment made to various office bearers of the *satra*.

**Religious Taxes:** Any person professing *mahapurushiya* faith shall be entitled to get a *bhag* or more on payment of certain amount of admission fee fixed by the managing committee. The *bhag* is taken through *Bora* who serves definite number of share holders under him. In *kirtan* festival he is to receive the share of the goods offered in *karbhar*.

Every member who has a *bhag* in the *satra* shall have the responsibility of performing the *pala* or to pay the amount in lieu of it.

Payment of *gurukar* is open to all. A man not being a direct disciple of the *satra* may pay any amount as *gurukar*. There is no maximum amount of *gurukar* but the

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<sup>13</sup> *Pranami*: voluntary contribution especially in cash made by the visitors during the festivals and other occasions.

minimum limit of it is fixed at Rs.5/. Anybody who pays *gurukar* is entitled to get *nirmali*<sup>14</sup>

***Specific Professional duties of various groups in Barpeta Satra:*** Barpeta is a place where a number of crafts are concentrated. Almost all of them maintain some relation with the *satra* institution. It may be recorded that some of these craftsmen were settled in Barpeta in the seventeenth century for the purpose of temple service by king Viranarayana of Cooch Behar. The king endowed the Barpeta *satra* with 18 families of *paiks* for various petty works of the establishment which include such artisans as blacksmith, potters and players of drums, pipes and cymbals (Das, 1991: 221-222). Descendants of these men are continuing their services even today. In course of time some other crafts were also established in Barpeta. The *satra* institution at Barpeta helps in flourishing these crafts.

The specialized crafts once flourished at Barpeta and the artisans could show their proficiency. But now they are somehow maintaining the tradition. These small industries are pottery, black smithy, gold smithy, fireworks, Ivory works etc.

Pottery carried on by the people of Hira community of Barpeta is an important cottage industry. It is one of the oldest crafts of this locality. There are nearly three hundred and fifty Hira families at Barpeta and its adjoining area consisting of Sundaridiya, Bamuna and Budarurtup (Sarma and Goswami 2016: 109). The engaged families engaged in these crafts are somehow maintaining their livelihood by selling their finished products and are upholding the tradition. The female folk are engaged in preparing different items; the male folk help their counterpart by collecting the raw materials. The items of this industry consist of *kalah* (pitcher), *paila* (vessels for keeping curd), *charu* (cooking vessels), *maale* (offering plate) and many others.

The Hiras as professional castes are attached to the *satra*. They have to supply a definite quota of earthen pots. They offer it to the *kirtanghar* during the *doul* festival. Against these pots the Hiras are honoured by with areca nuts and betel leaves at the close of the festivals from the *kirtanghar*. During the time of *doul* festival different people come to the *satra*. There is a guest house for these visitors. They are given *sidhas* in these pots by the *satra*.

Another potter caste of Barpeta engaged in making earthen pots is the Kumars. They make pots with the help of wheels. Their pots differ from those of the Hiras. *Kumar*

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<sup>14</sup> *Nirmali*: Consecrated flowers etc.given to devotees as holy token of blessings from deity

make pots like *chaaki* (oil burner), *dhuna daani* (handled pots for offering scent of powder), *ghat*, used in the different religious works etc. Over and above supplying these earthen pots, they have got their stipulated duties in the *satra*. The Kumars are to take on their shoulders the chariot on which *Doul Govinda*, the deity of colour festival, moves in a procession. The Kumars are also given areca nuts and betel nuts for their help by the *satra* managing committee.

The people associated with gold smithy are called Baniya at Barpeta as in some as in some other parts of Assam. There are nearly 200 families of this caste at Barpeta who mainly live in Ghoramora *hati*, Brindaban *hati* and Na *hati*. The Baniyas of Barpeta show their excellence in this craft and gained applause in various places in making gold and silver ornaments. Of this *keru* (earring), *haar* (chain), *kharu* (Bangles), *dhol maduli* (drum shaped neck ornaments) made of gold or silver are worth mentioning.

