

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Religious understandings are a part of culture, just as other understandings are. And the anthropologist's task is to understand them, not to judge them. Religion may be defined as the "people's belief in spiritual beings and forces." The human society is an organization of individuals. The effects of socio religious influence of the beliefs and rituals on the society as a whole as well as on individual member of a community are well perceptible. As such, social functions are related to the needs of the individuals and play a vital role in the society. The needs of man are varied. No doubt, his biological needs, such as- food, clothing and shelter are the fundamental needs. His moral, cultural and religious needs are also not the less important. These fundamental needs derive from their religious functions and rites which give great strength and fulfill mental desire to live on with. Sir James Frazer in his Golden Bough (1890) said that, "By religion it is meant that a propitiation or conciliation of power superior to man which are believed to bend and control the cause of nature and of human life. It is the fact that no man is religious who does not govern his conduct in some measure by the fear or love of God. All over the world the people have various types of Religious beliefs."

All religion consists of a mental attitude regarding the super natural beliefs. The most wide spread manifestation of this attitude is in the shape of beliefs and rituals that are deeply imbedded in all cultures. These systems of belief and action work upward and out ward throughout the cultural fabric. At some points they thread so finely in to the total pattern that it is impossible to say whether the religious ends and the mundane begins.

No people have been found to be withholding belief in supernatural powers of some kind. However, many deals with the problem of life by practical measures, there is always a margin of uncertainly and often of anxiety. Religious ideas and behaviors seem to arise out of situations in which human beings find themselves unable to provide simple explanations or solution to events they consider important. Madan and Mazumdar (1990) stated that, "Religion is the human response to apprehension of something, or power which is supernatural and supersensory. It is the expression of

the manner, and type of adjustment effected by a people with their conception of the supernatural.” From the etymological point of view, Bouquet said, “Religion is derived from the root word *religio*, which means to bind together”, and religion actually does it. Religion plays a role in social control, does not rely on alone. This is done through notions of right and wrong thing. Religion is its role in the maintenance of social solidarity. Religion, as the pattern of society, plays a very significant role in the life of the people of the society by providing not only the greater feeling of security but also the hope of a tolerable future. Religion bestows morality valuation, restriction of evil thoughts and controls the society in the proper path.

In this regard the relations between the *satra* (a *vaisnavite* institution) and *hatis* (cluster of settlements) at Barpeta town in Barpeta district of Assam, which is one of the seven states of North East India (map) and socio-religious study on the *satra* institution in general and Barpeta *satra* in particular is an important matter as it has a great impact on the people of Assam in general and Barpeta *satra* in particular. The neo-*vaisnavite* (those who are worshipping Vishnu) movement of Assam initiated by Sri Sankardeva during the last part of fifteenth century is remarkable for the religious and social life of the medieval Assam. Its impact on religion, literature, fine arts and social life of Assam, particularly on the Brahmaputra valley, is indeed great and abiding from which Barpeta *satra* in the district of Barpeta, Assam is not an exception.

Sankardeva, Madhavadeva and Damodardeva may be styled as *trimurty* (trinity) of Assam *vaisnavism* (cult of worshipping Vishnu). The movement brought in its wake literacy and artistic renaissance in Assam in general and Barpeta *satra* in particular. The movement did not differ in essential points from similar *vaisnavite* movement in other parts of medieval India. The movement may therefore be called a part of the “All India *Vaisnavite* Movement” of the middle age. In practical application of the principles and tenets and in working out the details of the faith, it evolved a cult of its own best suited to the genius of the people. The new cult, thus moulded according to the local circumstances is popularly known as the *mahapurukhiya dharma* (following the doctrine of Sankardeva). The real name of the cult is *eka sarana nam dharma* or the supreme surrender to God viz-Vishnu or Krishna (Sarma, 1999: introduction). The most notable characteristic of *vaisnavism* in Assam is the *satra* Institution through which the faith is 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.



'The *satra* institution was established during the last part of the 15th century or first part of the 16th century by Sankardeva. The first *satra* was established by him in the field of mustard crops of Kusumbara (father of Sankardeva) at Bordoia under Nagaon district of Assam around 1503-1504 A.D. It was the initial form of *satra* Institution' (Kakati, 1921 cited in Neog 1980: 12). It is worth mentioning that the *satra* have continued to be established in different places of Assam till today. The Assam District Gazetteers (1905) have recorded 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 foundational characteristics.

