

CHAPTER VII

SOCIO-RELIGIOUS IMPORTANCE OF THE SATRA INSTITUTION OF ASSAM WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO BARPETA SATRA

Introduction

One of the most important sects of Hinduism is *vaisnavism*. Evidence of *vaisnavism* was found in the rock inscriptions of Mahabhati Barman (554 A.D) which referred to the king as Param Bhagavati. But the neo- *vaisnavite* movement essentially began with the advent of Sankaradeva. The main emphasis of the neo-*vaisnavite* movement was on *bhakti* or devotion (Gait, 1905: 321).

The *satra* is a unique socio-religious and cultural institution of Assam and originated in the medieval times. It is a heritage institution of neo-*vaisnavite* movement of the state. Almost eight hundred *satras* are scattered all over Assam. The *satra* institution in Assam has produced deep impact on the socio-religious life and also the socio-cultural and socio-economic life of the people of Assam. People from different walks of life-scholars, businessmen and traders, peasants and different craftsmen who form the common mass and are linked with the process of production not only listen to the liberal and universal appeal of the neo-*vaisnavite* religion of Sankaradeva, but also come in large number to embrace this religion and become its astute devotees. The appeal of the religion is simple which can be understood even by unlettered people. If one wants salvation from this mundane existence, it is only through *bhakti* or devotion that he or she can attain it through *naam-kirtana*. *Satras* have become the centers where the devotees congregation in large number and join in the prayer to God. This has imparted a sense of unity or oneness among the people (Rajguru, 1988: 54)

a) History of Development of Satra Institution: The process of evolution of the *satra* as an institution forms a long course of History. For understanding this, the background knowledge of the *satra* institution is necessary. Sankaradevas's main emphasis was not on preaching a philosophy or dogma, but on teaching the people the simple way of living, equality of man irrespective of caste or community, practicing non-violence, discarding sacrifice of birds and animals in the name of religion, right

of entrance of all people to the *kirtanghar* etc. During Sankaradeva's time, the society was marked by the complicated and elaborate system of rituals and practices associated with the propitiation of various Gods and Goddesses and exploitation of the common people in all possible ways by the practices of elaborate ritualism and the caste system. Sankaradeva attempted to simplify the ritualism through single way of congregational progress, recitation of religious scriptures and devotion to Vishnu or Krishna (Sarma, 1990: 327).

The two aspects of this teachings namely submission to one God and rejection of caste distinction in the religious sphere is an attempt to create universal brotherhood. But that was not in consonance with the ideals of the ruling feudal king. So the monarch looked at the new religion with suspicion. At-times the enmity to the new religion become so intense that Sankaradeva had to flee away from the Ahom Kingdom and took shelter at Barpeta which was at that time under the rule of Koch king. Sankaradeva did most of his creative work by living at Patbaushi near Barpeta for about 16 years. *satras* also expounded gradually from Barpeta. After the expiry of Sankaradeva, the duty of proselytizing the devotees fell on his principal devotee Madhavadeva. He made Mathuradas Burha Ata the first *adhikara* of Barpeta Satra (Pathak, 1959: 14).

Apart from Madhavadeva, there were two other apostles of Sankaradeva, namely Damodaradeva and Harideva. During the time of Sankaradeva, there were no differences among the principal devotees. But after the death of Sankaradeva, differences began to surface among the principal devotees. It was Damodaradeva who first seceded. Although there were no formal differences between Harideva and Sankaradeva, in course of time, he also established his own sect. Accordingly there were three *samhatis* namely *brahma samhati*, *purusa samhati*, *kala samhati* and *nika samhati*. The term *samhati* is synonym of the term *sangha* which means an association.

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 *samhatis*. Most of the *satras* affiliated to this *samhati* are headed by Brahmins. These Gurus introduced compromise between Vedic and

puranic 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*. 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* (man) 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 have gone astray from the strict principles of *vaisnavism*. Padma Ata, an apostle nominated by Madhavadeva was the head of this sect.

Taking into account all the *satras* belonging to different sub sects the total no of *satras* would be more than 700. While some of them are very powerful with large income, most of these are poor, maintaining their existence with meagre resources. Some of them have already ceased their functions (Sarma, 1999: 93-138).

