

Barpeta Satra and its Economic Impact on the Society of Barpeta Town

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Abstract: The most important characteristic of the Satra is that they are self sufficient. This was an imperative of the medieval economy, when self-sufficiency was considered a virtue. Srimanta Sankaradeva devised the model of Satra in such a manner that the residents of that complex did not have to depend on the outside world for any of their requirements, but it is to be noted that their lives were very simple. 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 rptnt 2008: 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 Satradhikar of Barpeta Satra) in 1504 Sakaabda (Pathak, 1959 rptnt 2006: 12). The people of Barpeta live in different *hatis* are closely related with the Satra and the Satra has lots of impacts like- social, religious, political economic etc. among the people living in the society of Barpeta. This paper is a humble attempt to study the economic impact of Barpeta Satra to the society of Barpeta town.

Key words: Satra, hati, economic impact.

Introduction

The social life of the people is related with religion. The moral and ethical basis of the society is derived from religion. In Assam *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 personal visits, the heads of the *Satra* try to tone up the moral of the people (Sarma, 1999: 214).

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Review of Literature: Many studies have been made by different scholars on *Satra* institution. Most of the studies mainly focus on neo-Vaisnavite movement and the *Satra* institution in Assam and Barpeta also. Thus this topic is one of the most important topics in the literature of social science.

“The Neo-Vaisnavite Movement and Satra Institution of Assam” (1999) by Dr. S.N. Sarma is an attempt at systematic study of the *Satra* institution. “Cultural Heritage of Assam” (2004) by Maheswar Neog is the collection of a few important studies in Assamese culture by Dr. M. Neog which deals with various aspects of the society, culture and religion of Assam. Another important book is “Early History of the Vaisnava Faith and Movement in Assam, Sankaradeva and His Times, (1965 reprint 2008) by Maheswar Neog. This work 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. “Satra Society and Culture, Pitambardeva Goswami and History of Garmur Satra” (2012) by Dambarudhar Nath, 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 “*Barpeta Satrar Itihas*” (1959 rprnt 2006) by Gokul Pathak dealt with the varied religious-cultural activities of the people in relation to the *Satra*.

Area of the Study: Barpeta *Satra* is one of the chief monasteries of Assam, which was established by Madhavadeva the chief apostle of Sankaradeva in the later part of the sixteenth century (1570-1590) (Pathak, 1959 rprnt 2006: 12). Barpeta *Satra* is situated at a distance of about 100 km. to the north-west of Guwahati city. Barpeta is the head quarter town of the district of the same name.

Objectives: The objective that has been formulated for the study is to know about the economic impact of Barpeta *Satra* among the people living in different *Hatis* (cluster of settlement) of Barpeta town.

Methodology: The study is based on both primary and secondary sources of information. For the collection of primary data, I have applied field study method on a self-prepared questionnaire, personal interview and observation as well as participant observation method to collect information on the studied problem. Secondary data consisted of relevant books and articles etc.

Economic Impact of Barpeta Satra among the People of the Society of Barpeta

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 rprnt 2008: 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 *Satradhikar* of Barpeta *Satra*) in 1504 *Sakaabda* (Pathak, 1959 rprnt 2006: 12). Barpeta *Satra* is situated at a place which is also well known center of communication and business. The *Satra* is well planned. The *Kirtanghar* of the *Satra* is also known for its magnificent construction and design. Originally a *Satra* based community; Barpeta emerged as 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 in-

stead of agriculture (Goswami, 1990, in B. Choudhury and A. Sribastab, 1990: 74). 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 to a very considerable extent.

At Barpeta *Satra* Mathuradas Burha Ata regularized and systematized the daily prayer service into fourteen times a day. He delegated different functions in connection with the religious to different trained persons. The system introduced by Burha Ata has continued till date (Nath, 2001: 21). Mathura Das Burha Ata's attention was also directed towards social organization. He was the man who introduced the *Hati* (cluster of settlements) system. At Barpeta town the numbers of *Hatis* are 22. In each *Hati* a *Haitar Ghar* (community hall) was established (Nath, 2001: 22). The *Haitar ghar* is still being used as the venue for disposal of petty dispute and for decision making in connection with all matters relating to both temporal and religious problem. Burha Ata devised an ingenious scheme to promote trade and commerce. He established a treasury in every *Hati* to lend money to the *Hati* dwellers at easy rate of interest (Nath, 2001: 22). Barpeta *Satra* controls the lives of the people living in different *Hatis* in different aspects like- social, economic, religious and political aspect. So this paper is an attempt to describe only the economic impact of Barpeta *Satra* among the people living in different *Hatis* of Barpeta town.