Satras are generally situated on quadrangles surrounded by *palisadas* (walls). Each principal *satra* is marked by the existence of a *namghar* (place of worship), a *manikuta* (sanctum sanctorum), a *batchora* (gateway) and two or four rows of *hatis*. Each *satra* consists of three principal parties, viz i) *adhikara* (abbot) and *deka adhikara* (deputy) ii) *bhakata* (devotee) and iii) *samuha* (commoners). The first two parties generally reside within the four walls of the *satra* campus and the last via the *samuha* in the village outside the *satra* leading householder's life (Sarma, 1999: 139). Barpeta *satra* is the earliest and most influential *satra* of *mahapurushiya* sect (Sarma, 1999: 177) as well as the chief monasteries of Assam (Neog 1965: 137) which was established by Madhavadeva the chief disciple and apostle of Sankaradeva with proper help to Mathuradas Burha Ata (one of the chief followers of Madhavadeva and the first *adhikara* of Barpeta *satra*) in 1504 *sakaabda* (Pathak, 1959: 12). Barpeta *satra* is situated at Barpeta town at a distance of about 100 K.Ms to the north west of Guwahati city. Barpeta town is the head quarter of the district of the same name. It is said that, Sankardeva, while travelling by boat westward from his abode in upper Assam, first set his foot at Barpeta and moved to the nearby village Patbaushi, where he established a *satra* in 1546 A.D.

Barpeta *satra* is situated at a place which is also a well known center of communication and business. The *satra* is well planned. Probably there was wide publicity about its importance and as a result there are a large number of devotees of the *satra*. The *kirtanghar* (place of worship) of the *satra* is also known for its magnificent construction and design. Originally, a *satra* based community; Barpeta emerged as a dwelling place of non peasant community in course of time. Due to the geographical condition of the place, the people of Barpeta have taken to petty business instead of agriculture. As the *satra* institution itself is taken up for study, its

ramification on the social organization and cultural life of the township is also covered by a very considerable extent. At Barpeta, Mathuradas Burha Ata was the first to establish different *hatis*. Later on the municipal area included all the 22 *hatis* of Barpeta. Especially for Barpeta and Barpeta *satra*, Mathuradas Burha Ata did many things of lasting effects, such as- formation of the committee to publish *vaisnavite* literature, fourteen units of prayer service in the *satra*, preservation of ancient rites, training facilities, introduction of fund collection on *hati* basis, appointment of office bearers for the management of the *satra* etc. 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 articulated with the traditional functions since early 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 them in Barpeta. These functions were fixed by Mathuradas Burha Ata for smooth running of the *satra* (Pathak, 1959 reprint 2006: 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*.

Review of Literature: It is a fact that the historical and religious literatures of Assam are very rich. The names of the following scholars who have contributed to different aspects of religion, culture, art and literature of Assam are worth mention. The contributions of L.N. Bezbarua's two works (1911) and (1914) deserve mentioning. But these two, especially the latter, are not written with a critical mind, and therefore, make no discrimination between the supernatural and the real, the historical and the legendary. S.K. Bhuyan (1957) dealt exclusively with the people of Assam. Reference on Barpeta *satra* and its relationship with the people in the *hatis* was mentioned in passing only. Dr. S.N. Sarma's (1999) work was an attempt at systematic study of the *satra* institution. Though this is a valuable book for the researchers on *vaisnava* cult in Assam, it is not so much informative about the relation between the *hatis* and *satra*; particularly the Barpeta *satra*, Assam. Maheswar Neog (2004)'s book was the

