INTRODUCTION

Culture reflects the knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities’ and habits acquired by man as a member of society. As a land of multicultural manifestation, Assam has a rich unique culture. The germination of a greater territory called Assam is the ultimate culmination of the political unity evolved in the Brahmaputra valley centering round the migration of the Ahoms of Tai-Chin origin into Soumar during the first part of 11th century A.D.

The Bhakti movement popularly known in Assam as the Neo-Vaiṣṇavite movement commenced by Śaṅkaradeva the great Vaiṣṇava saint and social reformer of Assam in the beginning of 16th century was based on what was going on in India for a few centuries prior to that. Being by nature a protestant movement against the existing Brahmanical ritualism and caste rigidity, bhakti system brought a revolutionary social outlook in men and literary outburst all over India. While this was one of the aspects of the movement; its protestant side interrogated the priesthood and feudal oppression of the State. Rooted in this ideological background, bhakti initiated by Śaṅkaradeva in Assam, therefore, brought a revolutionary phase in the process of socio-cultural evolution in this part of the country. Although imported from outside, the Bhakti movement in Assam was not a replica of what was there in other parts of India at that point of time. With its own socio-political and economic background, this movement created an ideology and a structure of its own to distinguish it from other bhakti system of the country. This was egalitarian in character.

The most significant, distinguished & unrestrained character of this movement in Assam was its Satra system for monastic disciples and religious training with a common prayer hall called Nāmghar that can now be seen in almost all the village of Assamese Hindus in Brahmaputra valley. The Satras are in monastic in character and played a significant role in every aspects of Assamese socio-cultural economic and political life in the past as well as present. The Satra and Nāmghar - the institutional structure of the sect acted as a uniting force. Like the Moloch of the ancient Babylonians, the Nāmghar that arose as a sequel of Śaṅkaradeva’s preaching served not only as the place for prayer and devotion but also as the centers of community service. Indeed introduction of Nāmghar as a common prayer hall for the villagers of their caste and tribe affiliation signaled the breakdown of Ahom system of feudalism maintained by their king through the paik system. According to some British scholars the Satra are the spiritual colleges, the center of proselytization. Emerging as a major religious and social institution, their numbers grew to more than one thousand by middle of the 18th century and are still a countable force of social change and acculturation in the plains of the state. It is also the centers of cultivating Assamese classical dance and other performing arts, impart literacy and learning among the laity and encouraged spiritual education and train up the illiterate villagers to read, write and understand. We can termed the Nāmghar as the Musuam of Assamese culture.1

1.1 Satras:
The Neo-Vaiṣṇavite movement and its ordain form Satra are the regional expression of all India Bhakti movement of middle ages. In fact although the characteristics of reform movement and protest movement are clearly manifested in Neo-Vaiṣṇavite movement, it is in fact, a social movement based on religious ideology. Satras were established as the centers of new consciousness and allegiance of mind and soul was given to them. Satras framed moral laws and controlled the activities of society. This institution is a unique feature of the cultural environment of Assam which comprehended the local socio-cultural features based on population structure and consequently difference took place in the rules and regulations and values of Satras. The division of Satra into four categories like the Brahma, Kāla, Puruṣha, Nīka is the reflection of diversity which helped to sustain and stabilize Vaiṣṇavism by making it a part and parcel of Assamese social life. Despite opposition and challenges at the initial stage, the Satra institution emerged in the state at the state patronage itself. These Satras have their own physical identities with a secluded territorial jurisdiction, well defined structural establishments with the common prayer hall (Kirtanghar, nāmghar) at the center and the residential houses (bahai) of the inmates at the bottom. It runs a kind of administration that resembles in all aspects the medieval state structure. Hence the entire system forms a distinct society with its own identity. Other performing arts, impart literacy and learning among the laity and encouraged spiritual education and train up the illiterate villagers to read, write and understand. We can termed the Nāmghar as the Musuam of Assamese culture.

