



Origin And Development Of The Satra Institution In Assam

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Abstract: *Satras* are considered as one of the most influential development of Medieval Assam. Along with the *Namghars*, these institutions had shaped the socio-cultural and religious fold of contemporary Assam and still have a significant prominence. The origin of the Satra concept could be traced back right to the Hindu scriptures like *Satapatha Brahmana*. The growth of Bhakti movement had its after marks in the North Eastern part of India in the form of Neo-Vaishnavite movement, continued from Northern India. Along with the waves of Neo-Vaishnavite movement initiated and propounded by *Srimanta Sankardeva* and his disciples including *Sri Sri Madhabdeva*, the Satra institutions became an integral part of Assamese society. Following the death of Sankardeva, internal conflicts among the devotees led to the fraction of 4 *Samhatis* with their respective features. *Brahma, Purusha, Kala* and *Nika* – these four *Samhatis* have their identical features reflected through the Satra institutions. As per the impacts, *Satras* has a holistic impact over Assamese society in various sectors, i.e. – social, cultural, economic, religious etc.

In this paper, basically the origin and development of Satra institution in Assam in association with Neo-Vaishnavite movement is presented. The impact of Satra institutions in Assamese society is duly analyzed through this paper.

Index Terms - Satra, Neo-Vaishnavite movement, Samhati, Assamese society, Impact of Satra.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Following the growth of *Bhakti movement* in the Southern part of India, the Northern region submersed into *Vaishnava* worship. From the inspiration of the *Vaishnava* fold the Neo-Vaishnavite movement was initiated and propounded by *Srimanta Sankardeva* and *Sri Sri Madhabdeva* along with their respective disciples and devotees. In this movement the ideological and spiritual developments actually shaped the overall growth and development of Assamese society in a humane way. The formation of *Satras* and *Namghars* can be considered as one of the most crucial development of the Medieval Assam. In the post Sankara era the ideological divide and dissatisfaction among the prime *Vaishnava* Saints led to the deformation of the *Neo-Vaishnavite* fold, popularly known as the “*Samhati* fraction”. The four distinct sectarian divisions had optimised different kinds of features into the *Satra* institutions of Assam. Nevertheless, the *Satras* throughout Assam had an influential role in different sectors of societal structure. In this research paper, the origin and development of *Satra* as a monastic institution had been traced along with different stages of development. The impact of *Satras* and *Satriya* culture in Assamese society is one of the credential element of this paper.

2. OBJECTIVES:

- To extract the origin and meaning of Satra institutions.
- Trace the development phase of *Satras* along with Neo-Vaishnavism.
- Evaluate the influence of *Satras* in Assamese society.

3. METHODOLOGY:

This research paper is primarily based on secondary resources like – books, articles, newspapers, magazines, journals etc. After critically analyzing and evaluating the secondary sources from a historical perspective the overall write-up has been prepared in an objective manner. All resources used in this paper are thoroughly cited and referred in the last portion of this paper.

4. SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS:

This research paper has covered the overall origin and development of various Satra institutions throughout Assam. The impact of Samhati fraction over the Satras is duly discussed along with minute details. The influential credibility of Satras into the Assamese societal structure has been elaborated as well.

Satra as a Vaishnavite spiritual institution has a large corpus hard to be covered in such a limited extent of words. Thus, only a basic idea about the formation and development of Satra institutions in Assam can be discussed in this paper. Furthermore, the impact of *Satras* and *Namghars* has regional differences in parts of Assam that has yet to be discussed.