‘Under the umbrella of the four *samhatis*, *satras* grew abundantly as a class of socio-religious institutions in the 17th century in the post-Sankardev times. *Satras* soon flourished throughout the Brahmaputra valley to engage the masses in the developmental activities with a devotional bend of mind’ (Nath, 2013: 250).

B) Relation of the Satras with the State: The neo- *vaisnavite* movement and the *satra* institution of Assam did not have a smooth sailing in the earlier years. The monarch looked at the activities of the *satras* with suspicion. The Brahmin priests of that time alleged before the king that the neo-*vaisnavite* religion did not have any respect for the established religious rites and practices. As a result the king at various times arrested the *vaisnava* devotees and subjected them to persecution and even to death. Even Sankaradeva’s son was beheaded by the king while Madhavadeva was put to imprisonment for about 6 months. Owing to the hostile attitude of the king

Sankaradeva with his followers had to move from one place to another place and finally sheltered in the Koch Kingdom (Sarma, 2014: 7).

But with the progress of time, the act of proselytizing increased and no of *satras* as well as no of devotees swelled both in the eastern and western part of the Brahmaputra valley. The monarchs began to look kindly at the *vaisnavite* movement. The king also favoured many of the *Satras* with land grant and money. The bigger *satras* of Majuli such as Garmur, Dakhinpat etc were given land grant of several thousand *bighas*¹ of land (Nath, 2012: 33). Moreover, *paiks* (bonded labour) were also attached with the land. As a result the position of the *adhikaras* of those *satras* was considerably high in the society and they wielded considerable power. The Mayamaria revolt was a clear proof of the money and military power of the Mayamaria Mahantas (Guha, 1993: 17).

The effects of royal influence were found to be salutary for the *satras* on all spheres. The royal patronage gave the *satras* prestige and honour and brought about stability and progress of the society.

c) *Satra Institution and Socio-Economic Development:* After initial uncertainty the *satras* were established on a firm and secure footing. The Ahom monarch on the east and the Koch monarch on the west made land grant to almost all the *satras*. Such lands are *debottar* or *dharmottar* or *brahmottar* which were gifted to the *satras* without payment of any rent on their part to the government (Guha, 1993: 44). One of the reasons for which the *satras* received royal patronage was that. Social stability and peace were established in them which had a salutary effect on agriculture and other economic activities. *Satras* encouraged agriculture and other economic activities by bringing social unity. Once people settled under a *satra*, they did not want to move out from it. Along with agriculture, other economic activities also developed. The *charit puthis*² gave us an idea of how different trades grew up within the *satras*. The copper plates through which land grant was made to the *satras* mentioned the names of different craftsman. The subjects paid tax to the king in terms of money instead of

¹ Bigha: A local unit for measuring land. It varies from one third of an acre to almost one acre. The standardized *bigha* in Assam is 14,400 square feet, which equals 1,333.33 square meters or roughly one third of an acre.

² *Charita puthis*: Biographies of religious leaders

the earlier practice of compulsory labour service. The *charit puthis* mentioned the names of different taxes such as *kar, katal, panchak, begas, gulkar* etc.

The vast tract of land gifted to the *satras* became in course of time private property on a hereditary basis of the *adhikaras* who cultivated such land with the help of *paiks*. Once a person becomes disciple of a *satra*, he need not have to do other compulsory duties, outside the *satra*. This helped in the increase of devotees within the *satras*. The *satras* also encouraged in the development of different crafts such as blacksmithy, coppersmithy, goldsmithy, carpentry, weaving and a host of other activities. A part of these products paid by the subjects to the *adhikaras* found their way to the market. The economic position of the *adhikaras* improved considerably and with it political power and affluence. "According to Gazetteer of Eastern Bengal and Assam Garmur *satra* (in Majuli) received about 40,000 acres of revenue free land for the Ahom kings (Nath, 2012: 238). With the direct patronage from the Ahom and Koch kings the economy of the *satras* becomes self sustaining. "The powerful *satras* developed a kind of peculiar socio economic progress as early as the late 17th century. With large areas of revenue free lands at their disposal and sufficient no of tenants to work there on their own terms and conditions, the *satras* created a kind of feudal relationship" (Nath, 2012: 239). The British government did not take away the land granted by the previous Govt. but revenue free nature of the *satra* land was curtailed. Instead *satra* lands were mostly made *nisf-khiraj* (half rent).