The Baniyas are also associated with annual performance of the *satra*. They are to clean the gold ornaments of Doul Govinda, and Kaliya Thakur (the deity of *doul* festival). Their services are recognized by honouring them with areca nut and betel nut leaves at the end of the festival.

The one famous blacksmith industry of Barpeta is now somehow surviving and confined only to very limited families. There are nearly hundred Kamar families in Barpeta. Like other small industries, this industry is also facing scarcity of raw materials. There was time when articles made by local blacksmiths of Barpeta had a good market. They could sell sufficient quantity of their articles in front of the *kirtanghar* during *doul* festival and *kirtan* festival. The *bargacha* (gigantic lamp stands) kept inside the *kirtanghar* which can accommodate a thousand oil burners, occasionally lighted, are the examples of excellent craftsmanship of the Kamars of Barpeta. Such lamp stands of various sizes are sent to different religious centers, outside the state and to various museum of Assam from Barpeta.

The association of the blacksmiths with the *satra* as a professional group can be seen at the time of *doul* festival. Each Kamar family is to supply one knife to the *satra* during the festival. In return each family gets 10 areca nuts and a bundles of betel leaves. Nowadays at the time of festival the *Kumars* sell their production inside the *kirtanghar*.

On ceremonial occasions at Barpeta, fireworks are essential. On the day of marriage ceremony it is treated as customary for a groom party to pay a visit to the *kirtanghar* on way to the bride's house. A show of fireworks is held in front of the *kirtanghar*,

when more than one groom parties meet there on a particular day some sort of competition of fireworks is held there. Similarly on the occasion of the festival of colour a grand show of fireworks is a routine activity on the first day of the festival. The items of fire work are-

1. *Tarabaji* (which goes up after firing)
2. *Motar gach* (burns very bright)
3. *Phool Jari* (Flower pot)
4. Colour *baji* (rotates on a wheel)

The craft is associated with the *satra*. On the first day of *doul* festival a show of fireworks is held in the *satra* compound. For this performance payment is made in cash.

Apart from these specialized crafts, there are some other caste based occupations such as those of kaibartas, Mukhi, Dhoba etc. The Kaibartas form a scheduled caste community of Assam. Their primary occupation is fishing. But the Kaibartas of Barpeta are found to have taken to purchase and sale of fishes in the market itself and also from other sources.

The Kaibartas take a prominent role in the economy and day-to-day life of the people of this *satra* town. There are nearly six hundred Kaibartas families (Pathak, 1959: 111) concentrated in Bhakatpara and Rayatpara of Barpeta town.

The Kaibartas of Barpeta were associated with the *satra* activities through their professions. They supply a definite quantity of fish to the *satra* at the time of *doul* festival. They are treated as share holders without paying the annual fees in the form of rice and cash. But this practice is not in vogue now due to economic reasons. During mid-thirties of this century, there were objections that the Kaibartas were not supplying the required quantity of fish to the *satra* or were paying much less than the stipulated quantity (Pathak, 1959: 112).

There is another caste group called Mukhi. Their occupation was declining in time. With this traditional occupation that are related with the *satra*. People of this caste group are to do white washing the *satra*, before the *doul* festival. But now though old profession has been changed in the course of time, still they have maintained the traditional link with the *satra*.

Though these indigenous and traditional crafts and caste based occupations have suffered a lot, never the less they maintain relations with the *satra*. Their pattern of association may be shown below-

Table: 6.1 Association of the crafts and caste based occupation with the *satra*

Sl.No.	Crafts/caste based occupation	Pattern of Association	Occasion	Payment/Reward honour
1	Potters	Offer various earthen pots	<i>Doul</i> festival	Honoured with areca nuts and betel leaves at the close of the festival
2	Goldsmiths	Cleanse the Gold ornaments of the deity	Do	Do
3	Blacksmiths	Offer knives for using in the <i>Satra</i>	Do	Do
4	Kaibartas	Supply definite quota of fish	Do	Paid in cash
5	Mukhi	White washing the walls of the <i>Satra</i>	Do	Honour after the festival