1. Gunaviram Baruah (ed): Assam Bandhu vol-I 10th issue
2. B.K. Kakati: The Mother Goddess Kamakhya. p 82
3. Satras established under the direct patronage of the kings followed the satra system in their net-work of...
1.2 Management: 
The Satra institution contained the three principal factions (a) Adhikāra and Deka-adhikāra (b) Bhakat and (c) Siṣya. The first two factors reside within Satra while Siṣya lived in the village outside the Satra leading householder’s life. The Neo-Vaisnāsvam in Assam was based on wide network of Satra headed by Guru or a pontiff known as Adhikāra or Satradhikara, like all residential devotee is invariably a celebrity person and the bhaktas residing in the Satras are celibate. The Stradhikara always belongs either to the Brahmān or Kayastha community. It was the custom with the Barpeta Satra alone, which is a semi-monastic Satra that the headship is theoretically supposed to open for the members from all castes and filled up through a process of selection or election. In Majuli there is no Satra at present where the Satardhikara is elected, he is normally chosen from among the relations of the existing satradhikara, and the rule is that he can never be dethroned in his life. The only exception was Kamalabari where the Adhikāra was selected by the inmates at the initial stage. Later, not only the caste but also the lineal connection became a subject of consideration for selecting the Satradhikara. Every Satradhikar has one junior called Deka or Deka-adhikara who is the heir to the religious headship and extend their cooperation in the functions of Satradhikara. The coronation ceremonies of the Adhikaras of the four Satras of Majuli resembled with the coronation of kings in the Middle Ages. It is their custom that the installation of the new Adhikara be solemnized by one of their class. Both the Satradhikara and Deka-Satradhikar have their independent household. In Auniati Satra they have three separate and independent establishments with a number of attendants attached to each of them. Satradhikara is the initiator of disciples in almost all cases. But in the absence of Satradhikara and Deka-adhikara, the Raj-medhi could perform his duty on his behalf especially in distant places.

1.3 Bhakats: 
The inmates called bhakats are unmarried kewalas or udāsin, and lived in bahā. However he is to leave the Satra and return home or live elsewhere. It has a resemblance with what has happened to many sectors of modem Buddhism in East and South Asia and even aspired to by many in the society. Šaṅkaradeva, the founder of the vaisnāsav system in Assam had not introduced celibacy as a matter of discipline for his disciple, rather he elude this system when his most esteem disciple...
Mādhavadeva took it as a way of life. According to Gait there were some more than three thousand celibate inmates enrolled in various Satras alarmingly creating a deficit in the man power revenue of the state. Despite, sacrificing the life of a householder the inmates’ posses a kind of imaginary family where Burhā-bhatak regarded his junior as his children, and nominated one of them to succeed him to the headship and perform obsequies rites at his death.

1.4 Sisyas: The disciples or devotee of the Satra, known as sisyas lived in the village, leading a householder life. However besides these above mentioned functionaries there were other official viz. the bhūgavati or bhūgāī, pathak, sravani, gīyān-bāyān, naṭṭe and satradhikar, ojā-pali or kīrtaniya-phaud, deuri belaniya, thaimācī, borduri, pada-Silārbanuvaa, bharati, likhak, khanikar, paldhari, dvārī, ādhāra, majumdar, khātaniya. For the efficient management of the satras and for conducting religious services regularly the satradhikāra also appointed several functionaries from among his devotees to hold different departments under his control according to size and nature of each satra but in minor

1.5 Arrangements of the Satras: A full-fledged Satra is one with a nāṁghar, a maṇikār and hāthī with four openings or gateways called karō-pāṭ. The arrangements of Satras evoke comparison with the Buddhist monasteries or vihāras with the provisions of monk’s dwellings.

1.6 Income: The prime sources of income from where the Satra derived were two in types (i) lands granted by the kings, (ii) religious tithes contributed by disciples. In addition the income also derived from the occasional presents or offerings from disciples and special subscription raised from disciples considered as irregular income, though there is no legal obligation to pay the sum, yet force for religious obligation was strong enough to induce people to pay that small amount.