The *satras* in course of time have become the only organization through which *vaisnavism* is propagated. But the role played by *satras* in other spheres of life is also commendable. During the last few years of its existence, it has been enriching the social life morally, socially and educationally and contributed a great deal in the realm of art and literature. These cultural effects are not altogether independent of the religious movement.

d) Moral and Social Effects: Assam is the land where people of various ethnic groups with different culture and beliefs are living together. But this foundation of the society was weak and there was no bond of unity. The monotheistic *vaisnava* movement of Sankaradeva gradually prevailed over polytheism, tantrism and animism of the former religion and created a kind of unity among the people. The *vaisnavite* movement (since it is all-India in character) also brought about emotional unity of the people of Assam with the rest of the country. The state also acted as a kind of guardian of

morality by keeping close vigilance over its disciples. The *satras* also acted as self governing institutions. All disputes among the disciples were tried and solved through the *satra* institution.

e) Elevation of Backward Classes: According to *vaisnava* faith, there is no distinction among the disciple on the basis of castes and creed. In the *kirtanghar* men belonging to the schedule caste can freely mix with a Brahmin. This has considerably minimized caste rigour and caste distinction. Even Muslims were allowed to become disciple of the new religion (Baruah, 2009: 45). Through free intermingling and interaction of different caste and communities, the basis of the Assamese nation was built up.

f) Contribution of Satra Institution: For the *vaisnavite* movement in Assam the *satra* institution acted as an aid in making the Assamese society united. During the last few centuries of its existence it has been enriching the Assamese life morally, socially, educationally, culturally and contributed a great deal to the realm of literature and art (Sarma, 1999: 213). But these contributions are not altogether independent of religion; rather these may be termed as the products of the same religious movement I have divided these contributions into 4 divisions – Social Contribution, Educational Contribution, Cultural Contribution and Literary Contribution.

Social Contribution: The social life of the people is related with religion. The moral and ethical basis of the society is derived from religion. *Satra* is the main institution around which all cultural and religious activities move. The *satra* acts more or less as the guardians of morality by keeping close vigilance over their disciples. By maintaining regular agents at different localities and by personal visits, the heads of the *satra* try to tone up the moral of the people.

Existence of a *namghar*, big or small, is noticed in every Assamese village. All cultural activities of Assamese village move around the *namghar*. A village *namghar* is nothing but an extended wing of the *satra* institution. The *namghar* is the gift of *satra* institution. It is at once a village prayer hall, a village court and a village theatre (Sarma, 1999: 215). The villagers assemble here on various occasions to discuss matters concerning their village.

But one of the most important social contributions of the *satra* institution is the upliftment of the backward classes and minimization of the rigor of the caste distinction. So called untouchable and backward classes were freely taken into the religious fold, and the portals to a better mode of living and higher conduct of life were opened to them. In this respect *satras* functioned more or less on the line of modern Christian missionaries in India.

Another notable social contribution is its services to the tribes during its long history of more than four centuries. The earliest attempt to bring the backward tribes into the fold of *vaisnavism* was made by Sankaradeva himself who accepted a Garo tribes man named Govinda, a Miri named Jayahari, and a Muslim named Chand Sai as his disciple. In Sankaradeva's translation the fourth chapter of book II of the *Bhagavata-Purana* we find a significant stanza where in the tribes of Assam have been mentioned as getting themselves sanctified by the influence of *vaisnavism* (Sarma, 1999: 217).

Educational Contribution: In the educational sphere the *satra* institution contributed a lot. In medieval times, the education was not a concern of the state. Some *Tols* and *Pathsalas* (schools) manned privately by some individual, but it was not sufficient. With the development of the *satra* institution the responsibility of imparting education came under its domain. The *satra* institution voluntarily took upon itself the noble responsibility of enlightening the people through their own tools. The monks receive education not only in *vaisnavite* texts but also in Vedic and *puranic* lore (www.tributetosankarkeva.org/satra.htm). The *adhikara* and other functionaries also impart instruction to the monks through discussions. Further the monks are given written exercises not only in copying out manuscripts but also translating Sanskrit scripture and composing original works in Assamese. After years of education and rigorous training in *vaisnava* faith and discipline, these monks are deputed to various parts of the province for the purpose of preaching and propagating their faith. In this way, the *satra* produced successful teachers and missionaries as well as eminent philosophers, scholars and poets.