***Satra Centric Market:*** There is a market of Barpeta *satra* entitled “Thakur Bazar” which has been surviving for the last 120 years. The market is located within the *satra* premises. Inside the *satra* various shops are found. Their owners are local people. These shops are intimately involved with the *satra*. There are 21 grocery shops, 11 sweets shops and 15 stationary shops 09 vegetable shops, 07 fish vendors and 11 others. There is a traditional rule that when a man comes to *kirtanghar*, he brings an amount of salt and incense in an earthen pot. Some bring mustard oil also. In these grocery shops such type of things are available. The local people as well as the guest who occasionally come to the *satra* bring these things. When guests come to *satra* most of them buy some things from these shops. Apart from these things, sugar is also used as *prasada*. Local people buy sugar from these shops for the *kirtanghar*. *Magu*

(green gram) and *boot* (gram) are also available here in these shops. At the time of *Satra* festival these shops make good profit.

Besides these grocery shops there are some sweet shops. Some kinds of sweets and snacks are prepared regularly. The people living inside the *satra* are also benefited by these shops. At the time of festivals these shops keepers are busy with their activities. At that time all kinds of people buy such food from these shops, which are considered as *nirmali*. Stationary shops are also busy at the time of festival, mainly in the *doul* festival. During *doul* festival people come to Barpeta from different places. They buy such goods during the time of festivals.

**The Hati Bank:** The economic organization of the *hati* was planned by Mathuradas Burha Ata. He introduced the system of giving shares to the members of the *hati* on payment of definite fee and thereby raises a common fund. At a time when nobody could imagine about the necessity and usefulness of such a fund, Burha Ata planned it of his own. Individual families of a particular *hati* are benefitted because they can get loans from this fund. Persons taking loans from this fund also do not default as they believe that the money has got a sacred touch being collected from *bhakatas* of Barpeta *satra*.

Present sources of *hati* fund are-

- i) Tax realized from *dasturi*. At the time of marriage of each girl of the *hati*, a minimal amount is received from the groom's side. This called *dasturi*.
- ii) Interest on loan principal- The *hati* fund realizes interest from the loanees. The rate of interest for the loan may vary from *hati* to *hati*.
- iii) New shares- Another source of income of the *hati* fund is from new shares.

The *hati* fund is named after the name of a *hati*. The fund of the Pathak *hati* is known as Pathak *hatir puji*. People of Barpeta are benefitted by this fund to some extent. This is utilized for the purpose of welfare of the society particularly at the time of natural calamities.

Now and then the occasion of the *magh bihu* fish purchased and distributed among the families of the *hati*, fire woods are purchased in times of *magh bihu* spending money from the fund which are burnt at road side. The main function of the *hati* fund is to offer help to any member of the *hati* to tide over any unforeseen circumstances or to discharge such moral duties as marriage, performance or death.

To get a loan from the *hati* fund one is to mortgage gold ornaments of approximately equal value to the loan amount. In the annual meeting of the *hati* fund, which is held in the *haitarghar* in the first week of the month of *bahag*, interests on loans are to be paid.

Thus people of Barpeta are related with the *satra* in economic aspects. In the context of economic system of Barpeta *satra* the contribution of Mathuradas Burha Ata is remarkable. He established the *hati* treasury when the idea of bank was absent. All *satriya* people of Barpeta are economically related with the *satra*. In the *satra* there are different sources of income of these people. People living inside the *kirtanghar*, who have shops here, are closely related to the *kirtanghar*.

**d) Socio-political Relations:** When the *mahapurushia* religion was propagated by Sankaradeva and other apostles of the cult the kings regarded it with an eye of suspicion, because they feared that it might endanger their rule. This happened in case of all new ideas. Quite naturally the ruling class is always in favour of status quo. Moreover the Brahmins of that time spread false rumours against *mahapurushia* religion and maligned the kings against Sankaradeva and his apostles, saying that Sankaradeva and his disciples were against Vedic rites. There were examples of persecution and even death of *vaisnava* devotees at the hands of the kings. In Sankaradeva had to fly from Nagaon in apprehension of royal persecution. Even in Coch Behar also he had to face royal wrath from king Narnarayans. His life was saved by the timely intervention of Sukladdhwaj the royal brother. Of course Sankaradeva received royal patronage after the king could know about his depth of knowledge, clarity of vision and understanding (Khan, 2008: 57).