5. ORIGIN & MEANING OF SATRA:

The term '*Satra*' is originated from a Sanskrit originate Vedic term (Rig Veda). The Rig Veda has mentioned Satra as – "*sattehjatavishta nomohi: kumbheret: sishichotu: somanom.*" (Sarmah, 2018, p. 187) Here the term '*Satra*' represents a place where sacrificial rites were performed and food were distributed. Basically, it signifies an assembly of sages to perform sacrificial offerings. Early scholars like S. N. Sarma and Dr. Maheswar Neog also sustain this view. From another point of view, the term '*Satra*' actually originated from '*Satapata Barhamana*'. Here it represents a system of meditation. The word '*Satra*' is consisted of two terms '*Sat*' and '*Ra*' meaning '*Truth*' and '*Relief*' respectively. (Goswami, 2020a, p. 38) The stone inscription discovered in Ambari, Gauhati had represented connection of *Satra* institutions with the Pala Dynasty. (Rajkhowa, 2015, p. 5) As *Satras* of Assam resembles the '*Mathas*' of Bengal and Buddhist monasteries of Medieval period, thus the representation of *Satras* solely as an innovation of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement was questionable to some extent. Banabhatta, an outstanding personality of 16th Century defines *Satras* as "*supreme place adored by god and Vaishnavs, where ardent devotees perform duties pleasing to God and where nine-fold Bhakti daily prevails..... Vaishnavs residing there are naturally prone Harinama.*" (Bhuyan, 2015, p. 57) In his text "*Sarana Malika*' he had offered a clear and moderate definition as –

*"Yatracaranti sad-dharman Kevala bhagavat-priyah
Navadha bhagabat-bhakitir pratyaham yatra varata
Tat sallaram utama kshetram vaishnavah ! sura-vanditam
Tutrasths vaisnavah sarva hari-nama-parayanah"* (Pathak, 2008, p. 14)

(Meaning – "where the sole devotees of lord perform pure religious rites, where nine fold devotion to the lord prevails day in and day out – O Vaishnavas, that place is Satra, adorable of gods. All Vaishnavs who live there are ever engaged in (the chanting of) the names of Hari)

Here, as pointed out by S. N. Sarma – "we find that a religious sitting or association where the Bhagavata was recited or explained was designated as a *Satra* at the initial stage of Vaishnava movement. With the progress of time, these associations of devotees began to develop on distinct line and ultimately emerged as a well-developed institution having a distinct feature and elaborate paraphernalia and practices. Henceforth, the term *Satra* terns to signify a distinct type of institution with characteristics of its own." As per M. Neog "in Sankardeva's days the daily sittings of monks and such lay disciples, as used to attend them, were held in open of under the shade of trees. Such meetings, independent of any construction whatsoever, probably formed the nucleus of a Sankarite sattra, with the kirtan-ghar and the residences of the superiors and monks only came later to be inseparably with the notion of *Satra*." (Bhuyan, 2015a, p. 57) According to the interpretations of Narayan Chandra Guswami, *Satras* are kind of places for yajna and similar rites. The Assamese dictionary compiled by Hemchandra Guswami (Hemkosha) defined Satra as a religious institution of Assam with residential area for the nobles. Throughout the early stage of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement the term '*Satra*' denoted kind of spiritual discussions also known as '*Bhagavata Chakra*', not institutional formation. (Sharma, 2014, p. 3) In the translation of the Bhagavata Purana Sankardeva himself mentioned about *Satras* as –

*"Sahasra Rishi Bedata Pradhan /
Bishnur Noimisha Khestra Mahapunya Sthan //
Manyo Kori Sutaka Patila Satra Tatha /
Sounaka Promukheya Sune Bhagavata Katha //"*

In the context with Assam and Neo-Vaishnavite movement, the first Satra was formed by Srimanta Sankardeva at Bardowa in about 1494 AD. Following his footsteps in the later phase Atas like Madhabdeva, Damodardeva, Harideva, Gopal Dev etc. expanded this lineage. Although Satras are meant to be a platform of religious purpose, it has also served as a ‘multi-dimensional’ institute. At the first phase of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement Satras developed mainly in the areas of Bardowa and Barpeta, in the later part it had shifted towards Majuli Island.