Cultural Contribution: In the cultural sphere the *satra* institution contributes a lot. Dramatic performance known as *bhaona*, introduced for the first time by Sankaradeva as the medium of religious propaganda continued up to the present time. The *ankiya naats* written by Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva are playing a great role. The *satra*

institution also contributes to the Assamese society with songs, paintings and dance. The various forms of music, dance and dramas are also the means of attracting people towards the faith and establish a sort of articulation between the *satra* and community and *satras* become intimately related with Assamese society and culture.

Literary Contribution: There was the efflorescence of a great literature in the wake of the Sankaradeva's movement in 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: 107). The *vaisnava* writers' 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* into the spoken dialect of local people (Baruah, 2009: 260).

In his early works, *Harischandra Upakhyaana* and *Rukmini Harana* (Kakati, 1921 in Neog 1980: 173), Sankaradeva exhibited the same narrative zeal as was evident in the preceding period of Assamese poetry. Each of the 25 sections of the *Kirtanaghosha*, 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: 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* (Kakati, 1971: 70) and this has a queer mixture of Assamese, Maithili, Hindi and other elements (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brajabuli). "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* 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.

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 bhasa* although a good number of them are composed by his disciple Madhavadeva deviate from it (Neog, 1965 reprint 2008: 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 cymbal called *bar tal*. A different set of music known as *ojha_pali* 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 kirtana*. The *satra* dances mainly center round the *anka* dramas of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva. The *sutrdhara* (master of the show), 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 in Nath 2011: 60). At Barpeta *satra* One more dance type is found that is *bhor tal nritya*.

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* 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.

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* scenes of seven *vaikunthas*. 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 in a copy of Sankaradeva's rendering of the first half of 10th *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 17th century" (Neog, 2004: 141). It is evident that these paintings were done in some *satras*, most probably in Bali *satra*,

where the original manuscript was preserved (Neog, 1949: 32). 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).

Socio-religious study of Barpeta Satra

Barpeta *satra* was established by Madhavadeva as a center of neo-*vaisnavite* religion and culture based on the cult of *bhakti*. The leaders of neo-*vaisnavite* movement like-Sankaradeva, Madhavadeva, Harideva, Damodardeva and their apostles established more than 800 *satras* throughout the length and breadth of Assam in the medieval period (Sarma, 1999: Introduction). Many of them are now extinct while a large number of them are still functioning. Till now they are a potent force to reckon with and cannot be adequately known without knowing the neo-*vaisnavite* movement to the functioning of the *satra*. Barpeta *satra* is one of the earliest *satras* of Assam. It was established in the year 1570 A. D. Mathuradas Burha Ata was the first *adhikara* of Barpeta *satra*. Barpeta *satra* is older in age than most of the *satras* established in Upper Assam. In order to streamline the activities of the *satra*, Mathuradas Bura Ata constituted altogether 22 *hatis*. But there are three *thul* (principal) *hatis* such as- Uttar *hati*, Dakhin *hati* and Na *hati* (Pathak, 1959: 71). Each of the 22 *hatis* have one *haitarghar*³, where from the activities of the *hati* are managed. Persons living in a particular *hati* take all the decisions concerning the *hati* by holding meetings in that house. Minor offences are also tried by holding meetings in that house. Barpeta *satra* does not only cater to the religious needs of the people. It has multi pronged influence on different aspects of the people. The *satra* has tremendously influenced the social and cultural life of the people of the town as well as the surrounding territories. By unfolding spirit of one God, it has demonstrated the path of simple living and high thinking. The *satra* has also focused on how to lead a simple life to the devotees, most

³ *Haitar Ghar*: Community hall which are present in each and every Hatis of Barpeta, which were constituted by Mathuradas Burha Ata.

of whom are poor and illiterate people. The philosophy of the *mahapurushiya* religion has also moderated to a great extent the rigid caste system by establishing equality among different caste group. The motto of the religion is that all are equal in the eye of law and everyone has access to the *kirtanghar*. Thanks to such philanthropic attitude, the rigidity of caste system which is observed in other places is not experienced here in Assam. It has also patronized different cottage industries among the residents of the *satra*. People residing in *satra* become mild and gentle in behaviour. Following discussion deals with the impacts of *satra* situated at Barpeta on the socio-religious life of the people of Barpeta town.

a) Influence of the Bhakti Movement among the people: Barpeta *satra* has contributed a lot by propagating monotheism, showing the path of how to lead a life of spiritual happiness, equality and equal status for all, dilution of castism and caste destination among people, creation of employment opportunities for all development of handicrafts and trade. People living under the atmosphere of the *satra* become gentle by nature and of good behavior. Barpeta *satra*, like other *satras* of Assam helping in the promotion of songs and dances, art and culture, education and thus help Formation of Assamese Nationality.