When the *vaisnava* religion got a foot-hold and large number of people embraced it and the king also realised that it was not against their rule, the hostility turned into favour. From the time of Rudra Singha onwards the kings began to donate land liberally to different *satras*. Such a friendly attitude was also shown by the Koch Kings (Khan, 2008: 58).

During the British days the rulers maintained the policy of non interference in religious and cultural matters of the Indian people. The queen's proclamation of 1858 clearly demonstrated this attitude of the British rulers. The British government in Assam made comprehensive records of land and other resources. It did not alienate *satra* property donated by the Ahom Kings. Moreover it classified lands into

*dharmottarra*<sup>15</sup> (Land gifted for the purpose of religious rites) and *devottara*<sup>16</sup> (Land gifted for the purpose of the idol). Such lands are made either *lakhiraj* (rent free) or *nisf khiraj* (Barua, 2009: 134).

The *samuha bhakat* of the *satra* is concerned with preserving social norms among the people of Barpeta. It is such an organization through which Barpeta *satra* could ensure justice in case of any social offence. The *samuha* can discontinue one's *bhag* if he is guilty or if the person was reported to have indulged in trade of liquor, opium etc. He had to pay the imposed fine to the *satra* in order to revive his own lost of *bhag*.

***The Method of Initiation of the Trial of any Offence:*** The *samuha bhakat* sit in front of the *matha* after the daily *prasanga* in the morning and afternoon. Someone will have to report in the sitting of *samuah* about commitment of such an offence. The traditional mode of reporting is with the knees touching the ground and with folded hands. The guilty person would then be called in through the messenger of the *satra*. As the accused person presents himself in front of such a holy gathering of elderly *bhakats* with the *adhikara* and the *deka adhikara* in their respective seats, he could not but confess his guilt. The judgment thus pronounced is obeyed by all sections of people. Participants of such a sitting say that there is no written law of such a community of elders. There are traditionally specified rates of fine to be imposed on the guilty persons for different cases. Such offences, viz. drinking of liquor, taking of chicken or breach of the code of performance of daily *nama kirtana* are brought into the trial by the *samuha bhakata*.

***Election of the Satra:*** The election of *adhikara* is a rare occasion. As it is the highest religious post, people of Barpeta get involved in some way or the other. The study of the *adhikara* election and in case of the managing committee election show the cohesive influence of the *satra* on the society.

In order to have their chosen candidates, a voluntary group was formed consisting of local advocate, teacher, social workers etc.

e) ***Other Relations:*** From the above description, we have found that the *hatis* have different types of relations with the Barpeta *satra*, like formal and informal relation,

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<sup>15</sup> *Dharmottarra*: Land gifted for the purpose of religious rites.

<sup>16</sup> *Devottara*<sup>16</sup> (Land gifted for the purpose of the idol)

regular and occasional relation, political relation, economic relation, cultural relation etc. Apart from this the *hatis* have some other relations with *satra*. There are given below-

***Sarana (Initiation):*** To be a rightful member of the *ekasarana-naam-dharma* and to take on active part in the religious activities, a person must go through a formal process of initiation through the medium of a *Guru*. This formal process of initiation is called- *saran lowa* (taking initiation), which means to take refuge to Lord Krishna. Of course it is noticed that the character and conduct of the persons seeking initiation must be tested before he is finally initiated through the medium of some senior devotee.

The first initiation is called *sarana* which literally means shelter. In theory every *vaisnava* is required to take *Saran* before marriage. In theory he is free to become a disciple of any *Satra* he chooses but in fact he is almost always initiated into his father's *satra* so that *satra* membership originally determined by individual choice is now a matter of hereditary status. The idea however, of choice remains, on the deity who is the subject of devotion is one's *ista devata* (chosen God), so the Guru is one's *ista Guru* (chosen Guru).