collection of a few important studies in Assamese culture, which dealt with various aspects of the society, culture and religion of Assam. Another important book by Maheswar Neog (1965) gives a detailed account of Sankaradeva with his background and a resume and appraisal of his work. In this compact volume is presented almost all that we need to know about the Hindu culture of Assam as it expressed itself through *vaisnavism* and the *eka-saraniya* faith which may be described as Assam's expression of the mediaeval pan Indian *bhakti* movement. In this work Dr. Neog did not miss anything that is apropos to the study of Sankaradeva. He has treated all aspects of the subject in his twelve chapters. Audrey Cantlie's (1984) book deals with all the aspects of Assamese people including the *satra* institution, but it is not much informative about Barpeta *satra*. Neo-Vaisnavism and Other Religious Cults of Assam: A Study in Conflict is an article published in a book edited by Dambarudhar Nath (2011) based on research and analysis of North Eastern region. In this article *vaisnavism* and the *bhakti* system form the subject of analysis in terms of its institutional structure, its nature of impact upon tribal societies and its role in the process of social transformation, religious communities to integrated castes have been discussed. Dambarudhar Nath (2012) mainly deals with the *bhakti* movement and the *satra* institution, its origin and evolution, historical retrospective of Garmur *satra*, and state, Pitambardeva Goswami and social reforms, cultural activities, administration and economy of the *satras* of Assam. The significance of this work lies in that it is a rational and analytical work and based on modern historical methodology. Rani Kakati (1986) highlighted the origin of religious faith and different customs and tradition associated with it. But the work is not out of the limitation of study in this particular field. Digambar Das (1995) dealt with the history of Barpeta *satra*. He highlighted the social-political-cultural history of Barpeta. The author wrote about Barpeta *satra* and the religious-cultural activities of people. Phanidhar Adhikary (2010) is a critical study on the topic of influences of *satra* upon the people of Barpeta district of Assam. We are able to get much information from this work. Dewarah and Associates (1987) treated on the economy of Barpeta district. The Religious-Cultural aspect of the study was not given any weight. Akshay Kr. Mishra (1990) was a work on the life history of Mathura Das Buhra Ata, the first *adhiikara* of Barpeta *satra* and his varied activities. There were references of the religious-cultural relationship of the *satra* with the people but the analysis was not in depth. Gokul Pathak (1969) dealt with the varied religious-cultural activities of the people in relation to the *satra*. But it

does not provide much information about the relationship between the *satra* and the people living in different *hatis* of Barpeta. In addition to the above books relating to the subject any other important source materials for the study of *satra* institution have been consulted.

Research Scope: From the above review of literature it has been seen that the existing literature in the subject “A Socio Religious Study on the *Satra* Institution of Assam with special reference to Barpeta *Satra* and its relations with the *Hatis*” is still scanty. Though a number of studies have been made by eminent personalities of Assam, but none of these books dealt in depth about the relationship between the *hatis* and Barpeta *satra*. But with due respect to the above it is mentionable that none of them have clearly dealt with the socio religious study on the *satra* institution of Assam with special reference to Barpeta *satra* and its relations with the *hatis*. So, it is intended to study the topic for research on some new dimension for the same.

Aims and Objectives of the Study: There are several scopes of the study of neo *vaisnavite* movement in Assam particularly at Barpeta. Such study enables one to know about the nature, origin and development of the *satra* institution, religious rites and practices of *satras*, particularly Barpeta *satra* and constitution of Barpeta *satra*. However my prime aim is to know about the *satra* institution of Assam and Barpeta *satra*, relation and impact on the socio-religious life of the connected people. But to conduct any particular study objectives are necessary to gain new insights into the problem. Objectives also help one to find out new facts lying hidden and to invent new ideas to the existing stock of knowledge and for making advancement in research studies. Objectives differ depending upon the nature of the object of study. Thus through the following objectives of the study has been conducted.