The neo- *vaisnvide* religion of Sankaradeva does not recognize caste distinction at least in the religious places. All are equal in the eyes of God and all whether a Brahman or a cobbler can participate equally in the religious activities. Because of this extremely liberal view, people of lower caste and even Muslims were attracted to this religion. This kind of atmosphere helped in the dilution of different castes and paved its way for nation building. Barpeta *satra* does not only cater to the religious needs of the people. It has multi prolonged influence on different aspects of the people. The *satra* has tremendously influenced the social and cultural life of the people of the town as well as the surrounding territories. By unfolding spirit of one God, it has demonstrated the path of simple living and high thinking. The *satra* has also focused on how to lead a simple life to the devotees, most of whom are poor and illiterate people. The philosophy of the *mahapurushiya* religion has also moderated to a great extent the rigid caste system by establishing equality among different caste groups. The motto of the religion is that all are equal in the eye of law and everyone has access to the *kirtanghar*. Thanks to such philanthropic attitude, the rigidity of caste system which is observed in other places is not experienced here in Assam. It

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So far art and culture are concerned, the *satra* becomes the place where these are patronized and people are concerned to take them up. *Satriya* dance which was declared as classical dance form a few years back is regularly practiced. Moreover, drawing of art in hand written manuscripts, dresses for artists acting in different characters, making of ornaments etc are some other forms of art which are encouraged in the *satra*. People also become expert in different cottage industries like pottery, carpentry, gold smithy, black smithy etc. In older times there were people who were specially engaged in lime making from a special kind of snail. In short, till some years back, Barpeta was full of hectic activities. Goods produced in different cottage industries were sold both inside and outside Barpeta town. Through this process a class of traders grew up in the town.

In Sankaradeva's religion there is no difference on the basis of castes and creed. Everybody is equal in the eyes of God. People of all castes and creed have the same right to enter the *kirtanghar*. Because of this philanthropic attitude, people of lower castes and tribes came in large number to embrace the *mahapurushiya* religion. Sankaradeva even allowed the Muslims to become disciples. But in course of time, his followers gave up this philanthropic philosophy. Caste distinction began to surface. The hardliner began to restrict the lower caste groups from entering into the *Kirtanghar*. However such restriction were completely removed when Mahatma Gandhi came to Barpeta in the year 1934 (Raychoudhury, 2010: 235)

b) Impacts of Barpeta Satra on the Religious Life of the People: The society of Barpeta is fully *satra* centric. Within the periphery of the *satra*, influence of the *satra* on the people either directly or indirectly is immense. People of Barpeta are votaries of the deity of Krishna in their day to day life and pro *vaisnavite* in their culture and tradition. But it does not mean that they are engaged in hari-kirtana all the time. In this context Uday Nath wrote- "Although simplicity, detachment to worldly pursuit and worshipping of God are hallmark of *satra* institution, yet it is not fully engaged in religious activities alone. It has contributed irreproachably to the social and cultural progress of the people of Assam in general and the people of Barpeta in particular. Some other contributions of the *satra* are demonstration of simple and comfortable life to the socially backward people, to open the door of monotheism for all caste and

creed, dilution of the rigid caste system by admitting human values and equality for all and helping in the growth of handicrafts and inspiration to the people for works etc. are the contribution of this *satra* to open some essential way of work” (Nath, 2001: 147).

The commitment of the devotees to the *satra* arises concomitantly with establishment of the *satra* itself “At that time specifically Gopal Tanti with his associate devotees tried to develop the *satra* as an ideal *satras* of Assam and also succeeded in their endeavor. So, the popularity of Madhabdeva fame goes to full of brim during stays for about seven and half years after establishing the *satra* and were influenced by the rites and rituals of the *satra*” (Das, 2003: 15). This is still lightening the cultural horizon of Barpeta like *akkhay banti* of Bapeta *satra*. According to some devotees, the rites and rituals of the *satra* are being carried on from 16th century in whose shape was founded by Madhabeva.