1.7 Ownership and Property:- There are three types of ownership, (i) ownership vested in the idol of a satra, (ii) ownership vested in the community of devotees, (iii) family ownership. The properties of celibate devotees are considered as a part of Satra property. Their kinsmen cannot lay any claim to the property left by them. However in some satras the property left by a deceased celibate is inherited by the junior celibate serving and residing with. Satras are classified on the basis of celibacy of satradhikāra and bhakatas. It is of four types - monastics, grihasthi semi monastic and ad-mixture.
These Satras, irrespective of their material prosperity, possess equal position in reverence of religious affairs. Religious activities of one Satra cannot be questioned or nullified by another Satra. Hence no satra occupied the position of central institution, exercised the power of central authority. However the parent-satra occupied a higher status above their branches or offshoots.  

The Satradhikāra took the ecclesiastical tour to accompanied by satra functionaries to see the condition of disciples.  

1.8 Sarana:

Satra have important function in the society as they offer sarana which is also called sarana-lovā or sarana-hovā and bhajona among the locality and binds all the disciples. As there is no mantra in Sanskrit, the guru imparts the khatā, nām-khatā or khatā-vikāya. Women, Brahmanas and Kings are not required to prostrate themselves (aśṭānga-praṇāma) before the alter when are imitated. The second part of ordination called bhajona contained the esoteric and philosophical instruction, which may not give at the time of sarana. From the day of receiving sarana; disciples have to practice the process of meditation named guru-sevā, išvara-sevā or gosai-sevā. Satra also contributed much towards the uplift and betterment of the backward classes and the bordering tribes of Assam.

1.9 Food:

Satra had influenced all aspects of Assamese society. It had great impacts on the life style of the people, their food habits, their speech and moral behavior. The vaisnavas were generally vegetarian but sometimes take non-veg simply as a matter of convention. In the Vaisnava devotional practices all upacāras were not necessary only pāṇco-pacāras are practiced in devotional rite. Of these five upacāras the offerings of naivedya was regarded as most vital.

1.10 Dress:

Regarding the dress a celibate devotee used pieces of white cloths, dhoti, a cūdar and gāmochas. On the ceremonial occasions the devotees residing in the Satra used cauṅgā cāpākan. Satradhikar wear the turbans when they go out of the Satra-campus but never used the colour dress. In the Satras, the devotees generally use the Kath, pāṭi and dharā made of grass, bamboo-shits, and mat rush and ribs of wooden furniture. Gradually the Satras which received the royal patronage began to use certain things of luxury like valuable gems and ornaments and utensils etc. but these were intended for the use of images installed in the Satras or for decoration on the festive occasions like bhāṃā. The devotees used the paḍukā and sandals made of coir (phāṇiti) and jāpī. Besides dōld the Satridhakara also used elephants and horse, for land conveyance. Boats of different designs were used not only for transport but also for amusement and races conducted in the Satras. The celebates residing in the satras keep long hair, and had clean shaven, paste a circular mark or two vertical lines of sandal on the forehead. Rosary and garlands made of basil stem and leaves are commonly worn around head and neck.

53. House-holding pontiff (grihasṭhī/vishayee Adhikara).

57. Sixteen in number

58. Sixteen in number

59. Naivedya contained softened garm, mug, pluse, rice, banana, sugar-cane, betel-nut and other palatable things.

61. The chewing of tōmbāla (areca-nut) together with betel leaf lime and tobacco, milk and milk products were liberally used. The irrigant and excite food is generally eschewed by the inmates of a satra in the interest of celibacy. S.N. Sarma: NVMSIA, P.144

62. Though the garments were generally cotton but silk clothes also were used occasionally. Earlier the reformer emphasized much on the simplicity of garments

63. waist coat

64. Long Shirt.

65. flowing garments

66. wooden footwear

67. A kind of sedan chair carried on by two men on their shoulders. An usual land conveyance generally used by the Satradhikar
1.11 Relationship:

As a head of the religious community the Satradhikar enjoyed respects and obedience. As the human God the Satradhikāra was greeted as Prabhu-Jagannāth, Prabhū-īśwara (ruler of the world.), ātā-īśwara and so on according to the traditional method of addresses prevalent in each Satra. The villagers esteemed the Satradhikāra as gōsā-īśwara though the particular adhikāra may not be their religious head. The Satradhikāra was esteemed as ātā (ātama). In regards to the relation among the devotee, a senior devotee or monk behaves a junior one with at most courtesy. Every devotee irrespective of his age is greeted as ātai. Disciples incorporated to the same Satra are linked up by the same religious pledge. This pledge had far reaching effects on social activities. When the devotees are initiated by the same Satrādikāra, a sort of sacramental brotherhood is confirmed between them. They greeted each other as hari-bhakat.63 No marriage relation could be supervene among their son and daughter. The children of one sacramental brother usually address the latter as tōvai and his wife as āmai. At the death of sacramental brother the fellow devotee observed one day fasting. In regards to the manner and dealing, a Satrya-bhakat residing in Satra are very polite and highly polished, who used a class of lofty and elegant vocables. For example we can mention some of the illustration—

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>St. Assamese:</th>
<th>Satrīya form:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>teōlok(they)</td>
<td>terāsava</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eōlok</td>
<td>erāsava</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bhᾱt</td>
<td>cᾱul-sijowā</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jalukiyᾱ(black-pepper)</td>
<td>bhojan-ṭhelᾱ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sauc(call of nature)</td>
<td>bᾱhir-phuราว</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Enunciation of the names of Viṣṇu i.e. Rāma, Hari etc in the midst of every sentence is a sort of mannerism with most devotees. The devotees emphasized much on the habit of neat and clean and even not chew the pōn and tāmbula without taking their morning bath. About the offence and punishment, adultery, theft, assault and moral turpitudes of serious nature were regarded as offences and guilty persons were ex-communicated from the order. Kathā-guru-carita mentioned that Mādhavadeva expelled from his Satra one Haricarana on the mere suspicion of adultery.66 Indulgence of lying, libeling, back-biting, slandering and abusing etc. were pardoned after having reprimanded them and having realized a certain amount of fine from the offenders.67 But honest confession of any guilt even in serious nature was highly appreciated.

Besides, these moral offences worshipping of deity other than Viṣṇu was regarded as an act of misbehavior which was severely dealt with by the reformers and proselytizers. Śaṅkaradeva himself expelled one of his prominent followers Vyūsakalī for worshipping goddess Kali. Devotees who believed in magic, charms and sorcery were expelled from the fold. Addiction to opium eating, smoking and drinking was also prohibited.68 Even to-day the monastic Satras like Āumai, Dakhnopāt, Barpeta and Kamalabari Satra endeavored to maintain traditional rules and codes of disciples. Acts of moral depravity and religious delinquency are not tolerated and the devotees who indulged in such offences are required not only to pay monetary fine, but even expelled from Satra compound. The Satradhikāra with his councils decides such cases who declared the judgments according to the nature of the cases. If alleged persons proved his innocence then he is absolved from alleged guilt. In some monastic Satras notably in Majuli sometimes devotees are kept in confinement for several days.

1.12 Marriage and obsequial rites:

If the celibate desired to retaliate the householder’s life and marriage he was allowed for that. The practice of inter-caste marriage was prohibited among the vaiśnavaśa and for such marriage devotees are socially boycotted. Generally the marriage ceremony among the high caste and sub-castes held according to the Sāstric rites conducted by Brahmin priests, while the marriage ceremony among the socially backward sub-castes and Hinduised non-Aryan tribes held in accordance with the traditional or tribal customs supplement by Vaiśnava nōma-kīrtana. After the death of one Vaiśnava devotee, his body is cremated but after few months the bones of the buried person was formally cremanted. However, this practice was confined not among the Vaiśnavas but also among the Hindu communities. Purification rites and rituals and oblations were performed according to the Brahanamical rituals by simple devotional prayers.

1.13 Amusement and entertainment:

The Satra and the Nᾱmghar are the center of all cultural activites. The bhojanā performed every year in these institutions is a part of cultural ethos and attendance of Satradhikāra in the bor-sabha was incumbent. Holding an annual prayer in each of the families inviting the elderly members of the village is a part and parcel of their culture. Even the Bihu, a festival is accompanied by nōma called huchari-kīrtana is celebrated very joyfully. The Vaiśnava sects relished the festivals like jannāstami72, Nandotsava73, Pācalī74.