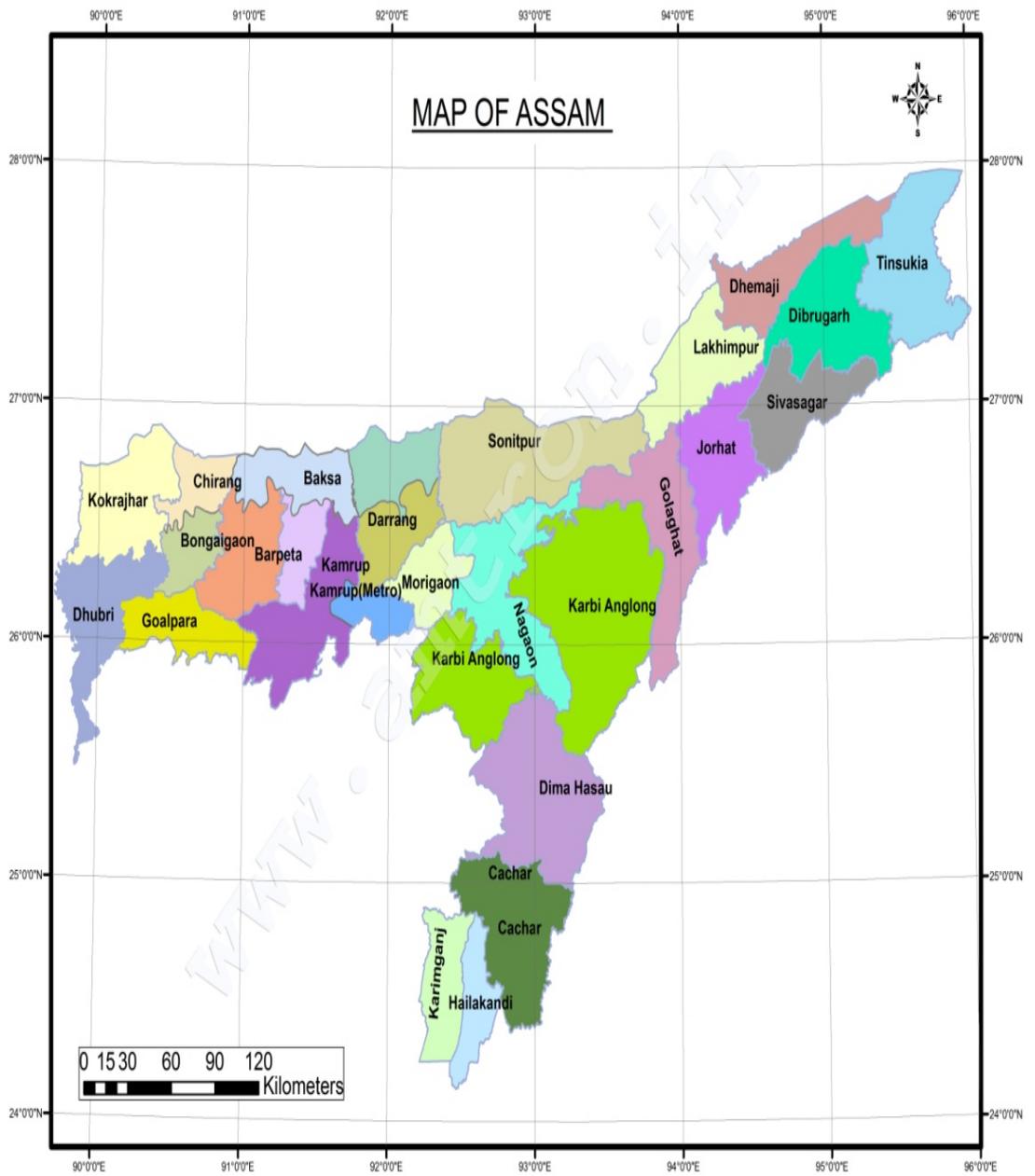
1. To know about the *hatis* and the *satra*.
2. To know the impact of *satra* on the daily life cycle of the people.
3. Knowledge about some formal and informal activities of the people related to the *satra* as a whole may be obtained.
4. To know about the *vaisnavite* movement in Assam as a whole.
5. To study about the nature, origin and development of the *satra* institution.
6. Religious rites and practices of the *satras*, particularly Barpeta *satra*.
7. Constitutions (*satrar sangbidhan*) of the *satras*, particularly Barpeta *satra*.

8. To study about communal harmony and universal brotherhood as vouchsafed by the tenets of the *satra* institution.
9. Various activities of the *kirtanghar* in the promotion of art, literature and culture.