People of Barpeta society are involved on a mass scale in the rites and rituals attached with different *satriya* festivals like *janmastami*, *tithis*, *domahi* and *doul utsav*. These impart a sense of cohesion and oneness among the people and they belong to a family. Mass participation in rituals like *holy*, *pek yatra*, *karbhar* to the *satra*, fasting in different festivals of *satra* like *tithis*, *domahi* etc. produce a sense of catharsis in the mind of the devotees.

Rites and rituals produce deep spiritual impact in the minds of the people. They come to believe in the oneness of the self with his creator. He becomes a firm devotee who dedicates everything at the feet of the God.

Different *sewait bangsaras* (dynasties service to the *kirtanghar*) are attached to different generations of the *bangsaras* to become part and parcel of *satriya* religious activities. These activities imbibe in them deep spiritual sense and moderate to a great extent their mundane activities.

The underlying spirit of the rites and rituals observed in the ‘*Satra* is service to God is service to man.’

Religious activities have great educative value. They teach people how to lead a good life with good thought and actions. These help in wiping off hatred, animosity, greed and other vices.

Mass participation in rites and rituals by the devotees dilute racial and caste prejudices. The underlying notion is ‘Ram’ resides in every soul. So offer your

obeisance to everybody. There is no distinction between high and low among the devotees.

Devotees living within the territorial boundaries of the *satra* come to offer obeisance to lord Krishna in the *kirtanghar* on important occasions like completion of *shradha* ceremony on the occasion of death of a person, the ceremonial purification of a girl after attaining puberty and in this connection after completion of the fasting of the girl, on the day of marriage by both of bride groom and bride, on the birth of a child, after proselytisation or salvation, birth day of children or adults etc. These rites bring a sense of order in the society.

Religious activities observed by the people inculcate in them a sense of cleanliness in their daily chores like cooking, cleaning, washing etc.

c) Impacts of Barpeta Satra on the Social Life of the People: The *satra* institution has produced deep impact on the socio-cultural and economic life of the people of Assam in general and the people of Barpeta in particular. People from different castes who form the common mass and are linked with the process of production not only listen to the liberal and universal appeal of the neo-*vaisnavite* religion of Sankardeva, but also come in large number to embrace this religion and become its astute devotees. The appeal of the religion is simple which can be understood even by unlettered people. *Satras* became not only centers of spiritual activities but also centers of socio-cultural and economic activities. In the earlier period, most of the people of Assam lived almost a nomadic life moving from one place to another place when they were disturbed by natural calamities like flood or epidemics like cholera, small pox etc or due to depredations of wild animals like tiger or elephants, because during those days the forests were infested with wild animals. Often people fled to deep forests to protect themselves from royal wrath or depredations of neighbouring community like Bhutiyas, the kacharies etc. Even Sankardeva and his community had to move from one place to another place before finally coming to Barpeta (Lekharu, 1952: 256). Formation of *satras* helped in creating permanent settlements of the toiling masses in different places of Assam and Barpeta also. Once people began to live within a *satra*, they did not generally try to move to other places, they formed a new *satra* owing allegiance to the original *satra*. Thus the *satras* helped in creating permanent settlements, which was very much necessary to carry on economic activities on a continuing basis. The *satras* contributed in a big way in boosting the

agricultural economy of Assam, which would have been impossible without a permanent population sitting at a particular place. Side by side with agriculture, other occupations also developed like carpentry, weaving, making of different agricultural economy thrived under the fostering care of the *satras* like Barpeta and others (Rajguru, 1988: 67). The neo-vaisnavite religion had to face royal wrath of the Ahom kings initially since they thought that the particular religious movement might to be directed against the royalty. The new religion was also maligned by the priests who approached king Suhungmung Dihingiya (1497-1539) and alleged that the religion propagated by Sankardeva did not believe in the Hindu rites of worship (Neog, 1965: 121). The royal attitude which was initially belligerent against the new religion got mellowed down in course of time, as the rulers found that the intention of the new religion was not to spread disaffection against monarchy, but one of help and co-operation. In fact from time of the Ahom King Siva Singha onwards the royalty began to patronize the new religion as it did in the case of other religion also by offering land grants were made either in the name of the presiding deity in the name of the priests (Sarmadaloi, 2003: 76). This provided an economic footing to Barpeta *satra* to carry on their religious activities. Barpeta *satra* was organised on the basis of division of labour. The *sewaits* were allotted *pattas* of land to carry on cultivation. Apart from peasant families in the *satra*, there were artisans carrying on different productive activities like carpentry, blacksmithy, goldsmithy, coppersmithy, weaving etc. All were considered as devotees owing allegiance to the presiding deity of the *satra*. Thus Barpeta *satra* offers unity and cohesion among different castes and communities as never before people in Assam who had been semi-nomad shifting from one area to another, none become permanently settled under the *satra*. The monarchy needed a permanent population clutching to the earth for economic prosperity and political cohesion. The *satra* provide this platform.

