

Satra: Its Impact on Assamese Society

Mamoni Sarma

Department of History L. C. B. College, Maligaon.

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.¹ 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 signalized 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 century² 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 Musam of Assamese culture.. ò±:â1 Öü÷Ïü ÿ± üÑ|'';îÂ1 û±ðÄâ1¼.

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.³ 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 *Brahmā*, *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 (*Kīrtanghar*, *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.⁴ Hence the entire system forms a distinct society with its own identity.

¹. The socio-political events in Assam lead to the militancy of the Mayamaria vaiṣṇavas.

². Gunaviram Baruah (ed) : *Assam Bandhu vol-1* 10th issue
³. B.K. Kakati: *The Mother Goddess Kamakhya*. p 82
⁴. *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- Vaiṣṇavism 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 celebrate person and the *bhaktas* residing in the *Satras* are celibate.⁵ The *Stradhikara* always belongs either to the *Brahman* or *Kayastha* community.⁶ 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.⁷ 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 time.⁸ The only exception was Kamalabari where the *Adhikāra* was selected by the inmates at the initial stage.⁹ Later, not only the caste but also the lineal connection became a subject of consideration for selecting the *Satradhikara*.¹⁰ Every

*Satradhikar*¹¹ 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.¹² It is their custom that the installation of the new *Adhikara* be solemnized by one of their class.¹³ 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.¹⁴ *Satradhikara* is the initiator of disciples in almost all cases. But in the absence of *Satradhikara* and *Deka-adhikara*, the *Raj-medhi*¹⁵ could perform his duty on his behalf especially in distant places.

1.3 Bhakats:

The inmates called *bhakat*¹⁶ are unmarried *kewaliā*¹⁷ or *udāsin*, and lived in *bahā*.¹⁸ 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 modern Buddhism in East and South Asia and even aspired to by many in the society.¹⁹ Śāṅkaradeva, the founder of the *vaiṣṇava* 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

administration with the *Adhikara* at the apex of the system enjoying the services of a sect of officers of juniors and senior ranks appointed by him with the designations, powers and functions similar to those in king's court.

5. K.L.Barua: *E.H.K.*, p 211, Śāṅkaradeva was not an *adhikara* nor was Mādhavdeva or Dāmodardeva. The system of *adhikaraship* was developed later.

6. M. Neog: *SHT*, p 335.

7. The tradition of Barpeta *satra* is that the community of the intimates called *samuh* used to gather after the death of an *Adhikara* to nominate the next *Adhikara*. In the process any persons having efficiency for the assignment was nominated to the headship. A.Raychoudhary :*Asomar Samaj Itihasat Nava Vaisnava Bad .pp112f*

8. However in some reasons if the *Satradhikars* of the grand *satras* resolved to dethrone one of them, in that situation they have the power to do that. L.N. Tamuli (edit): *Holiram Dhekiaphukan Rachnawali*, p72

9. E.L. Delton: *Notes on Mahapurusiya Sect of Vaisnavism of Assam*, cited from D. Pathak (ed.): *Creative Vision*, p

10. The heritage of *Satra* exists only when stamp of old system and traditions prevails both inside and outside it and thus remains a wonder for the changing. Besides possessing the attractive personality and good health, a *satradhikara* should be well-versed in Sanskrit language and literature and cultivate moral values ordained by the scriptures. However, he should also maintain and protect the rules as enunciated in the *Smriti* and the *Dharma- Sastras* for the well being

of the *Satra* and the society. Benudhar Sarma: *Dakhinpat-satra*. P3.

11. Śāṅkaradeva was not an *adhikara* nor was Mādhavdeva or Dāmodardeva. The system of *adhikaraship* developed later. D. Nath: *RSNEI*. P77

12. One of he features of such a coronation in the Middle Ages was that after the ritual was over, the king was to approve the succession by duly making an announcement to the public declaring the succession. Being the proselytizer of the king and his ministers, the *adhikaras* are much powerful in medieval period and no less revered at present so far as the most known ones are concerned. An *Adhikara* is perceived by his own dress including the head-dress called *pag* a style which his class intimated either from the Ahom kings who had established them with all sorts of paraphernalia resembling the feudal monarchs themselves. Buddhist monks who used to put his feet on the ground. The four prominent *satras* are *Aññiati*, *Dākhīnpat*, *Garamur* and *Kamalabari*. D. Nath: *Adhunikatar Unmeshat Shri Shri Auniati Satra* Appendix pp.152 ff

13. T.N. Sarma: *Auniati Satrar Buranji*, p. 322

14. At present there is no third incumbent to the future headship of the *Satra*.Ibid.p 315

15. T.N. Sarma: *Auniati Satrar Buranji*,p 394

16. (*sk.bhakta*) devotees who either hold ecclesiastical office of the *Satra* or lead the life of a celibate within the *satra* campus.