63 Fellow devotee of Hari
66 Daitari Thakur: KGC. p 399
67 Ibid. 369
70 The Carit-puthis mentioned that Śaṅkaradeva removed one Sūrya–Sarasvati from the office of the Bhūgavati for his addiction to opium. Santa-carit v 65
72 The birth anniversary of Kṛṣṇa is celebrated on the right lunar day of the dark fortnight in the month of Bhādra. The Vaiśnava of Assam never observed it in the month of Śrāvana.
Phalgutsava75, Rāsa-yātra which are related to some incidents or episodes of Kṛṣṇa’s life which are identical with those of other parts of India. Dramatic performance known as Bokā-bhāonā76 is performed in Nandotsava festival. The Keli-gopālā nats performed during the Rāsa yātra. Besides these festivals some other festivals like Ratha-yātra, Snāna-yātra and jhulana-yātra are also observed in prime satra of Brahma-saṁhāti. Again some of the ceremonies connected with Śayana77, pārśva-parivarttana78 and jāgaraṇa79 of Viṣṇu are also held in these Satras. The Satras that are associated with Puruṣa, Nīkā and Kāla saṁhāti observe the death anniversaries of Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva and their originator. The Brahma- Saṁhāti perceived the death anniversaries of Dūmodaradeva, Bhaṭṭaṭadeva and other prime apostles of the sub-sects. By observing the nirmāli-lovā prabhā 80 the Deka-adhikarā is formally elevated to the headship of a Satra. Besides these, usual devotional ceremonies some special devotional functions were observed both in the Satras and house-holders viz. bor-sabāḥ71, pal-nāma82, bhakat-sevā83, fasts etc.

1.14 Position of women:

Women are administered in śaraṇa after marriage and even allowed to carry devotional chantings in the Nāmghar but not simultaneously with the man disciples.84 Although women saints are met in other Vaiṣṇava sects but it is only in the Śaṅkaradeva’s faith that women have been found as heads of Satras.85 Śaṅkaradeva’s grand-daughter-in-law Kanaklata became not only the head of the Satra, but she herself appointed twelve Satradhikar to set up and organize more Satras. Women can also take part independently in the community prayer. Like the men, initiated women can perform various duties in the Satras. Even all the Satriya rites including initiation are open to women. Moreover there are provisions for women to become Bhaṭajana along with their husbands. In Satriya tradition married and initiated women are called Gopīnā th or mother. Such a liberal attitude towards women is the creation of the Satria institution. Perhaps such religious freedom of women is rare outside Assam.

These institution not only changed the spiritual and moral outlook of the people but also prepared the ground for the establishment of a new society, based on the principles of ‘universal social brotherhood, simplicity and liberalism’ in the religious practices and some other new elements viz. in the socio-economic fabrics. The society was reformed and reconstructed on the democratic and humanitarian lines. It endeavored for upliftment and betterment of the backward classes and bordering tribes of Assam. From the very beginning of his missionary activities, Śaṅkaradeva led crusades against existing caste system and untouchability of the society, instituted equality of all men irrespective of caste or character in the eyes of God. The Satras made a great appeal to the unsophisticated Assamese people and thus they commanded unprecedented popularity.86 The bhakti movement of Assam like the other parts of India toned down the caste and class discrimination demolishing compartments of social disparity and helped in building the plinth of a classless society.

According to B.K. Barua, the neo-vaiṣṇavism became a powerful catalayt, a cementing force of the different social group. The incorporation of the different tribal groups within the Mahapurūṣiya fold resulted in the growth of rich and varied forms of religious cultures within the neo-vaiṣṇavite fold. The Satras of the Kāla Saṁhāti notably the Dehing, Budbᾱri, Cecᾱ, Bāreghar and Kāntipār deserved special apperception for their proselytizing works amongst the backward and tribal people. As the untouchability had no place in this fold, besides the tribes

71. pal-nāma a type of congregational prayer continued for few days or even for a month without any break.
72. bhakat-sevā a popular function amongst the Vaiṣṇavas to ally the evil influence of the planate and spirit of the ancestors.
73. B.K.Barua : SVSA, p 110
74. Ibid, p. 110
75. SVSA, p 110
76. B.K.Barua : SVA, p 112
even the Muslim also accepted this faith. The gradual material transformation and the spread of vaisnavism among the different indigenous tribes of Assam constitute a fascinating and significant part of social history.