Vaisnavite satras of Assam are the social facts and cultural realities. Assamese society cannot be represented without referring to the *satra* institutions. 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 the evil. In the other art forms such as *ojha-pali* and *ghosa-kirtan* the names of God are sung in chorus.

Barpeta *satra* also serves as centre of learning and play 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. Barpeta *satra* has its own administrative and economic structure. It is administered by the assembly of the inmates called *samuha*. Barpeta *satra* influences the economic life of the people. In this context the formation of the *hati* fund bears great significance. Gokul Pathak wrote in this context thus “Shrewd Burha Ata (Mathura Das Burha Ata) not only divided the whole *satra* in to 22 *hatis* but also established a treasury in every *hati* for improvement of economic condition. People began to take advantage of the treasury established in each *hati*. Burha Ata formulated certain laws and regulation for smooth running of these treasuries, which are still in vogue. Even today the poor people living in the *hatis* get benefit from the *hati* fund. These treasuries enlivened the economy of Barpeta helping the traders and craftsmen.”(Pathak, 1959: 75).

The performing art forms of Barpeta *satra* comprising *ojha-pali*, *bhaona* etc. are important and powerful propaganda 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 Hati Fund: The social organization of Barpeta is *satra* centric and different castes and communities are connected with the *satra* and they provide different specific services to the *satra*. This is found in the case of some other *satras* as well. This cemented the bond of unity between the devotees and the *satra* on a firm footing. Thus the *satra* institution influences not only the religious and cultural lives of the people, but their economic lives as well. In this context the formation of the *hati* fund bears great significance. Gokul Pathak wrote in this context thus “Shrewd Burha Ata (Mathura Das Burha Ata) not only divided the whole *satra* in to 22 *hatis* but also established a treasury in every *hati* for improvement of economic condition. People began to take advantage of the treasury established in each *hati*. Burha Ata formulated certain laws and regulation for smooth running of these treasuries, which are still in vogue. Even today the poor people living in the *hatis* get benefit from the *hati* fund. These treasuries enlivened the economy of Barpeta help the traders and craftsmen” (Pathak, 1959: 75). Anil Raychoudhury wrote in this context that, “In 1930 and thereabout the total sum of money in all the *hati* treasuries stood approximately at Rs/ 89,000/-. *Hati* funds were the common treasuries managed democratically by the people” (Raychoudhury, 2000: 168). The funds are sometimes lent to people living outside the *hati* but at a higher rate of interests (Raychoudhury, 2000: 168).

c) Place of Woman: The status of women appears to be different in different societies. Generally in patriarchal society the status of women is lower than that of man. Yet highly learned women were respected even in old patriarchal societies. Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva accorded high place to women. Women were given their due honour in the neo-Vaisnavite society. Madhavadeva allowed women to participate in *nam-prasanga* (recitation of holy songs) inside the *kirtanghar*. When the *kirtanghar* was burnt down by forest fire during Mathuradas Burha Ata’s time, he allowed his wife to keep the *banti* (ever burning wick) before God. From that time, the wick before the sanctum- sanctorum is never allowed to extinguish. Harideva, another *vaisnava* Guru and a contemporary of Sankaradeva appointed his daughter Bhbaneswari as *adhikara* of Maneri *satra* (Sarma, 1999: 82). Another name worth mentioning was that of Padmapriya, daughter of Gopal Ata of Bhawanipur. She was an erudite scholar who composed many devotional songs of *vaisnavite* faith. Dr. Maheswar Neog commented on the position of power and prestige of women of Barpeta that ‘Women were given due honour in the *vaisnava* society’ (Raychoudhury,