17. *kewalia* – alone who desires final deliverance and seek consciousness of their pure soul. However celibacy was an immense pleasing aspect of the *Satra* system. It was considered as a superior way of life respected by all and even aspired by many in the society

18. A small house contained one or two small rooms, cloistered in a row of such houses called *hāti*.

19. D. Nath: *RSNEI*. p. 49

Mādhavadeva took it as a way of life.²⁰ 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.²¹ Despite, scarifying the life of a householder the inmates' posses a kind of imaginary family where *Burhā-bhakat* regarded his junior as his children, and nominated one of them to succeed him to the headship and perform obsequies rites at his death.²²

1.4 *Sisya:*

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 *bhāgavati* or *bhāgati*²³, *pathak*²⁴, *sravani*²⁵, *gāyan-bāyan*²⁶, *naṭuwā*²⁷ and *sutradhara*²⁸, *ojā-pali* or *kīrtaniya-phaud*²⁹, *deuri belaniya*³⁰, *thaimacā*³¹, *bordeuri*³², *pada-Silārbaniwa*³³, *bharali*³⁴, *likhak*³⁵, *khanikar*³⁶, *paldharia*³⁷, *dvāri*³⁸, *āldhara*³⁹, *majumdar*⁴⁰, *khātaniyār*⁴¹. 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

²⁰. Mādhavadeva expressed that celibacy was difficult for an ordinary person, and it was rather advisable not to intimate him in this regard. Daitary Thakur, *KGC*, p. 60

²¹. Gait: *History of Assam*. p169

²². P.D. Goswami : *Satriya Utsavar Paricoy aru Taatparyya*. p53

²³. Those who read and expound the *Bhagavadgīta*.

²⁴. *Pathak*-reader of payara composition and recite the metrical renderings of the *Bhāgavata-Purāna* and other poetical works.

²⁵. Appointed to be constant listeners to the reading and expounding of the scriptures

²⁶. *Satra-Orchestra*.

²⁷. Dancer and actors provided dance performances and took part in the dramatic representation.

²⁸. Stage manager of *bhāona*

²⁹. *ojā* the master musician or instructor of music in the *Satra*. *Pali* is the Chief Assistant of the leader of the chorus

³⁰. distribute the *Prasada*

³¹. Who sweeps the floor of *kīrtana-ghar*

³². Appointed to worship the idol.

³³. In charge of the shrine.

³⁴. Store keeper.

³⁵. Appointed to copy the Sanskrit and Assamese writings

³⁶. Who paint, engrave and decorate the walls and posts of *Satra* building. They also provided miniature illustration to manuscripts, copied by *likhak*. personal attendents of *Adhikara*.

³⁷. Who kept watch over *kīrtana-ghar* and other building of the *Satra*.

³⁸. The gate keepers who guarded the *Satra* gate-ways especially at night.

³⁹. Personal attendents of *Adhikara*.

⁴⁰. Who keeps the accounts and issue general orders is the name of *Sanūha* or general body of *bhakat*.

⁴¹. Who maintained relations between the Royal Authorities and the *Satras*.

satras where monastic characteristics are not prevailed such well ordered division of functions is not noticed.

1.5 *Arrangements of the Satras:*

A full-fledged *Satra* is one with a *nāmghar*, a *maṇikūt*⁴² and *hātis*⁴³ with four openings or gateways called *karā-pāt*.⁴⁴ The arrangements of *Satras* evoke comparison with the Buddhist monasteries or *vihāras* with the provisions of monk's dwellings.⁴⁵

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.⁴⁶ 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.⁴⁷

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 *bhakat*s. It is of four types - *monastics*⁴⁸, *grihashti*⁴⁹ *semi monastic*⁵⁰ and *ad- mixture*.⁵¹

⁴². The central temple contained a complex of a shrine called *maṇikūt* or *bhāj-ghar* and assembly hal

⁴³. These were modeled on the structural pattern of a Hindu temple which consists of a *garbha-grha* containing image of a deity and a *mandapa* hall. The main temple of *Kamakhya* has a similar apsidal *mandapa* adgoing to the main shrine

⁴⁴. It consists of four rows of huts or four long houses each divided into a number of rooms at the sides. According to *Katha Guru Carita*, generally *Satras* are established on the banks of *Brahmaputra* or its tributaries for easy communication and transportation and availability of food stuff in the locality and some sort of inaccessibility. *Daitari: KGC.78, 100.*

⁴⁵. S.C. Goswami: *Introduction to Assam Vaisnavism*. p

⁴⁶. *District Gazetteers of Assam*, p. 98f

⁴⁷. S.N. Sarma: *NVMSIA*. p. 114

⁴⁸. Monastic with its celibate inmates (*kewalia, udasn, bhakat*) where woman is not permitted to stay at night, within the four walls of the *satra* campus. Even at day-time, woman entrance not allowed except on religious grounds.