The periodic stages of development of Satras in Assam can be shown with a table as bellow –

Table1. The periodic establishments of Satras in Assam

Period	Upper Assam	North Assam	Muddle Assam	Lower Assam	Total	Percentage (%)
1500 to 1599	19	14	6	43	82	18
1600 to 1699	52	14	11	30	125	28
1700 to 1825	31	15	22	19	87	19
1826 to 1950	26	14	13	18	71	16
1950 to 2000	17	19	3	7	46	10
Not Informed	15	8	5	11	39	9
Total	160	102	60	128	450	

(Source: Vivekananda Kendra Institute of Culture 2011 Report)

Along with the spread of Neo-Vaishnavite movement, Sankardev and his fellow successors had developed a monastic like structure popularly called as ‘Satra’ for the propagation of their faith. Through those Satras the Vaishnava saints not only came closer to the general masses but also simplified the rituals for greater attention. Contemporary royal houses and monarchs encouraged these organisations through granting revenue free lands in exchange of subjugation to the kingship. It is also true that in many cases the royals and Satradhikars clashed throughout the medieval era. The well known Moamorian rebellion was one of the iconic examples of such. Specially, due to the non-violent nature and growing popularity of the Satras they had faced conflicts with Ahom monarchy. After the fractions of 4 Samhatis the Satras as an institution had gotten salient features. For instance – Damordrdeva introduced the ‘Kirtana Ghar’ (prayer house) and ‘Manikut’ in the Satra premises. Different kinds of ‘Nitya’ (Daily) and ‘Namittika’ (Occassional) ajendas were also introduced through this development process. There are twelve Satras which were established under the authority of Sankaradeva’s grandson Purushottam Thakur. The Satras of Mahapurushiya cult called as Bar-Baregharia Satra. Then, another twelve Satras were also established by another grandson of Sankaradeva, Chaturbhuja Thakur which came to be known as Saru –Baregharia Satras. This kind of division is purely part of Brahma Samhati. (Kalita, 2015, p. 240). In the post-Sankara era, his disciples continued this tradition of establishing Satras throughout the Brahmaputra valley

Speaking about the formative features, generally *Satra* institutes of Assam consists of *Kirtanghar* or *Namghar* (Prayer House), a *Manikut* (the Throne), a *Batsara* (Welcome gate) and *Hatis*. The *Namghar* or *Kirtanghar* was the primary organ of a *Satra* with all important discussions made here. The *Manikut* typically includes the *Thapana* commonly holding religious texts or emblems. The visitors and guests are typically welcomed in the *Batsora* area under the *Turan/Torans*. Lastly, the *Hatis* has different kinds of purpose to be served accoeding to the needs of the *Satra*.

The *Satradhikara*, *Bhakatas* and *Sisyas* (disciples) are the principal components of any *Satra*. In the absence of the *Satradhikara* the *Deka-Satradhikar* actually controls the daily activities of a *Satra*. The *Bhakatas* of a *Satra* can be divided into two major sections – i) *Grihasthi* (married) and ii) *Keolia* (unmarried). As per the categorisation the *Satras* again has 3 different verities – a) Monastic, b) Semi-Monastic and c) Mixture of both. In the monastic *Satra* the *Satradhikara* lives a life of celibate. Women are permitted only in day time here. While in the semi-monastic types although the *Stradhikara* and the *Bhakats* lives as celibates but maintain family relationship. The *Satradhikara* and *Bhakats* maintain family lives in *Grihasthi* *Satras*. In the admixture *Satra* although the *satradhikara* maintains family, devotees are both celibate and non-celibate.

6. NEO-VAISHNAVITE MOVEMENT IN ASSAM:

In the 15th and 16th Centuries a current of *Vaishnava* rituals and renaissance engulfed India. More specifically, *Bhakti* as a concept developed in the Southern part of India from the 9th Century onwards. Here it had developed as retaliation against the orthodox Vedic religion and its expensive methods of worship. In a small time the *Bhakti* movement had got massive popularity among the common people. In 8th Century, *Ramanuja* initiated the spread of all India *Bhakti* Movement. (Sarmah, 1995, pp. 1-2) Later on, since the 16th Century the second and succeeding phase of *Bhakti* Movement flowrished. *Sankardeva*, who spent 12 years outside Assam got necessity ideologies and inspirations from them. The rigid caste hierarchy and