Hypotheses: The hypothesis of the study are given below-

1. Whether Barpeta *satra* is a platform for spreading *vaisnavite* movement in Assam.
2. Whether Barpeta *satra* is an institution patronizing unique *satra* based culture of devotion to Lord Vishnu embraced by the people of Barpeta in general and Barpeta *satra* in particular.
3. It is assumed that Barpeta *satra* has much significance and the *hati* system of Barpeta could pave the way for promotion of socio-cultural and spiritual life of the people.
4. The *hatis* and the *satra* in Barpeta are platforms of communal harmony and universal brotherhood.
5. Barpeta *satra* has discharged the duty of spreading the *vaishnavite* movement in Assam.
6. Whether impact of *kirtanghar* and its religious and spiritual activities are helpful in the promotion of literature, art and culture.

Methodology: This study has been conducted at Barpeta *satra* and Barpeta town in the district of Barpeta, Assam (map). Barpeta *satra* is one of the most notable *satras* of Assam. At Barpeta, the contribution of Mathuradas Burha Ata, the first *adhikara* of Barpeta *satra* in the organizing *hatis* is notable. He divided the town into three *thul hatis* (principal) 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 as organized on the basis of division of labour, each *hati* having its own share of works to be performed in the *satra* context. Three *thul hatis* have been selected, where around 500 to 600 families are living. These three *hatis* bear close relation with the ecclesiastical affairs of the *satra*. 100 families of each *hati* (all total 300 families) have been selected by random sampling to carry out the field work.



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In a study of this type, where perception and belief system relating to order, authority and status are extended across both time and space and contemporary reflection on a living cult and its tradition are strong and vibrant, it is difficult to confine source materials to archival or textual material or even to formal questionnaires during field work. So apart from secondary sources, the proposed research work has been intended to adopt the analogical method based on field work. Secondary data consist of published books, unpublished thesis, official documents and records, journals, news papers, internet etc. Primary data consist of questionnaire, schedule, focus group discussion, interview, observation, and participant observation etc. Published books, official records and internet have been used in studying Assam and Assamese people. Data on age and sex, marital status, place of birth, education, household information, regarding domestic animals has been collected from household schedule which has been discussed in the chapter of the studied area and people: Barpeta town and the *hatis*. In this chapter major parts of data have been collected through observation. Apart from published books, different journals and news papers have been used in preparing the chapter *vaisnavism* and *satra* institution in Assam. In preparing the chapter *vaisnavism* and *satra* Institution at Barpeta, apart from secondary sources, primary sources like observation, participant observation and interview method have been used. Primary sources like- questionnaire, schedule, focus group discussion, interview, observation, and participant observation etc and some secondary sources like published books, journals and news papers have been used in preparing the chapter on relation between *hatis* and *satra*. All the above mentioned secondary sources and primary sources have been used in preparing the chapter socio- religious study on the *satra* institution of Assam with special reference to Barpeta *satra*. In formulating the plan for the present study right from the field work to writing down the description, it has been found convenient to maintain a wide approach. The whole study has been organized into eight chapters including the introduction. In this study in chapter I, the above matters have been discussed. Chapter II is about Assam and its people. The area of Assam and different social aspects of Assamese people have been discussed here. In chapter III discussions of the studied area and its people have been discussed. Here a general description of Barpeta town and *hatis* has been made. The *hatis* are mainly related to the *satra*. In this chapter a demographic outline of the

people of three principal *hatis* has been made. Chapter IV is about the *vaisnavism* and



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satra institution in Assam. *Vaisnavism* and *satra* institution of Assam has been broadly discussed here. *Vaisnavism* was first propagated in the medieval Assam by Sankardeva and the most notable characteristic of the *vaisnavism* of Assam is the *satra* institution. Chapter V is about *vaisnavism* and *satra* institution at Barpeta. In this chapter from the establishment of Barpeta *satra* to the status of women in the *satra* have been tried to discuss. In chapter VI relations between *hatis* and *satra* have been discussed. There are several relations between the people residing in different *hatis* and the *satra* and these are discussed here in this chapter. Chapter VII is about the socio-religious importance of the *satra* institution in Assam with special reference to Barpeta *satra*. In this chapter special attention has been made on socio-religious importance of the *satra* institution in Assam in general and Barpeta *satra* in particular. The last or chapter VII is an overview of the whole work connected with the previous chapters.

Few maps, some relevant photographs, appendix, glossary also have been appended for proper understanding of the problems connected with the subject under discussion.

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