⁴⁹. The celibate pontiff (*udasin-adhikāra*), or celibate pontiff with house-holding inmates (*grihi/grihashti/vishayee Bhakat*).

⁵⁰. House-holding with house-holding inmates .

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.⁵² The *Satradhikāra* took the ecclesiastical tour to be accompanied by *satra* functionaries to see the condition of disciples.⁵³

1.8 Śarana:

Satra have important function in the society as they offer *sarana* which is also called *śaraṇa-lowā* or *śaraṇa-howā* 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-vākya*. Women, *Brahmans* and Kings are not required to prostrate themselves (*aṣṭāṅga-praṇāma*) before the alter when are imitated.⁵⁴ The second part of ordination called *bhajona*⁵⁵ contained the esoteric and philosophical instruction, which may not give at the time of *śaraṇa*. From the day of receiving *śaraṇa*; disciples have to practice the process of meditation named *guru-sevā*, *īśvara-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 *vaiṣṇvas* were generally vegetarian but sometimes take non-veg simply as a matter of convention.⁵⁶ In the *Vaiṣṇava* devotional practices all *upacāras*⁵⁷ were not necessary only *pāñco-pacāras*⁵⁸ are practiced in devotional rite. Of these five *upacāras* the offerings of *naivedya*⁵⁹ was regarded as most vital.

1.10 Dress :

Regarding the dress a celibate devotee used pieces of white cloths, *dhoti*, a *cādar* and *gāmocha*.⁶⁰ On the ceremonial occasions the devotees residing in the *Satra* used *caugā*⁶¹ *cāpkan*.⁶² *Satradhikar* wear the turbans when they go out of the *Satra*-campus but never used the colour dress.⁶³ 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 *bhāonā*.⁶⁴ The devotees used the *paduka*⁶⁵ and sandals made of coir (*phānti*) and *jāpi*.⁶⁶ Besides *dola*⁶⁷ 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 celebrities 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.

51. House-holding pontiff (grihasthi/vishayee Adhikara).
52. The *Auniati*, *Daksinpat*, *Garamur* and *Kuruwabahi* of *Brahma Saṁhati*, Bardowa, Narowa, Kowamara, Dighali and Camaguri of the *Puruṣa Saṁhati*, Kamalabari and Barpeta of the *Nika Saṁhati* *Āhātguri*, *Dihing* and *Māyāmara Satraso* of *Kala- Saṁhati* occupy on enacted position among the respective *Satra*. These *Satra* received royal patronage, dignity etc.
53. The local officers like the *barmedhis*, *rajmedhis* *pācanis* made the arrangement for the stay of Gosains and his accompanied devotees by constructing temporary residences called *bahar* constructed in open field and collecting necessary articles from the village disciples. The *Satradhikar* of minor *Satras* are usually put up in the *Namghar*. *Satradhikara* impart *saraṇa* to new disciples and *bhajana* to those who are already converted and also collected *tithes* and decided religious and social disputes. After contacting the village disciples and administering of far as possible to their religious needs, they return their headquarters before the rainy season sets in *District Gazetteers of Assam*. Nowgaong, p 9
54. E.A. Gait: *Assam History*. p 187. It describes the process of *śaraṇa* ceremony with regard to king Rudrasimha' s aversion to accept the faith.
55. It is an elaborate religious ceremony meant for spiritually advanced disciples. The *bhajona* ceremony is always associated with conferment of rosary (*mālā*) with appropriate *mantra* which was prevalent in *puruṣa* and *Brahma saṁhati* while *Nīka* and *kalā saṁhati* did not follow this system.