The content of initiation is secret. The Guru imports to the initiate the mysteries of the cult through esoteric mantras which he swears never to reveal. Initiation usually takes place in the *namghar*, before an image or scripture representing Krishna to whom the initiate dedicate all his possessions. He fasts prior to the rite, baths and puts on two pieces of ritually pure clothing. The Guru on a mat, the initiate on the ground is symbolizing their unequal status. During initiation the disciples is instructed to consider his Guru as the representative of the founders of the sect and through them of Lord Krishna. The Guru says 'the *atman* of *hari* and *hara* (God and devotees) are the same (*hari hara atmar adhin*). Therefore, through the mediation of the Guru the devotee becomes identified with God. Traditionally in Barpeta *satra* every *vaisnavite* takes initiation. Some proceed when they are elderly to move to advanced stages of initiation. The main rites of initiation consist of an oath of surrender to the *cari vastu* (four principles) which together constitute *bhakti* and form the core of the religion *guru, deva nama bhakat*. The initiate surrenders himself to each of the four principles in turn taking a few steps and saying three times "I take shelter in *nama*, I take shelter in the devotees". After initiation, the disciple is expected to lead a life in which his daily action assumes significance through dedication to God. The Guru instructs him

in the conduct of life proper to a *vaisnava* and imparts to him a set of mantras which convert the ordinary routine of daily life into a series of religious acts. He must rise before dawn with the name of God on his lips. He should place his right foot first on the ground. Before eating himself afterwards in the prescribed manner with soil and water, he takes his bath, after which he repeats four times the four secret names of God (Ram Krisna Narayana Hari) termed the worship of name *nama sabha*. The proper method of bathing, dressing, praying and eating are set out in details by Guru together with the *Mantras* appropriate to these acts, whatever a disciple does, he vows in the name of God. In this way he delivers the things of their world to God while continuing to live in the world.

The laity makes for practical purposes a division between *saraniya* and *bhajaniya*. *Saraniya* has taken the first stage of initiation only.

At Barpeta *satra*, women are initiated after marriage. After her first menstruation a Brahmin girl becomes impure and no senior widow will accept food prepared by her. After initiation her husband's senior relatives may take food prepared by her.

***Bhajana (confirmation):*** The highest stage of initiation ceremony is called *bhajana*, because *sarana* indicates only the formal entry of a person into the *vaisnavite* order in the nature of an oath, promising to lead a life of a true *vaisnava* under the guidance of the *Guru*. But through the *bhajana* the *Guru* imparts higher institution to those devotees who are spiritually advanced. In case of ordinary *bhajana* there must not be less than two persons as customs goes in a body seeking *bhajana*. It is said that the persons seeking instruction on *bhajana* from the *Guru* would have been under the tie *sakhitva* (friendship) throughout their lives. A *bhajaniya* bath at least twice daily and have a prayer room in their house for daily worship. As a man only accepts cooked food from those who have taken equal mantra to himself, *bhajaniya* usually form a separate group at village ceremonies distinguished by the fact that they are given uncooked food, while the rest of the guests are eating various sweet meals.

***f) Social Relations:*** *Vaisnavite satras* of Assam are the social facts and cultural realities. Assamese society cannot be represented without referring to the *satra* institutions. Barpeta *satra* is one of biggest *satras* of Assam. Being intricality related with the people of Barpeta and culture, the *satra* performs certain social functions.

Most of the performing art forms of India including Assam are evolved out of religious institutions. The *satra* has been working as a centre of various art forms such as *bhaona*, *thiya naam*, *ojahpali*, *ghosa kirtan* etc. At Barpeta *satra* also such programs are held. The social context of these art forms cannot be ignored as the performing arts certainly emerged out of men and society. The *bhaonas* and the dramatic shows with mythological themes that are enacted in the *satra* compound depict stories showing the success of goodness over evil. In the other art forms such as *ojah-pali* and *ghosa-kirtan* the names of God are sung in chorus.