7. SAMHATI FRACTIONS:

The term 'Samhati' or 'Sanghati' was only found in the post-Sankara Vaishnavite literature. Originally, it was derived from the term 'Sanghattana', that means joining and unification. After the death of Sankardeva, the ambition of Damodardeva to the leadership of the order against Madhavdeva led to the fraction within Vaishnava fold. Although, in his lifetime Sankardeva had nominated Madhabdeva, his dearest disciple as the successor; still both *Madhabdeva* (1489-1596 AD) and *Damodardeva* (1488-1598 AD) came into clash after death of Sankardeva. Damodardeva observed some Vedic rites and rituals and incorporated them within it and emphasised over beautification of the *Satras*. Dvarikanath Dvij in his works explained the Samhati fractions in a fantastic and mythological way. S. N. Sarma critically noted that despite of divisions in terms of 'fundamental doctrines and practices' there is no difference amongst them. After the death of *Srimanta Sankardeva* in regards with the question of succession his disciples and followers gradually divided into sections. This ultimately led to the fraction of four 'Sanhatios' from the fold of Neo-Vaisnavism. Although these groups were divided ideologically, but in practice they had small portion of dissimilarities. The land grants of Ahom monarchs and their royal patronisation to some of the *Satras* was also recognised as a major cause behind this fraction (Dev Goswami, 2014, pp. 1-12). These *Samhaties* are as follows (Goswami, 2020b, pp. 40-42) -

7.1. Brahma Samhati:

This *Samhati* was basically created by *Damodardeva*. *Damodardeva* observed some Vedic rites and rituals in incorporated them within it. Brahma Samhati represents mainly Vedic related culture with Sankari Philosophy. Harideva also accompanied in this endeavourer with him. Actually Brahma Samhati originally constituted by Damodardeva was later on joined by Harideva, the followers of Yadumoni and some other *Satras* with Brahman abbots. The Auniati Dakhinpat, Garamur and Kuruwabahi *Satras* became the richest and most influential *Satras* of Brahma Samhati. Brahma Samhati mainly depends on the 'Deva' and an influential incorporation of *Brahmanical* rites.

7.2. Purusa Samhati:

Purusa Samhati was founded by *Purusottam Thakur*. *Purusottam Thakur* proclaimed that Sankardeva is the only Guru of the sect and the other proselytizers or religious heads were more representatives or agents of Sankardeva. He placed Madhabdeva as second Guru and termed the other religious heads as Acaryas. This Sanghati believed that 'Naam' is the supreme power of God. It is narrated in the biographical literature of this sub sect that Madhabdeva declared on more than one occasions that Purusottama being the direct descendant of Sankardeva, would be the real successor to the headship of the order founded by his grandfather, he simply acted as an agent during the interim period.

7.3. Nika Samhati:

'Nika' the word itself means clean. It is also known as *Nistha Samhati*. After the death of Madhabdev this *Samhati* is started. *Badala Padma Ata*, *Mathura Das Burha Ata* and *Keshabsaran Ata* considered the trio of *Nika Samhati*. The rules and regulation of *Nika Samhati* put stress on strict discipline in various sides like dress, manners, food etc. They always believed the 'Bhakat' or 'Monk'. "The sub sect had certain religious characteristics which also deserve notice. This sub sect lays special emphasis on serving holy association (*Sat-Sanga*). The second noticeable feature of this section is that its followers consider *Madhaba* as the Guru of the sect, while *Sankardeva* is regarded as the Guru of their Guru and as such their relation with *Madhabdeva* is immediate and that with Sankardeva is indirect". Barpeta, Kamalabari are the *Nika Samhati's Satra*.

7.4. Kala Samhati:

'Kala' - this word derived from 'Kaljhar'. The devotees of this gave supreme importance to the 'Guru'. According to *Kala Sanhati*, *Guru* is like God. They prayed to *Guru* as God in the human form. The devotees of *Kala Samhati* are known as very strong spiritually, socially and economically. They believed the *Gurubad*. *Gopal Ata* is the founder of *Kala Samhati*. Most importance *Satras* of this *Samhati* were *Ahatguri Satra*, *Mayamara Satra*, *Dihing Satra*, *Gajala Satra* etc. This *Samhati* has been well known for bringing into its fold the socially backward caste and communities like the *Maram*, *Motak*, *Kachari*, *Kaibartya* and others.