56. The chewing of *tāmbūla* (areca-nut) together with betel leaf lime and tobacco, milk and milk products were liberally used. The irritant and excitant food is generally eschewed by the inmates of a *satra* in the interest of celibacy. S.N. Sarma: *NVMSIA*. P. 144
57. Sixteen in number
58. *Gandha*, *puṣpa dhūpa*, *dīpa* and *naivedya*
59. *Naivedya* contained softened garm, mug, pluse, rice, banana, sugar-cane, betel-nut and other palatable things.
60. Though the garments were generally cotton but silk clothes were also used occasionally. Earlier the reformer emphasized much on the simplicity of garments
61. waist coat
62. Long Shirt.
63. flowing garments
64. S.N. Sarma : *NVMSIA*, p.145
65. wooden footwear
66. Indiginious sun-shade
67. A kind of sedan chair carried on by two men on their shoulders. An usual land conveyance gerally 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*, *Prabhu-iśwara* (ruler of the world.), *ātā-iśwara* and so on according to the traditional method of addresses prevalent in each *Satra*. The villagers esteemed the *Satradhikāra* as *gosā-iśwara* 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 *Satradhikāra*, a sort of sacramental brotherhood is confirmed between them. They greeted each other as *hari-bhakat*.⁶⁸ No marriage relation could be supervene among their son and daughter. The children of one sacramental brother usually address the latter as *tāwai* 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 *Satriya-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-

<p><u>St. Assamese :</u> <i>teōlok(they)</i> <i>eōlok</i> <i>bhāt</i> <i>jalukiyā(black-pepper)</i> <i>śauc(call of nature)</i></p>	<p><u>Satṛīya form:</u> <i>terāsava</i> <i>erāsava</i> <i>cāul-sijowā</i> <i>bhojan-ṭhelā</i> <i>bāhir-phurā</i></p>
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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 *pān* 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.⁶⁹ 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.⁷⁰ But honest confession of any guilt even in serious nature was highly appreciated.

⁶⁸. Fellow devotee of Hari
⁶⁹. Daitari Thakur: *KGC*. p 399
⁷⁰. Ibid. 369

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 Vyāsakalāi 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.⁷¹ Even to-day the monastic *Satras* like *Āunati*, *Dakhinpāt*, *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 vaiṣṇavas 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 *Vaiṣṇava nāma-kīrtana*. After the death of one *Vaiṣṇava* devotee, his body is cremated not buried. Though incidentally his body could not be cremated but after few months the bones of the buried person was formally cremated. However, this practice was confined not among the *Vaiṣṇvas* but also among the Hindu communities. Purification rites and rituals and oblations were performed according to the *Brahmanical* rituals by simple devotional prayers.

1.13 Amusement and entertainment:

The *Satra* and the *Nāmghar* are the center of all cultural activities. The *bhāonā* 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 *nāma* called *huchari-kīrtana* is celebrated very joyfully. The *Vaiṣṇvite* sects relished the festivals like *janmāstami*⁷², *Nandotsava*⁷³, *Pācali*⁷⁴,

⁷¹. The *Carit-puthis* mentioned that Śaṅkaradeva removed one Sūrya-Śarasvati from the office of the Bhāgavati 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 *Vaiṣṇava* of Assam never observed it in the month of *Srāvana*.

*Phalgutsava*⁷⁵, *Rāsayātra* 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-bhāonā*⁷⁶ is performed in *Nandotsava* festival. The *Keli-gopāla* naṭs 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-saṁhati*. Again some of the ceremonies connected with *Śayana*⁷⁷, *pārśva-parivartana*⁷⁸ and *jāgarāṇa*⁷⁹ of Viṣṇu are also held in these Satras. The *Satras* that are associated with *Puruṣa*, *Nikā* and *Kāla saṁhatīs* observe the death anniversaries of Śaṅkaradeva and Mūdhavadeva and their originator. The *Brahma- Saṁhatīs* perceived the death anniversaries of Dāmodardeva, Bhaṭṭadeva and other prime apostles of the sub-sects. By observing the *nirmāli-lowā prathā*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-sabāh*⁸¹, *pal-nāma*⁸², *bhakat-sevā*⁸³, *fasts* etc.

⁷³. Starts in the evening with illumination in honour of Lord's birthday. After prayers and recitation, a drama dealing with the birth episodes of Kṛṣṇa is performed. In the *Satras* where the image of Kṛṣṇa is prevalent an image of Kṛṣṇa is worshipped with *sāstric* rites and rituals. This festival is observed on the very next day of the festivals of janmāstami.

⁷⁴. The festival of *Pācati* is connected with Kṛṣṇa's nativity which is celebrated on the 5th day from the day of the birth of Kṛṣṇa which is exclusively conducted by women-folk. It is not performed in monastic *Satras*.

⁷⁵. *Phalgutsava* is celebrated on the full moon day in the month of *phālguna* which lasts for three days

⁷⁶. *Bokā-bhāonā* i.e. mud performance because colours and mud are sprinkled by the actors at each other representing the sentiment of joy owing to Kṛṣṇa's birth KGC.P406

⁷⁷. *Śayana* festival is observed on the eleventh day of bright fortnight in the month of Āsāḍha.