The Nāmghar which was set up as central religious-political institution of the villages played an eminent role in their cultural activities. Here not only the the Śātras and literary masterpieces were recited but also consulted and debated the problems related to the philosophy and religion. Like the ecclesiastical courts of Europe in the middle age, the Satra institution of Assam has been serving as dispenser of justice, especially in those cases where morality and religion are involved. All the contracts made binding by religious oaths came under the preview of the Satras. This institution helps to impart unity to Assamese village life. The benevolent institution brings integrity, unity and solidarity among the diverse population of the land through which equality in men is practiced and untouchability is discarded. All the devotees have equal share and status as man. It brings peace, tranquility and harmony in the society and can be regarded as the vital centers of life and worthy of the gifts of all that was prized and adored best.

The Satra have revolutionized lifestyle, beliefs and customs of the tribal people. Many articles of artistic quality and utility which now associated with vaisnavism were originally received from the tribes. The socio-cultural synthesis introduced by neo- vaisnavism though incomplete but undoubtedly a progressive historical step which helped the small but independent units to come closer to each other and in many cases merge into a general Assamese society. Thus concept of Assamese society that we have today owes much to the Satra institution founded by Śaṅkaradeva and his followers.

The Satras worked both as the hub of religious learning and as residential school. Consequently this network of institution helped the diffusion of education, learning and culture in entire state. Hence the Satra paved the way of originated successful teachers and philosophers and missionaries as well as eminent philosophers, scholars and poets. Therefore, through these two prominent mass media Śaṅkaradeva and his followers sowed the seed of democracy, removed untouchability and inequalities, introduced village panchyat and co-operative efforts before five hundred years ago. Gandhiji remarked “Assam is beyond my dream, my service are not required here. In Assam vaisnavism, Śaṅkaradeva successfully fought against the elaborate and costly rituals which were replaced by simple and easy observance of religious practices. The vaisnavas are highly polished in their behavior and polite in their manners.

The Satra culture evolved coincidently with folk culture as a consequence of Neo-Vaisnavite movement in Assam. The Satra institution being formed under the leadership of Mahaprunāś Śaṅkaradeva during the mid part of Ahom rule transformed Political Assam into a cultural Assam. As a consequence of the Neo-Vaisnavite movement, Assam becomes a part of cultural India, though she was far away from political India. The Bhakti movement conferred two social institutions as benefaction to the Assamese society. These two prominent institutions are the Satras and Nāmghar. It is the most prominent institution inherited by the people of Assam from the 16th century religious reform movement. Though Satra is a religious institution but it mimics the cultural traditions and democratically became the esteemed cultural centers. It had transferred the ideals of Neo-Vaisnavite movement into the socio-cultural and religious institution. Nāmghar is the simple manifestation of the Satra based on Satriya ideals organized the life of Assamese Vaisnavism community. It is not only the religious institution but also the authority of social control.

In initial stage of neo- vaisnavite movement the word Satra was used in the sense of religious sitting or association and not as stematized institution. According to Bhattadev “That supreme place adored by Gods and where ninefold Bhakti daily prevails is the prayer hall or ṛghkons”. The word Satra has been borrowed from the concept of the Rishi Saunak in the Naimha forest where the hermit used to assemble to listen to the recitation of the Bhāgavata for thousands years at a stretch performed by the monk Satka. Later on it came to mean the physical form and institution with a Kirtana-ghar or Nāmghar in the center and four sourroundings rows of huts for the residential clerics. The dictionary meaning of the word satra is one which protects the ‘ṛighkons’, it also used to mean ‘a residential place for Guru and bhakat’. This word is also mentioned in Śrīmad-Bhāgavat and Satapath-Brahman.

90. The central institute within a Satra is the prayer hall known as Nāmghar or kirtana-ghar.
92. District Gazetteers of Assam, P 95f
93. B.K. Barua: History of Assamese literature, p72
94. S.N.Sarma: NeoVaisnavite Movement in Assam, p76
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