2012: 132). It can be mentioned in this respect that Madhabdeva told women like mother of all and other women to attend the Morning Prayer at *kirtanghar* regularly. From this it is known that women took active part in the religious affairs of the *satra*. But of late, the position of women within the male dominated society of Barpeta appears to be downgraded and women are being looked down upon. They are not allowed now to enter the main prayer hall where the idol of Lord Krishna is worshipped. It is alleged that women without proper cleanliness may enter the holy place even during the days of menstruation. Hence women are debarred. However on close scrutiny, such contention seems to have been baseless because women are more aware of cleanliness and purity than man folk. The same changes may also be levelled against man folk who may enter the holy place without proper cleanliness.

The importance of *satra* institution does not lie alone on its religious activities. It has contributed much to the cultural development of the Assamese people. It gave a rich religious literature, revived and popularized the art of classical music and dance, introduced dramatic performance, encouraged handicrafts and introduced the art of manuscript painting. The elevation of socially backward people by presenting before them monotheistic religions to all alike irrespective of caste and sex, the loosening of the spiritual level, the spread of learning through Assamese versions of Sanskrit scriptures, the popularization of ethical virtues like kindness, non-violence, obedience etc amongst the villagers, and above all the fostering of a spirit of fellow-feeling or a bond of unity amongst persons of different parts of the country, are some of the notable social contributions of the *vaisnava* movement and the *satra* institution. But no institution can claim perfection and the *satra* is not an exception. The unusual multiplication of *satras* during the later part of the seventeenth century and after cannot be ascribed solely to the evangelical motive. Brothers and other members of the same family are frequently seen founding different *satras* instead of devoting themselves to the cause of the ancestral *satra*. The chronicles of several *satras* contained accounts of friction among members of the same family on the question of succession to the headship, and establishment of separate *satras* consequently.

Although detachment from material pleasure and attainment of salvation are the hallmarks of *satra* institution, yet its activities are not solely confined to religion alone. It has made immense contribution to social and cultural life of the Assamese society at large and to this *satra* centric town in particular. This *satra* has unfolded

some essential aspects of social and cultural life. Such as projecting the way of how to lead a sound life before the socially backward people, emphasizing the belief of one religion, one God before the people irrespective of caste or creed, relaxation of harsh caste system through admittance of values and equality of status, encouragement of cottage industries and such other essential aspects of life. The *satra* has influenced in different ways not only the residents of Barpeta, but also the people of the neighbouring *satras*. Barpeta has been acting as the symbol of morality and truth by focusing close attention of its disciple. It is a common knowledge that people living under the influence of the *satra* sober and gentle. In conversation among themselves they use passive voice as a mark politeness. The influence of the *satra* in the case of different art and culture is worth special mention. The *satra* has specialized in classical songs and dances. It has also introduced acting. Sankardeva, Madhbdeva and other religious heads wrote and popularized *ankiya-bhaona*. The staging of *bhaona* created a class of expert artists who were specialized in the art of preparation of dresses for the actors, manufacture of idols and their ornamentation, manufacture of furniture etc. The relics of these art forms are still evident at Barpeta *satra*. Every *hati* has a *haitar-ghar*, where the people of the *hati* can meet and discuss different religious and social matters. Every *hati* has also a *hati* treasury where the people can borrow loan to meet their needs. The *satra* has also encouraged the residents to engage themselves in different trade and commerce. In the neo-*vaisnavite* religion propagated by Sankaradeva, Madhavadeva and others, there is no distinction among people on the basis of caste and creed. This is the principal theme in the *vaisnavite* religion. Sankaradeva initiated the people of low castes and even Muslims into the fold of his religion. It is a matter of regret that his followers after him have sided from his religious philosophy. As a result, people of the low caste categories have found it difficult to raise their social position.

In the matter of women's entry inside the *kirtanghar*, women organizations have now become vocal and more vociferous in their demand for entry into sanctum-sanctorum and accorded the same position as man folk in the matter of religious practice. However strong demand is being raised from time to time in favour of women's entry but inside the town there were strong groups who were dead against the entry of women. Even women devotees are against free entry of women into the *kirtanghar*. This is however an anachronistic superstitious attitude and quite unreasonable and it is

hoped that sooner or later, this attitude will get softened and all restrictions in the entry of women will be removed.

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