⁷⁸. *Pārśva-parivartana* festivals are observed on the eleventh day of the fortnight in the month of Bhādra.

⁷⁹. *Jāgarāṇa* or prabodhani festivals is held on the twelfth day of the bright fort-night in the month of Kartika

⁸⁰. The fellow *adhikaras* of other *Satras* must reconiged this headship through this ceremony otherwise his opinion, his Judgments may not be binding on disciples and his position in any assembly of *adhikāras* may be questioned.

⁸¹. *Bor-sabāh* means big religious congregation where the devotional function of various nature mark the proceedings of the ceremony. Several house-holders generally combined together to perform this ceremony *Satras* having sound economic standing can aspire to perform it. S.N.Sarma: *NMSIA*. p 136

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 *Bhajanias* along with their husbands. In *Satriya* tradition married and initiated women are called *Gopīnīs* or mother. Such a liberal attitude towards women is the creation of the *Satra* 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-vaiṣṇvism became a powerful catalyat, 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 Saṁhati* notably the *Dehing*, *Budbāri*, *Cecā*, *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

⁸². *pal-nāma* a type of congregational prayer continued for few days or even for a month without any break.

⁸³. *bhakat-sevā* a popular function amongst the *Vaiṣṇavas* to ally the evil influence of the planate and spirit of the ancestors.

⁸⁴. B.K.Bruea : *SVSA*, p 110

⁸⁵. *Ibid*, p. 110

⁸⁶. B.K.Barua : *SVA*, p 112

even the Muslim also accepted this faith. The gradual material transformation and the spread of *vaiṣṇava* religion among the different indigenous tribes of Assam constitute a fascinating and significant part of social history.

The *Nāmghar* which was set up as central religio-political institution of the villages played an eminent role in their cultural activities. Here not only the the *Sāstras* 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*.⁸⁷ This institution helps to impart unity to Assamese village life.⁸⁸ 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 *vaiṣṇvasim* were originally received from the tribes. i.e. *Bhor-talā*, *dabā*, *sāraī* etc. The habit of writing *Satra* chronicles was probably derived from the Ahoms.⁸⁹ The socio-cultural synthesis introduced by *neo-vaiṣṇvasim* 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* pave 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 panchayat and co-operative efforts before

five hundred years ago. Gandhiji remarked “*Assam is beyond my dream, my service are not required here*. In Assam *vaiṣṇavism*, Śaṅkaradeva successfully fought against the elaborate and costly rituals which were replaced by simple and easy observance of religious practices. The *vaiṣṇavas* are highly polished in their behavior and polite in their manners.

The *Satra* culture evolved coincidentally with folk culture as a consequence of *Neo-Vaiṣṇavite* movement in Assam. The *Satra* institution being formed under the leadership of *Mahapurūṣh* Śaṅkaradeva during the mid part of Ahom rule transformed Political Assam into a cultural Assam. As a consequence of the *Neo-Vaiṣṇavite* 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*⁹⁰ and *Nāmghar*.⁹¹ 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.⁹² It had transferred the ideals of *Neo-Vaiṣṇavite* 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 *Vaiṣṇavite* community. It is not only the religious institution but also the authority of social control.

⁹⁰. In initial stage of *neo-vaiṣṇavite* movement the the word *Satra* was used in the sense of religious sitting or association and not as stematized institution. According to Bhattadeva. “That supreme place adored by Gods and the *vaiṣṇavas* where the ardent devotees perform duties pleasing to God and where ninefold *Bhakti* daily prevails is called *Satra*; *Vaiṣṇava* residing there naturally prone to *Hari-nāma*. Bhattadeva: *Saraṇa-Mālika*.

The word *Satra* has been borrowed from the concept of he *Risi* Saunak in the *Naimiha* 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 *Sutka*. Later on it came to mean the physical form and institution with a *Kīrtana-ghar* or *Nāmghar* in the center and four surrounding rows of huts for the residential clerics. The dictionary meaning of the word *satra* is one which protects the ‘*righkons*’, it also used to mean ‘a residential place for *Guru* and *bhakat*. This word is also mentioned in *Śrīmad-Bhāgavad* and *Satapath-Brahman*.

⁹¹. The central institute within a *Satra* is the prayer hall known as *Nāmghar* or *kīrtana-ghar*.

⁹². T.C.Sarma: *The Culture and Civilization of Assam and the Assamese Mind*, ed. by N.Saikia, p17.

⁸⁷. *District Gazetters of Assam*, P 95f

⁸⁸. B.K. Barua: *History of Assamese literature*, p72

⁸⁹. S.N.Sarma: *NeoVaisnavite Movement in Assam*, p 76

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