Each of these Samhatis has a large number of followers and Satras as well. The key profounder and some of the major Satras under each of these Samhatis can be shown as follows –

Table 2. Samhatis, founder(s) and the Satras

Sl. No.	Samhati	Founders	Total No. of Satras	Popular examples
1	Brahma Samhati	Damodar Dev Hari Dev	170	Auni ati Satra Dakhinpat Satra Garhmur Satra Kuruabahi Satra etc.
2	Purush Samhati	Purushuttama Dev Chaturbhuja Dev Niranjan Dev	251	Kuamara Satra Dighali Satra Samaguri Stra etc.
3	Nika Samhati	Madhabdev Mathuradas Ata Badala Padma Ata	103	Barpeta Satra Madhupur Satra Kamalabari Satra Badala Stara etc.
4	Kala Samhati	Gupal Ata Jadumani dev Anirudha dev	116	Mayamara Stara Dihing Satra Sesa Satra Badbari Satra etc.

(Source: Satra Samskritir Ruprekha by Dr. Keshabananda Devaguwami)

The aggregate number of Satras under various Samhatis can be shown through this table –

Table 3. Total number of Satras under different Samhatis (1550-1875 AD)

Year(s)	No. of Brahma Samhati Satras	No. of Purusha Samhati Satras	No. of Nika Samhati Satras	No. of Kala Samhati Satras	Total
1550 – 1625	17	1	26	11	55
1625 – 1675	72	56	25	46	199
1675 – 1800	8	27	1	28	64
1800 – 1875	-	1	4	2	7

(Source: The Neo-Vaishnavite movement and Satra Institutions of Assam, Appendix – V, the list have been prepared only of those Satras which have records of establishment)

8. SATRA AND SOCIETY:

Assam, contemporary to *Sankardeva* was in a socio-political tremulous stage. With a major chunk of tribal population 15th Century Assam had portrayed a varied picture of diversified culture. With tremendous popularity of Tantric practices and *Saktism* sacrificial practices (both animal and human) prevailed in this region. In such a juncture the Neo-Vaishnavite movement led by *Srimanta Sankardeva* shaped the set of new values and cultural unity. In such a case, religion as one of the most important aspects of human life sustains both individual and society as a whole. To deliver the external factors like prayers, ceremonial rites, and social gatherings in religious institutions provokes the role. Satra was such a progressive tool of contemporary Assamese society. *Sankardeva*, through his life time initiated *Satras* as a part of new Vaishnavite faith and religious perching. Similarly, *Madhabdeva* also established multiple *Satras* in his tenure such as – *Barpeta Satra*, *Ganakkuchi Satra*, *Bhela* and *Madhupur Satra* etc. Along with the royal patronisation the *Satra* instructions got the final phase of its development.

Speaking about the contributions in the society the role of Satras can be broadly observed in those sections –