Barpeta *satra* also serves as centre of learning and playing an important role in imparting informal education. At Barpeta *satra* various episodes of Ramayana, Mahabharata and Purana are recited in every evening. Thousands of people come here for listening to such type of epics.

The educative role of Barpeta *satra* may also be seen in its day to day activities. Barpeta *satra* besides being a religious institution also serves as center of recreation and amusement. Sankaradeva introduced *bhaona* performance as it can serve as the medium of religious propaganda but also came to be a source of pleasure, and recreation.

The performing art forms of the Barpeta *satra* comprising *ojha-pali*, *bhaona* etc., are important and powerful propaganda of media to direct the attention of the people towards a particular program. Barpeta *satra* with the performance of these art forms contributes immensely in enriching the social cohesion and social integration. The two epics and the Purana have been serving as instruments for national cohesion. *Bhaona* and *ojha-pali* are performed by the local people at Barpeta. Barpeta *satra* takes part in national integration. During the time of national distress due to Chinese aggression in 1962 the *satra* donated 1 Kg of gold from the *satra*, treasury for the defense of the country (Nath, 2001: 188). From time to time, devotees of Barpeta *satra* including the *aaisakal* (women devotee in collective) have expressed solidarity with the general people. They joined in various protest rallies and processions during the time of Assam movement for the deportation of illegal foreign nations (Nath, 2001: 186).

The organization of Barpeta *satra* tries to attract the people towards every aspect of the *satra* affairs. One such affair is maintenance of social justice amongst all. The *samuaha bhakat* of the *satra* is concerned with preserving social norms among the people of Barpeta. It should be noted that particular *hatis* and different dynasties of



Figure 27: Cultural school at Barpeta *satra* compound



Figure 28: Boys from Bayan dynasty playing *khol* in *kirtan*, Barpeta *satra*



Figure 29: *Bhaona* at Barpeta *satra*



Figure 30: *Samuhar mel* in front of the *math*, Barpeta *satra*



Figure 31: Yearly forecasting in the first day of Assamese calendar, Barpeta *satra*



Figure 32: Common people cleaning the *kirtanghar*



Figure 33: Women devotee in southern verandah of the *kirtanghar*, Barpeta *satra*



Figure 34: Devotees, listening the recitation of holy book in *bhagawatgriha*, Barpeta *satra*



Figure 35: Mass gathering in the holy month Magha in front of the *kirtanghar*, Barpeta *satra*



Figure 36: Shops of various goods which are used as offerings to the *kirtanghar*,  
Barpeta *satra*



Figure 37: Grocery shops in front of Barpeta *satra*



Figure 38: Vegetable vendors in the first day of the Assamese month Bahag in front  
of Barpeta *satra*

Barpeta are assigned with the duties in different *satra* centric rites and rituals in different periods of time and these are still in vogue. At different times of festivals people meet one another in the *kirtanghar*. The people of Barpeta who have service in different places come home during different festivals, specially in *doul* festival. People from various places also come to Barpeta *satra* and it makes communal harmony and universal brotherhood among the masses. Barpeta *satra* was established by the grant of land given by Ahom monarch Siva Singha. Afterwards during the British rule, Barpeta was declared as a township by amalgamating 22 *hatis* of the *satra* and town dwellers lead their life according to the rules and regulations of the *satra* organization. Now the town has been extended. Most of the people are involved in *satra* organization. In this way there has been a necessity for organizational change of the *satra*. In this respect the *satra* authority as well as the public should come forward to take necessary steps. From the days of Mathuradas Burha Ata, trade and commerce expanded to new areas. Traders of Barpeta expounded their trade even Dhaka, Rongpur and Moimansing. As the time passed, the number of trading communities has increased and their trades become hereditary. But as time passes on, the professions of most of the communities have come to the verge of extinction. We can take the example of lime worker, which have already abounded their profession because of non availability raw materials. Blacksmiths, goldsmiths and other caste based professions have abounded their professions at least partially. A large number of people have also changed their professions. Modern education is one of the reasons for this large scale change in professions.

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