The economy of Barpeta *Satra* depends on its sources of income. The income of *Satra* is mainly derived from two sources- i) Religious tithes contributed by disciples ii) Lands originally granted by the Ahom kings and subsequently confined and recognized by the British Government.

Any person professing *Mahapurushiya* faith shall be entitled to get a *Bhag* (Share in the offerings in the *Satra* by paying a definite fee) 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* (death anniversaries of *Vaisnava* saints) festival he is to receive the share of the offered things in *Karbhar* (payment of tithe).

Every member who has a *Bhag* in the *Satra* shall have the responsibility of performing the *Pala* (services in turn) or to pay the amount in lieu it.

Payment of *Gurukar* (Religious tithe given by the people to the *Satra*) 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 minimum limit of it is fixed at Rs.5/. Anybody who pays *Gurukar* is entitled to get *Nirmali* (consecrated flowers etc. given to devotees as holy token of blessings)

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 articulation with the *Satra* institution. It may be recorded that some of these craftsmen were established in Barpeta in the seventeenth century for the purpose of temple service king Viranarayana of Cooch Behar. The king endowed the Barpeta *Satra* with 18 families of *Paiks* (bounded labour) for various petty works of the establishment which include such artisans as blacksmith, potters and players of drums, pipes and cymbals (Neog ed, 1991: 258). Descendants of these men are continuing their services even today. In the course of time some other crafts were also established in Barpeta. The *Satra* institution at Barpeta helps in flourishing the 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. The engaged families are somehow maintaining their livelihood by selling their finished products and were 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* (curd vessels), *Charu* (cooking vessels), *Maale* (offering plate) and many others. The Hiras as professional castes are articulated to the *Satra*. They have to supply a definite quota of earthen pots. They give 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* (uncooked articles of ration, vegetables etc. Offered to a guest, priest etc.) in these pots by the *Satra*. Another potter caste of Barpeta is the Kumars. They also make pots, with the help of wheels. Their pots differ from those of the Hiras. Kumar make pots like *Chaaki* (oil burner), *Dhuna Daani* (handled pots for offering scent powder), *Ghot* (water pots), 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 by shoulder the in 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 Baniyas 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 Nahati. The Baniyas of Barpeta show their excellence in this craft and gained applause in various places in making a number of gold and silver ornaments. Of this *Keru* (earring), *Haar* (chain), *Kharu* (Bungles), *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 also is now somehow surviving and confined only to very limited hands. There are nearly hundred Kamar families in Barpeta. Like other small industries this industries 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. Kamar family is to supply one knife to the *Satra* during the festival. In return each family gets 10 areca nuts and a bundle of betel leaves. Now a day's at the time of festival the Kamars 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. *Colourbaji* (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 castes 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 Kaibarta families concentrated in Bhakatpara and Rayatpara. 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 the practices are not in vogue now due to economic reasons. During mid thirties of 20th 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.

There is another caste group called Mukhi. Their occupation was dealing in time. With this traditional occupation that are related with the *Satra*. People of this caste group are to do white washing in the *Satra*, before the *Doul* festival. But now though old profession has been changed in the course of time, still than 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-

Association of the can 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	Doul 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	<i>Mukhi</i>	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* be bring 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 different types of games are also found inside the *kirtan* which are related with money.

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 *Bhakats* 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 of 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 *Haitanghar* in the first week of the month of Bahag, interests for loans are to be paid.

Conclusion

From the observations noted above, it is clear that Barpeta *Satra* play a prominent role in the economic and life of the people residing in the *Satra* area. At Barpeta *Satra*, the *Satra* activities produce lasting effects on various aspects of life and living of the people and still continue to do so in the present time. It imparts stability to the society and gives a new meaning to the socio-economic life. The *Vaisnavite* philosophy of tolerance to other religious beliefs, secularist philosophy and belief in the God have created an atmosphere of peace and communal harmony. Moreover the *Hati* organization where different *Hatis* are assigned different duties in connection with *Satra* activities is something unique in character.

Goswami, 2016: Barpeta *Satra* and its Economic Impact on ... of Barpeta Town

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