8.1. Social:

The Satras are the inseparable organs of Assamese social life. It had great impact to the societal aspects. *Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankaradeva* attempted to organise a new society and to bring forward the mass people to *Bhagavata Bhakti*, forgetting the differential thought of caste, introduced the Satra culture through the Namghar. As mentioned by the Vaishnavite disciple Leela Mahanta – “the sole aim of Gurujana (Sankaradeva) was to organise a healthy systematic society by removing the dirty minds of mass people through the Satra culture. Like a holder, bearer, and an institution the *Satras* keeping the *Khol-Tal* (drum and cymbal) in the bosom with *Chari-Nam* (four items of devotional song), –*Caidhya Prasangas* (14 items of prayer) had been running continuously for 550 years”. (Adhikary, 2020a, p. 1444) Through its religious pricings and ideological developments the Satras established a good hold over the nearby societies with an authoritarian attitude. It is also a significant that the Satras bear the sign of steady progressive social life. In this regard Dr. Bhimkanta Barua writes that Satras are like the chief-post of Assamese culture. Along with spirituality the *Satras* has influenced the Assamese culture and proper teaching of the illiterate sections with the spiritual norms. The concept of Dhuti-culture (Dhuti-a long and broad waist cloth worn by man) which was derived from Satra culture is very popular in Assamese society. The Satra instruction encourages peace and social harmony among various sects and races of people. Eventually, the most of the important social discussions are taken with public gatherings like decisions and process of executing; celebrate religious and social festivals etc. Eventually, the *Satras* and *Namghars* acted as the public court. In the monarchical days from the king’s court also supported to this decision or verdict. Thus the Satra and the Namghar solve the disputes by justification amongst the villagers and on the other hand save the unity of the village firmly. In the mean time, if any family has to face any disaster under the jurisdiction of Satras and Namghars then the people of the locality try to rescue the family from the same. At the time of common disaster the villagers of Satras and Namghars stand united for the protection of the village. Thus the Satras and Namghars play an important role on showing the mentality of co-operation and helping hand from age to age. Therefore M.K. Gandhi believed, “what I am going to do is that the Neo-Vaishnavism spread it five hundred years ago in Assam”. That is why the chief aim of the Satras is to bring forward the people of the backward classes. From another point of view the Satras also can be regarded as a training centre of social system. Both trainees and trainers of this are called in common language as *Bhakat* or *Bhakat* (devotee). Because of such training sessions the devotees actually acquired proper knowledge about the Religious scriptures as well as of the classical instruments and songs, dance forms and folklores. This kind of knowledge system through Satras and Namghars actually shaped a proper human resource for the benefit of the society. The depth of influence from the Vaishnavite institutions in the Assamese society can be assumed from the wide range of titles in Assam originated from such institutes. Some of these titles obtained from the *Satras* and *Namghars* are as follows: *Adhikary, Gayan, Bayan, Pujari, Barpujari, Bharali, Pathak, Bhakat, Medhi, Kakati, Lekharu, Khataniyar, Daloi, Bardaloi, Oja, Dainapali, Bhagavati, Sutradhar, Mahanta* etc.

8.2. Cultural:

In the medieval period when the king’s courts were not interested in education then the *Satras* played the role as a centre of education. In the primary *Satras*, there were *Vidyalyaya, Tol* or *Catushpadi* under the scholars wherein students from different parts of Assam gathered to achieve the knowledge in various subjects. According to scholars only the Satra institutions were lighting the lamp of education and knowledge from the 16th century A.D. to the 19th century A.D. in Assam continuously. (Adhikary, 2020b, p. 1445) The most important role of the Satra for Assamese nation is the spreading of education traditionally amongst the illiterate people to which Dr. Surya Kumar Bhuyan mentioned as *Anakhari* or *Anakharik Siksha* (illiterate education). Some of the traditional leanings offered in the Satras included *Nam-kirtana* (congregational prayer), *Ojapali* (a coir or party of singers), *Bhaona* (theatrical performances), reading of *Puthi* (religious book) etc. In addition frequently discussions were held in religious scripts and traditional narrations. From these discussions the common people are also benefited as they come to know about the cultural and religious aspects attached with the traditional knowledge system. About this Dr. Surya Kumar Bhuyan writes that through these *Satras* and *Namghars* the knowledge have been flowed amongst the illiterate Assamese people in our state. For the Assamese people illiteracy is not a bar to earn knowledge; because there is a system of reading the religious books and explanation of necessary parts on presence of the common people. With the due impact of globalisation presently Bhakats of Satras are attending formal education along with the traditional one.

The contribution of Satras as a store house of Ancient texts and practice of Medieval literature (mostly Religious) is immeasurable. In the medieval period the Satras grew up as the main centre of practice of literature. Mostly in the field of song, drama and biographical literature it made remarkable contribution. If we look at the phases of Neo-Vaishnavite movement most of the Vaishnava literature have been composed at the Satras. Earlier at Satras the Gurus wrote the books in Sanchi-barks, cotton-leaves etc. To

write the books necessary articles like written instruments (pen), ink, Sanchi-barks, cotton-leaves were also made at the Satras. At the post- Sankara age, a new tradition of copying through the Satras and Namghars emerged along with composing. The Carit Puthis, basically hagiographical works of Vaishnava saints or Gurus can be considered as one of the most important source of Medieval Assam in terms of historiography. Even at present a large sum of such historical treasure are stored in the Satras of Assam. As per the data presented by Dr. Nara Kanta Adhikary in his article - Only the Chamariya Satra possessed more than 200 (two hundred) such a kind of books (Manuscripts). On being destructed for so many reasons only the 47 (forty-seven) books have been preserved there.¹² More than five hundred such books have been preserved in the Krishna Kanta Handique Library of Gauhati University. More than such kind of 30 (thirty) books have been preserved at the Museum of Dakshin Kamrup Girls' College, Mirza.

The dramatic art of Assam also has been flourished through the Satras. The Gurus themselves composed many songs and plays for the propagation of the new faith. To attract the common people arrangements were made to perform the dramas (*Bhaonas*) by common devotees to attract the devotion towards God. The plays of *Sankardeva* are called as *Ankiya Bhaona*, which are results of assimilating the dance, *ojapali*, acting etc. Though the *Bhaonas* were composed for the spreading of religion yet in course of time it becomes the carriers of mass education. Along with that it gave the opportunity for practice of literature, field of exercise of dances, songs and musical instruments etc. Once again through the Satras and Namghars the dramas and dancing art of Assam flourished in a particular way. Besides these the new *Satradhikaras* continued the tradition of compiling dramas and devotional songs. The "*Satriya dance*" also which is developed through the patronisations of the Satras which have been achieving the popularity and glory amongst all classes of audience from the beginning till today. Thus the unique creation of songs, dances, dramas on the auspicious of Satras and Namghars are truly the most excellent contribution to the Assamese society. Hence it can be safely said that art forms like *Bhaonas* through dance, song, acting etc. created the foundation of Assamese national theatrical stage. Such practices eventually played a vital role in the process of preserving the social integrity of Assamese society. Moreover the origin of *Khuti tal* (a kind of small cymbal) and *Bhor tal* (a kind of big cymbal) can be traced back to the *Satras* of Assam.

In Assamese societies Satras and Namghars are commonly regarded as the main centre of the religious festivals. The villagers organise their festivals and ritual ceremonies in the Satras and Namghars. Besides the daily prayers the festivals like three Bihus (Rangali, Bhogali and Kati Bihu), the Janmastomi (the birth anniversary of Lord Krishna), the Doul-utsava, the Nandotsava (Piyak Nam), Pal Nam, Suwari or Sori, Bar Sabah, the anniversaries of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva, the anniversaries of the Gurus, Anniversaries of the Atas, Ras Purnima, Bhaona etc. are observed by the villagers in the Satras and Namghars. These festivals have been creating the unity amongst the mass people. In addition in accordance with the festivals the Satras and Namghars the competitive games and sports have also been organised. In this sphere, especially the Nao-Khel (boat-race) of Lower Assam is remarkable. These competition held in the special occasions have been uniting all irrespective of caste, creed and colour. This again represented the unity among our ethnic identities.

8.3. Religious:

Apart from all these aspects cited above, the main objectives of the Satra are to spread the religion. Here it initiates the disciples in the religion and to explain the main facts of the religion to disciples. Through the propagation of religion Satras ultimately increase the standard and moral character of the disciples through the explanation the morality of the Bhakti cult. Especially, prime emphasise is given upon following the '*Chari-bastu*' (Four devotional truth), *Guru, Dev, Nam, Bhakat* of *Ek-Sarana Nama Dharma* at the *Satra*. Even today the arts of dance, song, music, *Bhauna, Nama-Prasanga, Ghosha-Kirtana* etc. are attached to the religious spectrum in the Satras. Notably that, the practice of the Nama-Prasanga etc. in the harmony of the sounds of Khol-Tal is the rare example in the other religious sects of the world. For the propagation of the Ek-Sarana Nama Dharma through the monotheistic ideal of *eka deva eka seva, Srimanta Sankaradeva* has been opened the way of nine-folded Bhakti as follows:

"Sravana Kirtana Smarana Bishnuka
Archana Pada-Sevana /
Dashya Sakhitta Bandana Bishnuka
Kariba Deha Arpana //"
(Adhikary, 2020c, p 1442)

This means, the *sravana-kirtana* was given the prime place by the Mahapurusha in the Bhakti Dharma. In this regard Dr. Nagen Saikia says that Mahapurusha Sankaradeva along with the other Gurus established a unique institution like the Satra as the centre of spreading the Bhakti-cult. Through the religious pricings of the Satras an overall establishment was proposed in terms of moral, spiritual, social and cultural teaching and exercise. It can eventually be compared as the first renaissance in the social life of Assam. Even the life of Assamese people also is influence in such a way that those who are outside the Satras turns into the

jurisdiction of morality, social ethos and cultural comprehensive value. Despite of the Samhati fractions, the general people of a village under one Namghar of one Satra and each Satra having remained in obligeance with such institutes and expanded religious and social bindings firmly. Nobody can deny the fact that the influence of the Vaishnava religion in Assam today has been spread and expanded from the *Satras*. The *Satras* play an important role on spreading and publishing the Neo-Vaishnavite religion in Assam till now. In simple terms, it is clear that the flow of the Assamese Vaishnavite culture is survived and flourished only in support of the *Satras*.

8.4. Economic:

In terms of economy, the *Satras* were the key centre of high standard cottage industry, and art, craft and sculpture. The expert artisans got the chances to exhibit and practise of their variety of artistic works through the *Satras* and *Namghars*. Eventually they were trained through the management of *Satras*. There are multiple kinds of artisans associated with the *Satra* institutions. Talking about the early phases, the craftsmen depicted various beautiful flowers and statues on wood. The writers prepared the Sanchi barks from Sanchi tree to write or copy the *Puthis* (holy books). They used various colours by preparing from various trees - grasses, barks and leaves as well as *Hengul-Haital* (vermilion-yellow arsenic). Through the *Satras* and *Namghars* the artisans like the craftsmen, the carpenters and bamboo workers, bell-metel workers, the leather workers etc. got the chance to showcase their devotions through artistic works. The artisans were mostly associated with making of items with daily use in the *Satras* like - wooden *Sarai* (a tray with a stand), *Thagi* (a kind of wooden tray with one leg), *Singhasana* (a seat supported on legs made in the form of lion), statues of *Garura*, *Jaya-Vijaya*, *Hanumana* etc. They also make necessary utensils used in Bhaonas along with hand crafted masks. Some of these includes bows and arrows, *gada* (cudgel or club), *Kiriti* (coronate), *Mukut* (crown) and wooden masks of *Ravana*, *Kumbhakarna*, *Kaliya-Sarpa*, *Narasingha* etc. Hence in terms of economic aspects, the industries along with *Satras* and *Namghars* can be categorised in various kinds such as -the cottage industry, the cloth industry, the clay industry, the bamboo industry etc. Even today those practices of artistic activities are prevailing more or less in all villages of Assam. In all those activities along with individual need and religion the commercial factor was highly connected. Along with those the *Satras* caused the paintings also to flourish. The Vaishnavite movement of Assam originated the custom of paintings in religious books. It is known that *Mahapurusha Sankaradeva* did paintings himself. It is mentioned in the *Carit Puthi* that the *Gurujana* (Sankaradeva) depicted the picture of seventh heaven on the cotton leaves. It is also ecoreded that *Sankaradeva* had presented the *Gunamala*, the holy book to *Maharaj Naranarayana* in a wooden box whereupon the picture of elephant was depicted. The '*Vrindavani Vastra*' was one of the iconic examples of high quality of craftsmanship and artistic talent in this context. Thus the role of *Satras* in the economic sector of Assamese society can be traced right from the period of their origin. Some of these industries are still in noticeable condition in present context as well.

9. CONCLUSION:

The *Satra* institution of Assam has a huge historical background to be dealt with. The Neo-Vaishnavite movement in Brahmaputra valley had led to the formation of monastic like structures, popularly known as *Satra*, which later proved to be a most influential part of Assamese society. Both in terms of spiritual and cultural domains *Satras* and *Namghars* has deep and long lasting relevance in Assam and Assamese society. Although the Samhati fraction had led to growth of salient features among the *Satras*, but the originality and integrity of this institution remain more or less the same. To evaluate the role of *Satras* in Assamese society different dynamics have to be stretched. In simple terms, the impact of *Satras* in Assamese society should be admired and preservation and protection of these heritage institutions should be encouraged.

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